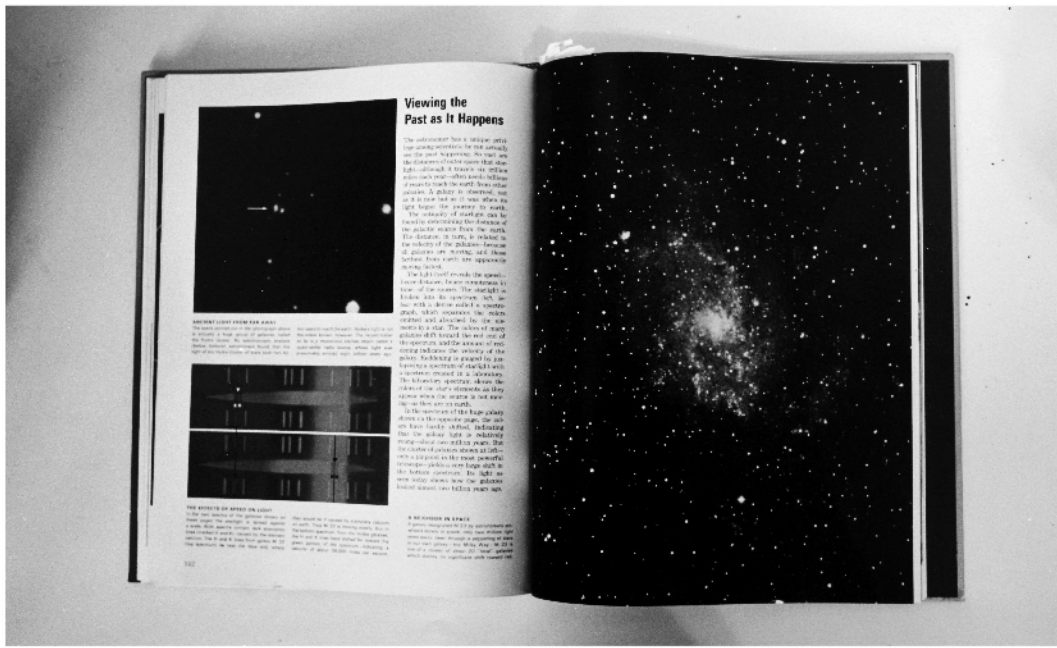




WILL ROGAN

A TWICE
LIVED
FRAGMENT
OF TIME

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Viewing the Past As it Happens, 2010, Silver Gelatin Print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

A TWICE LIVED FRAGMENT OF TIME

Allyson Unzicker

“Now he only waited to be liquidated with, somewhere inside him, the memory of a twice-lived fragment of time.”¹

The exhibition’s title is derived from Chris Marker’s epic ciné-roman, *La Jetée* (1962), a science fiction film constructed almost entirely of still photographs. Set in a post-apocalyptic France, scientists research time travel by conducting mind experiments on prisoners hoping to find a solution to their current crisis by sending emissaries through time. Only one man is capable of remembering the past; a vague recollection of himself as a child seeing a man die. Bewildered by the painful experiments, he is injected into the past where he begins to obsess over finding the answers to the memory that haunts him. Alas, after travelling back in time to that forgotten moment, he tragically discovers that the

death he witnessed was actually his own. *La Jetée*’s narrative is a psychological time warp in that we are always faced with the persistence of the past while our imagination projects us into the future. Time travel is unfathomable because we only experience physical time, which is imminent and linear, but our memory of time is nonlinear and fragmented. In a similar vein, Jorge Luis Borges poetically observed that “the present does not exist, and since the past and the future do not exist either, time does not exist...time is a mere relation between intemporal things.”² Since time is intangible, in order to foresee the future we must first understand the past. *A Twice Lived Fragment of Time* investigates the themes of temporal impermanence and mortality in the contemporary work of Will Rogan. His artistic practice is based largely around appropriated materials and capturing the everyday through photography, sculptures, and works on paper.

As in *La Jetée*, we too must search the past for ways to understand our future. Archives preserve history and serve the public as a resource for collective memory. In the series *Mediums*, Rogan’s process begins with collecting de-accessioned art catalogues taken from the San Francisco Art Institute Library. The images he chooses are of artists whose careers no longer exist. Cropped and mounted onto wood, the portraits become sculptural; their backsides obfuscated with black paint and sanded until smooth and reflective. Their black exteriors are a symbolic reference to falling into the darkness of obscurity. Through this careful process, the obsolete artists who have been cast out of discourse are again returned, existing for a second time in public view as memento mori. In their current reiteration, the images of the artists exist as an artistic material. Through this process, he has taken the artists who were purged from an organized system and returned them into a signifying system once more. In relocating them, he has retained their memories. Obsolescence thus raises the question of what role a cultural institution plays in an artist’s authorship. For instance, libraries are a protected heterotopia, yet they cannot maintain all of their artifacts. A lack of space for duplicate or damaged books serves as viable reasons for de-accession. Obsolescence, therefore is not a characteristic of the thing itself, rather it is an outside perception that makes something obsolete, i.e. de-accessioning books because the library no longer deems them relevant. Though the images are reclaimed, their precarious installation leaves them eternally unstable, in that they can be installed in various positions, all of which are susceptible to toppling over. In this manner, they exist only as remnants of their former selves. Hanging

precariously in the balance of time and memory, these unfamiliar faces are a representation of the archival system’s failure to maintain their contributions to the canon of art history.

In Rogan’s series *Vedaland Plans*, he again appropriates found materials by reconstructing the pages taken from a discontinued magician magazine. The pages are altered through the simple act of erasure, until only a portion of the original text or image remains. Collecting the magazines, only to erase them, is both an additive and subtractive process not unlike a magician’s disappearing act. By erasing the magazine pages, he not only removes, but refines the content. In *Vedaland Plans (more or less)*, all text is erased except a small excerpt stating, “All Societies with a long life of tradition behind them endeavor to keep some sort of record, usually referred to as Archives. The trouble is, these are not always kept, but get lost, more or less forever.” As with any type of advancement, older information becomes outdated and often buried. Archives, therefore, represent a temporal uncertainty. In resurfacing them, he regenerates their significance.

Serving as another form of record to document time and space, photography enables us to capture and preserve memories. Photography, in and of itself, exposes the impermanence of time and the complexities of representing it. For instance, Douglas Huebler’s photo series *Durations*, attempts to capture time through the photographic process. *Duration Piece #31, Boston (1974)*, is a photograph taken of a woman on December 31, 1973 at exactly an eighth of a second before midnight, while the exposure was completed an eighth of a second into the New Year of 1974. The woman not only travels through time, literally in the length of the exposure, but is forever suspended caught travelling *in* time between the two years. More interested in creating work about hypothetical statements than actual objects, Huebler famously stated, “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place.”³ Huebler’s piece employs the temporality and spatiality of the everyday, depicting time travel as a tangible concept. Rogan’s photographic practice is similarly engaging. *Viewing the Past As it Happens* is a photograph of a 35-year-old book on the subject of time. The text illustrates how an astronomer has the unique ability to see the past as it happens. It states, “A galaxy is observed, not as it is now but as it was when its light began the journey to earth.” Starlight takes up to billions of years to reach us. In the time it takes for the

light to travel, a star could already be extinct. *Viewing the Past As it Happens*, emphasizes the reality of time while also capturing its fleeting nature.

In viewing the light of a nonexistent star from the past in the present, we too are like Huebler’s New Year woman, experiencing a split in time, caught between the old and the new. The night sky reflects our distance to the past and is a constant reminder of our mortality. The lights are only a remnant of that which no longer exists, much like Rogan’s memento mori sculptures. Comparable to time travel, memory is nonlinear. It is a time warp that fluctuates between past, present and future. In this sense, there is no time, there is only now. The simple act of gazing at the stars makes the experience of time travel a psychological reality, as with *La Jetée*’s time traveling man who is captivated by the memory of his past. □

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Notes

1. *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker (1962: New York, Criterion Collection, 2007), DVD.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964), 196.
3. Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 135.

* Cover image: *Universe Party* (detail), 2010. Silver Gelatin Print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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