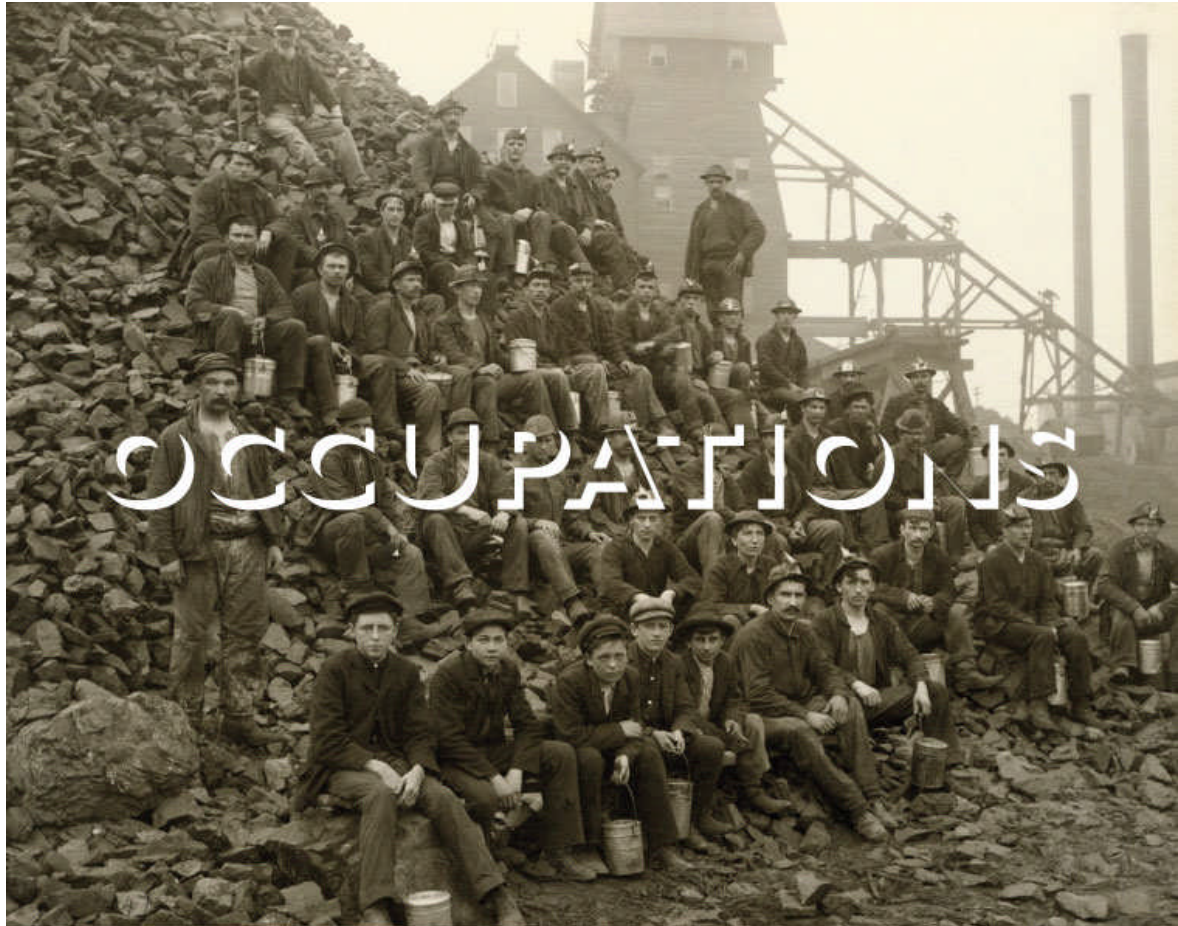


# Excursions

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Marcelo José de Melo, 'Occupying Time, Occupying Space'

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## Occupying Time, Occupying Space

My artistic practice, and the installations and works of sculpture and collage that I have created to date, have allowed me to engage with a variety of conceptual issues. I tend to incorporate a diverse range of materials in my making, as a matter of choice or chance. This diversity serves a purpose in the development of my ideas in such a way that one experiment leads me to another, allowing change to occur. My methodology is dynamic and incidental, permitting the inclusion of seemingly disparate ideas and materials, and I believe that my methods have evolved from a need to feel the surface of materials and combine them in ways that create a synthesis of distinct ideas. However, it can also be a mere fact of my compulsive nature and inability to sit still for very long—a kind of disturbance or neurosis. In many years of practice I have made use of cataloguing techniques or akin-to-scientific ways of displaying work with accuracy

and attention to detail also associated with neurotic behaviour; a repetitive ordering, a sort of impulse for typological outcomes.

I also have issues when it comes to consciousness, art and knowledge production, which play a guiding role in my creative practice. For instance, the act of making things makes me forget the fact that I am a conscious being. It distracts me from the fact that I am alive and have to go through life. It also connects me to something else which I cannot properly figure out. I tend to think that the core of my practice does not necessarily lie in any specific issue, but the passing of time itself—the act of occupying myself with making until something happens or something else more interesting comes up—or even until death comes knocking. All the connections, associations and juxtapositions in my work are mostly intuitive, and I do not always go about consciously deciding what will be used to achieve any predetermined result. Things tend to happen naturally. This is evidenced by the large amount of small scale works that I produce during any given time spent in the studio, works that are made from whatever material I find around me, ranging from coffee cups to discarded paper to leftover paint. Packaging, plastic bits, wrapping paper, tickets, barcodes and certain shapes and shades of colour appeal to me in many ways, and are collected for a possible use. I include them in small scale works that deal with consumption, boredom, mortality, and these smaller works do not necessarily generate pieces on a bigger scale.



Figure 1. de Melo, M (2010), Daily Bags [collage] Photo by the author: Amsterdam.

They inform them, but above all, relax the conscious controls in my mind, to allow a space for intuition.

Repetition seems to be a constant factor in my production. Through repetition forms and ideas tend to mutate and engender new possibilities for creating and for readings of my work. According to psychologist Adam Phillips,

Repetition is reassuring because it implies that there is a recognizable something—a pattern of relationship, a scenario, an impulse, a fear—that is being repeated. Repetition confirms our powers of recognition, our competence at distinguishing the familiar from the unfamiliar. The repetitions in our lives are like our personal collection of secure referents. The knowledge that is fear, or the knowledge fear protects us from, is born of recurrence, or its possibility (Phillips, 1995, p.58).

Based on Phillip's ideas, it is correct to say that an artist does not mindlessly engage in repetition. There is a selective process at work and, in my understanding, I am inclined to select works that contain interesting overlapping ideas. Familiarity seems to dictate the choices. Occupying time with repetitive actions, the overarching concept of my practice (i.e. my seemingly mindless investigation into the nature of how found materials and objects can be used to produce artworks and generate meaning) is thus a consequence of continuously making. At a certain point in time, this realisation led me to investigate the idea of how to deal with time in relation to sculptural practices. I came to the conclusion that through my making I can create an environment that allows ideas to develop and be explored—an experimental platform for investigation and discovery.

This can be triggered in several ways and, in the case of my practice as an artist, it happens through playing with materials, textures and ideas “hovering” in the studio i.e. ‘the repetition of material activity’, according to artist and philosopher Michael Schwab. The shifting of things around the studio with unpredicted consequences engenders what can be called ‘epistemic things’, which are unknown to the artist and need further investigation (Schwab, 2015).

By allowing myself to make use of almost everything that comes within range, my practice seems related to the idea of the instinctive nature of art developed by art philosopher Dennis Dutton, which can be explained through the analogy of becoming fitter as human beings. It means that we all have an art instinct that is a legacy from our evolutionary past and every time we expose ourselves to art it is like going to the gym, but for the brain. It activates certain faculties allowing for a communal experience

of culture, and identifies us with a broader understanding of human practices (Dutton, 2009).

Therefore, the full content of work developed through my practice until now has evolved in a fashion that can be called rhizomatic, that is in a non-hierarchical manner, where 'any point [...] can be connected to anything other, and must be' engendering diverse possibilities of approaches and readings (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.7).

My experiences as a traveller and gatherer with existential inclinations can be paralleled to those of Japanese artist On Kawara. It can be argued that the idea of *time as art practice* has occurred to us separately at different points in time. Prior to starting a MA in Fine Art in 2010, I was not aware of Kawara's entire oeuvre. Now I am. I began to understand the nature of my practice more accurately and I became more conscious of the idea of time through academic research. What had been presented to me through the repetition of material activity had become a tool for investigation. I thereafter embarked upon the quest to understand the role of time within my work, which in turn gave rise to the idea of incorporating time into sculptural practices. Occupying time and time occupying space are variations of the same artistic exploration and have been around since the 1960s, if not earlier. In the case of Kawara, it is likely that he began to engage with this exploration after his trip to the cave paintings in Altamira, Spain, in 1962. These paintings can be understood as beyond language and history, as Jonathan Watkins explains:

By definition, history does not apply to them. For Kawara there was no narrative, no question of resorting to a mediating discourse—instead a direct appeal made by their paintings over a vast expanse of time [...] The logical conclusion is that anybody, anywhere and anytime, can make art unselfconsciously out of anything (Watkins, 2002, p.55).

Kawara's encounter with the cave paintings was only possible due to his condition as a *tourist*, which 'has important implications for his later works, particularly the telegrams and postcards, the date paintings and, most overtly, [the work] *I Went*' (Watkins, 2002, p.54).



Figure 2. Kawara, O (1968-79) *I Went* [daily trips traced on photocopied map, 4740 pages, 12 volumes] At: [http://www.micheledidier.com/media/catalog/customfield/on\\_kawara\\_\\_i\\_went.pdf](http://www.micheledidier.com/media/catalog/customfield/on_kawara__i_went.pdf) (Accessed on 16.07.15).

In parallel with Kawara's practice I have travelled widely, and also worked with postcards that were made from gathered tickets and packaging material from places that I visited and then sent to friends around the world. I have cultivated this practice since 2003, however I was unaware of its relevance and implications until quite recently. These postcards have triggered the production of a large number of small-scale works that I have already mentioned. These works, which ultimately deal with consciousness, are conceptually related with Kawara's practice. The major difference between our processes is that Kawara uses precise measures with regularity, whereas I use aleatory and suggestive measures as I am interested in irregularity and non-linearity. Like Kawara, I am also interested in movement and change as they can also function as 'our awareness of time, an awareness shaped by a sequence of events determined either by ourselves or by external circumstances' (Wilmes, 2000, p.13).



Figure 3. de Melo, M (2010-11) *Instances* [collage] Photo by the author: Amsterdam.

### Producing a time sculpture

As time presented itself to me through my art practice within an academic context, as mentioned above, I felt the need to explore the idea in a sculptural manner. The main question was *how can time be claimed as sculptural practice?* Or, *how can a room be occupied with time?* I considered that, maybe, if we understood other sculptural appropriations such as sound and smell, then I could use these to create a time sculpture. If sound occupies space in the form of waves and smell occupies space in the form of molecules, I would suggest that time can also occupy space, albeit on a perceptual level. In order for this to happen, while understanding that time and space are interlocked, I would need to define space or mark down a spatial area where time could be presented. Space holds the key to perceiving time as a sculpture. However, concepts of time within art practices are more informative. This is an area that has been extensively researched and overlaps with film, digital and broadcast media. However, the purpose of this article is to engage with sculptural practices in relation to time. Therefore, it concentrates on engaging with spatial concepts and artists that have tackled the issue sculpturally.

Martin Creed has made use of metronomes to engage the audience with the idea of the passage of time:

*Work 112*: thirty nine metronomes beating time, one at every speed, 1995-1998 [...]  
*Work 134*: electronic metronomes: largo, larghetto, adagio, andante, moderato, allegro, presto e prestissimo (8), 1995 [...] *Work 180*: mechanical metronomes: largo, larghetto, adagio, andante, moderato, allegro, presto, e prestissimo, 1995-2004 [...]  
*Work 223*: three metronomes beating time, one quickly, one slowly, and one neither quickly nor slowly, 1999 (Creed, 2010, pp.112, 134, 180, 223).

Creed's actions of folding and unfolding paper of various sizes can also be seen as dealing with occupying oneself with time. The action of folding and unfolding denotes passage - i.e. time spent on an activity and in this case for the sole purpose of it. These works are then exhibited as 'unfolded bits of papers' of various standard sizes such as A2, A4 and so on. These works can engender other possible interpretations; however, here we will only consider the aspect of time.

The work of Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander, whose installations consist of see-through ceilings full of dead insects, dust or polystyrene particles which are blown slowly by a fan, draw attention to the very slow passage of time. In other works such as *Table-drawing-fingertips* (Neuenschwander, c.2003) she 'offers insights into the passage of time through her attempt to capture exactly a given moment and transform it into a permanent present' (Bowron, 2001, p.80). This work consists of a drawing made by the movement of her fingers through black pepper spread out on a table top and captured on sticky back plastic. Another frozen moment of time can be seen in her work *A Day Like Any Other* (Neuenschwander, c.2008) where a clock displays the following:

**FRI 00 OCT**

**00 00**



Kawara's date paintings are also relevant for the understanding of time in a sculptural sense, considering that they can become players in a pictorial present.

Our active consciousness digs deep into the folds of appearance and disappearance, between the succession of dates and the continuity of time; between the representation of history and the exhibition of the present; between the death of art and the life of the work. It pierces time and exposes it, so that time appears almost sculptural if to sculpt is to empty out, or hollow. Consciousness is embodied in and issues forth from the present. It is a hollow body, a gaping that borrows from sculpture the contours of the present (Denizot, 2002, pp.114-115).

In the case of Kawara, Neuenschwander and Creed, time is explored as passage or movement suggesting progression. However, another concept can be understood through the works of Robert Smithson, particularly in the example of *Mirrored Ziggurat* (1966). Influenced by his studies of crystallography, time in this work is non-dynamic, and is seen as deposition or accumulation. For Smithson,

time does not fly or pass; these terms imply that time is capable of arriving and departing [...] Smithson's sculptures imagine [time] as a material sediment that remains on hand indefinitely. Time merely accretes in pre-packaged quanta (Roberts, 2004, p.44).

Adopting this cumulative view of time allows me to compose a work where time can be displayed and occupy space, even if in a purely perceptual manner.

Enabled to use time as a sculptural material, I am faced with another issue: how can I evidence time sculpturally? What are the parameters in order for this to happen? As strange as it may seem, it can be a concept similar to the idea of non-places conceptualised by Marc Augé:

1. When an airplane flies over Saudi Arabia, no drinking of alcohol is allowed on the airplane.
2. When an airplane flies over France, the drinking of alcohol is allowed on the airplane (p.95).

Thus it follows that: 3) when time passes aleatorily, no sculpture is defined; and 4) when time deposits on an area predetermined by the artist, a perceptual sculpture is defined. Time occupies space.

In this way, time itself within a determined space can be susceptible to rules and regulations, as seen in the on-board behaviour when an airliner flies over Saudi Arabia, France or any other country. These regulations are perceptual and, in the case of the airplane, they are cultural and intrinsically connected to language and tradition. In this way, language can also be used to define the time sculpture with which I am occupying myself. In this case, visually, absence equals presence and the parameters are solely defined by language. In order to engage an audience with the time sculpture, language has to be employed to trigger the viewers' awareness.

This idea of sculptural time has also triggered other ideas when considering the marking of a determined area and how it would inform the work. I believe that marking a room with materials other than those related to language would undermine the purity of the work itself, and it would be no longer a work about time occupying space but also about marking an area of space-language. Accommodating both notions of time—as passing and as depositing I choose the following text to represent my time sculpture and occupy a room:

Here you are in the presence of time

Time passes here

Time reigns here

(not beauty, not love, not justice, but time)

Time fills this room

Here you are in the presence of time

The text above is meant to be pasted onto a wall of an empty room, thereby creating a room full of time. Once again, the only way of communicating with the viewer while retaining the purity of the work is resorting to language. Therefore, my time sculpture is first and foremost a conceptual sculpture, one that has been realised twice so far. It was shown for the first time at the Art Festival Begehungen 9 in Chemnitz, Germany in 2012 (fig.4) and again at IV Thessaloniki Biennale parallel event *Vanguard* in Greece, 2013 (fig.5).

I am inclined to suggest that *time* as art practice is an idea mostly propagated by art institutions; both through the use of time as material itself, and through gathered materials which directly connect to the idea of occupying time.



Figure 4. de Melo, M (2012) *Time Sculpture*, Chemnitz. Photo by the author: Amsterdam.

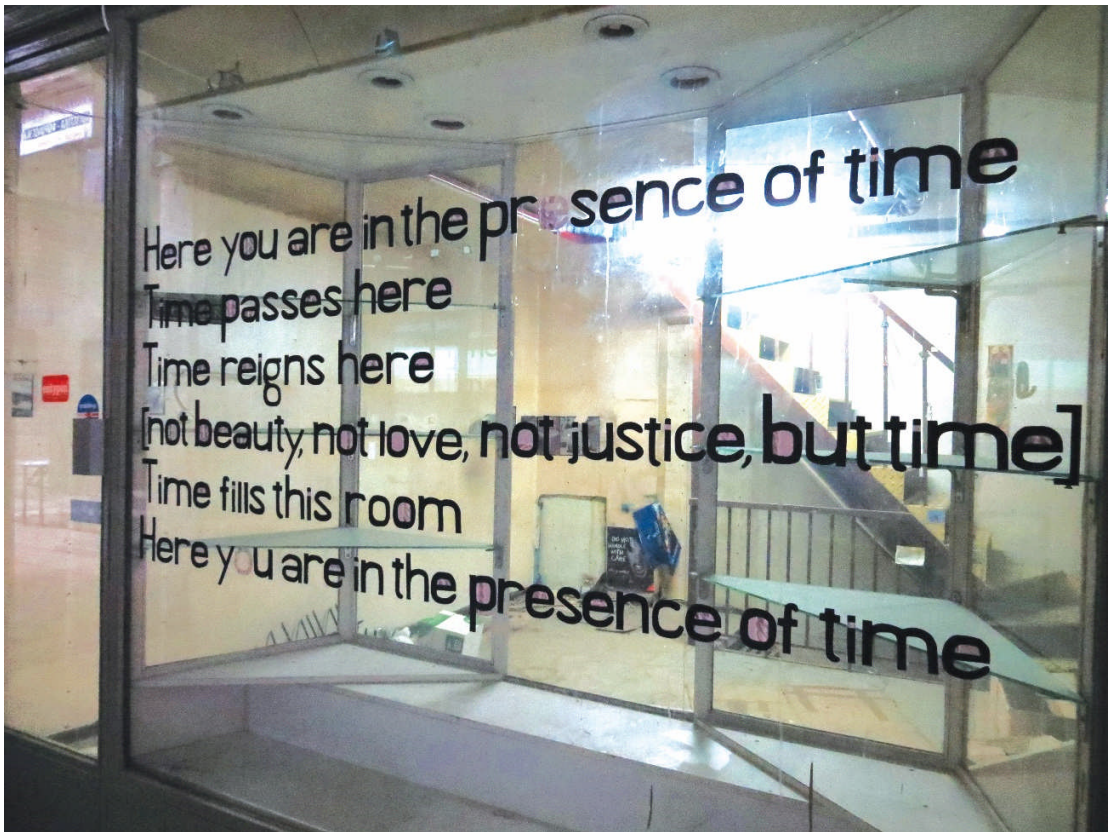


Figure 5. de Melo, M (2013) *Time Sculpture, Thessaloniki*. Photo by the author: Amsterdam.

In conclusion, central to my practice, there is a paradox. On the one hand my work is highly coincidental. I am using whatever materials I can find to keep myself busy and ‘pass the time’; my artistic practice is concerned with the surface nature of things and their incidental aspect. On the other hand, it is a practice of combining and reordering materials, thereby speculating on the possible creation of meaning, informed by personal experience. This is a non-hierarchical approach, based on intuition and alertness of mind and time. However, this implies that not everything produced in the studio is necessarily mature and ready for presentation. There are limitations to this approach. Referring again to the model of the rhizome, not all things are necessarily correct or workable. They are bound by language, tradition and cultural appropriation, always requiring mediation by the artist.

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