

THE PASSING OF TIME

JEANNETTE CHRISTENSEN
Text by KRISTIN GJESDAL

Time passed. The passing of time. How is time passed? How is it passed well? Time grants life meaning. Time makes life end—at times a timely ending, but most of the time it is not. Time is that through which life, life as lived and individualized, prospers, unfolds, and terminates. Time is there all the time. Yet we do not pay heed. How do we experience—hear, sense, touch, taste—the passing of time? How can we hold onto time so as to contemplate it? Time cannot be made to last. But time can be filled. We fill time by losing ourselves in time, by being in our practices such that the moment—the “now,” the “jetzt,” the “maintenant”—gains depth and resonance. This is what poets and philosophers cast as the secular prayers of the everyday; this is what they see as redemption in a world where theology and metaphysics can no longer yield firm anchoring points and a sense of whom to be and what to believe in. One need not be a Heideggerian to grant that much.

Jeannette Christensen’s “The Passing of Time” is a meditation on the temporal conditions of all things human. A sole individual: we encounter two women, several men, as they are stylized and by no means randomly positioned, caught twice, or thrice over, over the timespan of two decades. This is time passed. This is what it is like to live in time. Or to live—full stop. To live is to change in time. Yet the postures remain in Christensen’s subject. Or do they? Time and gravity have their own merciless play with the human physique. The clothing is the same, roughly, yet the fit is different. Exactly how it is different is somewhat hard to pin down. Bodies are marked by biological processes, choices made, and fate leaving its traces. Eyes have seen, faces have mourned and cheered for joy. Time as lived time, as it leaves its stamp on the human presence—this, perhaps, is the way time is registered; this, perhaps, is the way we contemplate time passed.

There is no clutter in these pictures. There is no background to speak of, no furnished rooms in which human activity can find a context. The pouring of milk, the measuring, the writing, the rest, head in hand. Practices are purified, without reference to a purpose, and left to find meaning in themselves. They stand forth,

as it were, against the black-gray of the still life. In the classical still life, the black gives shape to a frozen time. A bowl of fruit at the peak of its ripening is given a gloss beyond the real; this meal will never serve to satisfy a craving for nourishment. In Christensen's work, human activity is turned into a *stilleben*: at one and the same time utterly poetic and utterly terrifying.

The poses are all familiar from the work of Johannes Vermeer. For Christensen, however, the domestic space is no longer feminized. Would it be too much to hope that this is a sign of times to come? Would it be too much to hope that domestic space is no longer gendered in the way it previously was? If there are feminist currents here—and it would be silly to overlook them—they tie up with an even more fundamental concern with time as a great equalizer.

And then there is photography, the art of memory traces and temporality, if there ever was one. The medium of photography is definitely foregrounded in Christensen's work—and, fittingly so, as the appreciation of Vermeer, the painter, only intensified in the era of mechanical reproduction. We all know how photographic film changed the way we looked at ourselves. Pictures could be taken everywhere; everyone could be a photographer. Taking a picture would capture time, but no longer required that time was spent. Photographers were not made redundant, yet families managed quite well without them. There was no need anymore to visit the studio, the photographer would come to you, you were the photographer. Family stories were documented and shared—stories of the everyday and the breaking up of the everyday through holidays and vacations. We see the dressing up, the new places, and the conscious self-presentation in picture after picture as we chronicle time passed.

Photographic images are used to identify who we are, but also who we wish to be, how we wish to be seen, as time passes and future generations browse through boxes in attics and discover tucked-away memories in between book pages and newspaper cuts. Time is caught and held fast, a rupture in time—it is an expression of a very human desire to penetrate and understand temporality

as a basic condition of experience. And yet, Christensen's work presents a fugue over Vermeer, the painter who captured the fabric of the everyday, what we, borrowing from German, could call its *Stofflichkeit*. (Is it just a random, biographical fact that his father was a trader of silk and coffee?). Vermeer holds on to life: here and now in a pose, the draping of an arm sleeve, the heaviness of a gown, the frankness of a gaze—it seems redundant to mention the shimmering surface of the earring—and he does so with a precision that has made scholars ask if, perhaps, he might quite consciously have enhanced his vision by the usage of lenses and optical experiments. Did he create a sort of photographic vision before the birth of the camera?

What happens, then, in this encounter—this almost impossible merging of times—between the Vermeerian poses and the Polaroid? The Polaroid incarnates the hopes of modernization...technological optimism in box form. Vermeer's everyday is that of the early modern world, modernity at its most innocent and in its childhood. His world is one of new trade relations and new commerce, foreign smells and colors, bustling cities and a quickened pace of life. In all this, Vermeer, the merchant son from Delft, integrates what was new to his world into the familiarity of domestic spaces. In his paintings, the maps in the background open up a world beyond the immediate surroundings we glimpse through doorways and reflections in windowpanes. For us, the life of early modernity has lost its novelty and gained credence in the bank of historical memory. The everyday of the Polaroid has not yet had the time to accumulate a patina of centuries long gone. Who knows if it ever will? The Polaroid recognizes no fluid Vermeerian gestures, it does not present condensed narratives in the form of painterly gems, but comes with funny shaped cars in funny colors (when, exactly, were cars excluded from family photos?), clunky leather suitcases, hairstyles that make us giggle, clothes that shape bodies in ways we no longer recognize. Vermeer's renown ultramarine, his lead-tin yellow, his red: they were made to last. The blues, the yellows, and the reds of the Polaroid can and will not last—even when put

behind glass and framed for all to admire. Nor, for that sake, do we expect endurance from the puffed up hairstyles, the starched skirts, and the fashion icons that populate the images of the early Polaroid era. The Polaroid reflects a hyper-modern pace in the offing. In Christensen's work, variations in paper format and technique bear witness to the new velocity with which the familiar would become obsolete. It wouldn't be wrong to call Christensen's work conceptual, yet it would be a strangely vacuous characterization.

Vermeer inhabited the period when our modern world became precisely that—modern, ours, the world as we recognize it. In a prose loaded with admiration, the philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, whose reading of Dutch Genre painting crowned his exposition of modern art some two centuries ago, compares our experience of the early modern era to a sailor hailing the sight of land after an extended period at sea: a spiritual homecoming, a sense of comfort and safety. This is the time when our mindset—that of an inquisitive, human self mercilessly striving to capture itself in time—takes form. Here we find Descartes with his famous “cogito, ergo sum.” We find Shakespeare and his Hamlet (there is no reason yet again to repeat “to be or not to be?”). And there is, evidently, Vermeer with his inverting of the moment of sublimity from grandness of scale to the minuteness of everyday objects.

Descartes, Shakespeare, Vermeer—they give shape to different regions of early modern experience, these philosophers, poets, and picture makers. And by giving shape to the early modern experience, they also give shape to our experiential frameworks: our horizons of expectations, our hopes, our pains, and our joys. Thus the passing of time, as we find it in Christensen's work, is not simply the individual's passing of time, as she is left, absorbed and isolated, with her activities (will somebody receive her letter? drink her milk? hear her story?). It is also the time of the centuries. It is the time of traditions being forged and horizons merging. What, in all this, happened to the almost unbearable beauty of Vermeer's portraits? Is it still there, in Christensen's photographic palimpsest? Should it be there, as she captures the passing of time manifesting

itself across human faces and poses? Or might it just be that the attraction of these works rests, rather, with their return to the basic simplicity of time, lived time, a temporality that is prior to and, some would say, even a condition for the measurable units of calendar years, months, weeks, and days.

Christensen's work—not simply “The Passing of Time,” but her work overall—has time at its center. Sometimes it is the being of time as a *continuum*, as a background against which the world we call ours, the world of experience and all things human, will be disclosed. Sometimes time is broken off and turned into an object of reflective consideration, just like Vermeer's paintings show the slightly bewildered, yet strangely focused gaze of a girl interrupted at her music. Christensen's girls are grown up. They face time with a peculiar mix of blasé and, we must imagine, dread at how quickly the years pass by and how short, after all, the timespan of a human life turns out to be.

In Christensen's Jell-O benches and monochromes from the 1990s, she invites time to leave an unruly, unpredictable trace (no face, no posture here, no interruptions either) in the mold, the cracks, and the gradual transformation of the material for those who are there to watch. Later, there are the skulls, the stones—*nature morte*, in the most literal sense. These works inhabit a ceased temporality. And yet, there is the purified experiential fabric, the materiality of experience laid bare. (The touch, heaviness, resistance, as we find it in a drop of hard, white porcelain caught right there and then, plasticity paradoxically caught, as it is about to drip off a table end.) In a strange way, this combination makes a lot of sense. Time, it seems, is the most abstract *and* the most concrete, but it only finds concretion when expressed in and through the experiences that, ultimately, make up the fabric of a human life. For us human beings, time, emphatically, is the passing of time.

—KRISTIN GJESDAL

























































List of polaroids

The Passing of Time (*Woman interrupted at her Music*) 1994
The Passing of Time (*Woman interrupted at her Music*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman interrupted at her Music*) 2009
The Passing of Time (*Woman interrupted at her Music*) 2015

The Passing of Time (*Woman Holding a Balance*) 1994
The Passing of Time (*Woman Holding a Balance*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman Holding a Balance*) 2014

The Passing of Time (*Woman Writing a Letter*) 1994
The Passing of Time (*Woman Writing a Letter*) 2015

The Passing of Time (*Woman Pouring Milk*) 1994
The Passing of Time (*Woman Pouring Milk*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman Pouring Milk*) 2014

The Passing of Time (*Woman drinking*) 1994
The Passing of Time (*Woman drinking*) 2015

The Passing of Time (*Woman Asleep at the Table*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman Asleep at the Table*) 2009
The Passing of Time (*Woman Asleep at the Table*) 2015

The Passing of Time (*Woman Reading a Letter*) 1994
The Passing of Time (*Woman Reading a Letter*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman Reading a Letter*) 2009
The Passing of Time (*Woman Reading a Letter*) 2015
The Passing of Time (*Woman Reading a Letter*) 2015

The Passing of Time (*Woman writing*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman writing*) 2015

The Passing of Time (*Woman at the Virginals*) 1995
The Passing of Time (*Woman at the Virginals*) 2009
The Passing of Time (*Woman at the Virginals*) 1994

Kristin Gjesdal lives and works in Oslo and Philadelphia. She is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Temple University and Professor II of Philosophy at the University of Oslo. She works in philosophy of art, philosophy of interpretation, and post-Kantian philosophy. Her publications include *Gadamer and The Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), *Herder's Hermeneutics: History, Poetry, Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), and numerous articles on art, literature, theater, and philosophy. She is the editor of *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: Philosophical Perspectives* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press), *Key Debates in Nineteenth Century European Philosophy* (Routledge, 2016), and a co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook to German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics* (forthcoming with Cambridge University Press).

Jeannette Christensen lives and works in Oslo. She is educated at Vestlandets Kunstakademi in Bergen and École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. Christensen has been Guest Professor and Chair of *Mur og Rum* at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen (1998-2000), Professor II at Bergen National Academy of the Arts (2000-2007), and is currently Professor at the Academy of Fine Art, Oslo National Academy of the Arts (since 2010). Her exhibitions include *Woman Interrupted*, Kunstplass 10, Oslo (2017); *The Annual Spring Exhibition (Vårutstillingen)*, Forbundet Frie Fotografer and Fotogalleriet, Oslo (2015); *Poor Art-Rich Legacy: Arte Povera and Parallel Practices 1968-2015*, Museum of Contemporary Art, The National Museum, Oslo (2015-16) *Holding Balance*, Kunstnerforbundet, Oslo (2014); *Hold steinhardt fast på greia di/Norwegian art and feminism 1968-89*, Kunsthall Oslo (2013); *Learning for Life*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden (2012); *Good Night Then... Surrealism in Norwegian Art 1930-2010*, Stenersenmuseet, Oslo (2010); *Lessons in the Art of Falling: Photographs of Norwegian Performance and Process Art 1966-2009*, Preus Museum, Horten (2009); *Liquid Archive*, Kunstnerforbundet, Oslo (2009); *Dead Man Talking*, The Vigeland Museum, Oslo (2006). Other major exhibitions include *Trade routes*, 2nd Johannesburg Biennial, South Africa; Kunsthalle Feldbach, Steierischer Herbst, Austria (with Soo-ja Kim); The Yokohama International Triennial for Contemporary Art, Japan. Her work is discussed in a number of books, including Gunnar Danbolt, *Frå modernisme til det kontemporære: tendensar i norsk samtidskunst etter 1990* (2014); Øystein Ustvedt, *Ny norsk kunst etter 1990*, (2012); Lars Toft-Eriksen, *Good Night Then... Surrealism in Norwegian Art 1930-2010* (2010), and the monography *Fragments of Matter, Jeannette Christensen* by Mieke Bal (2009).

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