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Doing Time

Darren Almond

Darren Almond is entranced by the Westway, the great elevated hulk of a road that carves through London in a brutal arc of concrete and cars. It soars past his studio window, sweeps out of the city and up the backbone of England to end in the industrial North near his hometown of Wigan. The road roars day and night, an endlessly evolving, kinetic sculpture, connecting him to where he came from. Like an English Romantic, a Turner or a 'Mad' John Martin, Almond is seduced by the sublimity of the industrial; like a latter-day Futurist, he is fascinated by the rhythm of the machine. Trains and travel, clocks and television, automatic fans and electronic music: these are the ingredients for works that meditate on changing conceptions of time and space, as experienced by human subjects caught between an industrial past and an electronic present.

As a very young boy, Almond used to escape from the small coalmining village in which he grew up, boarding trains going anywhere and losing himself in the rail network which veins across England. As an adult, he fabricates a sculpture for a train, a 'Darren James Almond' nameplate for an Intercity 125 bound from Paddington to Cornwall. Realised in British Rail's distinctive livery, the placard summons every trainspotter's wishful dream, the endless pleasures of speed and unknown places. Trains irrevocably changed experiences of time and space. The rail journey forced time to play at new and varied rhythms, while space became condensed into arrival and departure points. The Greeks understood space as an enclosure, a volume bounded by certain limits: trains presented a new image as space shrunk into points on a linear diagram, connected by measures of time rather than volume. The fusion of time and space through locomotion finds expression in Almond's hypnotic film Schwebebahn (1995). It features the Sky Train, Wuppertal's extraordinary proto-Futurist public transport system, engineered at the turn of the century - a monorail hanging upside down from a 20 kilometre track which snakes through the German town's deep valley at vertiginous distance from the ground. Over three days, Almond journeyed from the beginning of the line to its end and back again, filming inside and outside of the train in one long unedited take. His footage is then stretched out, slowed down, flipped upside-down and turned inside-out, a series of manipulations that subtly disorientate perceptions. The inverted train appears to be the right way round, but as it trundles along its ever-too-slow, endlessly backward journey through the valley, the scene dissolves into

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dreamscape as river and road flood the top of the frame, sky the bottom, and passengers disembark in reverse out of carriages. Synched to a mellow electronic dance track, and cast in a gorgeous, impressionistic palette, Schwebebahn is an oneiric piece. It is a journey that induces a kind of gentle motion sickness as time stretches and space dissolves in a series of uncertain reference points - akin, metaphorically, to the way in which time and space are experienced in the unconscious not as distinct, manageable entities, but as an interpenetrating, indivisible flow. While Schwebebahn recalls cinematic visions of the future - the visionary transport systems of Fritz Lang or Ridley Scott's memorable cities - here we are journeying backwards, not forwards, through time, to an industrial past once capable of imagining a utopian future.

The histories of clocks and trains - arguably modernity's most significant inventions - are bound inexorably. Clocks gave time form, rendering it spatial; trains rendered space temporal. Time, we should remember, was not always made up of little pieces joined together and moving in one direction, its passing marked by the metronomic, machine beat of the clock. Benedictine monks conceived the clock in the Middle Ages to combat an unruly world of heterogeneous rhythms - the circadian pulses of the human body, the rhythm of the earth circling the sun, the cycles of the religious calendar - and since then we have increasingly lived time abstracted from nature and from the body. Tuesday (1440 minutes) (with clock) (1996) is a photographic work that fuses body time to clock time, a performance piece in which Almond sets out to physically experience, or rather, endure, each minute in a single day. Every time that the digital clock in his studio flips over to the next minute, he takes a photograph, laying out the resulting 1,440 images sequentially in a vast grid. Time is pictured according to the logic of the clock, as a series of fixed, discrete, elements occurring spatially between two points. But beneath this tight geometry a different tempo intrudes, as the blue light of dawn and the pink light of dusk create organic washes of colour across the fixed grid. Solar time, body time, clock time - each is implicated in Almond's shooting of the day.

Tuesday grew out of the earlier A Real Time Piece (1996) which Almond refers to as a performance - a performance starring an empty space. Presented over 24 hours in a small gallery in east central London, a large video projection presents an image of an interior. It is a corner in Almond's studio. Furnished with a draughtsman's table, a desk fan, a light, a telephone, a swivel chair, a digital clock: clean and functional, unextraordinary, bare of the detritus of traditional studio interiors, a place for intellectual effort, not sensual play with materials. The artist is absent. Nothing much happens. Time drags slowly. A minute passes and the clock flips over with a resounding crash - it takes a second to associate the changed number with the noise. Someone joins you in the gallery space and dials a number on their mobile. The phone rings in the image before you, but no-one picks it

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up. You realise, suddenly, that the inert scene in front of you is in fact unfolding in real, not recorded, time. A Real Time Piece propels us uncannily into a whole new domain of artistic representation, one in which the image, the representation, is experienced simultaneously with the moment it is happening. It is an artwork that no one will ever experience again exactly as you have, and most startlingly, it is an artwork where no one can know what will happen next. A live broadcast - a complex network of cables and microwaves, courtesy of the BBC, bounce the image of Almond's studio from one side of London to the other - A Real Time Piece is television at its purest, stripped of clamorous content in order to focus on the medium's peculiar spatio-temporal characteristics. The work, like live television, poses a philosophical paradox as it suspends the viewer in an 'equivocal space between "representation" and reality'. 1 In it, we witness an image that is simultaneous with reality, in which the normal divisions of space and time collapse in a representation of pure presence, pure Now. And yet how can we believe the real and its representation to be absolutely congruent? A Real Time Piece is philosophically rich; it opens up the paradox of time to art, through the medium of television.

The paradox of time has taunted scientists and tormented philosophers since culture began. How can we define 'now'? It is the only bit of time whose definition we can even logically attempt, the only part that truly exists, because the past is always over, and the future has never yet begun. But the present moment, the Now, eternally eludes understanding - as soon as we attempt to grasp it, it is already transformed into the past. Science never gives up searching for the duration of the present, measuring time in smaller and smaller intervals - the vibration of an atom, 10-44 seconds - but it can never solve the puzzle. Live television is the perfect visual medium for a contemporary age living at the speed of electricity. Computers and television push the project of the railway to its logical extreme, by collapsing space and time into a perpetual present, and demanding that we occupy that present, the Now. And yet it is the one place we can never fully inhabit, because it exists beyond understanding, beyond human consciousness, beyond the body, and 'the more we insist on occupying the instant, the more decisively it eludes us'. 2 A Real Time Piece forces a recognition of the frustrating ambiguity of time (metaphorised in the absurdly over-amplified clock) which worries at the heart of human experience, and is exacerbated in the technological age. It is significant, given this psychic friction, that two of Almond's subsequent works add a psychological dimension to themes of temporal and spatial experience.

Like A Real Time Piece, HMP Pentonville (1997) is a live broadcast, a performance of limited duration. A television camera relays the interior of a deserted cell from Her Majesty's Prison Pentonville live to London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. The tiny cell is blown up to enormous

scale on the walls of the gallery, monumentally oppressive in its bleak, institutional anonymity. Almond wanted to picture a space he found impossible to imagine - a close friend was imprisoned and he was troubled by his inability to visualise where they were. What he finds is a dead, inert space, filled with a bunk bed, two chairs, an opaque window, glossed walls. Nothing moves, nothing changes, except time and sound. In the frame, the video's digital counter rattles through seconds at hysterical rate, and the incidental acoustics of the prison are amplified to unbearable pitch - doors clang shut, keys scrape in metal doors, footsteps bang, voices in the distance rise in a cacophony. The unremitting volume of sound traps you in the gallery in a way analogous to the containing walls of the cell, forcing you to occupy the space as it invades from every direction.

Prisons are about time and space in extremis - hence the metonym 'inside', the phrase 'to do time'. Space is minimised, time maximised, as punishment for the crime. Prison space is the opposite of expansive 'train space', as it turns in on itself, encloses, fixes and represses the body. Prison is a place where the aporia of time, the paradox of the now, begins to unravel, because it is here that the present becomes palpable, as time slows down and weighs down, in 'a chronology that hesitates, a present moment that persists, in hours that never end.' 3 But ultimately the paradox of time is only resolved with death, when the Now is finally fixed in the space of the tomb. The companion piece Oswiecim, March 1997 metaphorises this, chillingly, by taking us on a journey to another architecture of incarceration, perhaps the most terrible. Auschwitz is not named or pictured. Almond approaches the subject obliquely using time and travel as metaphors for the unrepresentability of the Holocaust, in a way reminiscent of Claude Lanzmann's seminal Shoah, with its relentlessly repeated footage of track shot from a moving train. Two parallaxed 8mm films project side by side on the wall. In grainy black and white, slowed down by 81%, one records the bus stop where visitors disembark outside the Auschwitz museum; the other the bus stop lying on the opposite side of the street, the point at which one would board a bus heading further into Poland. Shadowy presences linger at the Museum bus stop, the other is deserted. Cars pass and snow drives diagonally across the scene, threatening to blot out the already grainy image. Time passes unutterably slowly, waiting for a bus which never arrives. It is a scene of hellish immobility, a site of oblivion, a place where time and space have locked in an eternal present, numbed by the cold and by history.

Whether through the painterly sound-and-vision aesthetic of his films, the performative aspect of his live broadcasts, or the off-beat mechanics of his kinetic sculptures, for Almond it is impossible to conceive of time and space without acknowledging the centrality of the human subject. His diverse work points to our profoundly heterogeneous experience of time and space as refracted through the dual prisms of technology and history - a significant thought for a

culture that often believes it has mastered both.

1. Scott McQuire, Visions of Modernity, pub. Sage Publications, 1998

2. ibid.

3. Georges Perec, Species of Space and Other Pieces, pub. Penguin, 1997

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