

Tense Beginnings

“Time will have passed.” Not “time will pass” (future), “time will be passing” (future continuous), or even “time will have been passing” (future perfect continuous). And not “time passes” (present), “time is passing” (present continuous), “time has passed” (present perfect), or “time has been passed” (present perfect continuous). Or, if we step into the past tenses: “time passed” (past), “time was passing” (past continuous), “time had passed” (past perfect), “time had been passing” (past perfect continuous). But instead: “time will have passed.” The future perfect. The past in the future, expressing an action in the future before another action in the future. But there is no action here, for the passing of time is the very ground of any action, the medium in which that action might occur. So to say “time will have passed by the time you arrive” – as opposed to, to say “the train will have left by the time you arrive” – says next to nothing: “Time will have passed before any particular future event occurs.” Yes, of course, time will have passed. Because time passes, time will have passed.

The past has passed. But, curiously, we can also say it in any tense and the meaning is about the same: *The past passes. The past is passing. The past has been passed. The past passed. The past was passing. The passed had passed. The passed had been passing. The past will have passed. The past will pass. The past will be passing. The past will*

have been passing. But if they seem to be more or less equivalent as facts/statements, they don't *feel* the same. Some of the propositions/statements are much sadder than others. They position us in relation to loss and desire in such different ways, with such different degrees of hope and resignation.

What, generally speaking, does the filmic image propose: that time passes, or that time has passed? If the particular filmic image is general rather than specific, it might merely propose that time passes: the filmed event, of course, occurred within time (is/was temporally embedded) but can happen again, is repeatable. Because of this quasi-scientific repeatability, there is no loss, and the filmic image lies, to a great extent, outside of history and subjectivity. But if the filmic event is a singular occurrence marked by specificity, we are suddenly faced with the possibly traumatic record of a loss, of something forever lost. Forever lost and the little scrap of celluloid (though it is likely to have been digitized, we can still see the grain and smell emulsion like a lizard smells swamp in human blood) may taunt us with romantic, nostalgic longings.

In *Time Passes*, time does indeed pass, though rarely in real time. The video – shot on 8mm film – is largely time-lapse, a single frame every second or so, greatly condensing the time of the event. (In time-lapse, events that took minutes or hours in the world – a flower blooming or maggots devouring a raccoon are common subjects – take seconds or minutes on the screen.) The passing of time that we see when the winter light passes through the interior of Nelson's Montreal apartment is at once a beautiful melancholy record of presence in one's home and an uncanny alienation from the experience of "home."

Time Passes is a moving record of presence due to the gorgeous framing of the shots and their everyday subject

matter: a houseplant, a shelf of books, and boots by the door. The sequence begins with individual shots in which the afternoon light penetrates into the interior, scans a particular section of the room – the light here is hard not to anthropomorphize as it creeps, spreads, reads, illuminates, blinds – before retreating/dissipating. In the sequence’s final shot, a skylight seems to suck or drain the diffused light from the interior altogether. So, there is presence here in three senses: firstly, we see that the interior space is not only inhabited but inhabited with a particular aesthetic sense or way of being: the boots placed just so, objects on a shelf, etc.; secondly, the light itself is an animate, anthropomorphized force; and thirdly, the deliberate framing shows a carefully vested familiarity with the space and how the afternoon light travels through it.

But there is also an uncanny alienation from the idea and experience of “home” in *Time Passes*. The first two intertitles: “Nothing is as real as this room,” and “I imagine my apartment when I am not there,” establish Henricks’ struggle to reconcile presence – the embodied experience of an event in time – with a reality that exists apart from him (or any particular subject). Even in the intimate domestic spaces he has arranged and inhabited, the light sweeps through independently of his will or presence. The images we see are both personal (the framing, the record of a particular home) and impersonal (the product of an apparatus that, once set up, runs on its own). The camera is a machine, its time-lapse recording a document. Henricks knows that a tree falling in the forest makes a sound even when he is not there to experience it, and enjoys the possibility of imagining his absence from the scene (this absence being a kind of death). He is thrilled by the prospect that his mechanical surrogate – the film camera – not only records the event in his absence, but produces a hyper-real document,

gorgeously condensed, bordering on the transcendent. Who needs to stay home wallowing in all this immanence when we can imagine our machines at work for us?

At first glance it may seem that *Time Passes* is, however beautifully shot, conceptually conservative, a kind of lyrical romanticism that seeks transcendence through a meditation on the immanent, the quotidian. But, as is usual in Henricks' work, there is a double movement. Whatever he gives us, he gives it to us only after it has been negated, cast in doubt. From the outset, Henricks problematizes the relation between presence and event, the independent exterior world of "Nothing is as real as this room" bumping against the subjective interior world of "I imagine my apartment when I'm not there." The images have it both ways. (*Time Passes* also attempts, with an almost Utopian vigour to draw parallels between writing as the apparatus between consciousness and language, and the camera as the apparatus between presence and event. Camera as surrogate for experience; writing as surrogate for consciousness.)

Does Henricks' *Time Passes* propose that time passes (the image as a document of the exterior world, a world of repeatable phenomenon) or that time has passed (the image as a document of something already lost, the interior world in which the subjective dimension of individual events predominates)? Well, both, of course: *time will have passed*, that more indeterminate temporal positioning that merely holds a place open for some future occurrence.

You Will Never
Be an Animal

One would not, I expect, consider Henricks to be a social satirist, yet a strain of it runs through his work, coming to the foreground in his exquisite comedy of manners, *The Pig's Tail*. The short story was published as a chapbook and remains, sadly, Henricks' only work in the genre to date. It seems to me, in part, a sly critique on transgression as a

satiric tool, as it turns away from the punk alienation of then-contemporaneous writers like Kathy Acker and Dennis Cooper to view the gay/intellectual milieu of Montreal's *Plateau* with an affectionate bemusement. The narrator is a pig living among Montreal's hipsters, attempting to integrate. This being Montreal, and Henricks being Henricks, there are no great impediments to this integration. "I am the only pig living openly in human society. You might think I'd be famous, but I'm not. People don't pay much attention to me."

Henricks' pig is not an allegorical pig, like one of Orwell's farm animals, but a "real" pig – which makes the sex scene hilarious and strangely haunting – who has simply somehow entered the house of language. Henricks' pig is also unlike any of Kafka's speaking animals in that he seems to have total self – and social – awareness, is self-assured and urbane. The tale is told in the first person by the unnamed pig. He explains that no name is necessary, as he is the only one. There are other animals, though, integrating into human society: a goat, a sheep from Toronto. But these other others are a source of social anxiety and mutual embarrassment.

The story opens and closes with anecdotes of reading and writing. If the pig has pleasures in the society of humans (sex and physical intimacy, conversation) his only relatively unfettered pleasures are literary: first as a reader, then as a writer. As much as our protagonist is a social agent, he is also a textual pig, positioned between the anxieties and pleasures of reading and of writing, caught up in a complex of identifications and compositions.

Apart from a party scene in which the hosts are mortified because they've served the pig a salad with bacon (the pig doesn't mind), there are two main confrontations in the story. In the first, the pig argues to his boyfriend that

he does not consider himself gay. “I like doing humans. But that’s it. Message over.” In the second, the pig participates in a conference at McGill, “Becoming Animal: Social Perspectives on Bestial Relations,” where he is attacked for his integrationist desires. “You are a fucking sell out. You are not a real animal any more. [...] You have betrayed your own identity by co-opting the identity of the oppressor.”

But the pig sees it as more of a question of survival, feeling that, “basically there was no future in being an animal.” But there is, perhaps, also no future in being human. One of the central themes in two other works, the video *Crush* and the installation *Fuzzy Face*, is that of abandoning the human – the realm of self-awareness and language – through a process (a “line of flight” as Deleuze and Guattari would say) of becoming animal.

As in *Time Passes*, *Crush* presents its central theme in its opening text, here spoken haltingly in voice-over: “It’s a matter of changing one’s body, of changing one’s shape. But how far can you go?” The transformations initially suggested, through both image and voice-over, are simply those of body building, but the narrator’s “ideal body” then bifurcates into two possibilities: superhero and animal. As the underlying desires regarding physical transformations are explored, it becomes clear that the narrator is “immensely dissatisfied with being human” and fantasizes various processes of becoming animal. Becoming animal is equated with ego dissolution (“When I become an animal, I will dissolve, become anonymous”) culminating in an exit from the house of language (“Just one last thing: my words.”). In the end, becoming animal becomes a full-blown death drive involving not only ego dissolution, but physical dissolution as well (“The edges of the body dissolve, become permeable”).

In the installation *Fuzzy Face*, Henricks enacts a different kind of becoming animal. This single-take-without-cuts

documentation of a performance is a close up on Nelson's face as he meticulously transforms himself by gluing cotton balls to his face until it is covered and then – slowly, painfully – removing them. The transformation enacted here is not the radical transformation/dissolution suggested in *Crush*. Yet, partly because it is thoroughly enacted rather than merely suggested as a wish, possibility or idea, this becoming animal has a particular gravitas, a quiet intensity. It is a human, obviously, with the dexterity of a human, who glues the cotton to his face and gets spirit gum in his eye and – weeping, physically distraught – goes through the equally laborious (if more painful) process of removing the cotton. Not even a transformation, really, just an elaborate masking and unmasking, facing the camera, mute.

Muteness of
the Long Duration
Performer

It is a general rule: when Henricks speaks in his work, he speaks in voice-over and does not visually appear. This is not to say his body does not appear in his work, for it appears quite often. In fact, a fragmented kind of self-portraiture occurs throughout Henricks' work: the hands writing or fretting, a single eye (usually, it seems, the left one) looking, the mouth as receptacle or fountain. But rarely is the mouth (his mouth) speaking. Speech occurs separately from images of the body: voice and body rarely coincide. Not to say that his body does not communicate using various signs – semaphore in *Emission* and placards in *Failure*, for instance – just that these signs rarely include spoken language.

This is partly, I think, merely due to the fact that much of his work is densely edited, with the images, text, sound and voice each having a separate, if precisely and densely interwoven, existence. If he were to include images in which he speaks – the verbal pinned or stapled to the vi-

sual – he would lose innumerable possibilities for montage. In the first section of *Crush*, for instance, the voice speaks haltingly, each word separate and deliberate. He begins to enunciate certain words at the end of a line in a manner, that while maintaining legibility, is somewhere between singing and humming. As he says, “But how far can you go,” the “go” is less spoken than sung/hummed. The image is a steel ring being rolled between the forefingers of his two hands, and the audio mixed with his voice is a resonating tone. At this point, it is not only the narrator who is speaking: the steel rings are speaking too, and it is the activity of the hands that seems to be making them speak. Again and again in Henricks’ work, speech becomes song, and song becomes non-verbal sound and it is the non-verbal sound that is wed with the image, non-verbal sound (music, as tone or rhythm) that motivates the image. The images are then deployed musically, and the montage often becomes rhythmic.

But some of Nelson’s work is not densely edited. He has a few pieces that harken back to the video-art tradition of the artist performing in front of a static camera and recording that activity/performance in a single take. I’m going to briefly discuss two of these here: *Fuzzy Face* (described above) and *Happy Hour*. *Happy Hour* has two components: a diptych of photographs and a three-channel video installation. It’s the video component I’m concerned with here. The one-hour performance is documented on three video channels. Nelson sits at a white table with a clock and bottles of Heineken and, at a somewhat leisurely pace, drinks several bottles. In the first channel he appears sober, and in subsequent channels he appears increasingly and clearly intoxicated, though never particularly sloppy. He seems consistently intent and self-absorbed (actually, downright sad) all the way through. (I don’t know why he is drinking Heineken; it seems a very poor choice to me.)

Like *Fuzzy Face*, this is a performance of a severely attenuated transformation. Cotton mask goes on, cotton mask come off. Apart from a bloodshot eye and some lovely beast images, there is no remainder, no transformation. Even less happens in *Happy Hour*. Beer gets drunk, the drinker gets slowly drunk, and while there is visible change in his behaviour – he appears unfocussed and wobbly – there is no visible change in his affect, and consequently, no particular internal or psychic development or transformation. He will be sober in a few hours; nothing will have changed.

Yet it is the muteness of these simple works, as well as their impoverishment, that seems to me incredibly moving, particularly in relation to Henricks' more well-known, densely edited works. It is in these video performances that several of the themes/problematics that run through his work are revealed most starkly and directly: the quandaries of self-portraiture, the impossible heaviness of writing and speech and literature, the passing of time and physical embodiment, and the self-consciousness of art-making within the discourses of contemporary post-conceptual practices.

Pure Signs (Montage
is Empathy)

Beginning with *Satellite* (2004), Henricks developed new strategies for video installation, particularly in relation to montage. His editing – the way he puts the images, text, sound and voice together – changed radically. (The only other artist I know who has also successfully developed a new language as they moved from single channel to installation is Harun Farocki.) *Satellite* was followed by *Map of the City* (2006), *The Sirens* (2008) and *Unwriting* (2010), each of which builds on and expands the techniques and strategies Henricks developed for *Satellite*. I'll be focusing on *Map of the City*.

Time Passes begins with the on-screen texts “Nothing is as real as this room,” and “I imagine my apartment when I am not there.” *Map of the City* re-phrases these assertions as it moves out of interior domestic spaces to explore, initially, the city of Rome. It begins, as Henricks’ films so often do, with a simultaneous positive evocation of an interior subjective space and a plaintive of the loss or absence of those spaces: “So many rooms in this world, but you will live in just a few of them.”

One is just a tourist in the world, the world of signs. A semiotic tourist. Possessing or not possessing (and loving to possess or not caring), reading or not reading (as the signs move from legibility to illegibility, are forgotten or repressed), writing or not writing (engaging with signs through montage/empathy or turning away, disengaging, refusing to play).

Henricks’ signs – his basic material components – have always been simple and direct. His is a frontal assault/seduction. He doesn’t go at it slant-wise or creep up from behind. His writing – whether spoken or presented as on-screen text – is lapidary and aphoristic. There are no sub-clauses and no sub-texts. This is not to say the writing is not complex. There are, as we’ve seen above, aporias of presence and loss, but stated as directly and simply as possible. The images are likewise direct. We always know what it is we are looking at.

Map of the City eschews camera movement altogether. It is constructed from hundreds of still images. There is, in many of the sections, a play between wholeness and fragmentation. Bodies are fragmented, as they generally are in Henricks’ work, but here the bodies are Roman marble statuary. The fragmentation/framing is determined semiotically. That is, the images are not framed according to any abstract or formal consideration, but ac-

ording to semiotic/linguistic category. And these categories recur in Henricks' oeuvre: hands (mostly), but also eyes, mouths, penises. Maps – in this case, a map of Rome – are also presented as fragments.

But if the original object is no longer extant – if it has been smashed, erased or otherwise forgotten – the fragments can also be wholes. This is the case with the images from Roman ruins. Each artifact, each chunk of incised stone, is presented individually. This is both an invitation to reconstruct the smashed architecture and to consider the legibility of the individual fragments, which are covered by marks that are both pictorial and linguistic.

Subsequent sections of *Map of the City* feature images of small objects, things that could fit in the palm of one's hand. Small bits of hardware, game pieces, toys, figurines, wallet-sized identity or portrait photographs and wrist-watches photographed without shadow against bright monochrome backgrounds. The video begins in fragments, takes solace in a kind of infantilized wholeness – pocket-sized objects – before problematizing even these simple signs by alternating between photographs and drawings, and descending back to the fragment. “Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”

In many of Henricks' videos and installations, the rhythm of the images is determined by the rhythm of the soundtrack. This is not the case in *Map of the City*, which not only eschews camera movement but also – excepting one section discussed below – rhythmic music or audio on the soundtrack. Rhythm is instead developed visually, through both the montage in each of the two channels, as well as in the relationship between channels.

Nelson uses the possibilities for rhythmic montage between the two channels (the rhythm of the left channel in

relation to the rhythm of the right channel) in a variety of ways. Initially, their rhythms are in sync: when the image on the left changes, the image on the right also changes. The dynamism in early sections of the video comes largely from the relations between text and image, which are kept scrupulously separate (intertitles are never over images, but have a separate channel). This results in the usual relation between image and text: image on one side and a text that refers to it on the other. But as the video goes on, the simple relation between image and text breaks down.

Writing in 1929, Sergei Eisenstein (filmmaker and theorist of montage), identified the seeming incommensurability of text and image as a central problem: “The forward movement of our epoch in art must blow up the Chinese Wall that stands between the primary antithesis of the ‘language of logic’ and the ‘language of images.’” In 1971, Jean-Francois Lyotard assigned a name to that dynamite: the figural. Lyotard recognized the failure of Saussurean structuralism and semiotics to comprehend the problem of meaning as being anything other than linguistic (that is, the possibility of images having meaning that is not linguistic). The figural is the force that turns language into image and image into text. Images become temporal, are made sequential and become discursive. Text becomes image, is removed from time and discourse and becomes spatialized. (For more on this, check out D. N. Rodowick’s amazing 2001 book, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After New Media*.)

In *Map of the City*, it initially seems that Henricks is deploying his images linguistically, as simple, iconic signs. And, indeed, he is. The image of a map more or less signifies what the word “map” signifies. When the on-screen text says: “My body gives off heat and light, dim and flickering

in slow motion,” the images are of a film projector running a film, making a metaphor: the apparatus of film projection is the filmmaker’s body. And when the text reads: “A house is leveled / And in its place / A new one is built,” the images are metonyms of the text: fragments from Roman ruins. These uses of the image are primarily linguistic: the visual sign must be translated into a linguistic one in order to complete the metaphor or metonymy proposed by the text. As the installation goes on, Henricks deploys the figural as a force that breaks down the primacy of linguistic signification. Soon, the images will be doing it (signifying) for themselves.

About mid-way through the piece, he begins to play around with the text/image relations. A little story (which Henricks adapted from *Ecclesiastes*) is told through several titles:

There was once a small city with only a few people in it. A powerful king came to make war against it. There lived in that city a poor but wise man. He saved the city with his wisdom but no one remembers him now.

Each title is “illustrated” by a single image. The “powerful king” corresponds to a chess piece; making war, a toy soldier; the city, a key; wise man, toy man; wisdom, a medal; “nobody remembering,” an eraser. It is the increasing playfulness of the image/text relation – moving from the usual straightforward primacy of a text being merely illustrated by an image. The “poor but wise man” is illustrated by a hand-painted toy figurine of a man. The paint is chipped off. It is perhaps the only object that is not photographed in its entirety but leans into the frame, and seems to look at us. We empathize with this comical figure in a way we could not empathize with the chess king,

which functions only linguistically as the pictorial analog for the word/concept “king,” but does nothing else. Finally, the act of forgetting the poor but wise man, our chipped and humble friend (“nobody now remembers him now”), is illustrated by an eraser. The connection between forgetting, erasing and eraser is logical and legible, to be sure, and primarily linguistic. But the relationship is not direct, we have to make a little leap (the leap is what makes it funny). This leap opens up an opportunity for the figural to enter.

What seems to me most interesting about Henricks’ work are the strategies he uses in coupling audio with the figural. There is a section of *Map of the City* in which the opening and closing of a book is visually depicted through still images (one image of a book being held open followed by an image of the book being closed between the hands). But as the image changes from open to closed, there is the sound of a book slamming shut on the soundtrack. As the book is opened and closed, the soundtrack becomes rhythmic for the only time in *Map of the City*.

This sequence is analogous to one in *Unwriting* in which the lead of a pencil breaks just as a hand commences to put it to paper. In the case of *Unwriting*, we have four channels rather than two. As well, the image is thematically integrated in a more explicit way: the installation is about writer’s block, the impossibility of putting pen to paper. The repeated image of the lead breaking is accompanied by the sound of lead breaking, and forms a rhythmic, percussive soundtrack.

Again and again in Henricks’ work, the impossibility of linguistic communication – of reading and writing – is resolved by a turn away from language. But this turn away from linguistic representation does not resolve itself in the image. Instead, it finds solace in audio, whether as a sim-

ple hum or drone, or a percussive banging. Rhythm is primary in Henricks' work, and it is the rhythm of becoming animal, of turning away from both linguistic and pictorial signification, turning away from consciousness itself to a pure, unmediated experience. Transcendence is the aural bath of the death womb.

Conclusion

I am still laughing at that last sentence!

But just one last thing about *Map of the City*. I had seen it several times, but there is one section I didn't remember until just looking at it again today. It seems to me completely strange to have it in the installation, and completely necessary. If there is a flight away from signification (death drive) in Henricks' work, there is always a corresponding attempt to keep making meanings. And meaning for Henricks is always rooted in social engagement, as empathic meaning. In the section I had repressed (I, too, walk around always accompanied by the giant image of an eraser) there are images from the maternity ward in a hospital (but personal snapshots, close-up) while the titles (the only time the first person is deployed in the piece) say, rather unconvincingly:

After the end of everything, I am here in this room, cataloguing images. Millions of images, each one crying for attention. I take care of them. I copy and file them. I give them life.