

Against the Day (Diaries)



BY YANN CHATEIGNÉ

*Thanks for the rain
In each split second
Just as these thousands of water drops
Time*

A photo of the Messier 51 galaxy taken on June 3, 1902 at the Yerkes Observatory, Williams Bay. Photo: User: Chiffre01 / Wikimedia Commons / CC-0

After having produced several fragments that I never had the possibility to assemble through a form that would satisfy me, from aborted essays to book projects that never happened, I decided to go through my notes again. These bits of unpublished texts (souvenirs, notes for lectures, drafts for various realized or unrealized projects) that had crystallized during the past years, I now realize that they all revolve around similar questions, around time. Mounted without chronology, they associate prose and theory, quotes and attempts of interpretation of some works of art. They finally form a sort of constellation, not necessarily an essay on time, but more an experience of dispersion, an attempt to write through time.

01.

(One Year before the Summer of Love)

I am going to sleep. It has been a while since the day has already begun. I feel totally relieved from any pain or anxiety. I don't feel the cold. The morning sun is burning my eyes closed, as well as my whole body, that is still wearing the same clothes. We danced since the sun sat down. At some point I remember sitting aside the crowd, looking at people, talking to my friends Tarik and Maria, thinking they are so beautiful, with their psychedelic halo surrounding them. I have soft hallucinations, that strangely look like if Harry Smith used Japanese drawings to animate his stop-motions movies. The whole site is filled with the distant sound of industrial techno music that the deejay continues to play for the few remaining dancers. I intuitively know that the party is at the bottom of this wave that will grow again soon, and might not stop for the next twenty-four hours. And I think of this sentence, that still haunts me: "*We are always dancing against something.*"

Actually, this idea first came to my mind a little earlier, when I was still part of this small group of resisters, dancing like contemporary dervishes, celestial bodies turning, and turning again at the rhythm of the repetitive music, echoing far away in the valley. There is something apocalyptic in the atmosphere, reinforced by the imposing and cold mechanics that we hear within the sound. I don't think that we feel sad at all, but suddenly, that we are angry. Angry against the Sun. We don't talk, we just feel the presence of each other, looking around from time to time. We put all our last vital forces into this strange and silent fight against the sunlight that comes. Not that kind of negative anger that would lead to physical destruction, but more a form of philosophical wrath against the light that suddenly illuminates the whole scene where, a few hours ago, we used to smoothly move our feet into the sand, dancing in the starlight, the whole group connected to the night with the great curve of the galaxy above us as only witness.

"*We are always dancing against something*": this sentence, which I don't know where it comes from at this moment, resonates in my head, as something that might matter. And I concentrate, desperately concentrate, despite the fact that the whole world seems to turn around the humid mattress on which I am lying. I am totally focused, trying to fix the sentence in my memory, as I use to do with dreams that I would really like to remember of. I hope so much this time that it is finally going to work. I am relaxed. I still see things, as the cold starts to come through my skin, entering through all my pores. My corporal envelope is freezing, even though I still feel an intense warmth inside. My daughter, in the tent, is sick. I take her into my arms. Everything disappears around us. We fall asleep together, exactly at the same moment.

02.

(Zurich).

Lecture on time-based curating at Cabaret Voltaire. Received this WhatsApp message by Raimundas Malašauskas: "re: time. two years ago i've stopped dating (indicating dates) in my notebooks as time does not exist there."

03.

(Geneva)

Frank Zappa quotes are wonderful:

"Everything in the universe is composed basically of vibrations—light is a vibration, sound is a vibration, atoms are composed of vibrations—and all these vibrations just might be harmonics of some incomprehensible fundamental cosmic tone."

"Each project is part of a larger object, for which there is no technical

name.” (“The Oracle has it all Psyched Out,” *Life Magazine*, 28 June, 1968).

Xenochrony = comes from the practice of constant touring—studio-based synchronization of sounds recorded on tour, at first seemingly impossible to combine, as if the musicians played simultaneously in different moments in time and space—comes from the Greek *xenos*, “strange” and *chronos*, “time”—cf. *Joe’s Garage* (1979): guitar solos are exclusively coming from previous recordings—horizontal composition, vertical listening. Influences: heterophony (Pierre Boulez), harmolodics (Ornette Coleman), difference tones (Pauline Oliveros).

“In common polyrhythm, we talk about 5 in the space of 4, or 7 in the space of 6. In xenochrony, we work with larger units of time; a whole solo with a specific metronomic rhythm in the space of another song with its own rhythm... It’s as if Monday and Tuesday crowded into Wednesday. What we do and have from the very beginning is concept art. You know?.” (Sleeve notes from *The Guitar World According to Frank Zappa*, 1987).

04.

(Notes in process on Robert Smithson and time)

Even if I never properly researched the question, I have always been curious to know why theater, music concerts or films were, most of the time, to be attended in the dark. Though, a possible elucidation of this matter of fact—perhaps very banal—resides in an essay by the late Robert Smithson from 1971. In *A Cinematic Atopia*, the artist speculates on what he imagines as the ultimate film spectator: an individual who permanently lives in the artificial night of movie theaters and, like “a captive of sloth,” and experiences, film after film without any rupture, a form of eternal immersion, blinded by the shadows and the lights of films. In this non-place, space dissolves in order to open a time-hole filled with “pure perception”. Smithson’s atopia is something like a drifting planet, a utopia that would have contracted a disease, a *place with no place*, where one dives into pure time, a time becoming a flow of matter of “blurred abstraction.” And, placed alone amongst the other watchers, like a hallucinated hermit, he would constantly “dwell amongst the elsewhere.”



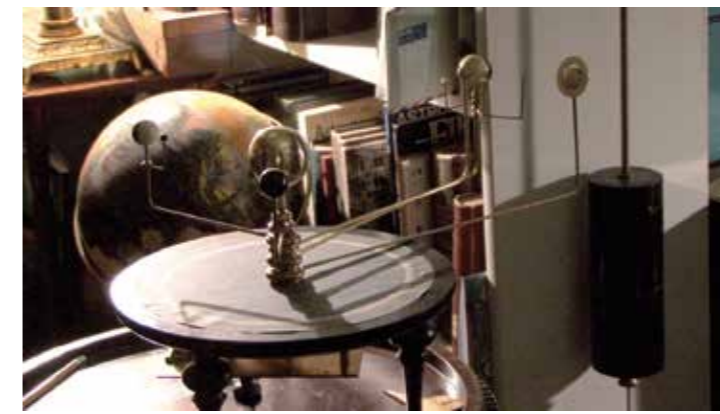
Robert Smithson, *Spirals*, c. 1970. © Holt-Smithson Foundation by SIAE, Rome, 2017. Private Collection. Courtesy: James Cohan, New York

[...]

Amongst the last traces that remain of his thoughts are the spiral drawings he was designing while he was working on the *Spiral Jetty* in 1970. I can’t help but thinking of this forms as film rolls transforming into galaxies, amalgams of things attracted and turning around each other, visions he had while conceiving this crystalline map, a galaxy in reverse displayed horizontally on the earth. An address to the sky where, a few months later, his life would be taken during an accident as he was surveying a site in the desert. What if this spiral, that one can walk on in the middle of the Salt Lake, was an attempt to materialize the connectivity of the inner movements of his mind? Is the *Spiral Jetty* a romantic monument to constellational thinking? Or, what if his *grand oeuvre* was simply an immense image of time, a future time, that would escape measure, that would repeat without ever being the same, unfold into never ending spirals in an eternal wave: a message addressed to humans, as well as to the cosmos itself, in between warning and desire.

05.

(Santiago—from the preparatory notes for a paper on the “constellational”)



Daniel Gustav Cramer, *Orrery* (stills), 2012. Courtesy: BolteLang, Zurich; Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf; Vera Cortês, Lisbon

Since its creation in 1772, the Geneva Observatory interestingly relies on a double tradition: it remains as a site where the sky was observed with the most acuity thanks to the cutting-edge development of the watch industry techniques (to become the observatory where, in 1995, the first extrasolar planet would be seen), as well as one of the few places on the globe where the exact time was calculated. Chronometry was then a successful and popular scientific discipline—alarm-clocks competitions were organized at the observatory—that grew out of the emergence of the Swiss precision watchmaking, and the need to use the knowledge of scientific and industrial fields in order to develop techniques that would lead on one side the discovery of far reaching planets, and on the other the invention of the speaking clock.

Orrery, by Daniel Gustav Cramer, organizes the reunion in one place of these two planes of time. The work revolves around the lonely activity of an orrery maker, who still fabricates mechanical devices that exist since more than two hundred years, and which aim was to represent, in three dimension, and through automated movement, the course of the stars around the Sun. Shot in a remote place in Australia, the film tells the story of the encounter in between the narrator and Brian, the artisan, in a house that connect different times and locations. It alternates meditative shots of constellational apparatuses and intimate texts that appear on a black screen. Conversations, feelings, histories succeed to each other in the form of a journal. The silences in between the words dilate time, and opens to an uncertain relationship with history, that progressively allows floating links in between the tradition of engineering, science and the prediction of astral movements and intimate narratives, the sound of a coffee machine bringing us back, at some point, to the narrator’s own place in Berlin.

There is something tragic in the depiction of Brian’s activity, who seems to act like in resistance, at distance of our world, to a conception of time that progressively shifted into complexity, infinity, and loss. Isolated in his shelter, he designs machines that perpetuate an attempt to measure duration according to a heliocentric representation of the universe. Yet the soundtrack gives the work all its density, its deepness and its meaning. Recorded at night outside of Brian’s house, it documents, in the form of a field recording of the surrounding natural sounds, the way the environment is transforming while the sun sets, as if the night sky existed in the film through the sound of nature that connects to it, as soon as darkness envelops the world. As if the night finally allowed this cosmic relationship that Walter Benjamin constantly wrote about: a constellation is nothing but a fiction, in the sense of a human construction, a surface on which shining stars, located at immense distance in between each other, exist, just like events within the writing of history, in differential time zones before being watched by us. They are connected, only in our mind, readable thanks to our sole imagination.

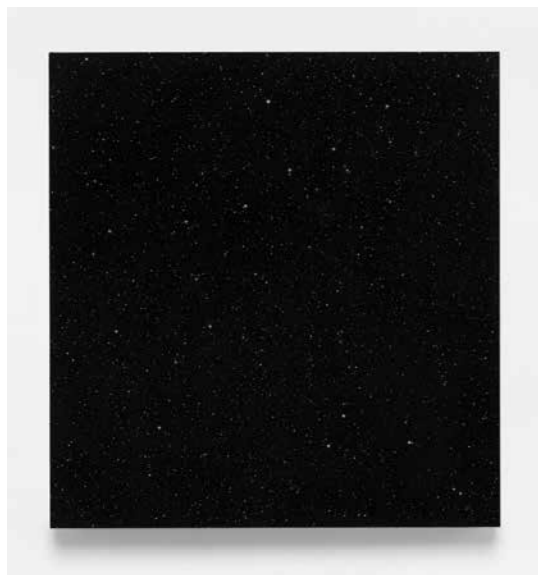
06.

(“It is always the night, or we wouldn’t need light”)

As soon as I open Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* (2006) everything becomes clearer, and darker at the same time. This quote by Thelonious Monk as a threshold: “It is always the night, or we wouldn’t need light.” This idea of a group of individuals which activities that the labyrinthine novel is following through more than one thousand pages, flying above the world aboard dirigibles, deciding to remain in the air and never come back to earth, watching human activities and going through its histories from the sky. Reading the original English title that has been nicely, even though perhaps a bit too cryptically translated into French as “*Contre-jour*” (noting the dash): this sudden revelation that we are not the only ones in history that fight against the day. Thinking of a work by Paul Thek, *Untitled (Earth Drawing I)*, from 1974, that shows, painted on newspapers, the Earth as seen from space, surrounded by darkness. Not knowing if the night that spreads around is gaining or losing terrain over the surface. Is the night (what night?) progressively enveloping the Earth, menacing us of some control? Is the

night disappearing, fading like fog, pushed away by some powerful forces, like the ones described by Jonathan Crary in *24/7* (2014), an essay that investigates how the night, all the activities that take place when the sun sets down, and sleep in particular, have become a space that has been progressively occupied, as the last remaining border of human activity that was not yet totally productive, not yet subject to the separation in between humans, not yet industrialized. Is the Night just everywhere, as we just have to connect to it, as Monk is suggesting? I am reminding of Paul Thek's letters to the curators of the Moderna Museet as he was producing his first large scale and space filling environment, *Pyramid/A Work in Process* in 1971, desperately trying to push the limits of time, the one of the conception of the work first, that he always constantly postponing; the one the installation, then, that expanded through the night, as he wanted to spread it in different places at the same moment, connecting rooms, museums in the city, with the collaboration of his troupe, and friends, and lovers, playing guitar, working, partying, living at night; and the one the work itself, that he declared *in process*, the day of the opening blurred, conjured, and not considered as the end of the work, just the beginning of something else. Thinking that this drawing might be one of the most beautiful, deep and heartbreaking thing I have ever seen.

07.



Vija Celmins, *Night Sky #24*, 2016.
© Vija Celmins. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

Dreaming that I curate a single room show with works by Vija Celmins. No chronology. A series of reproduction techniques.

A desert ground (from 1975): looking down for traces, relics, diving into geological time, reminds me of my early archeological excavations, an image of materialist historical investigations, that mirror the artist's method itself (lithography).

A close up on the sea (1969): an early work, showing the tension in between the conceptual distance and the emotional, waves and the dissolution of time, loving, patient reproduction and the meticulous fabrication of a sort of technical protection, like a screen that filters overwhelming, oceanic feelings (graphite).

A night sky (1998): a fixed image of the movement of the stars, frontality and slowing down, even stopping, entering into another time through reproduction, and in the meantime an image with no horizon, no boundaries, an icon of immersion, of deepness, the very idea that *constellation* is another word for being together, and that low-intensity might be the keyword for the creation of commonality, weak power and shining stars, then the technique: thinking that charcoal might be made out of combustion, such as the stars shine through the burning action of some sun (charcoal).

The image a tree aside the one of a night sky (1985): the feeling of a cosmic connection (mezzotint, "or the dark manner").

Then, a collection of stones (1977-1982): reproduction in bronze, one might say sculptures that transcend the whole oeuvre, stones that are found, cast, reproduced, and are also tools to reproduce (such as in lithography), eternal reproduction and infinite difference as being a specific conception of time (it might be not by chance that the work is presented in the form of a spiral of stones (bronze cast).

Marie Kølbaek Iversen, *Io/I*, 2015-, *Io/I* installation view at NLHspace, Copenhagen, 2015. © Marie Kølbaek Iversen. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Frida Gregersen

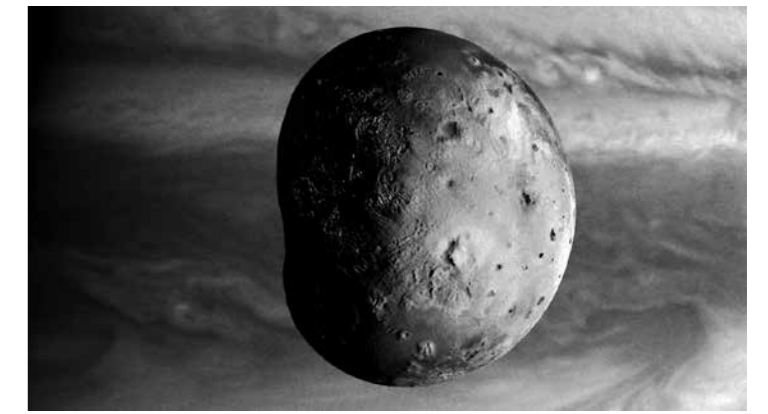


08.

(Rome)

Lecture by Marie Kølbaek Iversen accompanied by the screening of *Io/I* (2015-). The work animates satellite images of Jupiter's volcanic moon Io taken by NASA's Voyager I and II, as well as Galileo, while the artist is reading a text written at the first person. Subtly drifting from *I* as "the moon", to *Io*, the mythological priestess (after whom the moon had been named by Galileo in the early seventeenth century), who had been condemned to wander eternally after having an affair with Jupiter, to *I* and *Io* as the "Self"—the woman, the

artist herself, us, as I get it then. What fascinates me is the black and white treatment of the slowly, violently and sensuously deformation of the "body" of the planet that is menaced of self destruction each time it grows and waves, without ever exploding. I feel the tension in between all the selves that are staged there, and I find it so clear, precise, brave, intimate and moving at the same time. I am proud to be accepted amongst the women group that was invited to participate in Full Moon yoga session, followed by a conversation that put in perspective the condition of being an artist, a mother, and a women at the same moment in time, having the feeling that I rarely attended a discussion that articulated in such a crystalline way some the most important questions that are at stake in the art world today.



Marie Kølbaek Iversen, *Io/I* (still), 2015-. © Marie Kølbaek Iversen. Courtesy: the artist

09.

(Paris).

Received Suzanne Treister's tarot as part of the *Hexen 2.0* project (2009-2011). Pure constellational process. Clarity, Pynchon and technologies mentioned by Lars Bang Larsen in the introduction of his essay. Charts, maps, diagrammatic thinking: something that fascinates me, even though I never managed to produce anything like this. My infirmity lies in the impossibility to represent space. Though, I feel like I would ne able to affirm, more or less at any time, the exact time it is. Different forms of orientations and disorientations.



Suzanne Treister, *Three of Chalices - The Astrolabe* (tarot), 2009-2011. Courtesy: P*P*O*W, New York

10.

(Vancouver)

Heard in Michael Stevenson's *On How Things Behave* (2010), this fable-like fragment of a short story by Jorge Luis Borges from 1940, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* that also appears in the form of a discrete palimpsest,. Inserted in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) by W. G. Sebald:

"On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. The heresiarch would deduce from this story the reality—i.e., the continuity—of the nine coins which were recovered. It is absurd (he affirmed) to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think that they have existed—at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men—at every moment of those three periods."

In Stevenson's filmic essay, a neutral, almost mechanical, feminine voice over concludes, in the form of an open question that leads to a philosophical interrogation on our intimate relationship with time:

"If the Sun rose every morning and all the other days before, since what we imagine the origins of time, what makes us sure that it will rise tomorrow?"

Michael Stevenson, *On How Things Behave*, 2010 (stills). Courtesy: Carl Freedman Gallery, London



11.

(Reading W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, 2001)

Time, again. Mention of an observatory. Characters living in the "Andromeda Lodge" (sort of a natural history museum). Time could be measured by so many other means than "the calculation of the movements of the earth, or the average duration of sunlight each day". Why not by "the growth of trees, the disintegration of limestone"?

Jacques Austerlitz (a man who proudly never owned an alarm clock):

"If Newton really thought that time was like a river like the Thames, where is its source and into what sea does it finally flow?"

"Why do we show the hours of light and darkness in the same circle?"

"Could we not claim, said Austerlitz, that time itself has been non-concurrent over the centuries and millennia? It is not long ago, after all, that it began spreading out over everything. And is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows direction?"

12.

Giorgio Agamben, from the conclusive chapter of *Infancy and History* (1993):

"Yet for everyone there is an immediate and available experience on which a new concept of time could be founded. This is an experience so essential to human beings that an ancient Western myth makes it humankind's original home: it is pleasure. Aristotle had realized that pleasure was a heterogeneous thing in relation to the experience of quantified, continuous time. 'The form [*eidōs*] of pleasure'—he writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—is perfect [*teleion*] at any moment', adding that pleasure, unlike movement, does not occur in a space of time, but is 'within each now something whole and complete'. This lack of correspondence between pleasure and quantified time, which we seem to have forgotten, was so familiar in the Middle Ages that Aquinas could answer in the negative to the question '*utrum delectatio sit in tempore*'; and it was this same awareness which upheld the Provençal troubadours' Edenic project of a perfect pleasure [*fin'amors, joï*] outside any measurable duration. This does not mean that pleasure has its place in eternity. The Western experience of time is split between eternity and continuous linear time. The dividing point through which the two relate is the instant as a discrete, elusive point. Against this conception, which dooms any attempt to master time, there must be opposed one whereby the true site of pleasure, as man's primary dimension, is neither precise, continuous time nor eternity, but history. [...] True historical materialism does not pursue an empty mirage of continuous progress along infinite linear time, but is ready at any moment to stop time, because it holds the memory that man's original home is pleasure. It is this time which is experienced in authentic revolutions, which, as Benjamin remembers, have always been lived as a halting of time and an interruption of chronology."

13.

(Home)

"What is relevant always arrives in good time. Or rather, the party does not begin until the last guest has arrived. Perhaps this brings us to a historicist arabesque around that wonderful Prussian saying, 'The later the evening, the more beautiful the guests'." (Walter Benjamin, in a Letter to Gerhard Scholem, Berlin, August 1, 1928).

Yann Chateigné studied literature, history of art, archaeology, has been mentored by a famous museum director, learned by collaborating with artists, collectively curated in Barcelona, Eindhoven and London, solitarily wrote for local and international publications, obliquely lectured in Brussels, Vilnius, Zurich, researched psychedelia, the occult, technologies, taught curating, history, cultural theory, lead a museum program in Bordeaux, founded a publishing house in Paris and is a professor at Geneva School of Art and Design.

