

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



# 27

COMMENTARIES

## Slow Objects

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## 'Slow Objects'

Vanessa Billy, Edith Dekyndt and Erin Shirreff

### Fictive Time

At some point in 2001, I got an email from my brother asking me to draw a map. The night before, chatting over a few drinks he and an old friend had remembered the time capsule the three of us had buried in our backyard in 1990 (give or take a year). They had decided to go and find the capsule. It was the middle of the night, and a young couple was now living in the house where we had grown up; so they went to the train tracks that ran behind the house, jumped the fence and began digging in the dark. A dozen or so holes dug into the thick Georgia clay later, they gave up.

I marked what I remembered as the rough spot with an X; the next night they returned, and after a few more exploratory holes finally found it, or what was left. We had smartly put our cache of items in a few plastic bags, tucked into a cardboard Lego box shielded by a few more bags. A stew of mulch and tattered plastic was the majority of what they brought up.

The memory of this minor escapade was brought to mind by a work of Edith Dekyndt's, encountered at a recent show in London – a small boulder of crumbling clay that sat in the middle of the room. Inside, apparently, were a collection of items that her mother had selected from an old house, covered in cloth and then packed with wet clay that was drying as the show ran. A sort of family time capsule where the contents are withheld, but their preservation – their persistence and aging – are what is presented to us.

The contents of Dekyndt's time capsule remain known only to two people. I suppose ours was known only to three people, though none of us can remember what else we had put in our flimsy vessel. All that survived was a few coins – a penny, a dime – and a Donatello teenage mutant ninja turtle toy.

The urge to make a time capsule is a peculiar one, in that it is an archive of sorts, a supposedly representative sample of a time, that is also bound up with the desire to be found again. Who do we think we are communicating with? And what if it just happens to be only yourself, ten years down the line, revealing nothing but your own earlier idealised aspirations to commune with the future? Michel Foucault once wrote of the

archive as “the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which outside ourselves, delimits us.”<sup>1</sup> A gift that hems us in.

Dekyndt's time capsule in London, like the other surfaces and puddles hanging around in *Slow Objects*, asks us to consider materials over a duration, things still in process and in the midst of being transformed; what we have gathered is a cluster of time capsules and time traps. My own insistence on this is itself, inevitably, a time-rooted issue: time travel could be said to be my generation's paradigm, or its pervasive metaphor – the postmodernism of the 1980s and 90s existed of pillaging and collaging every other point in time to make it appear something like the present. Why else would you have youngsters so versed in the delicacies of the space-time continuum? This grew for me into an obsession with time paradoxes, time lapses, parallel timelines and the 4th dimension. A recurring entry point for me is Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), ostensibly a book about the bombing of Dresden in World War II, where the main human character jumps back and forth in his own life. We encounter a set of aliens, the Tralfamadorians, who view all time at once, seeing the past, present and future simultaneously like we might see a mountain range; a human, to them, appears like a sort of centipede, with a baby at one end and an old person at the other.

I tried for an extended part of my twenties to adapt the book – to write a film script (the existing 1972 film is a brave but limping affair), or perhaps, I thought eventually, more appropriately as a deck of cards that could be reshuffled and chosen at random. After a long while it sunk in that the very fact it functioned in describing and summoning up an experience of time travel was its structure: as a novel read from beginning to end, it's the linearity which permits an understanding of the non-linear jumps back and forth. Perhaps, I had to conclude, we need these things, these external tools of fiction, to help us understand how time runs, or might shift. Conceits that step outside of the normal running of things to help us appreciate its flow and jumps.

Take, for example, Dekyndt's *Deodant* (2015): the oxidized green dripping down the stairs literally describing a trail that we can retrace with our minds, imagining the hours it drips, splatters, pools and eventually dries. Here the spilling defines the work, accident is the same as essence. Her *Slow Object* series is a set of experiments and observations of material in action, perhaps only slightly offset from what

we might call normal experience: the extended breathing of a wrapped chimney, that suggests the house as a sort of body with its own living rhythms, ones tied up in the infinite chaotic nuances of air pressure and the wider rhythms of the earth itself. The fourth work in the *Slow Object* series consists of a hand juggling a rubber band, though it is unsettlingly stiff – it rises slowly as a near-static circle, settling again in what we read as slow motion, only eventually grasping that we are seeing the action taking place under water. It's not so much that the objects are literally slow – what so-called inanimate object isn't 'slow'? – but that Dekyndt makes a space for observation of objectness, watching objects which might have their own fictions for time.

Vanessa Billy's *Refresh Refresh (Mould Squeeze)* (2016), has a similar sense of persistence, or the insistence of accident, where a squeezed lemon rather than being cast away is cast in bronze as two oversized halves. The speckled oxidized outside and the vibrantly reflective inside make the former fruit into a sort of geode: a moment of juicing turned into a geologic artefact, which in my imagination solidifies the teardrops of dripping pulp into hard crystals; though here all we can see is our own distorted faces looking back – the 'refresh' of the title, perhaps, being the incessant present seen in its mirror. Billy's practice is full of such slippages and puns; things *almost* becoming other things. There is an elusive but persistent sense of optical illusion, or a sort of spectrum that runs between external or factual phenomena and perceived phenomena, a spectrum that disregards distinctions of occurrence, whether human-made or not.

What these objects offer are throwaway moments trapped in amber, or glimpses from an elongated process. What got me thinking, though, was whether the time span was held within the objects, letting us grasp a slower sense of time that normally eludes us – which is innate in them – or whether we endow them with it. What direction does the slowness come from? Or, if we think of time as the fourth dimension, where does the fourth dimension start?

It certainly doesn't start from the geometric diagrams often used to explain the concept; those are simply stiff, unyielding diamonds. With our memories, projections, layers of experience that we constantly read back and forth in our thoughts onto the present, it feels more appropriate to try and acknowledge that we already live in four dimensions. Is the external stuff we make just fictions of slowness, fictions of other possible times; or reminders?

In Erin Shirreff's photos and films of sculpture, the layers that might mediate the present and the experience of the present are themselves turned into the material. Photographs of sculptures sit before us, animated by other means. The content doesn't change, but how it appears does, as if in some sort of alternative cycle of day to night. In *Medardo Rosso, Madame X, 1896* (2013), the image of the sculpture was itself photographed hundreds of times from different angles, printed in large format and then filmed digitally under different light sources, the resulting footage edited together in a series of cross fades. The resulting image is static but not: experience, Shirreff implies, is a gloss on surfaces.

Experience, if we might consider that the basis for our sense of time, comes from the Latin root of *experiri*, to try; itself from *perior*, which also means disappearance, or death. It would seem that our own understanding of the four-dimensional brain itself constantly disappears, necessitating the impulse to create objects, tools of narrative, which might reignite or readjust that understanding. Which is to say, the objects aren't presenting fiction, our perceived distance from their time dislocations is the fiction.

Perhaps, like the Tralfamadorians, we might benefit from a different model of time, to counter our linear tendencies. Rather than defining time as a thing in itself to attempt to understand, these slow objects suggest that it is the mediation of experience and objects that we might conceive of as time. Think of it, then, as the pouring of an extremely viscous liquid: the point of impact – on whatever surface – something akin to the present, and the slowly spreading thick mass the distribution of the past and future, a pool which we might run our fingers through in any direction.

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1. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans AM Sheridan Smith, Pantheon, 2001, p.147.



Image 1: Vanessa Billy, 'Old Cloud', 2017. Patinated bronze.  
Erin Shirreff, 'Relief (no.3)', 2015. Archival pigment print. Collection of The Perimeter, London.  
Vanessa Billy, 'Les fonds qui pleurent', 2017. Nylon net, bio-resin, dye.

Image 2: Edith Dekyndt, 'Underground 05 (Tournai)', 2017 (detail). Fabric.

Image 3: Vanessa Billy, 'Old Cloud', 2017 (detail). Patinated bronze.

Photos by Ruth Clark.