

Introduction

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Visiting Kelly Mark's studio at the bottom of Tecumseth Street in Toronto – the abattoir district, and one of the city's last remaining artist studio buildings – was to immerse in a small space, dense with a careful arrangement of art storage, loft bed and shower, kitchen and working space with sofa and cat, in which there are also shelves stacked with CDs, books, bottles of scotch, and a punch clock that flashes up and rings with a hard clang in one-hour intervals.

The punch clock has accompanied Mark's working life as an artist since 1997, and the work titled *In & Out*, is the monumentally conceived evidence. In its exhibition form, the piece consists of several steel racks with hundreds of time cards bearing the stamps of the time that Mark has punched in and out. The racks comprise weekly logs for each year, from 1997 to the present (and Mark has pledged to continue to the official retirement age of 65). In a proto-Conceptual manner, *In & Out* commits artistic creativity to mechanical process, biography to administrative system, and life to "file."

With its indexical preoccupation, *In & Out*, mimics industrial or service-sector shift work, but measures instead the capricious durations of the working life of an artist. The hardcore Conceptualist format, that grey-in-grey of the file, unexpectedly returns something of the unpredictability of "life," especially the particular condition of the artist's studio. In fact, the tension between formal methods of time management and the interval – the time and duration between – underlies much of Mark's interests (the way in which, in the complex flux of durations, life is lived).

This book, and the circulating exhibition that initiated it, sets out to document the rich array of Mark's preoccupations and interests with time. While organized around media – drawings, video, photography, sculpture, etc. – the works' underlying and overlapping chronologies trace shifting concerns and ricocheting interests partially inflected by the saturated landscape of media and signs upon which they draw. The earliest works are concerned with processes mechanically performed: Mark would set herself a task – charged with the pathos of uselessness such as counting the grains of salt in a saltshaker – and follow it through methodically, thereby echoing an industrial mode that found its appropriate counterpoint in the concerns of Minimalism, process art, and early Conceptualism. Here the idea was "a machine," such as evidenced in a series of early sculptures and drawings that were made by setting a graphite pencil to paper and drawing tight, spiraling circles until the graphite was gone. The material is consumed by mechanical execution, and the artist's time – invisible yet ensconced – becomes its aura.

Mark's more recent focus has shifted from the tautological nature of "a work made by time spent working," and the compaction of time within the mark-making, to frame the poignant actions of others and the residual flotsam of the everyday. The Conceptual format becomes an indexical medium, taking account of a particular, observed phenomenon, whether repetitious or unpredictable in nature. A series of photographs reports on the way in which desperate people have affixed, with great ingenuity and creativity, comedic notices on broken parking metres, seeking to avert ticketing. Notably, the new, more efficient sun-powered devices now in operation everywhere no longer allow for grey zones of freedom granted by mechanical failure. The administration of time, as to be expected in our culture, has hardened its grip, and creative forms of "talk-back" are disappearing. Throughout, Kelly's low-key attitude and slow-burn resistance to the abstract administration of time is registered precisely against its systems. Sometimes suspension in the automation performance of a task, the absorption within it, suggest a preferred mode of being – the task that requires no thought at all allows thought to take its own course, into daydreams perhaps. Within the stupid there lies heaven – as the title of the circulating exhibition suggested. At other times, Mark short-circuits the obsession with achievement, such as in her reiterations of the sentence "I really should...", the ellipsis of which betrays procrastination or the ever deferred Ideal. Indexing the innumerable ways that define what one indeed should do, an audio-track fills in the elliptical blanks of *I Really Should...* to the point of sheer excess. If obligation is bound-up in social structures (family, health, work), to refuse it (by procrastination or resistance) casts doubt on their values and diligent striving. Such existentialism underlies much of Mark's humour, as when an orchestrated demonstration puts an end to the historical, conventional form of social protest demands: in front of a gallery's black-tie fundraising event, a group of artist friends bearing blank placards declare, "What do we want... NOTHING!" and "When do we want it... NOW" and "Hell no... We don't know."

Watching television is perhaps the greatest means of contemporary distraction and procrastination. It is also the greatest tool of time management and immersive pleasure ever devised. If television constructs and dominates "Free" time, it has substantially altered the once "natural" pulse of day and night, waking and sleeping, by absorbing its audience into an interstitial day-dreaming, time-eating, surreal time. The installation *REM* (2007) (1), part of her recent multi-leveled focus on the glow and narrative structures of television, is nothing short of a tour de force, featuring a movie that illuminates the experience of channel-surfing television time. An encyclopedic array of segments are taken from television, edited, and strung together to create a new full-length "feature," complete with title warnings, ads, network logos, and credits. The story follows a protagonist who seeks to escape the law, and who changes shape like an avatar, appearing with each edit in the body of a different actor. He (and through him the audience) perpetually loses and regains track of where he is – whether in a dream, asleep, awake or in a drug-induced state. These states are not only the means of narrative propulsion and the content of the new film; they also elucidate

the subject of television as such: consciousness recycles and strings together changing attention spans and pursuits in a combination of narrative bits. The meshing of production and consumption in narrative hyper-time informs a new sense of subjectivity and artistic practice.

While *In & Out* continues the march of time with that implicit clanging of the relentless clock, Mark's work has come to engage ever more often formats of public interventions, therewith punching holes into the landscape of cliché and neurotic urban obsessions, such as *Public Disturbance*, in which an angrily arguing couple is staged and recorded at a fundraising party of the Power Plant, catching the attendees of the ball unawares and uncomfortable, but heightening some of the social tensions that typically beset such occasions; as well as her eight-hour chain-smoking performance in *Smoke Break*, which interjected demonstratively into working life, and reminded one of the smoking-as-leisure moment that is all but illegal in most public spaces now. Her working-life – in which she herself regularly makes appearances wherever and anywhere – is a matter of working hard(ly) working. More often yet, she has been working with neon and other sign formats to interject circular pronouncements into the public realm. Their exclamations suspend the reader, stumping attention to focus on that which is often elided in the thrust of progress, forward movement, striving: *Hold that Thought*, for instance, consists of a purposefully flickering neon that does not settle down; the laser-cut sentence, *IT'S JUST ONE GOD DAMN THING AFTER ANOTHER*, is set in a circle so that it eats its own tail; *No Tofu, No Yoga Mat* signs counter fashionable trends of self-improvement; and with *I Have No Issues* she declares her own distance not only from currently favoured art parlance, but also everyday contestations. Such interjections throw a wrench into the mechanics of meaning and focus the attention on the here and now, sometimes with as simple a means as the addition of a letter into the publicly reigning fire exit signs: they now hail the passerby to *EXIST*. Her work seems to stretch attention and land us unconditionally in the temporary reprieve of the moment, and as such, resolutely countering – or perhaps forgetting to remember to forget – the administration of life.

(1) REM is the acronym for rapid eye movement, which occurs as a result of brain activity during sleep.