

Anne Ffrench
To Hold Still



TIME'S INHUMAN NATURE

Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment's destruction of superstition merely reinstates myth¹

Modernity defines itself in relation to time. Not simply time as a linear progression of states and events which are differentiated from what came before, but time also as a set of quantifiable structures whose organisational scale codifies from the unit of the second all the way up to the millennium.² For modernity it is not enough that the present is that which follows the past (with the future being that which succeeds the present), time must now be subdivided into ideological categories of period that attempt to impose a human will on a form that is fundamentally amorphous and open-ended. From the periodisation of art into discrete temporal movements (with solid centres but slightly liquid edges), to the development and deployment of financial quarters, the purpose here is to construct a cartography of advancement, improvement, progress and growth. By valorising the production of the new above all else, modern time must inevitably pit itself

¹ Ray Brassier, 'The Thanatosis of Enlightenment', in Amanda Beech, *Sanity Assassin*, Urbanomic, 2010, 49.

² The atomisation and ordering of time, of course, extend far beyond these limits, from the yoctosecond – a unit of time which is a trillionth of a second – to the supereon – time unit comprised of multiple eons (eons are the largest unit of geological time, commonly in the region of one billion years) – but, at these microscopic and vast scales the perception and theorisation of time by the human tends to dissolve, becoming either imperceptible or unthinkable.

against the tyranny of a history that provides the model from which it must seek to endlessly outrun.

Yet despite the dominance of this prevailing ideological position, the future of time still remains categorically unknowable, an anxious realisation for modernity that manufactures itself in the inexhaustibly ruthless design of future states that are yet to come. As the future is that which is new, it exists always in the present as an unthinkable proposition, and so planning is used to circumvent the horror of an unfathomable possibility that lays beyond. When confronted with a scenario wherein design and planning is denied opportunity to develop, modernity's anxiety kicks into over-drive as the reality of *being-in-the-world* often times presents itself as an unbearable *truth* for both the micro individual human and the macro society that they are housed within. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, it was this inability to accurately predict future states that appeared as most distressing. Recoiling inward to wait it out solidified itself as the most logical reaction, and during this episode many actively pursued, or were forced, to explore alternative structures of temporal organisation.

Time appeared to pause, but, of course, it didn't. However, it would be accurate to assert that a certain conceptualisation of time was placed in suspended animation; human time — or, more precisely, the human time of modernity — was interrupted whilst, it was said, *nature* began to reclaim and reflower. Nature has its own time (I will specify that in this instance I refer to another

particular conceptualisation that brackets out nature from the human), and it is this alternative mode which provides the stimulus for Anne Ffrench's work *To Hold Still*. It is described as a sculptural installation, and here I want to take a moment to briefly grapple with the categorisation of installation itself. Opposed to a series of fragmented objects, the installation provides a unitary body that is inserted into a spatial setting under the spectre of art as aesthetic experience. Through this action of embedding, the work no longer sits *on* the space and instead *becomes in* the environment. It is for this reason that the genealogy of installation art frequently intertwines with site-specificity, as both, in the words of Robin Mackay, gesture 'to rescue the conception of the art object as an autonomous unity containing its meaning within its own confines'³. Accordingly, although the installation may produce a unitary function, it is one that bootstraps itself *into* the meshwork of the site in which it is displayed.

In this process the installation becomes unified with its environment to a degree which produces a synthesis; a productively integrated force that renders explicit the processes of its construction. The disruption of individuated idealism — of fictively defined self-contained units — is doubled in *To Hold Still*, as spatial reconfiguration is accompanied by an austere rumination on ecological temporality. Briars have their own life-cycles, ones

³ Robin Mackay, 'The Barker Topos', in Robin Mackay (ed.), *When Site Lost the Plot*, Urbanomic, 2015, 253.

which are not entirely beholden to human-centric schematisations of time. As the briars have been collected over an extended period, the arrangement of their sculptural form presents each — of the over 700 — in varying states of decay. The work is made from a mass of briars, but individual ones that illustrate an unfolding sediment of a heterogeneously inhuman time. Their coming together, densely packed, manifests a grid, which as Rosalind Krauss noted is the index of modernity.⁴ Though, this particular grid is in the shape of a matrix that lacks the clinical precisionism of human engineering; a matrix of biomorphic design whose innards remain impenetrable to vision and therefore resistant to anthropocentric ordering and organisation.

What does it mean *to hold still* with an ecological form and temporality that exists necessarily as *inhuman*? I would propose here that it is in the pathos of what Timothy Morton calls the ‘humiliating descent’ that comprises the contours of ecological thought⁵ — a fundamental de-centring of the human’s place within the universe — that we may begin to unearth transgressive modes of futurity that cast off the rigid structures of experience and temporality that are the hallmark of modernity. Ecological thought demands thinking a systematic-holism that seeks to (re)integrate the human condition (back) into a nature, that, for so long, it has

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Grids’, in *October*, 9, 1979.

⁵ Timothy Morton, ‘Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, The Strange Stranger, and the Beautiful Soul’, in Robin Mackay (ed.), *Collapse VI: Geo/philosophy*, Urbanomic, 2010, 195.

dreamt of severing itself from. Doing so does not necessitate a wholesale rejection of the project of historical modernity, and instead this alternative potentiality can take shape as a variant of Fernando Zalamea's concept of *transmodernism*: 'a synthetic universalism, dynamic, plural and revisable, yet capable of moments of partial universalization'.⁶

During the human retreat caused by the lockdowns of the coronavirus pandemic, nature did not so much reclaim as simply continue. Human time, similarly, did not halt, but proceeded to lurch forward. Rethinking the relation of the human to nature must endeavour to abandon a strict demarcation between these categories, as, due to the looming threat of ecological crisis, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand this dynamic as a complex and fully-integrated system. Continuing with a rubric of infinitely novel production, that treats nature simply as an entity that is to be organised and mined (a logic of extraction), risks annihilating the future of our species. Stillness, in this moment, is not a denial of time's progression, but instead can be grasped as an opportunity to imagine new strains of futurity.

⁶ Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, 'What is at Stake in the Future?', in Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik (eds.), *The Time Complex: Post-Contemporary*, NAME Publications, 2016, 133.