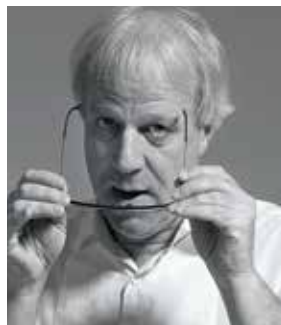


TIME TO OBEY

A reflection on the peculiarities of human power relations leads to a quiet exhibition at Wong Chuk Hang's Spring Workshop, which wrestles with the most implacable power of all – time.



JOHN BATTEN

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In art, as in life, everything is connected. Over time, control and power is never far from most events. It has prompted explorations of the human psyche for millennia: think of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Countless books have studied China's Cultural Revolution or Germany's Third Reich and have reflected on our propensity to be controlled and, at times, the improbable acceptance of this.

A consequence of power-based relationships is obedience and authority. Social psychologist Stanley Milgram, in his experiments begun in 1961, studied various controlled scenarios that led to his controversial conclusions about how people behave and the levels of obedience that they accept when commanded by different faces and degrees of authority.

"The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous importance, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations," Milgram said. "I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist.

"Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not," Milgram continued. "The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation."

ENNUI AND INSECURITY

In 1996, the late Philippine artist Santiago Bose depicted another aspect of authority in his video work, *Jaguar at the Western Front*, originally screened in Vancouver. He shows a bored/tense/alert Filipino security guard (played by Bose himself) pacing up and down, sitting, and watching a set of six unseen television monitors. This bank of monitors,

however, is what the audience is actually watching, with the security guard as the main object of attention. Each monitor flickers; and the roving cameras capture and depict different angles and time sequences, while the grey tones of the moving security guard, himself under surveillance, explore the tension of observation.

Bose is dressed as a security guard and "armed" with the tools of someone in authority (in this case, a bank of observation monitors). In this work, Bose skilfully plays with cinematic implication to raise interest in his video performance. We are waiting for something to happen, because we can feel that something will happen – but nothing does.

We are, however, watching a bored security guard. Bose is making a cultural observation – this Filipino security guard suffers from ennui: although alert, he is bored. Likewise, the hundreds of thousands of security and surveillance cameras that have been installed around the world – especially after the attacks on New York's World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 – actually record nothing of consequence most of the time. Nothing.

CAPTURING TIME

Here in Hong Kong, Spring Workshop's "Days Push Off Into Nights" in Wong Chuk Hang is an excellent exhibition about stillness. Curated by its newly appointed programme director, Christina Li, it is a quiet exhibition at a slow pace. So many exhibitions, as in life nowadays, are too busy, too crowded, too noisy; they jostle rudely for attention. This show tackles that stolid theme of artists – time.

About 150 years ago, time was seemingly captured in Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of animals in motion. In 1872, with his innovative stop-motion photographs, Muybridge famously ended an argument about whether a galloping horse had all four legs off the ground at the one moment (they do). Muybridge's work was the precursor of today's cinema, and highly influenced later artists, especially the Futurists, and the Surrealists, led by Marcel Duchamp and his pivotal painting,

COURTESY SPRING WORKSHOP / KITWIN LEE / XUETAN / GALERIE FONS WELTERS / GERT JAN VAN ROOIJ



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Relief 2: 25 March 2009 – 6 Jan 2012 (2009–2012) by Job Koelewijn, cassette tapes, books and wood;
Sunrise, Sunset (2011) by Magdalen Wong, metallic tape; Christina Li



'DAYS PUSH OFF INTO NIGHTS' ... IS AN EXCELLENT EXHIBITION ABOUT STILLNESS. IT IS A QUIET EXHIBITION AT A SLOW PACE. SO MANY EXHIBITIONS, AS IN LIFE NOWADAYS, ARE TOO BUSY, TOO CROWDED, TOO NOISY; THEY JOSTLE RUDELY FOR ATTENTION

Nude Descending A Staircase, No 2. They sought to depict movement and observe time.

Similarly, in this exhibition, Magdalen Wong's *Sunrise, Sunset* hangs rolls of gold tape above a window. These slowly succumb to gravity and unravel downwards in their own time, some unrolling slower than others. Nearby is Dutch artist Job Koelewijn's visual depiction of reading books, *Relief 2: 25 March 2009 – 6 Jan 2012*. As he reads in 45-minute slots each morning, he records the sounds around him; in a sense it is the sound of him reading. The tapes are kept and stacked atop the actual books that he reads. His entire installation has an archivist's obsession: time preserved for future listening, the passage of reading, moments in Koelewijn's life.

Olga Chernysheva's *Screens* – five film sequences taken in Russia – are leisurely "portraits" of life: a train travelling through a beautiful snowy landscape; villagers chatting together while casually eating snacks; a man exercising. These videos are ruminations on the mundane, life without drama; how most people spend their time.

In another room, five young men are employed to write their own diaries – the most traditional noting of time – each day for six weeks. If you watch this performance, the idea of Scandinavian artists Elmgreen & Dragset, the diarists are often fidgety, no doubt waiting for the moment they can leave for the day. It visually notes their obedience to, and possible annoyance with, the imposed control of their time. ☹