

OUT OF TIME: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW

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WE CANNOT NOT PERIODIZE. – FREDRIC JAMESON

Roberta Smith's pen is surely one of the few that still draws a weighty line in the field of art writing. So when, in her 1 September review, 'Power, Injustice, Death, Loss: At Sea in the Here and Now', she condemned the curators of *Out of Time*, Joachim Pissarro and Eva Respini, by questioning their 'curatorial imagination', then partially covered her tracks by implicating in the selection a 'higher-up' at the museum, and then derided the entire curatorial staff for not being as adventuresome as their colleagues at other institutions, I found her trashing hard to disregard.

While I too would take issue with the curatorial logic behind this thematic reinstallation of MoMA's contemporary galleries, I would not accuse the team of a lack of imagination. I believe it actually takes quite a lot of imagination to stretch the subject of 'time' to cover a wide selection of art from the last 30-odd years, especially art with such overt social, psychological and historical subject matter. 'History', or some variant of it, I thought, would have offered a more justifiable thematic for *Out of Time*. From Gerhard Richter's anti-monument to the events surrounding the deaths of three Red Army Faction members, *October 18, 1977* (1988), to Rineke Dijkstra's photographic series, *Almerisa* (1994–2005), which documents the literal coming of age of a young Bosnian refugee through pictures taken between 'March 14, 1994' and 'March 24, 2005', 'history', be it personal or geopolitical, seems the more pressing concern. Even Martin Creed's self-explanatory *Work No. 227, The Lights Going On and Off* (2000), which won the young British artist the UK's prestigious Turner Prize, comes across as an archaeological oddity with secrets to reveal to future generations about the legal and economic shape of the artworld at a certain moment in its history.

I enjoyed the trio of Robert Morris, William Anastasi and Janine Antoni's procedural-based drawings – *Blind Time VIII* (1974), *60 Minutes* (1987) and *Butterfly Kisses* (1996–9) – even if their grouping may have been, as Smith noted, 'obvious'. But again, I took these pieces as a historical argument, rather than an overtly aesthetic one: that the procedures of different kinds of mark-making under different kinds of constraints – some temporal, some physical – could interest artists of different generations says something less about time than about how unresolved are questions concerning the dynamic confrontations that can occur between artistic subjects and their chosen materials.

To my mind, the historical preoccupations of much of the work on view, such as Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995), or Kota Ezawa's *The Simpson Verdict* (2002), or David Goldblatt's photographs of South Africa, along with those pieces that appear most formally concerned with 'time', such as Warhol's *Empire* (1964) or Dieter Appelt's *The Field* (1991), belie an unspoken anxiety about not knowing just how to stage, or, to use a more technical term, to 'periodize' the

'contemporary' as such. 'Time', from this perspective, appears less like a theme than a symptom of an impasse, as when the archival and the historical aims of the museum – different rubrics to be sure – overlap in the present. It's rather like the story of an event catching up with the event itself.

Smith's criticism of *Out of Time* is equally symptomatic of this impasse. Her call to the curators of the exhibition to 'relax and give in to the irrational, subjective nature of visual experience', to let 'their eyes betray them and take them to places where carefully worked out theories and fashions do not' is asking for a kind of innocence of the eye and mind that makes of art a purely visual, aesthetic entertainment. Perhaps that doesn't sound so bad; it certainly keeps us safe from the uncomfortable possibility that art may indeed have some higher meaning not immediately evident in what we see.

And yet art does have a history; it may, in some instances, even be theoretical. Is it the place for the critic to shy away from writing under these flags if it – that is to say, the history and the theory of the art – is part of the experience, is indeed inextricable from that experience? I don't think so. But it is certainly not the curator's place to shy away from making that experience available to the museum's general audience. *Out of Time* may be deeply flawed, but I choose to see in it an attempt on the part of museum to tarry with the difficult problem of periodising, or conceptualising, or simply coming to terms with the 'contemporary'.
Jonathan T. D. Neil

Rineke Dijkstra, *Almerisa, Asylum Center, Leiden, The Netherlands, March 14, 1994*, chromogenic color print, 35 x 28 cm. © 2006 Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Robert B. Menschel Fund and the generosity of Leila and Melville Straus

