

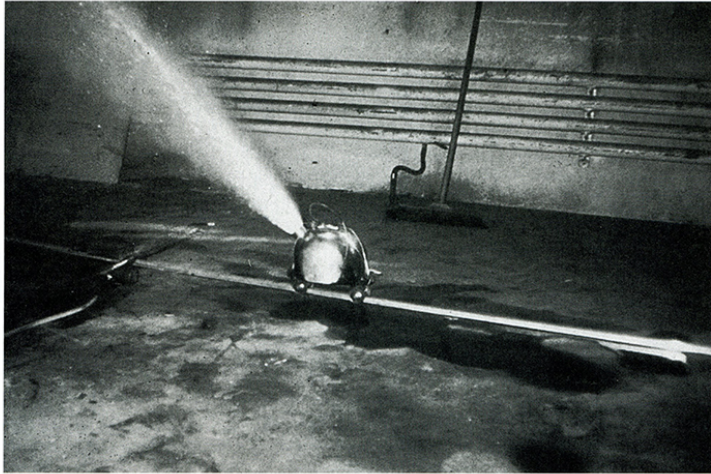
## CHAPTER FOUR

# Time

Time is a vital topic in contemporary art, addressed in a rich range of works that involve a variety of media, approaches, and concepts. In this chapter, we look at the prevalence of the theme of time in art after 1980, as well as some definitions, historical contexts, artistic strategies, and subthemes that begin to map aspects of this far-reaching topic.

To begin exploring the complexity and variety of artists' reflections on matters of time, let's look at two works of art: a film by a team of Swiss artists, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and a sculpture by American Heide Fasnacht. In Fischli and Weiss's entertaining thirty-minute film, *Der Lauf der Dinge* (*The Way Things Go*) (1985–87) [4-1], the camera pans the long floor of a warehouse, along which are arrayed makeshift conglomerations of simple props, such as buckets of water, rubber tires, Styrofoam cups, string, and balloons. Through the action of fire, gravity, chemicals, and gunpowder, each object spills, falls, rotates, ignites, or explodes in turn. Each object's demise triggers what happens to the next object in line. The chain reaction embodies time in its absurd kinetics: one thing is engineered to lead to the next in what appears to be a continuous thirty-minute sequence in real time. (In fact, though, Fischli and Weiss had to film some of the micro-events separately and splice segments of film together to achieve the appearance of a seamless chain of events.) Fischli and Weiss do not structure time as a narrative in this film: there is no plot with a beginning, middle, and end, and the chain reaction has no ultimate goal or final outcome. Rather, their approach to time favors sequencing without narrative. In the view of curator Amy Cappellazzo, "Since the objects are set up to have a domino effect but rely on time, rather than a story line, to dictate their next move, the entire work can be viewed as a kind of time-piece or clock."<sup>1</sup>

Besides coming close to representing a real-life experience of time, *The Way Things Go* may also have a moral subtext. Fischli and Weiss devoted months of tinkering to achieve their house-of-cards effects. The implication is that there is value in time spent making something essentially useless that exists only for a short time, simply for the joy of seeing an idea come to life. This devotion to time spent in creative play generally contradicts how time is valued in day-to-day life in industrial societies.



4-1 Peter Fischli and David Weiss | still from *Der Lauf der Dinge (The Way Things Go)*, 1985-1987

16mm film

© Peter Fischli David Weiss, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Heide Fasnacht's sculpture *Demo* (2000) [4-2] conveys a sense of time that is more instantaneous yet paradoxically more permanent than the sequence of time expressed in Fischli and Weiss's film. In a highly unusual approach to sculpture, *Demo* freezes a split second in time, suspending the explosion of a building in midair (much like in a stop-action photograph). To create *Demo*, Fasnacht referred to black-and-white photographs that were made during the detonation of an actual building. Working at a scale slightly larger than a standing human and using nontraditional materials (Styrofoam and neoprene), Fasnacht suspended the myriad shards of an exploding building flying outward into space. What would normally occur in the blink of an eye is frozen for us to peruse at our leisure, unlike the constantly changing mini-events in Fischli and Weiss's film. A key difference between these works is that Fischli and Weiss's film *embodies* time, whereas Fasnacht's sculpture *represents* the explosion of a building as a suspended moment in time.

*Demo* is one in a series of stop-action sculptures that Fasnacht began in 1997, when she first introduced a human sneeze as a subject. Since then, in numerous drawings and sculptures, the artist has represented a range of eccentric events—including sneezes, geysers, fires, and military explosions—which, according to Nancy Princenthal, "fall at the threshold of visibility, in the realm of things that, while not imperceptible, are more or less impossible to visualize in any stable, conventional way."<sup>2</sup>

Intriguingly, *Demo* manipulates the dimension of time on multiple levels. First, there is the (rapidly moving) time of the actual explosion; second, the (stopped) time of the artwork's depiction; and third, the (much slower but still moving) time of the



4-2 Heide Fasnacht | *Demo*, 2000

Neoprene, styrofoam, pigment, approximately 9 1/2 x 10 1/2 x 10 feet  
Courtesy of the artist and Kent Gallery, NY

viewer's experience walking around and looking at the artwork. In addition, the subject of the artwork provides a fourth, metaphoric level of meaning. The sculptural simulation of an explosion, with its unreal quality of suspended animation, expresses the futility of any belief that we can control time. Moreover, the sculpture, made in 2000, has taken on another, prophetic meaning. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers, Fasnacht's fellow Americans can regard *Demo* as a metaphor for the traumatic attack and a cautionary symbol of a possible future apocalypse.

### Time and Art History

Concepts of time vary from culture to culture, from the cyclical philosophies of time taught in Hinduism, Buddhism, and many other traditional Asian philosophies to the linear view of time that the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West teaches to the ideas of relativity and simultaneity that modern science proposes and modern culture with its new technologies fosters. Thus, the sense of time that different works of art express can vary widely.

The means that visual artists use to make time visible are also varied. Historically, visual artworks were most commonly static forms—paintings, sculptures, tapestries, ceramics, and the like—physical objects that were not intended to move or change. (Among the exceptions were artworks designed for use in performances and rituals; these artworks generally did not change in form, but performers moved the objects about.) Artists making static works who aimed to express concepts of time could only represent time through symbolization and suggestion. For example, a Hindu artist holding a cyclical philosophy of time might incorporate a wheel in his art as a symbol

disorient the visitor: if the present is the culmination of the past, but the past keeps shifting, then where are we now, how can we take our bearings? In the face of temporal disorientation, Tolle's work requires that we pay attention and refuse to take the present for granted.

Brian Tolle was born in 1964, the son of a mechanical engineer and a real estate agent. He was raised on Long Island and studied at the Parsons School of Design and Yale University School of Art. He now lives in New York, working in a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

### PROFILE: Cornelia Parker

Found objects that are recycled in artworks generally impart a sense of time to the degree that the objects' past history and identity remain evident. In a wide-ranging body of work, British artist Cornelia Parker has used found materials in inventive, often startling, ways that complicate their connection to both past and present and ask us to recognize the relentlessness of change in the meaning and form of everything over time. For example, *The Maybe* (1995) was a wall installation displaying a truly surprising array of found and borrowed objects, each with a factual relationship to history. Among the borrowed items in this bravura work were psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's pillow and blanket from his couch, a quill pen used by novelist Charles Dickens, and a rosary owned by Napoleon. *The Maybe* asked larger questions about these mementos than how they were used by their famous owners. Why do we keep relics around? Do they tell us something about the past or about the present? Can, and should, an artist transform relics into art materials, thereby giving them new life and meaning in the present? By altering the meaning of an artifact, is the artist somehow also altering the meaning of the past?

Other artworks by Parker explore time in nuanced variations on the same basic themes found in *The Maybe*—the complicated, ambiguous relationship of past and present, and the tricks and transformations wrought by time. For instance, to create *Shared Fate* (1998), Parker managed to borrow the actual guillotine that beheaded Marie Antoinette in 1793, which she then used as a tool to cleave apart all kinds of things from everyday items, such as bread and a necktie, to eccentric collectibles. As art historian Geoffrey Batchen put it, "These otherwise ordinary objects now share a fate with one of the great historical figures of the French Revolution, cut as much by the weight of that knowledge as by a metal blade."<sup>35</sup> One object that Parker guillotined was a doll based on a fictional character, the protagonist in Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*. The Oliver doll was designed so he appears to wince, an allusion to an episode in the novel in which Oliver's ear is twisted. The wince acquired a new layer of emotion when the artist used her historically freighted tool to slice Oliver in half at the waist! In Parker's wickedly humorous artwork, a fictional character's story becomes linked with the life of a real person from history. The cleaved Oliver doll confronts us with some mysterious questions: Can truth and fiction coalesce over

time? Is some aspect of the historical person Marie Antoinette now invested in the doll because the very same blade sliced them both? Does the guillotine's association with past horrors invest the artwork with the power to rattle us?

As we described in the previous profile, Brian Tolle created simulations of historical relics when he replicated Thomas Jefferson's writing desk and some of its copies. Parker, in contrast, has incorporated actual relics in her artworks. Both artists explore how time can be manifested in the physical as well as the conceptual changes that material objects undergo. Time becomes palpable when experienced through physical objects whose form and meaning are constantly and unstopably changing.

Parker has made several installations in which she creates an illusion of stasis—by displaying a halted action—but also undercuts that illusion by using recycled materials that show how completely and rapidly one thing can change into another. Parker's installation *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) suspends the remnants of a destroyed building from the gallery ceiling on thin strands and other support mechanisms. The hovering shards coalesce (as a visual gestalt) into a facsimile of the original structure, a ten-foot-wide garden shed whose demolition was deliberately arranged by the artist (the shed was blown up with the help of the British Army). Before the explosion, Parker crammed the shed with used objects she had acquired at yard sales (such as garden tools, books, and toys), the remains of which are scattered throughout the installation. To make the related installations *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)* (1997) and *Anti-Mass* (2005) [4-13], Parker obtained the remnants of two small wooden churches: *Mass* had burned after being struck by lightning in Texas, while *Anti-Mass* was destroyed by arsonists in Kentucky. In each case, her installation suspends the charred fragments into a cube about the size of the small church prior to its destruction. Not coincidentally, the titles of these installations refer to fundamental physical properties and the Big Bang, the cosmic explosion that many scientists believe gave birth to our universe. Parker, who was raised as a Catholic, has also suggested a religious subtext to her artwork, stating, "The whole notion of transubstantiation, the changing of one substance into another, has clearly influenced the way I think as an artist."<sup>36</sup>

It is interesting to compare Parker's partial reassemblages of architectural fragments to Heide Fasnacht's sculpture *Demo* (2000) [4-2], which represents a building frozen in the middle of imploding, with the entire mass about to tumble down. Despite an affinity in subject matter (the destruction of man-made structures), the works measure time differently. Fasnacht's *Demo* freezes a split second of linear time; time seems to stand still as in a tableau from a play or a stop-action photograph. The sense of time in Parker's *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)* and *Anti-Mass* is more ambiguous and more expansive. The charred fragments hover in a transitional state; they are no longer part of a whole, but they resist the pull of gravity. Or perhaps Parker's sculptures hint of an afterlife; the parts have risen, Lazarus-like, to become a ghost or a memory of a former self.