Exhibition Preview

Senses of Time
Video and Film-Based Arts of Africa

Karen E. Milbourne

with Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts

More than fifty years ago, the art historian George Kubler wrote that time is, “like mind, not knowable as such” (1962:13). Kubler was concerned with human difficulties in understanding time other than by looking back upon the material record to assess processes of change and permanence. He did not, however, question how time is conceived in situation-specific modes or how it might play out differently based on location. We do live in a world made up of multiple times. Reproductive “clocks” tick according to biological time, the continents move on geological time, our watches are set to the precision of US Naval Observatory time. As scientific as such measurements may be, time is always a cultural construction. Precolonial African societies had their own senses of time, and rather than linear or strictly so, some understood time to be circular or a spiral leading from origins to present moments. Colonial authorities made great efforts to colonize time, yet vestiges of earlier temporal systems, calendars, and astrologies remain. As Kubler astutely pointed out, notions of time are all connected to material records—those objects often called “art,” as we often find in Africa. Now that the art world includes an ever-wider spectrum of media including “time-based” video, digital, and performance arts, relationships between time and art have become much more complicated and much more necessary a field of inquiry.

The exhibition “Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Works of Africa” is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from December 20, 2015–January 2, 2017, as co-curated by Karen E. Milbourne, National Museum of African Art, and Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, UCLA and LACMA. Many of the ideas developed in this essay came to fruition during and since a colloquium on Time and Temporalities in African Art hosted by The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, as convened in April 2014 by Karen E. Milbourne. Participants in the colloquium were Bili Bidjocka, Theo Eshetu, Naima Keith, Dominique Malaquais, Prita Meier, Simon Njami, Sylvester Ogbechie, Sue Williamson, and Polly Nooter Roberts. The hosts and colleagues of the colloquium played an important role in helping to create a stimulating dialogue and set of discussions around a provocative subject with far-reaching implications for the fields of art history and African art. This focused exhibition brings together a selection of time-based works that address the role of temporality as embodied by the medium itself and as experienced—and produced—by the body, the senses, and the choreographies of memories and identities in motion. After opening at LACMA, “Senses of Time” will be on view at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton NY, from September 10–December 18, 2016.
Stills from single-channel video projection, 16mm color film and digital video, transferred to DVD; Duration 3:30, Edition of 5, 1 AP.

*Photos: courtesy of the artist*

In this sequence of stills, the artist performs a riveting commentary on the slippages of time and identity as she steps with trepidation along a glass surface lubricated with olive oil. As she inches toward the top of the frame, her feet begin to slip and we see her entire body slide backward (or what appears to be downward) accompanied by a dissonant sound as her form refracts in the oil. With each pouring of oil, Searle begins her ascent anew in the viscous material.

What is too often absent, however, is a critical engagement with both the temporalizing strategies and assumptions that frame African experience, and the ahistorical treatment of African art by many scholars.

It has been more than thirty years since Johannes Fabian published *Time and the Other* (1983/2014) in an effort to combat the idea of “the traditional” as time standing still. Fabian sought to counter the denial of coevalness between people inhabiting European and non-European spaces, and to recognize contradictions inherent to the acceptance of such stasis within the discipline of anthropology. Fabian challenged earlier Western scholars’ relegation of “the Other” to a lower evolutionary model of “natural” or “universal” time outside of “Modernity,” and he took on language and default euphemisms. As he stated, a discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, third world or whatever euphemism is current), does not think, or observe, or critically study “the primitive”; it thinks and observes in terms of the primitive. “Primitive” is essentially a temporal concept, a category, not an object of Western thought (Fabian 2014:17–18).

Slowing down a scene, repeating, mirroring, layering, distorting or dissolving an image—these are just some of the techniques employed by Berni Searle, Yinka Shonibare, Sammy Baloji, Moataz Nasr, and Theo Eshetu—the artists featured in “Senses of Time”—to heighten awareness of the ruptures and variations within the production, experience, and tactility of time. Time’s movements can be circular, progressive, or stagnant, for as Alan Lightman reminds us in his novel *Einstein’s Dreams*,

"time moves in fits and starts. [We] know that time struggles forward with a weight on its back when rushing an injured child to the hospital or bearing the gaze of a neighbor wronged. And [we] know too that time darts across the field of vision when eating with friends or receiving praise, or lying in the arms of a secret lover (1993:19)."

Particular the manner through which artists approach the passage of time as it is experienced in the body through movement and by the sensorium. For insight, we look to Laura Marks’s concept of the “skin of the film” as a way for people to connect through the senses with what has never been experienced directly or has been colored by nostalgia. Our thoughts are further informed by Marks’s discussion of “haptic visuality” through which “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (Marks 2000:22) and the role of the viewer becomes intertwined with what is being viewed so that barriers between observer and object are broken down. As we consider time-based works by the five artists featured in the exhibition, we seek to “restore a flow between the haptic and the optical that our culture is currently lacking” (Marks 2002:3), and to explore this flow specifically with regard to time.4

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Although the adjective “primitive” is wholly unacceptable in relation to Africa and/or African arts, terms like “traditional,” “Third-World,” or “developing” linger in outsiders’ descriptions of African contexts, where African arts are treated as at odds with or precursors to “Modern” and “Contemporary” Western arts. All too often, such words obscure rather than clarify the contexts in which works of art were created and circulated. For instance, photography is a medium often associated with “the Contemporary,” yet it has flourished on the continent since 1839, the year the daguerreotype and calotype were invented. As António Ribeiro (2006:133) has so pithily noted, “Jacques Daguerre’s discovery took just eleven weeks—the length of the voyage [by ship from France]—to reach South Africa,” which, ironically enough, makes the earliest photographic images taken on the continent a good deal older than much of what is cherished as “traditional” African sculpture. Conversely, masquerades are among the most “contemporary” performances flourishing in parts of Africa to this day, including cities such as Ibadan in Nigeria (Campbell 2015). What gets called “traditional” did not necessarily precede the contemporary in Africa, and as obvious as it may seem, all of Africa’s arts have been “contemporary” at the time that they were created. To redirect Fabian’s term, they are coeval with contemporary art-making anywhere else in the world.

Even so, temporally inflected words like “traditional,” “modern,” and “contemporary” shape the contexts in which African artists produce works and in which they are then interpreted. Nevertheless, the emphasis on Africa’s past is coming into balance with its future, as evidenced by work like that of Wanuri Kahiu and growing attention to Afro-futurism (see Keith and Whitely 2013). As Reinhart Koselleck (2004) has suggested in relation to the experience of modernity, time is malleable and not only constituted by the past. Time-based media accords artists a forum to explore temporalizing structures within and against the progression of seconds and minutes. William Kentridge’s five-channel video installation The Refusal of Time (2012) created for Documenta 13 is perhaps the best-known recent meditation on time and its consequences by an African artist. The thirty-minute work features live action, song, sculpture, light, motion, and animation, and reveals the complex legacies of colonialism and industry in an intense, visceral experience. At the center of a room wrapped with videos projected on sheets of wood is a breathing machine—“an elephant in melancholy madness,” to borrow Dickens’ evocative description of monotonous mechanical process in Hard Times (1854:132). The viewer is further surrounded by metronomes and other sounds or senses of time, early maps of Africa appearing and disappearing, the spinning of hands on clocks, and a parade of shadowy figures. Kentridge worked with Peter Galison, a Harvard professor of the History of Science and Physics, as well as Philip Galson, who wrote the score, and Catherine Meyburgh, who provided editing. Their complex, multisensory installation outlines a history of changes in the interpretation of time: from celestial understandings to Newton, to Einstein. Following Kentridge, Einstein’s theories of temporal relativity collide with the rigid Greenwich Mean Time imposed as “universal” across the former British Empire and now accepted around the world.

The “refusal” in Kentridge’s title is both personal and political: “Everybody knows that we are going to die,” Kentridge has stated, “but the resistance to that pressure coming towards us is at the heart of the project. At the individual level, it was about resisting; not resisting mortality in the hope of trying to escape it, but trying to escape the pressure that it puts on us.” Politi-
cally, “the refusal was a refusal of the European sense of order imposed by time zones; not only literally, but this refusal also referred metaphorically to other forms of control as well” (Kenntridge quoted in ICA 2014).

Somewhat similarly, Keith Moxey (2013) has described how there are always at least two forms of “visual time” made present by a work of art: the time in which the work was produced and that in which it is experienced. Each work opens an experience for the viewer in the present at the same time that it provides a window into the past, as its context. Following such reasoning, what the best time-based works of art do is to unsettle our complacency with the fixed nature of time. We cannot simply look at the work in the now, imagine the then of when it was created, and move on. Our progression is stopped. Our bodies are stopped. We are caught in the web of time.

Like Wanuri Kahiu and William Kenntridge, the artists featured in “Senses of Time” tackle the production and interpretation of time in their work. They do so with bodies. Using their own bodies, those of friends and actors, or figures from archives, they interrogate the absences, frailties, and repetitions of history and memory, the temporal dimensions of identity, and the hopes pinned to the passage of time.

**TIME AND THE BODY: WORKS IN “SENSES OF TIME”**

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**BERNI SEARLE**

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson (2003:5) suggests that the title of Berni Searle’s vertiginous video, *A Matter of Time*, is a play on words, a proposal that it will only be a matter of time before we live in a world less plagued by gender and racial inequality. These goals are certainly worthy, but this is not the only matter of time brought to bear in Searle’s 2003 video projection. In particular, rather than expecting viewers to identify with the artist as the subject of her work, they are encouraged to sense a “bodily relationship” with the video’s movements and moments, “responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin” (c.f. Marks 2002:3–4).

In *A Matter of Time*, Searle slips and slides in an effort to climb a sloping surface. To create this three-and-a-half minute, single-channel projection, the artist installed a transparent platform eight meters in the air upon which she poured thick olive oil (Fig. 1). The camera was then positioned underneath, and was tightly framed. The sequence is shot in “real time.” There is only minimal editing to the drama that unfolds. We keep pace and feel the tension as Searle’s feet fight the forces of viscosity and gravity. The only sound comes from suction-like noises as she attempts to lift her feet and then slides back again. Searle’s use of olive oil recalls the times during her youth when her grandmother would encourage her in the face of discrimination, telling her that outside of South Africa people regard having an olive skin like hers as beautiful. On an obvious level, the oil materializes a memory from the artist’s past, but it also lubricates the artist’s performance of the slippages of time. Searle’s progress is by no means linear. She glides, sticks, inches along, and falls, despite the clinical precision of the clock on her camera and the projector sharing her struggle on a continuous loop (Fig. 2).

To return to the compelling words of Alan Lightman, Searle’s is a world in which there is mechanical time and there is body time. The first is as rigid and metallic as a massive pendulum of iron that swings back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The second squirms and wriggles like a bluefish in a bay. The first is unyielding, predetermined. The second makes up its mind as it goes along (1993:18).

Searle juxtaposes temporal experiences to reveal that who we are and who we want to be are still being determined as we slip-slide onward, even as we may lose ground. As Searle’s title suggests, it is merely “a matter of time” until she falls—and with her, we do too; but even as she does and we do, we all get up and begin again (Fig. 3).

*About to Forget*, Searle’s 2005 three channel projection that is also featured in “Senses of Time” represents a departure in her work. Rather than featuring herself as primary actor, the artist worked with archival photographs of three generations of her family (Fig. 4). Each screen depicts a different configuration of silhouettes cut from red crepe paper. The two-and-a-half-minute projection opens to the sounds of water dripping against an empty white screen. Red découpage floats into place to reveal...
but incoherent subject, an image that contains the memory of a more complete self” that may just be that of the viewer her- or himself. A compassionate, open-ended response is elicited then, again following Marks, as the dissolutions of Searle’s reflexive work “draw us into a deep connection with all things, absent and present.”

YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

Yinka Shonibare MBE is another acclaimed artist who tackles time, although this may be a less-discussed aspect of his work. The artist’s manipulations of time recall the words of Walter Mignolo (2011:77–78), that “there is no ontological reality such as modernity or tradition. Modernity and Tradition are BOTH WESTERN AND MODERN CONCEPTS by which ‘West’ and ‘Modernity’ become the very definition of the enunciation that invented ‘Tradition’ and ‘the Orient.’” In Un Ballo en Maschera (shown in “Senses of Time”) and the 2011 Addio del Passato, Shonibare interweaves and subverts the geographies and temporalizing narratives of tradition and modernity.

In 2004, the artist made his first foray into film with Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball). Taking its title and theme as a “gesture” to Verdi’s opera of 1859, the film portrays the politically
motivated assassination of Sweden’s King Gustav III at a masquerade ball in Stockholm in 1792.8

The work opens to the rhythm of a beating heart as the camera moves in on a candlelit building. Inside we see masked women lacing up their bodices before moving on to a spacious ballroom. Towering wooden doors open into a marble chamber, and through them enters the king, played by a woman (Fig. 10). The king is surrounded by bewigged dames in sumptuous gowns and masked gentlemen donning frock coats, all fashioned from colorfully patterned wax print fabric of the sort that is understood as “typically African,” yet has long been most famously produced in the Netherlands (see Guldemond and Mackert 2004) (Figs. 8–9). Over the course of the film’s thirty-two minutes, we see and hear dancing feet and rustling skirts engaged in a highly formal minuet. In lieu of dialogue, we share in the sounds of living, breathing beings in motion. The action comes to a climax as a sea of periwigged dancers parts and a stunning brunette in an owlish mask raises a flintlock pistol, aims it at the king, and fires (Fig. 11). The king drops to the ground amidst the gasps of the masqueraders, lies dead for a moment, rises, and smiles benignly. The fatal choreography is repeated, even as “the event is played backwards and forwards with minute variations as the actors re-perform the event for the camera.”9 The king is dead, long live the king! Time is suspended, momentarily irrelevant, and where we are left is where we begin, again (Fig. 12).

Shonibare makes us captives of his playing with time. His work is set in a particular historical moment and yet it refers to the global politics of 2004 when the work was filmed, for Un Ballo in Maschera is on many levels a parable of the Iraq war and all too many other absurd history-repeats-itself tragedies around the world.10 The film loops. Unless viewers choose to snap their attention back into the here and now, each person watching the video is subjected to circular time as the artist constructs it. While the frames and seconds of the projector tick forward, time as portrayed by the artist has been captured. Shonibare admits that “the repetition in the film is a metaphor for the repetition of history. That repetition also alludes to the formal loop in video art shown in the museum.”11

As an artist of Nigerian descent, Shonibare lives in Britain and considers himself a “postcolonial hybrid.” As such, he is all too familiar with how Africans and their arts have been set in, or

These five stills are drawn from Shonibare’s majestic gesture to Verdi’s opera of 1859, in which the Swedish king Gustav III is assassinated at a masked ball. In Shonibare’s rendition, the historical event is an allegory for the absurdities of political violence as history repeats itself in an unending cycle—with the artist specifically thinking of the Iraq war and other politically motivated global tragedies. Dramatized by masked characters in gowns and frock coats made from the colorfully patterned wax print fabric made in the Netherlands but considered to be “typically African,” the scenes move from the rhythm of a beating heart to a sumptuous ball during which the king, played by a woman, is shot dead by a masked brunette, before reviving to recommence the choreography in a play upon the circling of history and the looping of time-based media.

(left–right, top–bottom, opposite and this page)

8–12 Yinka Shonibare MBE, Un Ballo in Maschera (2004)
Still from high definition digital video; Duration 32:00.
Photos: courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, NY

Through his signature use of Dutch textiles and his mining of history, Yinka Shonibare skillfully probes and problematizes the ways in which Africans and African art have been set in, or
left out of time. Shonibare creates works of art that cite Fragonard, Gainsborough, and Goya, thus placing himself within the established chronologies and canons of Western art history, while “provincializing Europe” itself, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) might have it. Shonibare’s works do not permit that he be considered outside of time like unidentified African artists have been and may still be. Instead, he cycles through time, finding parallels between Enlightenment-era European philosophy and current globalizing practices, and suggesting how the assassination of an obscure eighteenth-century Swedish king may foreshadow the hubris of twenty-first-century world leaders. Shonibare places himself firmly within Western-based models of progressive time, and points out how Europeans and Americans have their recurring traditions, too.

The ways in which Shonibare bends and folds time point to a need to consider African art and artists inside, and not outside, of time. His vision is as big as the layers of corporeal, historical, and experiential temporal experience.

**SAMMY BALOJI**

Unlike Yinka Shonibare’s extravaganza *Un Ballo in Maschera*, in his video *Mémoire* (2006), Sammy Baloji guides us on a spare dance through the ruins of time and into the ambiguities of present and future. He does not investigate the grand sweep of Western historical narratives, but presents particular tales of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the failed promises of its Belgian colonizers and post-Independence leaders that are made painfully manifest in Lubumbashi’s de-industrialized wasteland of what used to be the Gécamines mining complex (Jewsiewicki forthcoming).

*Mémoire*, or *Memory*, is the artist’s first foray into time-based media. For this fourteen-and-a-half minute, single channel video for projection, Baloji partnered with the Congolese choreographer and dancer Faustin Linyekula. Their raw, “moving portrait of broken promises” (Jewsiewicki 2010:14) commences with words set simply in white against a black screen. As Baloji puts it in the opening words of the film (translated in the subtitles), “…Mémoire is the story of politicians and the working-classes; …of those in power and the work of those who are governed. It is also the story of a body that moves among the ruins of what was once the economic heart of the DR Congo.” Of particular poignancy is the sense of loss that young Lushois and Lushoises—that is, men and women living in Lubumbashi—feel due to dire rupture from a past characterized by the salaried labor of their grandparents that once led to a vibrant urban middle class. This was to be their modernity as well, and yet now they have next to nothing—only debris (Fig. 13). The mines have been shut down and their rusting relics, stilled machinery, and thwarted futures cause angry frustration directed not just at whatever local and international powers are understood to have caused such distress, but to parents and grandparents who enjoyed the hope of ever-better circumstances now denied to their descendants.

*Mémoire’s* text gives way to an enthralling voice from the grave, as a recording of Patrice Lumumba speaking in 1960 animates scenes of the blue Congolese sky and the ruins of Lubumbashi’s huge Gécamines copper-mining complex. In his speech, Lumumba reclaims Congolese land for the new nation’s chil-
dren in preparation for “sublime struggle” toward prosperity and
greatness, social justice, and fair worker compensation. The rush
of running water and moving machinery are replaced by scenes
of contemporary men engaged in mining slag-heap detritus
from shut-down mines. Lumumba’s hopeful words are followed
by those of Joseph Kasavubu, but rather than document the
dates of the speech by the independent republic’s first president
or other officials, Baloji lists the dates they served in office—their
temporal slice of the past that shaped present moments.15

As these futile words end, the camera cuts to grainy footage
of the slight figure of Faustin Linyekula, wearing nothing but
trousers and a belt and standing in front of a dented and rusted
conduit through which nothing does or can flow any longer.
Linyekula holds an empty frame from which he looks toward
the viewer even as his body begins to rhythmically writhe and
contort (Fig. 14). He picks up a sheet of paper as his dance
continues and to the ticks and screeches of static and feed-
back, he moves with this page from the past. The sound track
reaches a crescendo as the dancer cries out three times, “Vive
l’indépendance!” Past conflates with present in painful ironies.
The screen goes black and we return to alternating footage of the
mine, archival soundtracks of Presidents Mobutu and Kabila,
and Linyekula’s lithe movements in the anomic spaces of the vast
but ruined property.

As the video nears its conclusion, Linyekula moves out into
the sunlight and his arms stretch toward an undetermined future
to whirl in extended circles. We hear the recurring warning “tss”
of a snake, though nothing moves beyond the dancer. No work-
ers, no machines, only dust and rust. Linyekula’s body torques in
arabesque movements (Fig. 15) as he inscribes the time and place
to the voice of Mulumba Lukoji, first President of the Sovereign
National Conference (1990), saying:

We owe it to ourselves, as we owe it to our ancestors as well as to our
children, to be able to discuss at length, to talk about the past and
the future of our country without indulgence but also without emo-
tion and with no gratuitous violence, even if it is merely verbal. Given
that those of our brothers and sisters who today find themselves in
another place were also almost all of them, previously in positions of
power at a time not necessarily that long ago, we could legitimately
permit ourselves to show that they shared, to different degrees admit-
tedly, responsibility for the general degradation into which we have
fallen today.16

Linyekula then turns toward the camera, walks forward with his
arm raised, turns to dance, looks to the sky, folds, spins, then
walks briskly to the shadows, waiting for the video to loop and
tell the tale again.

Susan Stewart (1993:33) has taught us that “speech leaves no
mark in space; like gesture, it exists in its immediate context and
can reappear only in another’s voice, another’s body, even if that
other is... transformed by history.” What does not remain in
space leaves its trace in time. Balaji and Linyekula turn to the
language of the body, gesture, and speech in space, to harness
time and reveal its betrayals.

MOATAZ NASR

Like Berni Searle, Yinka Shonibare, and Sammy Balaji, Moataz
Nasr invokes the vocabulary of bodies and the moving image

Stills from a single-channel video projection; Duration 05:00.
Photos: courtesy of the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy

Time is closely tied to identity in this study of self and circumstance. Individuality
is recast by time as the faces of Egyptian men, women, and children are briefly
reflected in a puddle before a boot stomps into the water, distorting, fragment-
ing, and transforming the images. It is as if to say that we are all in flux, and
that our circumstances are greater than our individual capacities to assert stable
senses of personhood. Is the fragility of human time trampled and trodden by
the forces of political time? Or are the quivering, shimmering faces that we see
in Nasr’s work a looking glass that mediates and transcends time?
to think through politics and the impact of time on “the past’s future,” to borrow Reinhart Kosellek’s (2004) powerfully pro-leptic phrase. Like Mémoire, Nasr’s The Water (2002) fits within a broader body of work that includes still photography. Just as Baloi accompanied his video with his renowned montages of images drawn from the Gécamines archives and what the artist calls “portraits” of the mine’s industrial dissolution, Nasr created ephemeral hand-made sun-prints in a series called Insecure, of faces that waiver and retreat in the five-minute video installation The Water. Taking time-traveling light of the sun, he has created prints that speak to the fragility of human time and highlight the central role of time in his video work.

In The Water, the face of a young man quivers, shimmers, distorts, and reappears as it is reflected on the surface of a puddle (Fig. 16). Projected on the wall, it is as though we are looking in a mirror at some distant soul or shadow from the past until the image is abruptly disrupted by the resounding splash of a treading boot. The young man’s face is replaced by the wider, fleshier face of an older man, though this next visage is accorded less time before another boot crashes down (Fig. 17). A man with a mustache comes next, his face almost dancing to the light and ripples of water. The reflections of curly-haired children follow the next footstep (Fig. 18) before they too morph into the face of a stern, mustached adult, and then another footstep. A woman wearing a scarf is the next to shimmer on the surface, though her time is also brief. The parade continues as faces reflect across the water and footsteps pick up their pace. The water bubbles and grows more opaque until the first young man returns and the video ends where it began—to begin again.

Bodies appear in fragments in The Water—feet and faces that waiver—and we never see or otherwise experience these Egyptians in full. Their pasts and futures dapple and dance as water reflects the sun’s distant light. Identities are distorted and dispersed in allegory of the turmoil that Cairenes have known so intimately since the Arab Spring. In an interview with Hou Hanru of MAXXI in Rome, Nasr refers to the “Once upon a time” of Cairo before religious and political divides led to “something that isn’t human anymore” (Hanru 2014:22). Does the surface reflect the persons whose reflections it reflects, or is preference given to the boot that roils and ruins expectations of predictable futures?

In The Water, the artist focuses his lens and our gaze upon spectral humans, but he does not allow us to escape as passive observers, for he implicates our bodies, as well. At the base of the installation lies a pool of water or some other reflective surface, extending the work’s interactions to include visitors. Like Alice’s...
looking glass, this feature and the video itself transport each viewer through the threshold to a place beyond time.

THEO ESHETU
Theo Eshetu states that

the way time is experienced very much depends on one's mindset. Walking time and flying time are very different ways to experience space. Technological Time satisfies our wish to do things more quickly. It is anchored in a specific time frame or epoch and evolves with each technological invention. Mainly it reduces the normal time it takes to do something, so alters our understanding of time. Ritual Time aims for Timelessness. It belongs to the sphere of transcendental experience which seeks to overcome linear time and define the "eternal present." We speak of Birth, Marriage, and Death rituals, and through these we seek to stop the sensation of time moving forward and try to define a specific moment. Rituals are like the markings on a clock dial, technology is like the clock hand.18

In his artistic practice, Eshetu explores perception, identity, and notions of the sacred through electronic time-based media and optical devices and effects (Fig. 19). He draws from anthropology, art history, scientific research, and religion—Catholic, African, Muslim, Buddhist—to explore clashes and harmonies of human subjectivity between and among world cultures in global contexts. Each of his forays into film, television, or video is grounded in compelling aesthetic components, often achieved through fractal repetition, kaleidoscopic mirroring, multiscreen projections, mosaic-like patterning of images, and mood-sensitive soundscapes.

Eshetu's Brave New World II (1999) crystallizes a phenomenon Franco Berardi (2001:11) has poetically described as the "fractalization of time." In this single channel super-8 film montage, images of the pre-9/11 Twin Towers in New York City flow into scenes of Timkat—the Ethiopian Orthodox celebration of Epiphany in January. Balinese dancers follow, as do those of airplanes, baseball games, a Kellogg's cereal box, and an excerpt from an Italian insurance company commercial. Sometimes repeating, slowing, or reversing, these pictures dissolve into one another (Fig. 20).

For this work, Eshetu used super-8 film because he felt that its granular, “romantic” quality evoked landscapes of memory. The montage of Brave New World II is presented on a 25”-tube television screen—its own “memory device” in our time of enormous, ever-thinner, always “smarter” computer-driven TVs. An “aura” results from just such apparent defects, leading viewers to fill in details that have been lost or that might be available in more up-to-date media (Marks 2002:94).

The TV set is situated so precisely within a pyramid of four inwardly directed mirrors that reflections form a “perfect globe,” even as they elicit kaleidoscopic sensations.19 When viewed obliquely or from a distance in the gallery, the work appears to be a moving image in a simple gold picture frame, but by approaching and then leaning into the opening of the box as one is invited to do, viewers are caught up in a mise en abyme, with mirrors catching and reflecting their portraits. That is, the device is recursive, insofar as versions of one’s face contain smaller versions of the same image, seemingly ad infinitum. Again with reference to the proverbial Alice, viewers are given the impression that they are being pulled down a rabbit hole to the TV screen showing pictures ranging from tragic to banal. Caught in the act of looking, each visitor bears witness to Eshetu’s captivating vision of a world in which people, ideas, and temporal codes travel, repeat, and converge “in shared fragility, corporeality, and mortality” (Marks 2002:177).

Brave New World II takes its name from Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel that, in turn, is based upon Shakespeare’s Tempest. In famously ironic lines, Miranda exclaims, “Oh wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! Oh brave new world! That has such people in it!” (5.1.181–84). The words and the ideas of these great authors inspired Eshetu to explore the contrasts between diverse symbolic systems and consumer culture, the tensions inherent to using technology to represent non-technical arts, and the divergences between ritual time and technical time (Fig. 21).

Brave New World II was preceded by Brave New World I. The two differ in their soundtracks. In the earlier work, music by Arvo Pärt “suggests a connection with an ethereal spiritual space,” whereas for Brave New World II, Eshetu worked with his longtime friend and collaborator, Keir Fraser, to create an original score to evoke “a presence, a nowness associated with the reflections in the mirror.”20 Viewers are lured with the “nowness” of Brave New World II’s music and then caught in the ongoing act of witnessing. We see ourselves past and present as we lean in toward receding realities.

ENVOI: ABOUT TIME
The discussion of time should not be limited by medium. Painting is a temporal act, as is sculpture. As Arnold Rubin demonstrated in a formative 1974 essay, the “cumulative” process has
ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

SAMMY BALOJI. Born and raised in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sammy Baloji is sensitized to colonial histories and the postcolonial decline of the DRC’s once-prosperous Copper Belt that Chinese companies exploit today. In his artistry, Baloji juxtaposes past and present, “ideal” and actual, to elicit glaring cultural and historical tensions. Early Congolese photographs placed against present-day scenes of desolation are strikingly poignant as the artist explores the human body and architecture as traces of social histories, sites of memory, and witnesses to operations of alienating political power. Baloji has had solo exhibitions at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris; the MuZee of Oostende and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, both in Belgium; and at the Museum for African Art of New York. His works have been featured in the Venice Biennale and many group exhibitions at other prestigious venues including the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art and the African Photography Biennale of Bamako. Among his prizes and awards, he was recognized with a Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative Award, partnering with Olafur Eliasson, and he has received a Prince Claus Award. Baloji divides his time between Brussels and Lubumbashi.

THEO ESHETU. Born in London and growing up in Addis Ababa, Dakar, and Belgrade before settling in Rome, Theo Esetu’s mixed upbringing informs his contrast of African and Western outlooks under the umbrella of our increasingly shared global culture. His focus on video’s expressive potential and his exploration of African cultures led to experimentation with tensions among photography, documentary film, television, and the aesthetics of video beginning in the 1980s. Esetu is recognized as one of the first artists to employ video-wall installations, and he frequently splits and mirrors moving images to dramatic kaleidoscopic effect. His documentaries have been screened at film festivals internationally, and his works have been presented in celebrated exhibitions such as “Africa Remix,” “Snap Judgments,” and “GeoGraphics,” and at noted venues including BAM, Tate Britain, BOZAR in Brussels, the Venice and Roma Film Festivals, the American Academy and Museum of Modern Art in Rome, the New Museum and several other institutions in New York, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art, London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, and the Kochi Muziris Biennial in India. His Till Death Do Us Part at the International Art Show to End World Hunger was juxtaposed with works by Warhol, Paik, and Beuys, among others.

MOATAZ NASR. Born in Alexandria, Moataz Nasr now lives and works in Old Cairo. Bearing witness to complex cultural processes underway in the world of Islam, his work sets out to overcome particularism and geographical boundaries, and to give voice to concerns and problems of the entire African continent. Nonetheless, the need to belong to a specific geopolitical and cultural context and to maintain a link with his own place of origin are key elements of Nasr’s life and work. The artist uses a range of media including painting, sculpture, photography, video, and mixed-media installations. His work may focus on Egypt, but his goals are extremely close to everyone’s concerns as human beings are rendered international through common fragility. Indifference, impotence and solitude are the human characteristics laid bare by Nasr: weaknesses that do not pertain to any one country but which are a profound and all-embracing aspect of human nature. Moataz has been featured in many important international art events including the biennales of Bogota, Cairo, Venice, Sao Paulo, and Seoul, and a great many solo and group shows around the world including “Africa Remix,” “The Divine Comedy,” and “African Marketplace.”

BERNI SEARLE. Berni Searle is a world-renowned South African artist working with photography, video, and film to produce lens-based installations that stage narratives connected to history, memory, and place. Often—though not exclusively—incorporating herself into her films, she produces performative works that explore issues of self-representation as well as relationships between personal and collective identities. Her use of metaphor and poetic ambiguity transcend the specificity of context, drawing on universal human emotions associated with displacement, vulnerability, and loss. Searle’s many awards include the Minister of Culture Prize at DAKART, Senegal; the Standard Bank Young Artist Award, South Africa; and a Rockefeller Bellagio Creative Arts Fellowship. Her work has been shown at the Venice Biennale, the Museum of Modern Art and the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum of London, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and the UC Berkeley Art Museum, among other prestigious venues. Searle is currently Associate Professor at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town.

YINKA SHONIBARE MBE. London-born Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare is well-known for his exploration of colonialism and postcolonialism in contemporary contexts of globalization. Working in painting, sculpture, photography, film, and performance, Shonibare examines race, class, and constructions of cultural identity. His sharp political commentaries concern economic and political entanglements between Africa and Europe. Describing himself as a postcolonial hybrid, Shonibare wryly cites Western art history and literature to question the validity of contemporary cultural and national identities. After receiving an MFA from Goldsmiths College, Shonibare’s works won quick acclaim, and in 2005 he was inducted into the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, hence the “MBE” after his name. He has been featured in Documenta 10 and the Venice Biennale, and noted world institutions hold Shonibare’s multimedia works in their permanent collections. In 2008–2009, a mid-career survey of Shonibare’s work was seen in Sydney, Brooklyn, and Washington DC, while in 2011, another dedicated survey was presented at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the Royal Museums Greenwich, and The Queen’s House London in the UK, as well as at museums in Copenhagen, Gdansk, and Warsaw. Yinka Shonibare MBE now resides and maintains his studio in the East End of London.
and share their senses of time—and really, it is about time.

Karen E. Milbourne is Curator at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Iowa, based upon long research on Lozi visual and performance arts of Zambia. She was the curator and author of NMAfA’s exhibition “Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa” (2013) and curates the ongoing exhibition series “Artists in Dialogue,” as well as overseeing such projects as “Yinka Shonibare MBE” and “The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists.”

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Notes

1 We would like to thank the hosts and participants of The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute for generously supporting the colloquium, Time and Temporalities in African Art, and our LACMA colleagues, in particular Michael Govan, Nancy Thomas, Debra McMahan, and the exhibition production team for supporting the project. We also wish to thank the five artists participating in the exhibition—Sammy Baloji, Theo Eshetu, Moataz Nasr, Berni Searle, and Yinka Shonibare MBE—as well as colleagues at the National Museum of African Art, the James Cohan Gallery, Galleria Continua, and Axis Gallery for their contributions and generosity in bringing this project to fruition.

2 As Kubler presciently continues, “we know time only indirectly by what happens in it: by observing change and permanence; by marking the succession of events among stable settings; and by noting the contrast of varying rates of change. Written documents give us a thin recent record for only a few parts of the world. In the main our knowledge of older times is based upon visual evidence of physical and biological duration. Technological inventions of all sorts and sequences of works of art in every grade of distinction yield a finer time scale overlapping with the written record” (1962:11).

3 On the colonization of African systems of time, see Cooper 1992; on African calendars, Cartry 1984; on temporal aspects of African cosmologies as presented through visual and performance arts, Kreamer 2012. More informally, many who have worked in Africa have heard the expression “African time,” often used by Africans themselves. This is a humorous way to explain why, say, a party announced for 7 pm may not get rolling before midnight. As the Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi has quipped, “The West might have watches, but in Africa, we have time.” Personal communication to Karen E. Milbourne, April 2012.

4 See Graham 2005. For issues involved in the identification and care of time-based media, see Lasserson 2006.

5 For a discussion of how such thoughts can be applied to African visual and performance arts, see M.N. Roberts 2009. In this latter piece, Marks’s sense of “haptic visuality” is turning about and extended as a “visual tactility” through which the performance of touch in ritual leads to engaged vision and insight.

6 In Amy Powell’s thoughtful dissertation (2012), she addresses some of the vocabularies of temporal manipulation such as repetition, and explores broader implications of time and the interrogation of identity and location, particularly as related to Africa and African experiences. For an updating and innovative application of Marks’s theorizing, see Sharma 2015.

7 Erin Haney (2010) provides important insights into the interplay between photography and textiles and roles of photography in display systems of the Sande Society among Mende women of Sierra Leone. As additional studies emerge that look at the crossover between so-called traditional and modern technologies across time, we will gain greater insight into how these spheres have always overlapped and coexisted.

8 Searle changed the proportions of the projection of A Matter of Time “from the standard 4:3 ratios to an elongated 16:9 ratio,” and she rotated the projector ninety degrees “so that the image appears sideways. The effect is that the artist appears to be walking up and then sliding or slipping back down the wall!” For these and other thoughtful comments by curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson when A Matter of Time was featured at the UC Berkeley Art Museum, see http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/images/art/matrix2012/MATRIX_2012_Berni_Searle.pdf. As Paul Simon had it, “You know the nearer your destination/ The more you’re slip slidin’ away.” From “Slip Slipin’ Away” on his album Greatest Hits, Etc. (Columbia Records, 1977).

9 Giuseppe Verdi’s Un ballo in maschera is a three-act opera with libretto by Antonio Somma that had its debut in 1859. The plot concerns the historical events of the political assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden, who was shot in 1792 during a masked ball and died of his wounds two weeks later. For a useful overview of the Verdi opera’s history and content, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Un_balbo_in_maschera. On Shonibare’s work as a “gesture” to Verdi’s opera, see Schneider 2015. Note that the lack of upper-case letters in Verdi’s title is subject to English usage in Shonibare’s, hence his “Un Ballo in Maschera.” For reviews of the artist’s work, see Court 2014, Hynes 2001, Picon 2001, and Shonibare 2014.

10 Backstories to the Verdi opera abound, permitting viewers to discover their own allegories in Shonibare’s “gesture.” For example, Italian censors compelled Verdi to recast the opera to concern colonial circumstances in Boston. When Marian Anderson “broke the ‘color barrier’” of the Metropolitan Opera of New York, she did so by performing the role of Un ballo in maschera’s fortunate-teller Ulrica—however, race may have played a role in such casting; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Un_balbo_in_maschera. Commentators have also suggested that the work was an allegory about the “masking” of homosexuality in former times; see Richards 2014. It is difficult not to see analogies to colonial circumstances in Africa and its diaspora, as well, via suggestive works like Franz Fanon’s 1963 Black Skin, White Masks (Fanon 2008), and the absurdities of “post”-colonial Africa (as though colonial oppression has ended), with the continent’s despotic successions and cycles of cruel oppression, must also come to mind; see Mbembe 2001.

11 Emily Lennox (Shonibare’s studio manager), email communication to Karen E. Milbourne, June 24, 2013. Confusion between references to “film” and “video” is clear, for the work is described as the artist’s “first film,” yet it is distributed and shown as high-resolution video, and the artist himself refers to the work as video.
12 Personal communication to Karen Milbourne, November 7, 2009. On Shonibare as “postcolonial hybrid,” see http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/yinka-shonibare-mbe. On ways that African and other artists are “held outside time,” see Chakrabarty 2000 and 2008 for pertinent theorizing of the “belatedness” projected onto and used to confine subaltern people. Being “belated” means that oppressed people can never quite achieve modernity, for they are always deemed a step behind, always subject to fantasies of what might have been rather than a recognition of what is and can be. Like Chakrabarty, Shonibare would see “belatedness” as an “opportunity” for reflection and push-back social activism.

13 On Faustin Linyekula’s choreography-as-social-activism through the Studios Kabako he has founded in Kisangani, Democratic Republic of the Congo, see Dupray 2013.

14 Baloji’s words are from personal communication with Karen Milbourne. Bogumil Jewsiewicki has worked closely with Sammy Baloji to articulate the grief of young Lushois and Lushoises that Baloji presents in his video and photographic montages; see Jewsiewicki 2010, 2011, and 2015.

15 There are many overview histories of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Lumumba’s legacies; see Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, 2014.

16 Subtitled translation from the video. Mulumba Lukoji was an important politician of the early 1990s who sought to organize opposition to then-President Mobutu through a series of national conferences; see Mthembu-Salter 2003.

17 MAXXI is the Museo nazionale delle arti di XXI secolo, or National Museum of 21st Century Art, housed in the celebrated buildings designed by Zaha Hadid.

18 Email communication to Karen E. Milbourne, June 29, 2015.

19 This description is from the artist’s email to Karen E. Milbourne, July 6, 2015. Sir David Brewster’s invention of the kaleidoscope in the early nineteenth century was, in the man’s own words, a play on “productivity and efficiency” moving from the symmetries of nature to the “multiplication of simple forms” associated with the increasing mass production of Western Europe’s Industrial Revolution; see Crary 1992:116. As with any work of art, viewers bring their own perspectives to bear on their interpretations, and with Shonibare’s Un Ballo in Maschera, analogies and allegories are there for the making in Brave New World II. It may be noted that taking photographs of a visitor’s experience in the celebrated buildings designed by Zaha Hadid is a key aspect of contemporary art. See also Jewsiewicki oq.kbu028.extract, accessed July 5, 2015.

20 Email communication to Karen E. Milbourne, June 29, 2015.

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