A SYNCHRONOLOGY: the contemporary and other times

Hunterian Art Gallery | 27 October 2017 — 28 January 2018

11. Roman Ondák, *This Way, Please*, 2013. Performance: the gallery staff arranged through the building in ascending order of age. NB: this work will be performed intermittently during the exhibition.

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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Our contemporary moment is one in which time has become a particularly urgent preoccupation: fraught discussions of how best to save and to spend time are commonplace. So too are anxieties about how much we may now be subject to economic and technological imperatives that leave us with no time to reflect, no time to share. In his 2013 book Jet/\ Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (Zone Books), Jonathan Crary offers a stark diagnosis of the contemporary epoch as a time of endless time, in which we perceive the relationships between such moments in a new way, and to see also how political and broadcast media construct a particular kind of shared time, political speech projecting its own meanings onto imagined pasts and futures.

Sharon Hayes
Sharon Hayes’ video work My Fellow Americans documents the artist’s nearly-10-hour recitation of all of Ronald Reagan’s addresses to the American people. As in the re-performances of iconic moments of popular protest for which Hayes is best known, here she puts a moment from the past back into the present tense, and introduces an uncanny unfamiliarity into our most familiar way of orienting ourselves in time.

Robert Barry
Robert Barry’s All the Things I Know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:38pm, June 15, 1969 is an important work by one of the pioneers of Conceptual Art, and is the earliest ‘contemporary’ piece in the show. Made a century after Hawes’ Synchronalogy, it marks a specific, precisely detailed moment in time, but nomimates an unknown (and unknowable) set of thoughts in relation to that moment. While conceptual art is often thought of as logical — perhaps even overly cerebral — Barry’s work here suggests that he was equally interested in what eludes rational description or representation.

Simon Starling
In Simon Starling’s Pictures for an Exhibition (2013-14), the artist used a modified vintage Deardorff plate camera to recreate documentation of an important 1927 exhibition of Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture which was arranged by Marcel Duchamp. In order to bring those works back into a shared presence in his photographs, Starling had to travel extensively, conduct archival research (detailed in the ‘titles and notes’ which accompany the photographs and are an important part of the work), and occasionally to make multiple exposures within a single image. In the process, he traces not only the lives of these art objects over the past century, but also marks the temporal distance between 1927 and his own cultural and historical moment. Starling’s work consists of 36 individual images, of which 10 are shown here.

Gerard Byrne
Similarly using photography and text to loop back to a formative moment in the history of modern art, Gerard Byrne’s Images or Shadows of Divine Things (2005-ongoing) presents images of contemporary America that seem redolent of both mid-twentieth century style and mid-century street photography but which the artist has taken in the recent past. Four photographs from the much larger series are shown here alongside a wall text that cites Perry Miller’s study of the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards. The wall text functions to relate the photographs to a key strand of American religious thought, but also alludes to a controversial 1967 polemic against materialism by art critic Michael Fried, which used this quote as its epigraph and made a plea for art to exist in its own special, immediate temporality. ‘Presentness is grace’ Fried wrote, calling for a modernist art analogous to Edwards’ vision of a world constantly created here alongside a wall text that cites Perry Miller’s study of the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards. The exhibition itself marks a particular period of time, in that it celebrates the 10th anniversary of Glasgow-based not-for-profit arts organisation The Common Guild. All the artists included here have worked with The Common Guild over the past decade: the exhibition brings together selected works by these artists that explore time in less didactic forms than the timeline, often proposing the existence of multiple temporalities at any one juncture.

Ruth Ewan
Ruth Ewan’s Unrecrofored Future, Tell Us What Broods There (2008) was first made for the town of Frome in Somersset. Ewan took lines from a 1927 book of poetry, Poems of Human Service by Gustav Spiller, reproducing these texts in woodblock prints and having them proclaimed by a town crier. Spiller was a pacifist / humanitarian activist and published Poems of Human Service without copyright, requesting that the poems be ‘freely reproduced’. As much of her work, Ewan here explores the future-oriented, even utopian, potential embedded in historical moments that now seem far removed from us, but which might still be reactivated. At the gallery’s reception desk is one of ten decrimal clocks Ewan produced for the Folkestone Triennial in 2011. This disconcerting object revisits an experiment with reforming time during the French Revolution when a new calendar and decimalised hours were introduced. Ewan’s Folkestone project, titled We Could Have Been Anything We Wanted To Be, registers a moment of radical change in the past perfect tense, and introduces an uncanny unfamiliarity into our most familiar way of orienting ourselves in time.

Tacita Dean
Like Ewan, Tacita Dean has sometimes addressed moments from the past which projected or imagined the future in a utopian key, but moreover she has made time perhaps the central subject of her art. If Im is the medium in which Dean’s temporal preoccupations took their fullest expression, her work in other media is also marked by its theme. In 2002, aware that the relatively rare phenomenon of a palindromic date was imminent, Dean worked with five mass-circulation newspapers to alter their mastheads and accentuate this moment of the human condition. The result was a series of ‘pale, faint, ephemeral’ prints for instant obsolescence and a formative institution in the construction of modern daily-ness – appears doubly obsolete: The Guardian’s broadsheet format is long since gone, and the front page news no longer has much currency.

Roman Ondâk
Finally, Roman Ondâk’s This Way, Please, a 2013 performance work loaned from the collection of Glasgow Museums, will be presented occasionally during the run of A Synchronology’. Museums and art galleries are ‘time machines’ of sorts, allowing us access of a kind to other epochs. This Way, Please works draws attention to the often overlooked human labour that makes such access possible for visitors on a day-to-day basis. In This Way, Please museum attendants are arranged in order of age, from the youngest to the oldest, as the visitor passes through the building. Roman Ondâk has suggested that he was mindful here of how a museum visit might only take half an hour of a visitor’s time, but that attendants may spend much of their lives in such spaces. Human time and the museum’s ‘timelessness’ come together in Ondâk’s simple gesture.

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WITH THANKS TO

The artists:
Robert Barry
Gerard Byrne
Phil Collins
Tacita Dean
Ruth Ewan
Sharon Hayes
Roman Ondák
Simon Starling
Corin Sworn

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Frith Street, London
Rob Tufnell, London
Tanya Leighton, Berlin
The Modern Institute, Glasgow
Koppe Astner, Glasgow

The following individuals:
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