

**The Moment Beckons:  
The Ephemeral Narrative of Nelson Henricks' "Time Passes"  
By Charlie Fox**

***Introduction***

Through a considered use of qualities inherent in time-based media, combined with evocative imagery that gains symbolic and/or metaphoric status, Nelson Henricks creates video artworks that contain suspended narratives inhabiting an altered "time and place". The territory negotiated within the narrative is personal, a place of insight into the transitory nature of trying to learn to "live in one's skin", or to unravel the process of finding a niche to inhabit amongst the many layers of human relationships. Ultimately, we are made aware of the materiality of our ephemeral moments of being, placed against the relentless passage of time, a quality that coalesces in the 1998 production *Time Passes*.

The act of recording the passage of day to night within the boundaries of an apartment space allows Nelson Henricks to frame an observation of the flow of time. Time-lapse camera work tracks the movement of light as it caresses the walls and floors inside the space; when the camera is turned to look outside the apartment windows, clouds rapidly scuttle across an urban landscape that rushes from bright to darkness.

In occupying a living space such as an apartment for any period of tenancy, the human presence becomes ephemeral by its very nature of being human. Nelson Henricks conveys this inability to completely grasp the fullness of the march of time by presenting a central character in *Time Passes*, who struggles to chronicle this onward rush to the future through the act of writing. Writing - or in this case the act of writing - becomes the powerful metaphor through which Henricks conveys the proximity of human existence to the very shadows that track the walls and floors of the apartment.

Serving to document this passage of time, wishing to present the ebb and flow of portions of this passage, the very essence of writing points to a flaw in our existence: we live through, not within the moment. In *Time Passes*, this unraveling meditation bears witness to such a series of moments, recognizing that no one can possibly become completely engulfed within the present. The very process of writing makes certain the fact that the writer will be missing the truest experience of being within all of life's many moments. The writer, as is only human, can be but merely a witness to a part of the whole, a representation of the totality. Methods in the materials and the messages.

Approaching the rich investigation in *Time Passes* entails focusing on some of the distinct attributes found in the use of mediums, signifiers and actions. Nelson Henricks' creative mobility allows the material qualities of film / sound / video to develop - in concert with the work's content - a sense of the ephemeral, a suspension of realities. It is a forum in which this artist facilitates unique, charged moments - moments that enhance a revelatory arena, a place in which the orchestration of the diverse elements transforms into a holistic vision.

The complexity of *Time Passes* grows from an openness to the opportunities found in creating new, unique narrative constructs, allied with an innate understanding of hybrid strategies that expands the language of the media. It's not that there is a complete ambivalence to tradition - in fact, in *Time Passes* and other recent work Henricks retains strong ties to traditional aspects of media, methods and content. The strength of a story well told, aptly rendered in the medium of choice, is not a new artistic device.

But the work does thrive on refreshing the language of artistic production, constantly renewed in approach and maturing in content. Among the strategies at the artist's employ is a borrowing of the compositional methods found in experimental music. Such methods can include structural qualities normally foreign to music composition, such as the timing of the pulse of short-wave radio sounds, the irregular rhythm of ocean waves or the ebb and flow of rush hour traffic. Alternately, the artistic scaffolding can be constructed with improvisational elements around a theme that has been fixed and determined prior to the writing and/or performance of the work. Inevitably, the juxtapositions and complementations of the resulting collages contain both suspensions and realizations of meaning.

It is not just the emphasis on composition that benefits from hybridized strategies. There is a methodology in the use of media tools that impacts the voice in Nelson Henricks' work. In its (most deceptively) simplified form, this is evidenced in the combination of exposing images on film but finishing the work on video. There are a plethora of traditional languages - that of the use of the film camera, the visual qualities or nature of the film image, the attributes of a film image as transferred to video, the methods and abilities unique to electronic editing - that are then resolved into the visual and aural expression found in the resulting artwork. It is the recombination of these time-based media arts linguistics that assist the artist in extracting new expressive forms.

In "*Time Passes*", the material qualities of the recording media and the demands of narrative structure come ever closer to attaining what seem to be Nelson Henricks' strategic motives. "*Time Passes*" continues the play with concerns of home, body and memory, though achieving these aims in a manner different from earlier works. Now we have recognition of the fleeting moments from which human endeavor emerges. Sunlight traces swiftly moving shadows on an apartment wall and the spill of day into night hurtles past in the world outside the apartment windows. The depiction of 'time' is compressed through the use of time-lapse camera work, as four, six, ten or twelve hours become ten, twenty or thirty seconds.

This fast track on time is carried even further. We see the most intimate details of a writer's work, as pen crosses page after page in writing. The diaristic tone of "*Time Passes*" emerges: while we are not privy to any details of the text written under the gaze of the camera eye, we are made aware that there is indeed a chronicle being written. Intertext flashes on the screen amidst the images, the narrative ensues:

They write in order to disappear.

This is a considerable task.

to transfer oneself to paper.  
Pages accumulate into books.

Volume after volume.

The pen greets the page amicably, hungrily, ceaselessly, wearily.

The writing advances relentlessly, the amplified sound of the pen scratching the page accompanied by an array of visual representations of the process. There is no ponderous narrative of a male voice, but instead a progression of texts in the form of the electronic titles: the "intertext". The nondescript script of the writing is coupled with a reading of the texts by the viewer. It is our responsibility to unwind the yarn.

Then there is the representation of the relentless advance of time. The time-lapse images waver ever so slightly, due to a mechanical feature of the film camera's registration of each frame of film. As each frame of the time-lapse is progressively exposed, it is imprecisely fixed in the gate of the camera during the exposure. The resulting images of buildings and interiors appear to float, ever so slightly, as the film is played-out. The passage of time turns the concrete city scape into a floating, immaterial representation.

The language of the medium, through the tools of production, thoughtfully reinforce the meaning of the work. We are offered a meditation on existence through the close, intense framing of key imagery and the use of a steady, studied narrative voice to achieve a great dignity in elevating the qualities of isolation and meditation. Simulacrum arches at times into metaphor, as the material qualities of place and action portray the heady relationship between the passage of time and the human need to capture the moment, to make the march stand still, to extract meaning from the measured unfolding of one's life.

The pen dives in, swirls, dots, crosses, dashes, comes up for air, dives back in again.

The ink blazes like fireworks at dark, glistening oily blue and wet, then falling flat and black as ashes.

No place is as real as this room."

### ***Conclusion***

Nelson Henricks' Time Passes functions through an internal, whispering voice that dominates the ebb and flow of the story. In the creation of a unique narrative intimacy, we're granted a compelling, unfolding glance into ideas or concepts that waft through the work. The surface is scratched: a glimpse of deeper meaning appears, only to float

through the evolving narrative. It is a strategy that the artist employs to keep the audience's perception on edge, thirsting for more, drawing a variety of conclusions and perhaps stimulating a sense of kindred relation to the story presented. As a part of the recent body of work by this artist, *Time Passes* conveys a need for searching, touching and then creating within a framework of transformation.