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Chronophobia: doing time

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CHRONOPHOBIA:
DOING TIME

A thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

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ABSTRACT

Chronophobia is the fear of time—characterized by panic, anxiety, and claustrophobia. Also known as prison neurosis, it may be the most common anxiety disorder in prison inmates. Sooner or later, almost all prisoners suffer chronophobia to some degree and become terrified by the duration and immensity of time. This is often called going “stir crazy.”

The work in this installation subjectively explores interpretations of the passage of time through various multimedia experiences. Interactivity is a key feature of several installation components. There is also limited use of traditional print media graphics.

References to time in music, literature and film are incorporated typographically as well as audibly and visually, while non-interactive motion graphics are represented through digital video. All of the work utilizes appropriated images and sound as well as original material.

The prison and being-a-prisoner scenarios certainly present powerful literal images for interpretation. However, chronophobia is used here as a metaphor for other skewed perceptions of time present in the lives of ordinary, non-prisoner individuals.

Influences for the work come from various twentieth-century video artists, filmmakers, and graphic designers, with an emphasis on surrealism.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The passage of time is simply an illusion created by our brains.

—Julian Barbour, British physicist

The subjectivity of time as a thesis topic grew out of an initial interest in chronophobia—the fear of time. As the most common anxiety disorder in prison inmates, chronophobia and its physical indications are commonly referenced with the colloquialism “going stir crazy.”¹ Eventually this topic became the metaphor for a more universal concept regarding skewed perceptions of time’s passage in ordinary lives. The decision to focus in this direction was crystallized by the events of September 11, 2001. In reflecting on the ordeals of those directly involved in the tragedy, many of us have re-evaluated the moments of our own lives.

An experiential video installation supplemented by print graphics contains the artist’s interpretations of certain subjective elements of time. As a whole, the project seeks not only to present the artist’s concepts, but also to invoke a self-reflexive experience for the viewer.

The Internet, television and film all influence one another in style and even content to some extent. With transiency and illusion versus reality and truth as fundamental—though paradoxical—elements of these media, viewers may have varying interpretations of a single piece. The nature of the electronic impulses which produce and define moving images can be compared to the physiological processes of nerves in the human body. As McLuhan stated, “All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical...electric circuitry [is] an extension of the central nervous system.”²

As we are fascinated and entertained by moving images, we are also informed and influenced by them. McLuhan further stated, “Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world.”³

This project explores video's flexibility as an art medium through the use of original material as well as through a process of recontextualization. Re-editing and re-purposing of both audio and video copyrighted content is a relatively recent practice which has become more common as computer technology decreased in price and increased in capability. Just as DJs now remix music to create a new work, a new genre of filmmaking is experimenting with re-editing mainstream films. This new era of recontextualization, referred to as "the age of open-source film," although controversial at present, is viewed as inevitable.⁴ The clips from appropriated audio and films which are woven throughout this project are a part of this trend. However, from a fine art perspective, this re-purposing and re-combining with original material is directly related to traditional collage and found-object assemblage.

CHAPTER 2 THE MEDIA CHOICE: SUITABILITY AND APPLICATION

Use of space, sizes, and proportions have all been considerations in the design of the installation. Small, 13" television monitors were chosen for three reasons:

- 1) The small size necessitates that the viewer stand closer, thereby becoming more connected to the work.
- 2) The small scale of the screens and their images implies a more intimate subject and experience.
- 3) The smallness underscores the seeming insignificance of these rather ordinary events. The one exception, of course, is the 9/11 segment, included in the same format for two reasons: first, because of its universal impact on our daily lives, and, second, because most of the world experienced this event and its continuing aftermath through television broadcasts.

As another concession to the expectations of a media-saturated public, all of the episodes are in extremely brief time formats—the shortest being 30 seconds. This delivery, as well as the random order in which the episodes play, is meant to engage viewers who have been pre-conditioned by broadcast TV to channel changes, quick cuts, “sound bites,” fast action, and commercial interruptions.

One of the challenges of using video as an art medium is trying to actively engage viewers in a form which is inherently passive. By creating two opportunities for visitors to see themselves in the work through concealed cameras, it is hoped that they will question this inclusion of their own images for a self-reflexive experience.

One monitor on Video Wall Clock is reserved for a live feed image of the visitor(s) standing in front of the piece. No sound is used here, as the goal is for the viewer to focus on the purpose of his/her image as a component in this diverse collage.

At Time Corridor, another station within the installation, visitors pass between plexi-glass panels, viewing images printed on vellum. The panels are horizontal, presenting the common format of a timeline and our linear view of time. These static, printed images

reference “past” and “future.” Interacting with these panels, the visitors’ figures, as seen through and between the panels, are captured by a video camera. These live images are then transmitted to the TVs in Triptych at the end of this plexiglass “corridor.” Here the visitor represents present time—caught between the past and future; the transmitted “live” images represent a mere perceived present.

CHAPTER 3 ABOUT THE WORK: TECHNIQUE AND SYMBOLOGY

The centerpiece of this installation is the 12-channel Video Wall Clock which incorporates a series of life/time studies in an episodic format. Each piece is designed to represent a particular event with which most of us in Western society can identify, ie., either through personal experience or symbolically. Various cinematic effects and techniques are used to imbue the pieces with a subjective quality. The goal was for a diegesis—a figurative, or indirect delivery of the subject matter. The pieces are not intended to be documentaries but rather fictive allegories which serve as stimuli for self-reflection.

Chronophobia, a rear screen projection video, is the introductory piece in the installation. An indistinct “everyman” character moves behind a screen seemingly trapped as he continuously reaches in unsuccessful attempts to grab—and thereby control—the moving dates and times. Scrolling text which interacts with the figure explains the textbook definition of chronophobia. As the piece concludes, the figure disappears while the dates flicker on and finally fade away, only to begin again as the looped tape repeats. Audio for this piece is slow, repetitive, non-objective sound which plays and loops continuously throughout the viewer’s visit to the installation.

Video Wall Clock is the dominant piece in this exhibition—a composite, or collage, of eleven video pieces which represent subjective experiences with time. Pieces one through ten are arranged clockwise in a sequence which flows from pregnancy and birth through childhood, the middle adult years, and senior years. Time-related issues of each life-stage are presented.

In general, one side of the clockface (positions one through five) contains videos which are positive in nature. The subjects are eager for something to begin or end; or, they are engaged in an activity with positive or indifferent results. The episode on sleep is placed in the sixth position, as this is viewed as a neutral, predictable necessity of life. It therefore serves as a transition to the more negative episodes in positions seven through eleven.

These later pieces deal with time as an issue related to handicap, confinement, aging, struggle and disaster. The eleventh video is dedicated to the events of September 11, 2001, and serves to stimulate thinking about the universal impact of a single tragedy on one's own view of time. Even though there is a static, underlying order to the sequence of these images/events, the episodes play out in a deliberately non-linear mode. This is to more accurately represent the randomness of our experiences, rather than imposing a strict chronology. The twelfth station on the clock is allocated for a live feed image of the visitors who stand before it—their images caught between the “parenthesis” of camera and monitor.⁵

CHAPTER 4 FORMAL ISSUES AND EFFECTS

In Video Wall Clock the individual videos use a variety of effects and techniques to convey ideas of confinement, repetition and time perceptions. For example, Video #1 Pregnancy deals with pregnancy as a life/time event. During these nine months, a woman may feel imprisoned by the new form of her body. The gestation period becomes a “sentence” of sorts with the baby’s birth representing reprieve. To convey this in the video, moving vertical bars segment the image of the woman’s swelling body—then melt away as the newborn appears.

In Video #8 Incarceration the images drift as floating blocks—each a glimpse of a subject seemingly related to imprisonment—that is, until the panel with a smiling young woman appears. The viewer is left to question whether the piece is the literal portrayal of a prisoner’s daily life. While repetition is used to suggest the monotony and sameness of prison life it also translates as similar feelings of someone unable to escape a stale relationship.

Repetition and redundancy are techniques also employed in multiple other videos in the Wall Clock group including #4 Work, #5 Treadmill, and #9 Drowning. Audio accompanying these segments further reinforces the idea of repetition. A few pieces rely on recorded ambient sounds such as background noise of crowds or children at play. Heartbeats, breathing, ambient noises and environmental sounds, are used to enhance other episodes.

In some cases, appropriated music from movie sound tracks, the Internet and other sources is edited, manipulated and re-purposed. In Video #11 9/11, there is no sound; power of the images alone is sufficient to create a reflective mood. Without audio, the viewer must rely totally on his/her visual interpretation.

In several pieces Video #6 Sleep, Video #7 Man in a Wheelchair, Video #8 Incarceration, the image is tightly cropped to fit a confined space (i.e., box). This technique is employed as a visual device for conveying specific feelings about entrapment or confinement. In other cases, the image is fragmented, connoting confusion and inner struggle.

Additional effects, including “stepping” (a time remapping effect), strobing, frame blending, and time stretching (for slow motion), are employed in various pieces to manipulate and alter the real time of the footage. The purpose is to achieve a subjective delivery in a compressed time format.

Color has also been used subjectively for emphasis in several of the episodes. In the following examples, black-and-white footage alternates with full color to emphasize contrasts between phases or transitions:

- In Video #5 Treadmill as the runner warms up, the color shifts to black-and-white; it returns to full color as he settles in to his pace for the duration.
- Footage of the subject sleeper in Video #6 Sleep is in black-and-white, representing the one-third of our lives that we spend in a state of being essentially unconscious and completely unaware of time’s passage. The waking life appears in full color around the sleeper.
- In Video #10 Senior Moments, the troubled eyes of the subject are presented in black-and-white while the images he contemplates are in color—are these memories, dreams or actual scenes he is observing—perhaps through a fog of medication?

Subjective colorization is also used in Video #4 Work to distort the reality of the workday, in Video #8 Incarceration to infer a removal from the normal world, and in Video #9 Drowning to separate the secondary image from the real-world primary image. In the latter example, as in Video #6 Sleep an inverse effect is also applied to further alter the natural state.

The subject of Video #7 Man in a Wheelchair is the prominent British physicist Stephen Hawking. This episode began initially as a generic piece about those who are confined because of physical handicap. However, the decision to use Dr. Hawking allowed the piece to function on two levels. For, not only does he represent a wheelchair-bound person, but he is also a world-reknowned scientist whose primary work has dealt with time.

Although many viewers may not recognize him or know of his work, they will still be able to empathize with the plight of the wheelchair-bound—or of anyone who does not have freedom of movement. Symbolically, these latter might include the sick, prisoners, those unable to enter or leave a country, those who are repressed because of social or economic constraints.

CHAPTER 5 INFLUENCES

Ideas underlying this installation have their roots primarily in Cagean theory, Surrealism, and Jungian philosophy.

For John Cage, art potential was everywhere. His revolutionary concepts of the 1950s about ambient sound as music and audience participation as art promoted the commonplace to a new level.⁶ This thesis project incorporates examples of these ideas through video, sound, “live feed,” and appropriation.

Early surrealist films such as Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) and Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* (1926) contain techniques and effects which were originally suggested by the Futurist cinema manifesto of 1916.⁷ Now, in the next century, many of these same techniques (quick cuts, superimpositions, soft focus and distortion) are produced digitally and incorporated in *Video Wall Clock*.

Un Chien Andalou (1928) by Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel relies on structural dislocations instead of visual technique. “The film’s thrust is to frustrate the narrative expectations of the viewer and maintain him or her in that state of tension that characterizes the surrealist aesthetic experience.”⁸ *Video Wall Clock* seeks a similar goal, but incorporates the visual experimentation of earlier surrealist films as well as structural dislocation.

The “live” video elements in this exhibition incorporate Jung’s concept of synchronicity (“...what happens to us now is always important, not simply because it happens, but because it triggers a psychic response that is literally beyond rational understanding...”).⁹ This emphasis on the present instead of the future is an anti-Western ethic but one which bears reconsideration in light of the 9/11 events.

Contemporary influences (1960s through the present) from the field of motion graphics include the film title sequences and short films of Pablo Ferro, Kyle Cooper and Saul Bass. Use of kinetic typography, tightly cropped imagery, and compressed symbolic narrative are among their more important techniques which inform these thesis works.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

From its inception as a project exploring the literal interpretation of chronophobia as a psychological phenomena affecting prisoners, this project has evolved into a subjective look at time issues in daily life. The application to prisoners is present here also, but the majority of the work in this exhibition speaks to more universal time-related concerns.

We are, in a sense, all “doing time”—our own time—and how we view our minutes, hours, days, our past, present and future is worth examination.

The unexamined life is not worth living.

—Socrates

ENDNOTES

¹ Doctor, Ronald M. The Encyclopedia of Phobias, Fears and Anxieties. (New York: Facts on File, 1989), 103.

² Marshall McLuhan. The Medium is the Message. (Corte Madera, California: Gingko Press, 1967), 40.

³ McLuhan, 41.

⁴ Shulgan, Christopher. "Who Gets Final Cut?" RES/Resolution Independent Jan./Feb. (2002): 69.

⁵ Krause, Rosalind. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." Video Culture: A Critical Investigation. (Rochester, New York: Peregrine Smith Books in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1990), 188.

⁶ Haskell, Barbara. BLAM! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958–1964. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 31.

⁷ Hedges, Inez. Languages of Revolt: Dada and Surrealist Literature and Film. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1983), 44-5.

⁸ Hedges, 46.

⁹ Davis, Douglas. "Time! Time! Time! The Context of Immediacy." The New Television: A Public/Private Art. Ed. Douglas Davis and Alison Simmons. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977), 75.

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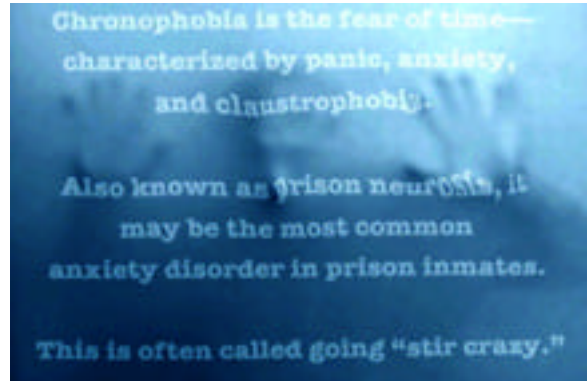
Shulgan, Christopher. "Who Gets Final Cut?" RES/Resolution Independent Jan./Feb. 2002: 66-69.

APPENDIX: ILLUSTRATIONS

The following illustrations are selected screen captures from the videos.



a



b



c



d

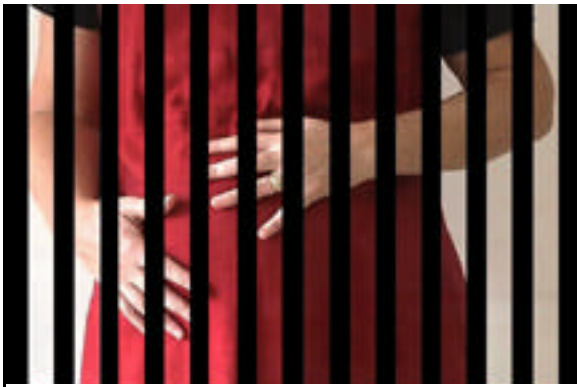
1. Chronophobia



a



b



c



d

2. Video #1 Pregnancy



a



b



c



d

3. Video #2 Child



a



b



c



d

4. Video #3 Waiting



a



b



c



d

5. Video #4 Work



a



b



c



d

6. Video #5 Treadmill



a



b



c



d

7. Video #6 Sleep



a



b



c



d

8. Video #7 Man in a Wheelchair



a



b



c



d

9. Video #8 Incarceration



a



b



c



d

10. Video #9 Drowning



a



b



c



d

11. Video #10 Senior Moments



a



b



c

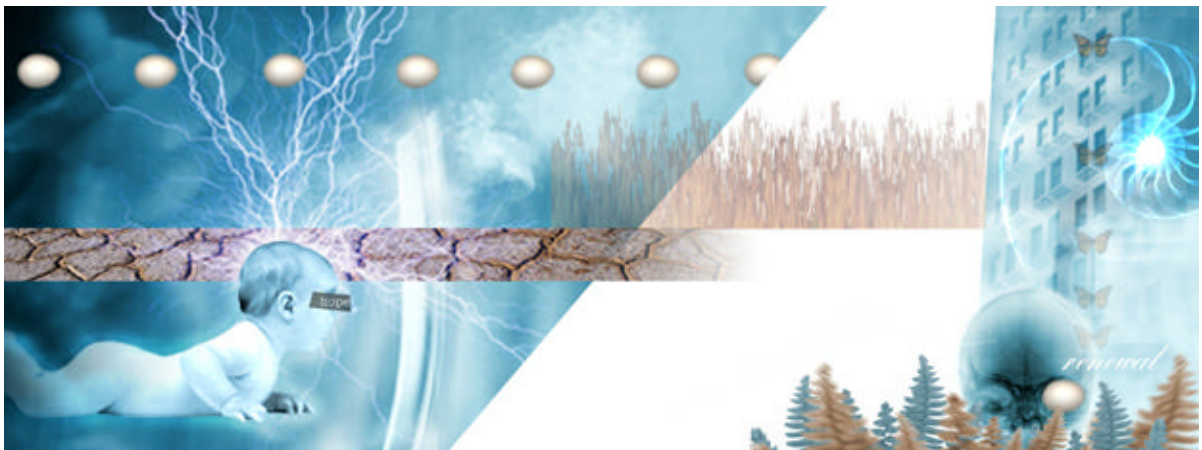


d

12. Video #11 9/11



Past



Future

13. Images from Time Corridor



a



b



c

14. Views of the installation in Foster Gallery

VITA

Rosemary Hill was born Rosemary Stoltz in Memphis, Tennessee, on September 9, 1949. She grew up there and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in design from the University of Mississippi in 1971. She also holds the Master of Education degree from the University of Memphis.

Having worked as a graphic designer, art director and illustrator in several states, Rosemary currently resides in New Orleans. As an associate professor of Visual Communications at Delgado Community College, she has been teaching graphic design, illustration and computer graphics for the past ten years.

Rosemary is scheduled to receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in studio art with a concentration in graphic design on August 8, 2002.