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In conversation

Valeska Soares and
Kelly Taxter

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I'd like to talk about time as a material in your work. Pieces such as *Un-rest* (2010), *Finale* (2013), *Any Moment Now...* (2014), and *Time Has No Shadows* (2015) all address time directly or indirectly, through materiality and language.

Time has always been of interest to me. Initially it was the creation of a timeframe through the attention span a work demanded. We live in a society where time is fragmented. You can simultaneously talk, text, and watch TV. Time is subjective, and technically imprecise; it's just a way to synchronize events in space. For example, we're going to meet for lunch at two o'clock. But who knows what "two o'clock" means. I have no sense of other people's subjective time. I live by myself, I can wake anytime I want, I can sleep anytime I want, and I travel a lot, so I get lost in time zones.

You're not subjected to objective time.

Or to someone else's time. I can sleep the whole day and work the whole night. Because of the way I perceive things, sometimes I lose a day: I think it's Saturday but it's Sunday. My unique relationship with time causes me to devise weird ways to measure it. *Any Moment Now...* was a way of keeping time for a whole year; that's why it is 365 canvases. Instead of counting hours or days, I counted books.

Did you make one piece a day?

No, I'm not that neurotic or systematic. I measure time, but in my own way. Sometimes it can be ten days, and sometimes it can be no day at all. So the measurement is quite subjective. All artists create rules for things that have no rules or parameters. The 365 days is intended as a measurement that relates to how other people think of time.

At what point did your work move from manifesting a timeframe or relational experience to directly addressing time as a subject?

It started with my interest in books and the idea of writing. The first one was *For to* (2007). Because of my relationship with books there was an absurd number of them in the house, and I began deconstructing the books themselves, and mining the pulp for things that caught my interest. I noticed a lot of references to time and place. *Timeline* (2010) is an example of this; it's poetry in a sculptural form. The titles work together to form a loose narrative.

But even before that, there has always been *Killing Time*, which happens when I'm very anxious. Some people knit, but when I have an artist's block, I've found ways of working that keep me doing something that isn't anything specific. If I have nothing to do I'll write "killing time" on paper, and measure how much time it takes to fill a sheet.

Have those pieces ever been shown?

No, I don't know yet. They work as a sort of mantra. It gives me some sort of purpose.

Can you speak about that in terms of an artist's daily life? I think about pieces like Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* from 2001. It's a dull nighttime surveillance video of his studio, a supposedly highly productive space where anything can happen. It's loaded with anticipation

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and expectation, but we see it without the artist, without any product. It seems you're speaking about that same sense of neurosis and anxiety that the studio, and being an artist, can bring.

Maybe for Nauman it's a way of having control over the chaotic. His work is similar to mine in that it's about an intelligence. *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* is a way to approach the work by not approaching anything. The idea is to calm your anxiety. You create a system for something that has no system whatsoever. I think life can be quite challenging.

Some people think my life is so great because I can do anything I want, when I want, but I actually have to be quite disciplined to do anything: to wake up, move, read. I have to create these crazy systems, like *Killing Time*. Essentially, everything in my life is a project. I can't even imagine these "holidays" people talk about.

I know! I've noticed that artists are terrible vacationers.

I am asked, "Don't you just want to sit in a hammock and do nothing?" I don't know *how* to do nothing! When I went to Rome, I had to have a mission. I decided to see all the Bernini sculptures in Rome.

Did you see them all?

Yes! That project created a vector to knowing Rome. I'm not really a tourist, so I'm always creating these kinds of vectors to experience time and space.

You mention vectors, and it makes me think of the hand on a watch as a thing that moves across a map, and each number is a different location.

If you think about it, a watch is a reproduction of a cosmology. When I started scientifically looking at time, I learned that time is measured by the relationships between the rotations of the Earth and between the Earth and the sun. Everything is spinning, and rotating around, and the watch is a graph of that system. You can think of the center—the pivot point of the hour, minute, and second hands—as the sun. Our days and hours are measured in relation to these rotations. Everything is a circular movement.

In the piece *Ouroboros* (2014), which is a rotating pocket watch that hangs down from a circular track on the ceiling, you removed the hour hand. Thinking about your anxiety around organizing time—that it's a loose material that you need to give shape to and systematize—I'm now thinking about the hour hand as a pusher, as something that metaphorically and poetically propels you.

— not necessarily moving forward or backward, but just going. It's like the universe, it's just going. But the universe has an arrow of time, that is, if you think of it as formerly being very simple and now very complicated.

Did you know that all the things measured on a watch are called "complications"? Watches don't only measure time; they can also measure the phases of the moon, or the tides. There's a watch called the supercomplication with twenty-four different functions. It sold for \$24 million at Sotheby's last year.

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What does it look like?

It has a lot of things on it, but it's just a pocket watch! People think of complications as bad things, but they can be good things. "Complicated" can simply mean "complex," as in, not an easy thing to understand.

A person using that watch could choose which complication to pay attention to. They could wake up one morning and decide to be tidal, as opposed to solar.

Yes, you could think of time as just an imprecise agreement people follow.

Like language.

Yes, another thing that's interesting about watches and hands is that if you start with a group of watches set at the same time, in a few hours or days they may no longer be in sync. That's part of the reason why I took the hour hand off the watch in *Ouroboros*. That work is intended to be much more about movement and subjectivity, the way the object relates to a concept in someone's mind, than precision in measurement.

It's the opposite of precision.

Well, even the precision of measurement is an illusion.

When the hour hand is gone, it can be whatever your time is at that moment.

It's whatever time that person has interacting with the watch. For the newest piece, *Time Has No Shadows*, which has twenty-four pocket watches, my original idea was that viewers could wind the watches.

Finale is a good example of how I get people to interact with my work. I didn't want a specific time for the event to take place; rather, I wanted to provoke an experience, one that had a level of secrecy to it. Every once in a while, someone would voluntarily come to the gallery and drink from glasses strewn across a table. When that happened, and visitors saw that one could do that, they wanted to do it too. There weren't a hundred people interacting with the work at one time, but rather a story about the work that became viral information: "Did you know that you can drink from those?"

It's the same thing with the watches. If you see someone winding one, you might take the liberty of doing the same. Or if you hear that you can, you may go back and see the piece a second time, this time interacting with it in a new way. In the case of *Finale* it was very interesting because people are ordinarily very germ-phobic, but that piece cut through that. People were drinking from the same glasses three days later. The glasses were not refilled yet visitors were drinking from the same glass somebody else already drank from (which was a three-day-old glass of alcohol), seemingly without worrying that it could be contaminated. It was transgressive, because the desire to do something was more powerful than the default social constraints.

I think many of my pieces also deal with the idea of secrecy and the possibility of doing something you're not supposed to, especially in a museum setting: to touch art, walk on it, wind it, hold it, bang into it.

In those moments you're somehow outside of time. You're outside of—let's call it society's idea of time, and inside your own time.

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When you're always in movement, a condition starts to arise of only living in the moment. You can plan to do something on a future date, or remember something from the past, but your relationship to the past or the future is very tenuous.

That's happened to me so many times. It's a mental-physical divide that happens without any drugs or anything.

Let's talk about the idea of grounding in your work. So much related to time is about movement: astronomical bodies moving, human bodies moving in space, or a relationship between your body and an object. There are objects in your work that have to do with feet, a kind of literal grounding. For example, the carpet in *Time Has No Shadows*, or the spiral library stairs of *Spiraling* (2014), or the footstools in *Un-rest*.

You're always thinking; it's just whether or not you recognize the process. Whether you are engaging your conscious or unconscious mind.

And it extends the life of the work because you create narratives and a relationship with the objects. It becomes playful as well. That's why I like the idea of an abundance of watches. While I'm talking about complex issues such as time, reversibility, cosmology, I also want to be engaging and keep people interested.

The way people perceive the world now is so sped-up. As a teenager, I traveled from Europe to Brazil by boat. It took fourteen days, and communications were delayed. To us now that's inconceivable. Nowadays people live on the move. There's no time to adapt to anything.

Yes, I can only grasp "now." I think most people these days suffer from a scattered mind. I can still focus on each of the many pieces, but sometimes, for instance, I put my telephone in the fridge because I'm thinking about something else. Or I blank out. I don't remember a block of time at all. I'll come back home after a party, park my car in the garage, and later think, "Did I do that?". I'll have no idea how I got home. Some part of my conscious mind was involved because I didn't crash, but another part was completely elsewhere.

It's so fascinating, that distancing from the self.

There's something very true in that. The spiral stairs in *Spiraling* are a metaphor. I thought I was Spiraling out of my mind, so I took that sense and invested it in a concrete object. It was a way to ground myself as well as put a subject in place. If you think of my earlier work from the late 1990s, there's an interest in vanishing points and perspective, where the subject is in relationship to ideas and feelings. I think that's very telling. My work is not photogenic, in that it's not visually coherent. But it is conceptually coherent, because the process is related to an intelligence. The work is an expression of thinking, not a mastery of things. Can we master thinking? No. Can we think too much? Yes. How do you stop thinking? I only know how to tame it a little.

In my artistic process, the only way I can engage is to disconnect and create my own personal symbology and marks, thus creating a different language of my own. It's very emotional, as opposed to structural. It's always interesting to me how I get to *here*. How do I get to be able to speak this particular language that's mine?

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It's the same process with writing, which is about a set of subjectivities. You have to ask yourself what's valuable about your experience with a topic, then close yourself off and think about things on your own terms.

There's a patina that comes from living in New York for a long time, a texture to the way you behave and interact with people. Which leads me to another observation about your work, that it's primarily made from old things: an old rug, old watches, old books, and old drinks.

And by using these types of old things, you create a continuous loop of time.

So your objects aren't about the past but more about what you can glean from them in the present.

Sometimes I feel like a kid in that annoying phase, constantly asking "why": Why not? Why can't I? Why does it have to be this way? Why does this mean that? Why, why, why, why, why? I was never ever in my life able to follow specific rules without somehow twisting them. A good example is when long ago artists had to send sets of twenty slides, and it always drove me nuts, this very arbitrary number of twenty. How am I supposed to say anything at all about an installation in twenty slides? My way of dealing with it was having: 1a, 1b, 1c and 2a, 2b, 2c. I was following the rules, but with subcategories. My entire life has been like that.

All objects collect stories. Just as I collect books, the objects are stories in themselves. In *Time Has No Shadows*, the watches bring a thickness to the work, a way to memorialize different lives. Those watches have stories, they went places, and they did things. Perhaps it's my own idea of permanence. But more than that, I like to think of objects as having lived. I don't use old things because it's nostalgic. It's a way of making things alive again.

They're not only about collections. Collecting things is a strategy used by many artists, but my work is not only about collections. To me it's very important that I give the collections a little twist so that they're not only agglomerations but also something else, beyond historiography. In *Un-rest*, for example: the invisible chair, the shape and the way you perceive it. It's not only a collection of stools; it takes you somewhere else.

That's the difference between what I do and how a museum collects. Although I have a collection of similar old things, they're not just that; they're somehow activated and transformed by the way they're put together, and they create something that's not only a display but is reactivated and has a purpose. The purpose might be to communicate something that can't be communicated with spoken or written words, or images alone. These things only make sense if there's a perception that they exist in space and time.

Yes, it's a cosmology and circularity. It's a form of cultural and poetic investment. Not because I'm sad or nostalgic.

Correct. It's like reading a book. When you read, you imagine the lives described and create them in your mind. Objects are the same. They're a source of imagery, poetry, and ideas. They accumulate so much life, but their stories are a multitude of secrets. Who knows what the glasses in *Finale* celebrated? Someone might have cried while drinking, celebrated birth, had a fight over lunch. We'll never know.