

PERSONAL STRUCTURES TIME SPACE • EXISTENCE

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ • VITO ACCONCI • CARL ANDRE JO BAER • ROBERT BARRY • NELLEKE BELTJENS BRAM BOGART • CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI • LOUISE BOURGEOIS WALTERCIO CALDAS • MAX COLE • HANNE DARBOVEN TOSHIKATSU ENDO • VALIE EXPORT • HAMISH FULTON LIAM GILLICK • ANTONY GORMLEY • DAN GRAHAM GOTTFRID HONEGGER • PETER HALLEY • ANN HAMILTON KOCOT & HATTON • JOSEPH KOSUTH • WOLFGANG LAIB LEE UFAN • SOL LEWITT • HEINZ MACK • SANNA MARANDER TERESA MARGOLLES • JOSEPH MARIONI • KRIS MARTIN TATSUO MIYAJIMA • HERMANN NITSCH • MASAO OKABE ROMAN OPALKA • SABURO OTA • HENK PEETERS GIUSEPPE PENONE • OTTO PIENE • THOMAS PIHL ARNULF RAINER • RENE RIETMEYER • ULRICH RÜCKRIEM YUKO SAKURAI • HEARTBEAT SASAKI • KEITH SONNIER JESSICA STOCKHOLDER • ERWIN THORN • RICHARD TUTTLE JORINDE VOIGT • LAWRENCE WEINER • XING XIN

ESSAYS

THOMAS PIHL



Thomas Pihl, "1966 in Bergen, Norway," The focus of Pihl's paintings and sculptures is his critical dialogue with the mass production of 'aesthetic' in our everyday culture. Lives in Bergen and in New York City.

As a producer in the visual field, I want to discuss Time, Space and Existence in light of the Visual.

Current culture has developed a vast and sophisticated visual machinery of production. This encompasses mass of visual activity, a sign of our time — a phenomenon that has not occurred before. What we experience is unique and gives urgent information about Time, Space and Existence. I use the word 'visual' to designate the knowledge humans have gathered to efficiently introduce and grasp retail attention concerning their activities, ideas and presence in a competitive world. I mean all kinds of abstract material as color, form, line and vast surface treatments artists and contemporary industry have invented. With a growing understanding of the potency of cultured visual knowledge, it has been vitally important for mass culture to dispose over this powerful insight. Never before has so much labor been invested by designers and artists to understand and use these visual tools. There is a large industry involved in the attempt to comprehend the 'cultured visual' impact on the human mind. We now have apparatuses and systems to more and more accurately measure the influence of visual material on our senses. This research is being conducted in studios and laboratories. The knowledge is destined to enhance the influence of a visual phenomenon or spectacle — mostly to stimulate and persuade desires. As much as the knowledge is used to open our eyes, it is equally active and effective in disguising critical information. We have created the ultimate tool of manipulation and we are addicted to it.

With the extreme and unrealistic expansion of the global economy — that led to the financial crisis and the exhaustion of our natural resources — the competition 'development of visual knowledge' has entered a manic state: the hyper visual.

One aspect of a hyper state — whatever field it is in, for instance, economics — is that it still appears to function much as we are accustomed to. However, an understanding of a ticking tightly and possibly collapse is surfacing, both in our consciousness and in reality.

It is becoming more and more crucial to understand and control the hyper visual because of the power it exerts. A hyper condition may not only be identified in terms of the over-developed efficiency it operates on, but also by the tremendous energy it consumes to keep it functional. The amount of power invested for preventing the opposite of a breakdown — and even a further expansion of the economy with the visual as a propelling source — has no realistic relation to the outcome of the investment. Entering a hyper level, it is always a matter of time before it exhausts itself. The success of the hyper visual is due to the eye's extraordinary proficiency as an unguarded door to our mind, and its free access to economical resources. To give one example: With the genetic technology available today, one can produce a salmon that looks like a full grown specimen, though in fact it is not. A foreign gene speeds up the growth. A sibling to this full grown looking fish — a fish without the inserted gene — is too small and not suitable for the market. The consumer becomes a victim of misreading. Of course the particular phenomenon is an intention of several dilemmas, but first and foremost, it is about the visual manipulation of the eye, and how we read or misread visual information in relation to ethical structures.

It is not news that culture and power go hand in hand. The inherent characteristics and dynamics of abstract visual vocabularies are the focus of my work. My aim is to communicate to the viewer how essential and concentrated the impact of abstract visual features might be, and how in contemporary culture it affects our lives. I am interested in how efficiently it seeps beneath our skins — independent of the quality. Visual vocabularies create moods or atmospheric spheres, and it is difficult to define their impact. — It is like the gene I described earlier where the experience is complicated to track, articulate and make us conscious of. This is how the phenomena are related to ethics and power and why we are drawn to them.

Visual research is currently at the highest level of sophistication ever in human history. This is due to the fierce competition in mass production and politics. Due to how powerful it is, the amount of resources poured into this field is enormous. We have knowledge, speed, and constant motion: abstract visual information that never before. The visual — now the hyper visual — has always fascinated us. This is where — cultured beauty surfaces and thives. This is where beauty and least comfort, might blend, and even appear identical.

SPACE
As a producer of visual material I have observed that a product—in addition to the obvious space the (art) object was planned to inhabit—occupies an additional space: A space not accessible by the eye. Observing the excess paint I washed out in the sink, I realized that this lost material was not only waste. This was unconscious material entering unconscious space. I was alarmed that my creative practice was leaking. It was like losing critical material to the creative process and my understanding of the consequences of being a producer. I was involved in creating a loss of crucial data and ideas that had importance for the creative process. The work was bleeding into other spaces out of my control and my practice was losing responsibility and vitality.

This problematic, unconscious space is not unidentified or mysterious. On the contrary we are finally starting to address the fact that all the deposits resulting from our cultural activities are entering and affecting spaces crucial to life. This is a reality permeating all the way down into molecular space and changing it—even at the level of atomic space as well.

For my own work I started to collect spatial material related to my practice. For several years I collected all production surpluses. This means things like disposable gloves, damp cloths, paper towels, excess paint, paint containers, etc. It soon dawned on me, this real occupation of space—and spatial economy—was something my practice as a two-dimensional artist was responsible for. The material consisted with the intended product—the paintings—even though it had been removed from the art work's close proximity.

This accumulated material I then redefined as art supplies for sculpture. I wanted the material to occupy space—as artwork. The volume is defined by the amount of spatial material involved. I wanted the sculptural structure to be defined by its own mass. The surface of the sculptures is intended to mimic consumer aesthetics and convey artistic beauty at the same time. This surface prohibits the viewer from seeing the amalgam of the internal structure. The intention is, though, that a slight feeling of its inner complexity be communicated.

Contemporary production exceedingly occupies viable space. The products we bring into the world and its various spaces—fulfill a complexity of needs. The hyper visual culture maps unconscious human desires and produces objects that visually trigger the wish to own it. The production and consumption of cultural objects occupy space in our search for individual fulfillment.

The psychology of hoarding is interesting in the context of space. This disorder—as we define it—is identified by the 'patients' lack of ability to throw anything away. Their living spaces are filled up with objects defined by our culture as having no or limited 'value'—like mountains of old newspapers. Several of these patients have died of avalanches of piled material tipping over.

Hoarders' collections are mappings of spatial material that have entered into their space and ownership. The collection is also a visual testimony of the space a human being occupies in a lifetime. In our culture we define this psychology as a disorder. But it's also evidence of a human being's entire cultural consumption and a cultural footprint. This colossal occupation of a living space is more or less equal for all who live in capitalist economies. However, most people chance their entire mass to spaces out of the visual field—to other spaces—and define their behavior as functional and healthy within the existing culture.

Hoarders are often considered as having creative, intelligent minds and are largely very well educated. The complexity of their interaction with cultural material can be traced to a complex understanding of the objects. Hoarders' collections are a physical visualization—of one human being's entire cultural usage of space. I think the various dilemmas this phenomenon demonstrates to how culture fueled by the hyper visual industry produces vast and complex volumes—physically and metaphorically.

My paintings—restitution—occupy compressed space. I float the pigment grain in a slab of acrylic medium. Light streams into this space filled with acrylic and pigment. Light—natural or synthetic—rotates around the grain of color and bounces back to the viewer's eye. Although the compressed space is limited—it simulates vastness. The painting's visual impact is not unlike a video or a computer screen. The spatial components in the paintings are a merging of real space in three dimensions and manipulated space. Natural light blends with and confuses the layout of illusionary light. I am interested in this light and spatial confusion in order to create a perspective of uncertainty. My intention is to include, in a seemingly recognizable outline of beauty and comfort, a complete lack of spatial foundation.

Plastic fragments polluting the ocean is an example of natural space being affected by and filled with residue of visual production. Plastic in nature breaks down to tiny pellets. In the ocean this material is found in certain areas to occupy as much space as the natural mass of plankton. Scientists argue that we have reached a peak and that the problem cannot be fixed. Because the plastic has undergone visual treatment in the form of a color, animals 'misread' the material as food. The chemicals in the plastic will ultimately be embedded in the organic tissues. This is also an example of how natural and cultural space are merging, turning into an indistinguishable spatial 'soup'—in this case by material from visual production. Every single pellet occupying these spaces has a connection to a product designed to serve modern culture and its economical parameters.

I am specifically interested in spaces that are occupied by our culture in places where we cannot see the impact of the occupation. These peripheral spaces challenge us to be aware of the fringes of our psychological patterns, ethical structures and our details.

EXISTENCE
To exist as a human being is a continuous process of learning. The human mind—our extended intelligence—continually investigates life and life forces. Knowledge becomes understanding and understanding grows into wisdom. The process extracts the essence of life observations. This is Existence as the process.

We culture the human capacity—in mind and body—for understanding our place in the universe in an attempt to make meaning out of it. Due to our success as a species we have developed this far beyond the survival instinct. The natural growth of the human struc-

TIME
Time is a measuring system invented by humans. Therefore time will end with us. The sun will continue to rise and set, and inner clocks in other species will continue to run. But time will end with us. The end of time has been predicted throughout history.

For the first time in the human saga we are observing and experiencing indications that our activities and behavior are critically related to time. Culture at large — as it exists now — has a new timeframe. We have created a culture of production that essentially links into all corners and structures of global space and natural life. The effects can be measured in structures from the atom to the global. This is a crisis that has now entered the contemporary time zone.

This new time frame is, however, weird. Thus, we do not yet fully experience this new condition of time. We are still functioning out of habit with an old, but obsolete time perception. Seemingly still functional rhythms in nature and human manipulation of current data produce a time related deceit.

Now we organize and choose time, and the time quality, for the coming generations. The contemporary consumption of energy and natural resources will ultimately have an effect on the human experience of time in the future. The contemporary visual industry takes command of crucial information and impacts how future generations time will be dictated to by survival. Life spans are already impacted now, and will continue to be so in the future. Time as this tense changes place with time as extended existence.

The visual industry persists in hiding and softening the signs of the new contemporary time frame. The hyper visual culture is an effective tool. The size of the comfort industry grows proportionately to the urgency we are creating. We choose the comfortable more pressing a situation develops into. Creativity or manipulation is operating at its maximum capacity and we are now experiencing time as loss. The scale of this time emergency is universal.

A bankruptcy of an economical structure is a reality long before the moment it shuts down. Denial, the culture of manipulation and comfort, is the force continuing to keep it afloat. Time is then experienced as delay. The time we are experiencing at this moment, is delayed time. What are we in the midst of right now time wise? We may not of our perception systems are capable of recording the condition of a situation in its right time. The hyper visual expansion of our perception systems prohibits consciousness.

The efficiency of an internal advertisement system gives us individual abilities for dealing with time — catastrophic time is the ultimate time constraint. The amount of awareness and concentration the human construction may establish under extreme time limitations is a resource not yet set in motion. We have thousands of years of experience that the natural system and rhythms work and change within their own time cycles. Behind us, time as past. This long standing perception of time is changing even as we speak. Time as urgency is an escalating contemporary time characteristic. This new time is a resource as well as a threat. This is a serious dilemma.

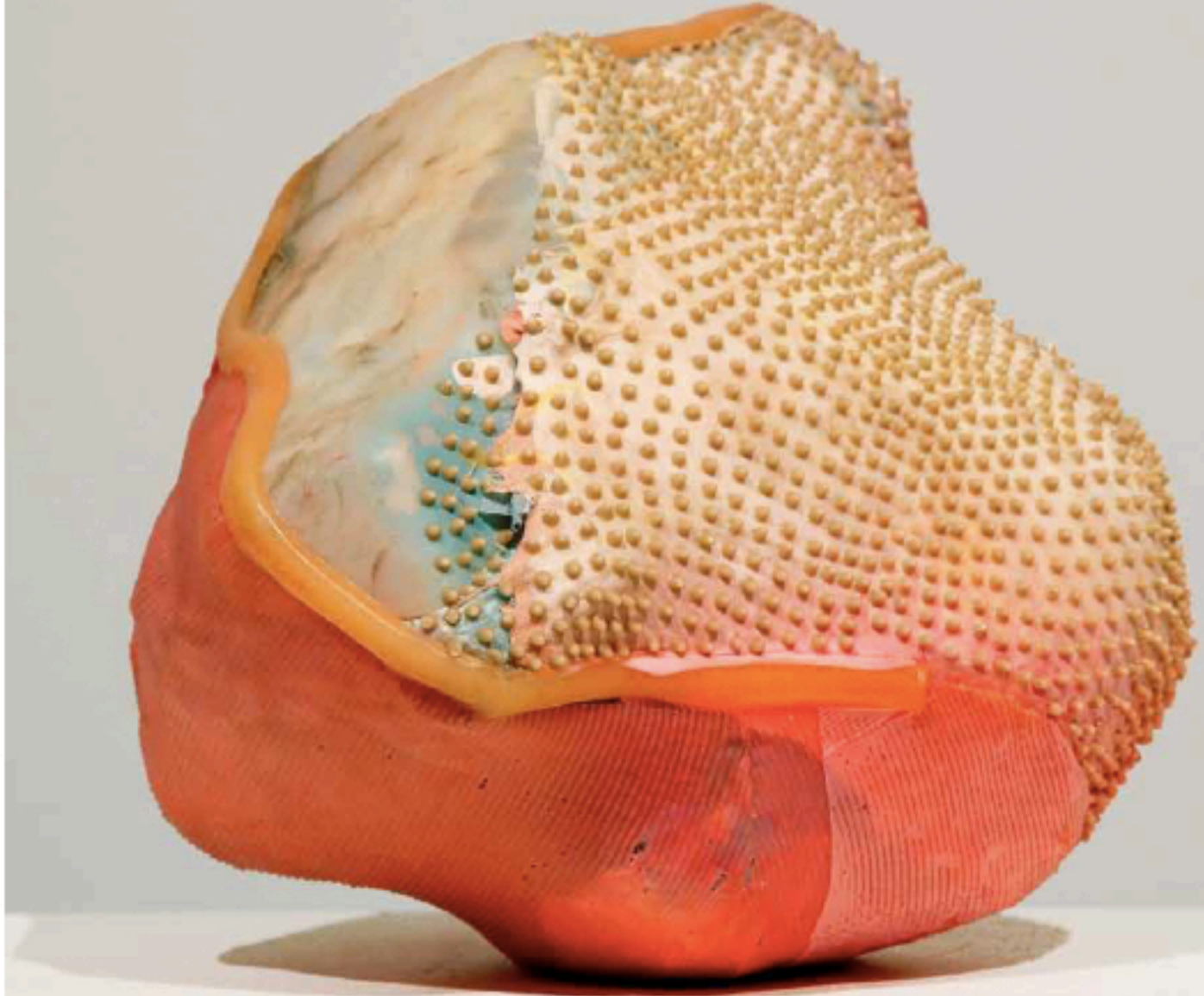
In the quest for saving the current economic system as being the most viable — two successful time based economic ideas were introduced. The idea of planned obsolescence was a lucrative time founded invention. We plan our productions to fail and die with time. This destructive idea is of course meant to generate larger consumption. This again is due to the ever increasing need for energy and power contemporary culture craves in order to generate surplus value. The other one was the invention of credit and credit cards. This generated an extraordinary monetary flow down from the future. If we focus on the outcome of these time oriented inventions we may question our human capabilities. We also have to review what we define as success.

Time as a valuable commodity is a matter of connection to the current economy and the social realm. Each individual experience of time and the awareness of our limited lifespan reflect time as a value as well. Time becomes a matter of priority and conflict between the individual human understanding of time, and the societies constant call for our time as producers and consumers.

We have incorporated into our bodies an internal feeling and understanding of time. This internal time zone is cultured by society but it is also purely individual. A healthy ninety year old man said to me yesterday, I have plenty of time! He placed time in a multi qualitative perspective: Time as fluidity and time as something extraordinarily coveted. We are all faced with time — time as the now, but an experience that is different. This man has lived much longer than I have and he might outlive me. Time is relative, and when time is limited — to define this time limitation as endlessness — changes the perception of it.

This summer I selected a portrait — a drawing — of a woman. I once knew very well. I thought about the specific time the portrait was created — from the first line on the piece of paper to the moment it was finished. There was a date, and there was time invested. A complicated web of thoughts, feelings, artistic and cerebral concentration, sounds and smells, and expectations existed within this defined creative time frame. The portrait is a recording of time — a recording of a complex specific moment. But the drawing is a portrait of lifespan as well. The woman's life time of course, but the artist's and the viewer's as well. The portrait is a portrait of time. We know we are in the midst of a countdown. A lifespan and its time are defined by death.

In my work I do not record time — but there is a time aspect involved in producing art. One aspect is similar to the portrait of the woman: An artistic process operates as a recording device of the actual production moment. More crucial to me is the time aspect of viewing. My paintings' 'reduction' characteristics challenge the viewer to experience seeing as a heightened experience, by denoting time. My intention is to create a visual situation that generates immediacy and delay. Viewing the work is dependent on the time frame between the two. I think of the painting as a complex meeting point between past and future observations. I do not date my work when it is finished in the studio, but when it is first shown to the viewer in a public space. That is the moment it is finished and when it starts.



It is instrumentalized to hide and confuse the path towards achieving as complete a picture as possible.

Ethical structures in contemporary social building and behaviors are the target of the hyper visual culture. The visual comfort culture and convenience industry is extraordinarily effective, and our deep instinct to avoid pain is targeted. We then lose the ability to accept and transmit pain as a vital motor in our development as human beings. In this process we lose the ability to identify and empathize with anguish when we encounter it. The hyper visual mirror is effectively protecting us from the painful. This is confusing our ability to locate the balance between destructive and constructive forces and bewilder existence as ethics. The question arises: Is my place in the world, and the degree that I 'stand out and glow' considered in terms of how it affects my path? To be aware of the quality the footprints left by our existence is a complex process of observation and consideration.

With the enormous stream of information and technology we currently have available instruments better than ever for understanding our place in and our impact on the world. We can observe and trace the smallest particles ever examined and measure and detect the slightest residues in an organic tissue. We persistently equip and extend our senses so that the horizon in the quest for information is constantly moved closer. We have created an extraordinary opportunity for developing our beings and culture to the utmost.

We have simultaneously developed a large culture to veil and distract information from the immediacy of our senses. This is to promote and portray contemporary cultural production as viable and sound. What you consciously see and record is then not the entirety of your experience. Information is filtered and not available to you. Your access to good judgment has been reduced in favor of producing a desired reaction or movement in the consumer. We have, as a result, developed visual dyslexia. Our senses are in constant danger of becoming dulled and washed out by uniform aesthetics presented to us as value. The hyper visual is exceedingly addictive. The target is the individual and we are promised a self with value and attention. Are we as visual producers responsible for developing the opposite—an epidemic of self-absorption?

We are cut off from access to the entire ethical structures of activities and products. And we do not want to know about this. We have been cultured to communicate such manipulation with precision ourselves. We have no idea whether we are nurtured or threatened. We do not any longer know if we are nurturing or threatening. But we are fiercely fighting for our positions that we have created for our own good. We have developed symptoms of autism narcissism. The extent our picture and products are produced and reproduced is a measure of success. Existence towards becoming has been thrown into a deep crisis.

Our human capacity to invent sound and creative answers to all the questions and dilemmas surfacing faces serious challenge. We have created a situation that is extremely demanding. It will be interesting to see if we are able to create a culture of minds that opens up to create a future that seriously considers all cultural production in relation to the entire complexity of value and ethics: Time, Space and Existence as the human life force.

If we think of existence as a pathfinder in a desaturated life, creativity comes to mind. The creative force is comparable to a pathfinder in understanding existence, and therefore it is crucial. The capacity of creativity is extraordinary. The extended complexity of a creative mind, or creative occupation bears inherent potential for individuals to generate tools for their existence. Creativity pursues the fringes of human capacity. It is an investigation into the veiled desires and frustrations at the periphery of our abilities. This is where an understanding of the fragility of these processes is refined and where the quality of uncertainty is celebrated.

Creativity as a motor for existence is not entirely utilized if one does not include death. The end of our existence generates more than anything: awe. Awe is crucial for awakening the human senses to aim for the limits of their faculties. To observe and respect life powers with awe embraces existence for developing a self in balance with the ego. Awe produces a consideration to what exists beyond our self and generating respect for it.

We as no other generation before us have access to information and therefore the most sophisticated instruments ever to contribute to the culture our existence. As visual producers, our work is located in the creative field. However, in light of the mass visual—the current culture of flooding the senses and thought processes in humans, existence towards becoming is—in its entire complexity—endangered. Visual material is used not only to heighten the understanding of a given phenomenon. The reverse also applies—