

# Slow Time



Kimsooja A Laundry Woman - Yamuna River, India 2000 video

**Marcus Verhagen** discusses globalisation and time

SOME FIVE MINUTES INTO *EASY RIDER*, 1969, WYATT, A LACONIC YOUNG BIKER PLAYED BY PETER FONDA, STOPS HIS CHOPPER AND LOOKS AT HIS WATCH, CONSIDERS IT FOR A MOMENT, THEN PULLS IT OFF AND THROWS IT TO THE GROUND BEFORE SETTING OFF INTO THE CALIFORNIAN DESERT WITH HIS FRIEND BILLY (DENNIS HOPPER). Having just made a mint on a cocaine deal, the two are about to embark on a journey across America that is also, for Wyatt, a quest for a new mode of living; and in discarding his watch, he is signalling, a little obviously, that from now on his time is his own to pass as he pleases. Over the following week or so, he and Billy waste time in detours, they do time in a prison cell, they slow time down on marijuana and stretch it on LSD. But the experiment ends in failure, as Wyatt recognises well before he and Billy are killed on a country road in the South. And the reason for its failure is touched on earlier by their alcoholic fellow-traveller George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) when he says, 'It's real hard to be free when you're bought and sold in the marketplace'.

Wolfgang Staehle  
 Comburg 2001-  
 real time webcam



Time was a major stake in the cultural and ideological conflicts of the late 60s. Two years before *Easy Rider* was released, the British historian EP Thompson wrote a seminal article in which he argued that industrial capitalism had ushered in a sharpened rational conception of time, one that was no longer shaped by the rhythms of the activities that filled it but by the synchronisation of increasingly regimented tasks in the modern workplace. Thompson showed that employers in the emerging industrial order in Britain were aided by the growing availability of affordable timepieces and by the puritan critique of idleness as they worked to impose tight and strenuous schedules on their workers. In Thompson's own words: 'The employer must use the time of his labour, and see it is not wasted: not the task but the value of time when it is reduced to money is dominant. Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent.' Other commentators reached similar conclusions and applied them more explicitly to their own time, as Guy Debord did in *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in the same year. He wrote that time, divorced from the cyclical patterns of pre-industrial society, had come to be seen as abstract and exchangeable – as, in other words, a commodity. That was precisely the notion of time that Wyatt was hoping to leave behind when he threw his watch away.

Today Wyatt's gesture still strikes a chord. It finds a distant, often glib echo in the writings of commentators who have expanded on the benefits of slow sex, slow food, slow exercise and slow travel in a large number of new lifestyle manuals and self-help books. In a more promising subgenre of the literature on slowness, other writers have championed idleness as a defence against the demands of modern living. The most famous among them, Corinne Maier, counsels against working too hard at the office in *Hello Laziness*, 2004, a witty, acerbic diatribe on the inanities of corporate culture that did little to endear her to her employers at Electricité de France.

Today, as in the late 60s, time is widely perceived as a crucial arena in the struggle to resist the more harmful effects of the economic order, but the terms of the debate have changed to allow for present conditions. The geographer David Harvey and others have pointed out that a new economy of time has emerged in tandem with the development of global trade: the processes of globalisation are underpinned by technologies that allow real-time communications, quickened transactions and cheaper and faster transport, intensifying what Harvey, in *The Condition of Post-modernity*, 1989, calls 'space-time compression'. Meanwhile French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski contends, in *Time Passing*, 2003, that globalisation has harmonised the rhythms and temporalities of different regions, bringing large areas of the globe into line with western notions of time. Agacinski goes on to argue that one effective resistance to the present order is to waste or give time, to let it pass, to use it unproductively. That is an argument that Wyatt would have understood, though he might have pointed out that such an attitude to time does not come free of charge; after all, he and Billy bought their idleness with the proceeds of their drug deal.

The same preoccupation with time is also widely discernible in contemporary art. In 2004-05, Tate Modern put on 'Time Zones', a show that examined the cadences of social rituals across a variety of different locations. The catalogue contained an excerpt from Agacinski's book, which seems to have served as the show's intellectual lodestar. Later in 2005 *frieze* magazine brought out a 'Slow Issue', while the Lyon Biennial, titled 'Experiencing Duration', opened in the autumn (see AM291). Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans, who curated it, explicitly looked back to the 60s and 70s, showing the work of artists like Douglas Huebler and Yoko Ono, while stressing in the catalogue their engagement with an art of the *longue durée*. Last

year an exhibition called 'Artempo' was put on at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, the show focusing on signs of impermanence in recent and not so recent art; and the list could go on. Plainly, both artists and curators are attending to contemporary notions of time and to the global pressures that colour them.

So is there such a thing as slow art? Certainly, some artists have offered visions of a slowed existence. Wolfgang Staehle's *Comburg*, 2001, which was included in 'Time Zones', is a live web feed of a medieval Benedictine monastery near Schwäbisch Hall in southern Germany; the image is updated every four seconds, generally recording only slight changes in the light or movements in the trees below the monastery as branches bend in the wind. The piece clearly encourages the viewer to reflect on the cycles of nature and monastic devotion, the near absence of movement serving as the outward sign of an apparently curative slowness. Staehle has said of the work: 'I wanted viewers to consider how they experience time ... We're all running around all the time. I wanted to make people feel aware.' In a sympathetic reading, the piece might be seen as intimating that you can escape the global information society in remote places such as this one, where the temporalities of humankind and the natural world are more closely attuned.

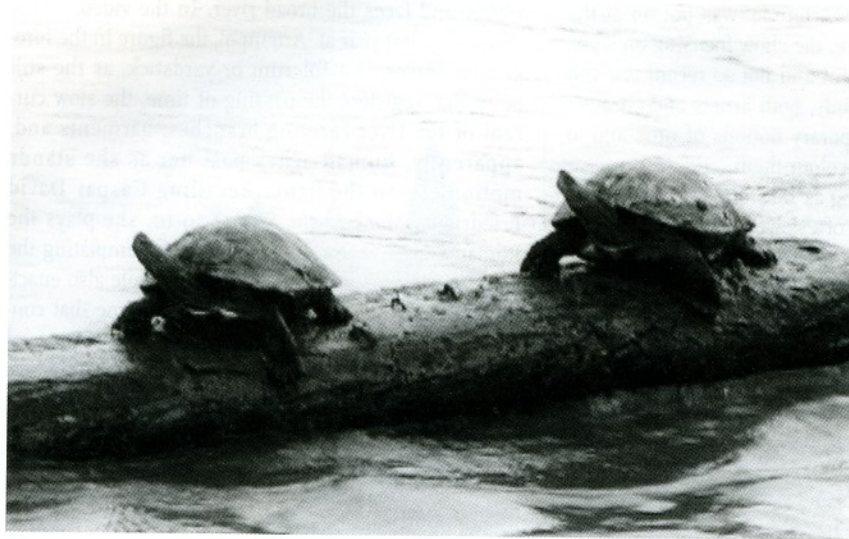
Never mind the triteness of the symbolism, which is worthy of a travel brochure – what is troubling about this work is that Staehle's optimism is grounded in nostalgia. The utopian affirmation of slowness in *Comburg* rests on a disengagement with the conditions of the present, conditions which, unavoidably, still pervade the work. Given that the webcast is relatively rare in contemporary art and that a live web feed is not usually blown up to fill a large screen, the viewer is as likely to marvel at the technical novelty as to reflect on the quiet unfurling of time in *Comburg*. Staehle's piece, depending as it does on the near-instantaneous transmission of visual data from a distant location, offers not just the pleasure of slowness but also the thrill of speed. After all, the webcam is used in videoconferencing; it is one of many tools that have contributed to the ratcheting-up of space-time compression, bridging space and so saving time for those who believe they have little to spare. In fact, *Comburg* can be read, against the grain of Staehle's own comments and imagery, as suggesting that the information society is tentacular and that information technologies mediate even those areas of experience that are seemingly beyond their reach. So the work inadvertently calls attention to the tenuous relevance of its own defence of slowness. Like many of the writers of the Slow Movement, Staehle aligns the slow with the local and sees in it a means of recapturing a lost relation to time, but in stressing the restorative power of slowness he has to elide the systemic pressures that condition our contemporary experience of time, pressures that resurface in *Comburg* every four seconds as the image brings itself up to date with a shiver.

Staehle is just one of many artists who are currently making work that expands on the virtues of slowness. Kimsooja has explored similar territory in *A Laundry Woman – Yamuna River, India*, 2000, which features the artist herself as she stands with her back to the

viewer and faces the broad river. In the video, which was shown last year at 'Artempo', the figure in the foreground serves as a fulcrum or yardstick, as the still point that registers the passing of time, the slow current of the river carrying branches, garments and, apparently, human ashes past her as she stands motionless on the bank. Recalling Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, 1809-10, she plays the Romantic part of the solitary figure contemplating the sublime vastness of the natural world while also enacting and defending an understanding of time that conforms to the cycles of nature rather than to the pulse of human enterprise. Like Staehle, Kimsooja adopts a nostalgic, quasi-mystical perspective on time, her utopian longing for slowness lapsing into a numinous escapism as it isolates itself from the conditions that motivate it. Both artists reproduce the tendency of the Slow Movement to consider our experience of time as if it could be divorced from its economic and technological determinants, as if being in time were an exclusively private matter, a question of attitude or lifestyle.

Other artists, fortunately, have resisted the solutions of the Slow Movement, many concentrating instead on space-time compression and its local manifestations and effects. This is true, for instance, of Fikret Atay's *Rebels of the Dance*, 2002, a video piece that was also shown in 'Time Zones' and that follows two teenage boys as they loiter in front of a cash machine in Batman, a town in eastern Turkey. Fitfully, hesitantly, they perform what looks like a traditional dance while chanting in Kurdish. The bank machine behind them acts as an emblem for the newfound wealth of the oil-refining town, for its integration into larger financial and industrial circuits and for the speed of computerised transactions: according to the old maxim, 'time is money', and so it is here, the machine saving time and hence money for both the bank and its customers. So where does that leave the boys? They look quizzically at the machine from time to time but mostly ignore it as they dance and loaf around; they, apparently, are time-rich and cash-poor and so have no use for it. Agacinski and many of the writers of the Slow Movement maintain that wasting time is an act of resistance, but the significance of the boys' idleness is not so clear-cut. True, there are hints of defiance in the pleasure they seem to take in their dance and in the stealthy glances they occasionally direct at the camera, but their time-wasting is also a reflection of their economic marginalisation in a town which, despite its growing prosperity, has a high unemployment rate. Where Staehle and Kimsooja romanticise the local and the slow, Atay demonstrates that the local is penetrated by the circuitry of the global and that slowness may turn out, for some, to be a deeply ambiguous prize. As Zygmunt Bauman recently pointed out, the benefits of 'downshifting' are more apparent to those who have first managed to 'upshift'.

Like Atay, Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla bring a double-edged wit to their consideration of time and globalisation. In *Amphibious (Login-Logout)*, 2005, a video that tracks the progress of six turtles as they sit on a log and float with the current in China's Pearl River Delta, the camera occasionally views the riverbank from



Jennifer Allora &  
Guillermo Calzadilla  
*Amphibious (Login-Lt*  
2005 video

the turtles' perspective. We glide by ramshackle dwellings and then modern housing developments, we pass small workshops and then smokestacks and shipyards, but inasmuch as our gaze is aligned with that of the turtles, we are implicitly invited to view the unfolding landscape as alien and unintelligible, which in a sense it is, given that industrialisation in Guangdong Province has been spectacularly rapid but uneven, turning the delta, as the footage shows, into an anarchic patchwork of sweatshops and factories, slums and condominiums. At other times, the camera dwells on the turtles, which then look alien themselves, their immobility standing in stark contrast with the buzz of economic activity on the banks. But lining up on the log as they do, they can also be seen as forming a queue and so acting as a parodic reminder of the logjams and tailbacks that result from explosive growth.

What Allora & Calzadilla show is that, under the impact of globalisation, different temporalities mesh and collide, the tempo of global trade often coexisting with and progressively undermining the different cadences of local activities. And these temporal dislocations are repeated in the video's formal texture, the camerawork being smooth at some times and choppy at others while the editing is alternately brisk and breezy. The same attention to the artist's medium as a crucial mediating agent in the description of new and conflicting temporalities is apparent in the work of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (Young-Hae Chang & Marc Voge), a duo that makes text-based animations viewable on the internet. Their pieces advance witty, meandering, querulous commentaries on a variety of topics, from state propaganda (*Cunnilingus in North Korea*, 2003) to the ontology of art (*The Art of Sleep*, 2006), their texts flashing up on screen, phrase by phrase, to the accompaniment of musical scores. Throughout their work they combine the rapid, staccato cadences of cybernetic communications – some of their texts unfolding so quickly that the viewer can barely follow – with the suave rhythms of jazz tracks, which point to an experience of time that retains a kinetic bodily logic. So the pieces

reflect corrosively on the short attention span of the surfer while providing, in the jazz notes, a sensuous counterpoint that teasingly drives home the phenomenal cost of space-time compression.

As artists like Atay and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries well understand, to address contemporary ways of being in time is to tackle an urgent and politically resonant issue. Anyone who is in any doubt on this score only has to consider the recent disputes in France over the introduction and then the partial repeal of the 35-hour working week. This is the central failing of the Slow Movement; though occasionally, as in Mai Hellebrand's *Hello Laziness*, it considers the benefits of slowness in a properly political light, for the most part it sees time in misleading terms as a matter of personal well-being, putting forward simple, private solutions to complex, public ills. The same misapprehension underlies the work of artists like Staehle and Kimsooja, who reprise the concerns and symbolism of the Slow Movement, making romantic pieces that view the experience of time in isolation from the forces that currently shape it. Much more convincing are works that take a more clear-eyed view of globalisation, often reflecting in the process on their own technical means and temporal organisation. Far from positing an ideal world that stands outside the networks of global capital and operates at a saner pace, artists such as Allora & Calzadilla make pieces that insinuate themselves into those networks and underline the lapses and discontinuities that accompany the processes of globalisation and dislocate the temporal ground of experience. As they explore those lapses, they also occasionally draw out the pressures that buck or impede the tempo of global exchange; they highlight the times at which the pace of experience is keyed to desire and not to necessity – and as they partition themselves within global circuits, they can dwell on those counter-currents in time without sliding into escapist inconsequence. ■

MARCUS VERHAGEN is an art historian and critic.