

RALSTON FARINA'S

TIME // TIME

TIME // TIME

This is a part time study for a portrait of a half hour.

I am interested in the phenomena of internal time consciousness (expectations, anticipations, etc.). Nothing I do is intended to be symbolic. My medium is time. Let me say that again. My medium is time. The materials I work with, the objects and images, are merely moments of punctuation, phrasing and articulation. The intended image is timing. The intended object is the time.

What you have just experienced is thirty minutes; the thirty minutes being one portrait of a duration with strategically embedded moments (such as the TV commercials in a half hour series). This show is just one of many explorations in my time studies of aesthetic display.

- Ralston Farina

TIME // TIME



"A SUFFICIENTLY HIGH
PROBABILITY MAY SERVE
AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR
ACTUAL STIMULATION
IN THE COGNITIVE
PROCESS"

RALSTON FARINA

TIME//TIME

Anecdotes

My Medium

My medium is time. Let me state that again: my medium is time.

Good Times

I like time and I like money. We've all heard it said "time is money." When I experience quality, I know I must be experiencing the time and money which went into its production. It takes money to produce quality time.

Time Objects

I experience time as an object. The phenomena of internal time consciousness (recollections, expectations, anticipations) represent objects in my mind to my mind.

Stylistic Tendencies

Styles generate tendencies. These tendencies suggest various directions. TIME//TIME is an attempt to display pure tendency. By concurrently manipulating optional style characteristics, an image develops over and above the actual display. The meta-image is internal to the spectator's mind. It is subjective and random; it is a "sculpted" time object.

Time Binding

Style as an image displays the times. One can consider art history as an accumulation of stylistic tendencies—these tendencies combine over time, styles acted upon by styles, continuous transformations of abstract characteristics. TIME//TIME is display of higher orders of abstraction. The retro-interaction of complex ratios of abstraction, mixing styles.

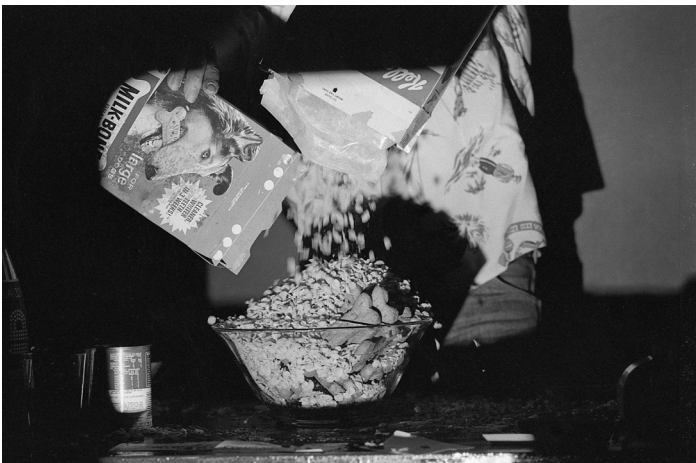
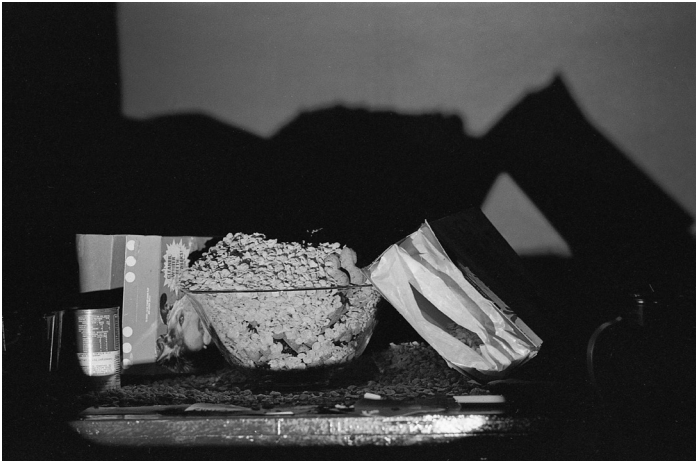
The Aesthetic Paradox

The problems of art are the problems of adjusting; most aesthetic displays only pretend uncertainty. Time art retains this vital aspect of life.

Two Futures

There are two kinds of future: there is the future that will happen, and there is the future that may happen. The future that may happen is just as much a part of the future as the future that will happen. Both futures are equally real.

This text was originally published in French in the catalogue *10e Biennale de Paris, 1977*



Fun with Time//Time, Artists Space,
May 22, 1977

TIME//TIME

Portrait of a Half Hour

Episode (Name of city)

My medium is time. Let me state that again: my medium is time. Nothing I do is intended to be symbolic. I have fun composing with time; I use time as a painter uses paint or a sculptor uses wood. The time in my spectators' minds, their recollections, expectations, and anticipations are options for my 'palette.'

This subjective and random occurrence of internal circumstance, i.e. the spectators' private show, becomes concurrent with my estimation of it. I anticipate the spectators and compose opportunities for counter-expectations. Once these tendencies are established I can anticipate expectations of changes in the spectators' expectations, and act upon these in subsequent intervals. The surprises result in a good time for all. The non-symbolic temporal configuration presented in this episode is a portrait of your time.

TIME//TIME

A Portrait of a Half Hour

Episode (Mode a la Mode)

Every show I do is composed uniquely for the time it is to be presented.

This show, a half hour serial of abstract random events will display two aesthetic distributions of temporal characteristics, *Deja-Vu//Jamais-Vu*.

Highlights of the last four episodes (New York, Documenta 6, Biennale de Paris, ICC Antwerpen) will re-present the past. Current experimental investigations will imply the future.

I am depicting the phenomena of time both in what I display, and how I display it. For instance, by rehearsing an event, most of the rough spots are removed, thus displaying the time spent on its preparation. For me, this 'roughness' is an aesthetic texture. An unrehearsed experimental event has different temporal qualities than a rehearsed known event. By composing ratios of rough and smooth events (dissonance and consonance), one can aesthetically display phenomenal aspects of time. This is partially what I mean when I say, my medium is time.

This episode will require very little in the way of equipment and materials. A slide projector, a super 8 projector, a record player and a small room, a video tape documentation and invitations will complete the list.

TIME//TIME

A Portrait of a Half Hour

Episode #1001

My medium is time. Let me state that again, my medium is time. Nothing is intended to be symbolic; the materials I work with, the objects, the images, and styles are merely moments of punctuation, phrasing, and articulation. The intended image is the timing. The intended object is the time. The result is novelty phenomena.

For more than a decade my artistic endeavors, both philosophically and technically, have been influenced by the inspiring methodology of Wittgenstein's "doctrine of showing" (what cannot be shown cannot be said), by Edmund Husserl's "phenomenology of internal time consciousness" (expectations, recollections, phantasy, and imagination considered as "time objects"), and Henri Bergson's ideas on duration as duration. Aesthetically, I owe a great deal to Maestro John Cage for his compositional method of chance operations on found options and his fascination with experimentation.

Here are a few interesting past experiments with time:

A CEREAL SERIAL: Throughout the year of 1968 I presented a series of two-minute episodes. Every Monday night in New York City, at approximately 9:00 p.m. I displayed two minutes.

Each episode in the serial involved a series of novelty operations on a box of breakfast cereal (Corn Flakes, Wheaties, Corn Chex, Wheat Chex, Cheerios, etc.). This was one of my first serials.

In 1972 I displayed **BLICK RATSEL** (Look Puzzle) in a store window in what was at that time the newly emerging SoHo area in New York. Each cell in the matrix contained a clue to the puzzle; the solution has yet to be deciphered.

Recently the results of my research into techniques of advanced computer graphics programming have provided a dynamic schema for combining all of the above into a mode of aesthetic display which I call "Time Art."

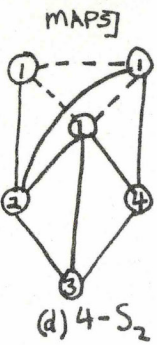
"**TIME//TIME: A Portrait of a Half Hour**" is the fruitful result of this extensive exploration into the multiple manifestations of time as time.

*Please note that the title of the piece is always to appear exactly as indicated (i.e. with **TIME//TIME** in **CAPITAL LETTERS** and a double slash (/ /) between.



(N) ... COMPLETE CEREAL INVENTIONS ...

THE MARCH OF TIME - TIME



WITH



(WHO'S WHO)

BUSTER BROWN
= RALSTON FARINA

(12) "THE TONE IS SO TRUE ... SO AMAZINGLY CLEAR".

(G-SHIN-RJE)

AN EVENING OF (4)

RELAXATION OSCILLATIONS

(HCHI-KHAHI BARDO)

ST. MARKS CHURCH 10ST AND 2ND AVE.

WED. MARCH 29 - 8:30 P.M.

PARIS LETTER

(In the form of an interview)

Ralston Farina

So you spent five months in Paris. Tell me about it.

The American Center for Students and Artists, Boulevard Raspail, which is run by a new administrator very interested in performance art—Don Foresta—is beginning a new direction. They asked me to teach there and to be the specter of that new direction.

And the idea of the new direction?

To erase the old image, whatever that might have been, and to create a new image of an international avant-garde university.

What happened?

We were depending a great deal on the French press. We gave a press conference and I did a performance for it which was very well received. But weeks and weeks went by and I never saw anything in the press. So they were obviously content for the American Center to keep its old image.

So what did you try to do besides win over the press for the American Center?

I was negotiating with the Beaubourg Museum. That was still in the works when I left. I did receive a letter from a dance school, CID, something like Cultural International Dance, which asked me to do two lectures. After the lectures there was such a positive response they booked me for ten weeks beginning in September.

This school is in Paris?

Yes. It's an all-around dance school, modern and ballet. There I was teaching timing. The class I taught at the American Center was called the Aesthetics of Time, "Esthetique du Temps," because the French don't have a word for timing. After having six translators work on it, we still couldn't find a word for timing. The course started out being called Serial Pattern Design, then it became the Aesthetics of Time, then we decided to call it the Anatomy of Spectacle. Each time we did a publicity campaign we changed it, because we weren't communicating. The dancers and choreographers absolutely appreciated the need for timing, but the artists didn't understand what "performance" was.

There's no word for that in French either.

So we had a hard time with that, explaining what performance was to young artists who didn't have the slightest idea except for a few things they've read in magazines. And when people only do performances from magazines instead of seeing performance, it will be very one-dimensional. Which is why, in fact, so much performance around the world is one-dimensional.

Did the dancers associate you or what you were teaching with John Cage's ideas?

Yes and no. In my press release, there was a quote from Cage talking about my work, so they knew he admired what I do. The man from *Humanité* said my notation system reminded him of Douglas Dunn's. He was quite surprised when I said I'd never ever seen it. I don't think it occurred to him that Douglas had danced with Merce Cunningham and that Merce and John work together, and that I'm a former student of John's, so the connection had nothing to do with Douglas Dunn.

What kind of artist performance did you find in Paris?

Beaubourg had a resident performer who was teaching there, and she was cutting herself with razor blades.

Gina Pane?

Yeah. I never saw it. I heard she was teaching rudiments of first aid. Someone said her first class was telling students that before the performance you should put alcohol on your arm to prevent infection.

Do you have any idea why Europeans find body art so fascinating?

There was an international show called Art Corporeal at Beaubourg organized by a South American man and it was a joke from what I saw. I thought I was back in 1969. Vito Acconci was there, and when I came on the Soho scene, he was doing all that.

Did he present a live piece at Beaubourg?

He showed a videotape. And then they had this big debate about whether body art was art, and what was performance, which was hard because they don't have a word for it.

But do other artists do other kinds of performance besides body stuff?

Out in front of Beaubourg they have three fire-eaters, guys who lie on glass, a guy who plays a saw like a violin. Then there's the other crowd who cut off their penises and piss on themselves, that's about it. My intention was to bring happy art to Europe! The last time I was there, I was accused of not being a serious artist and that's absolutely true, I'm for happiness, I think there's enough seriousness. I've no desire to see somebody cut themselves up for a show. To me, performance is art, not just a spectacle. That's the difference I think—the Europeans are attracted to spectacle. I think performance is a Soho thing, and only has any veracity or meaning in Soho.

Did you ever see a performance in a gallery in Paris?

As a Frenchman would say, "What's a performance?"

I know of one gallery that sponsors performances, Farideh Cadot, but most of the artists are American.

Yeah. She was having some performances, I missed them. But Paris is still a painting town, or so it seems to me.

Paris is conservative about all performing arts, not just performance.

Right. I think there are two problems. One, the French are very inhibited. And two, there's no place to do performances other than the American Center and Farideh Cadot Gallery. And when artists do have a chance to perform, they often abuse it in the name of some political consciousness. For instance, Jean Dupuy had a performance festival at the Louvre and someone threw a smoke bomb at the Mona Lisa. That probably set back performance in the Louvre for a thousand years or so. Herman Hesse said something I've always liked, that to use art in the service of politics is like driving a nail with a light bulb.

If there was a stronger interest in performance, wouldn't places begin to emerge?

They complain that they're not subsidized the way spaces are in New York. A lot of people who would not have been allowed to perform in a gallery in New York were able to work in alternative spaces, and subsidies make those places possible. If there weren't alternative spaces, there would be many fewer performers. And now that I have some distance, I'm able to say that there are simply



TIME//TIME: Portrait of a Half Hour, I.C.C.
(Internationaal Cultureel Centrum Antwerp)
November 9, 1977

differences in culture, and you can't compare them and expect cultures to match up to each other's ideals. It's not really useful to compare our culture and France's because you see all these deficiencies in French culture. If you just compare it with their own culture, there are no deficiencies. They have their bread, wine and cheese, and that's what they want. They don't want America.

Is "time" different in Paris?

Before I went to France, somebody told me that the French conceptually define time as though it were weather, that they see time changing like seasons. I didn't particularly feel that, nor did I have to use the idea to communicate about time. Henri Bergson, who wrote some of the most important things ever written about time, termed it physics time. Psychological time, subjective time was French, but because of circumstances, he was rejected. His ideas on time are absolutely brilliant, accurate, and good.

And there was his cousin Proust, a literary time artist.

I doubt if the French gained as much as they could from them.

When you were teaching, did people have trouble understanding your concepts since they had no object to go with the theory?

I refused to show them my performance, because I didn't want them to do what I was doing. But I had no problem, because I had spent months before the class researching the psychology and the mathematics of how to describe what I had been working on for fifteen years. There was no communication problem.

Did any of your students give performances?

Yes. I had a student do a performance which we put together five minutes before he did it. The technique I taught was so strong that it worked absolutely. It was so purely designed, pure because based on computer theory, the performance would be interesting no matter who did it or how it was done.

In terms of your work, which is performance, it's not that Paris is behind the times, but it doesn't sound like fertile ground for a performance missionary.

I wonder if I were to deny that I am a performance artist if I would lose my chance

to be in this magazine. When I was a child I was an entertainer, I used to do a magic act. When I was about twelve, I did a professional mind-reading act with my father in a nightclub. When I came to New York, I decided to do art and not theatre, not entertainment. But around the time when conceptual art became popular, I got very interested in the concept of time and especially in terms of the composition methods of John Cage and Schoenberg. I wanted to be a composer but I wasn't interested in music, I was interested in pure composition. So I began experimenting with the idea of time, and just as a throwaway, because I had had this experience as a child, I would do what you called "a performance."

As far as I'm concerned, the people who typify performance, like Laurie Anderson and Duka Delite, are part of a genre that is popular now. I would say that only part of the work I'm doing has become popular, the performance part that I pioneered. What I'm really working on has not even come about yet, but probably will come about in Paris with my students, and that's working directly with time. So I consider myself a time artist, not a performer.

Why does that have to happen in Paris and not in New York?

Because I gave away some of my trade secrets to some students. I taught them how to compose time, how to notate, analyze, and synthesize the time-art experience. This was taught at the American Center for what I think was the first time anywhere in the world. Readers, correct me if I'm wrong.

Do you know about Robert Dunn's classes in the early sixties?

No.

I don't know exactly what was taught, but what I've read about them sounds not unlike what in general, not in particular, you're up to. It was a composition class for dancers based on Cage's methods.

There's a difference between what I teach and what I do. As an artist, I use time as my medium, I give a temporal presentation. I don't dance, but dancers can learn from my experiments with time and use it to enhance their timing. A lot of art performers, who are basically entertainers, could really do with learning something about timing.

And you're doing all this in Paris, not New York.

You just made a temporal statement. I'm not in Paris, I'm in New York now. I did it in Paris because there are more cafes in which to do research. When I thought about organizing all my notes and theories, I wanted to do it in a very aesthetic environment like Paris because they do have a certain sensitivity to things, and I wanted to absorb some of that feeling. If they ever picked up on time as an art form, they would be the best in the world at doing it. If they learned American technique and applied it to that sense of finesse, it would be fantastic. I wanted to try to pick up on that sense of finesse, to capture finesse as a phenomenon and learn how to express time with finesse.

As a temporal expatriate, what do you think about the performance scene in New York now?

Some of it is just bad theatre, bad entertainment. If the art world lived up to any of its propaganda, it would have to criticize most performances because they're not very unique or very original. There are a few people who do some original things, but I haven't been impressed very often because I've been around a long time. If you see more of the root than of the plant, something's wrong. I want to see the flower, I don't want to see the root. And if the root is somebody else's root, why would I want to see imitations?

That's called graft.

This text was originally published in *Performance Art Magazine*, Issue 1, ed. John Howell, 1979

THE ESTHETIC OF TIME

Serial Pattern Design

American artist RALSTON FARINA presents a new technique for the timing of the succession of events that compose a show; the psychological mechanisms of esthetic communication.

This technique SERIAL PATTERN DESIGN, is independent of context, the show may be a dance or theater performance, a film, a video presentation, music, etc.

Ralston Farina is well known as a pionnier of the new form of expression : "ART PERFORMANCES".

His esthetic method is based on personal experience acquired through fifteen years of research and experimentation. He has performed in Soho, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, at Princeton University, Dokumenta, and at the Xth Paris Biennial Museum of Modern Art.

Through his experience Ralston Farina analysed the art public's response and reactions, their interest curve.

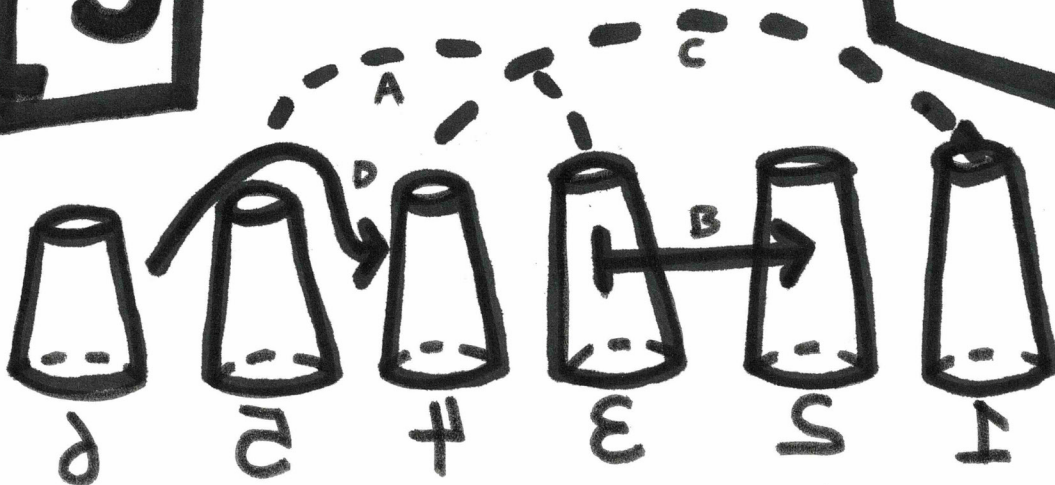
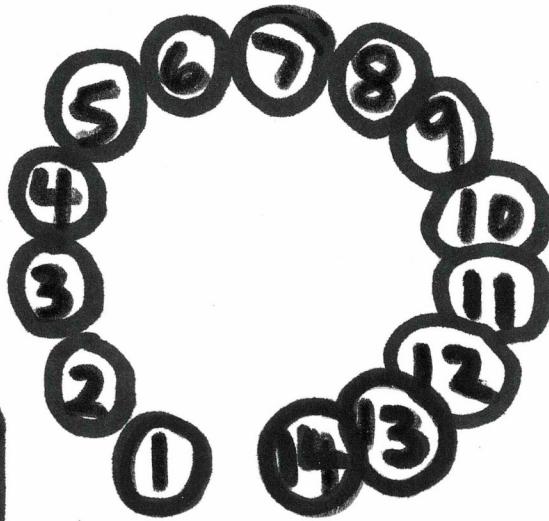
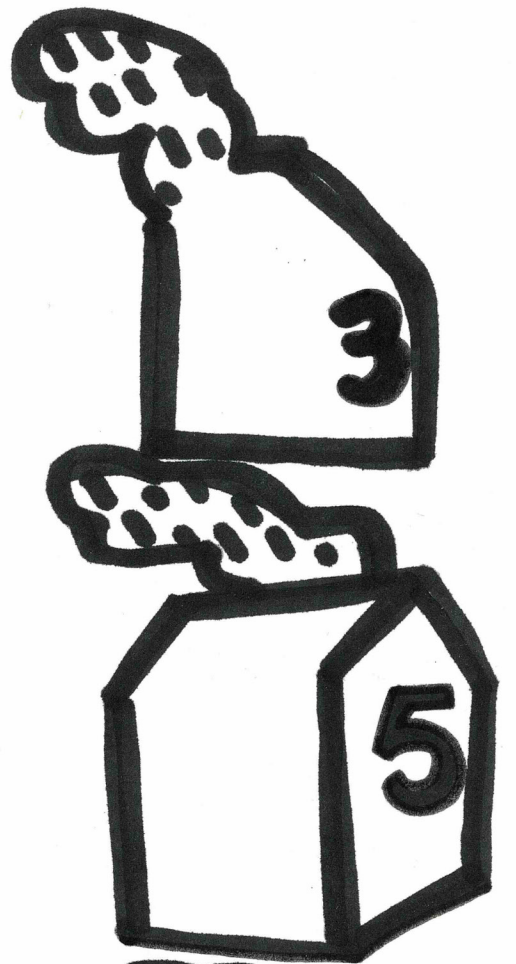
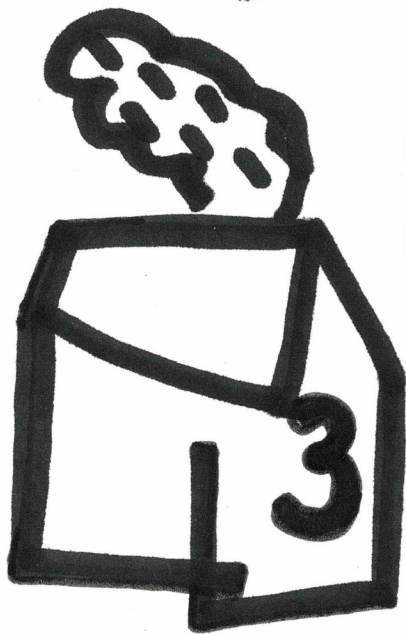
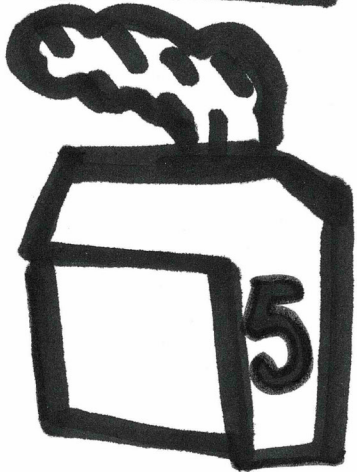
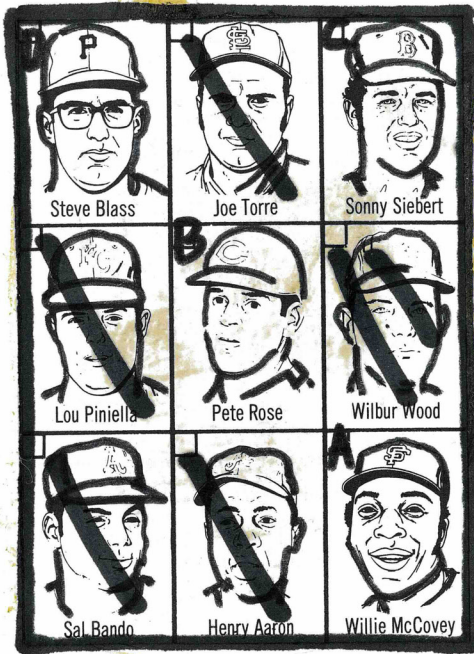
He then designed a method defining the rules of configuration in time of the elements composing an exciting show.

Ralston Farina's extended practice of advanced computer science helped him define these rules logically.

A very flexible and simple system for SERIAL PATTERN DESIGN has been established to outline the structures and general ideas applied to complex esthetic situations.

Inspired by the mechanisms of these serial patterns, Ralston Farina teaches the use of a simple intuitive tool to artists who wish to achieve the maximum spectators response and to give professional quality to their esthetic presentation. A quality which usually would only be acquired through years of experience.

John Cage said of his work : Ralston Farina's work is very high, and exists somewhere between music and theater. Everything I have seen of his is mysterious, unexpected and strong. His work is beautiful and it comes across to me as a vision.





Last spring he put sacks of flour at the intersection of Spring and West Broadway, creating clouds, or snowstorms, when cars ran over them; dog biscuits were laid on the street and outlined in chalk (like accident victims) and he wrote: "When the truth vanishes from the arts, it's gone forever," which might serve as an epitaph for SoHo.

—Lucy Lippard, *The Geography of Street Time: A Survey of Streetworks Downtown*, 1976





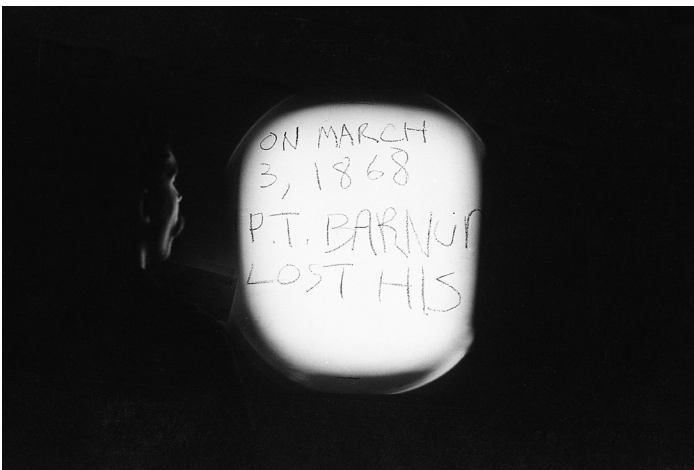
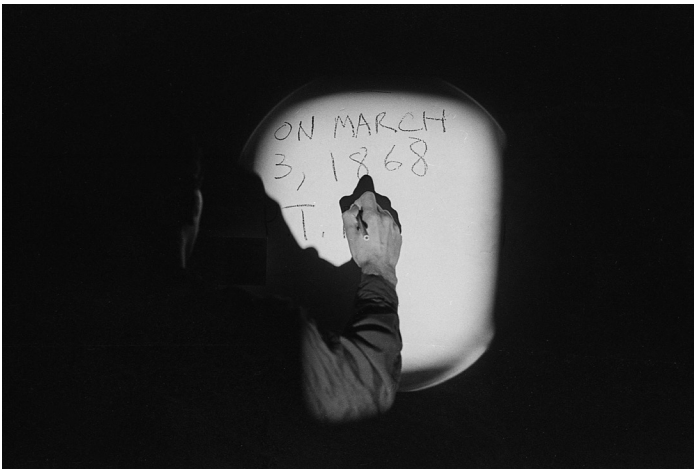
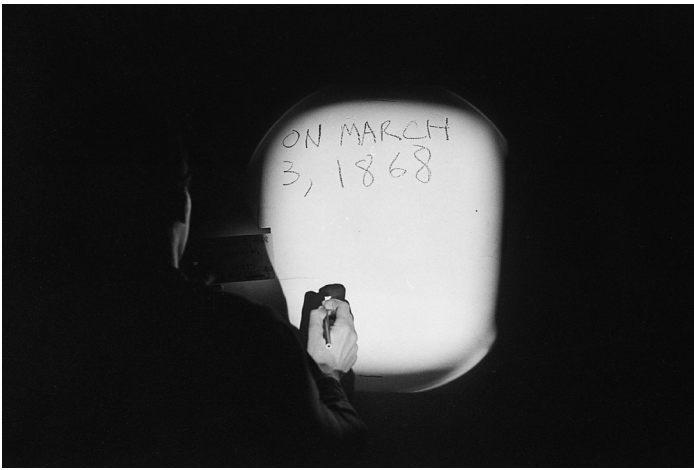
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In 1972, I displayed Blick Ratsel (Look Puzzle) in a store window in what was at that time the newly emerging SoHo area in New York. Each cell in the matrix contained a clue to the puzzle; the solution has yet to be deciphered.

—Ralston Farina



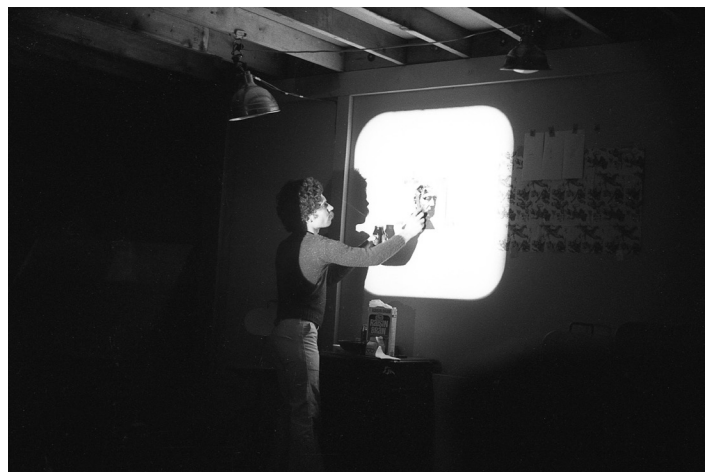
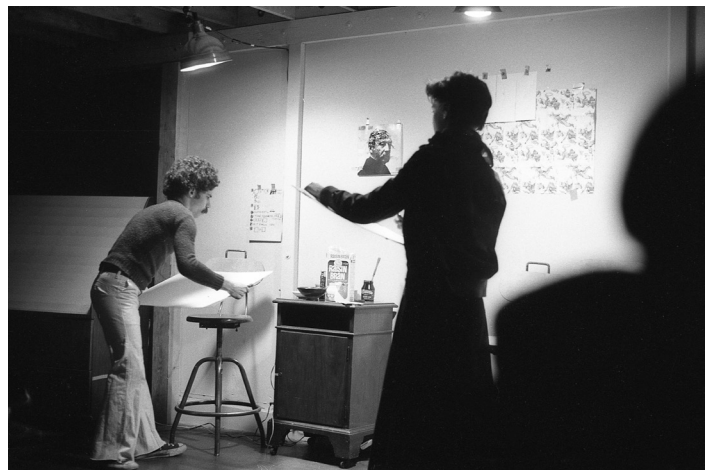
The show began with the sound of a ticking clock, then the sound of a buzzer, and a light beam illuminated Farina's hand where he made a matchbox stand up. This was followed by ten minutes of a Caruso tape playing, while he projects prints of Jesus before swiftly dropping them to the floor. Finally, he ends the show by writing on the wall, "On March 21, 1868, P.T. Barnum..."

—John Howell, "Art Performance,"
Performing Arts Journal, 1977



Ralston peels masking tape under a desk lamp. A friend blindfolds himself and picks out a Passover song on the xylophone, then sings a torch song with his wife. Ralston sprays a diagonally striped piece of paper and new marks appear. In a "word of commercial interest" Ralston plays Laszlo Toth to a reproduction of the Pieta. Ralston lights Jewish commemorative candles and spreads butter on empty salt shakers. A women in a white gown draws a MaccDougal Street-type caricature of Ralston while he fools with a model-building kit. Two friends sit on chairs on a table, she painting her toenails, he sticking pencils and cigarettes between his toes. Ralston sends balls bouncing down an inclined plane lit flickeringly from beneath, then sends cereal boxes down the ramp, then glasses full of 7-Up, then two becardled birthday cakes which never make it, all this accompanied by Oriental music the way the other events were by pop songs. The structural and thematic links between the various vignettes were invisible, but I sensed in them a strong autobiographical significance. Taken as independent actions, free of symbolic content and generating their own raison d'être, the "movements" of "Time Time" possessed an irresistible charm, free as they were of the obnoxious self-indulgence that bogs down so much similar work.

—Peter Frank, "On Art," *SoHo Weekly News*, February 7, 1974. Review of Ralston Farina's *Time Time* at Onnasch Gallery on February 1, 1974





15 Minutes, University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, March 29, 1973







I REMEMBER RALSTON: THE ART OF RALSTON FARINA

J. Hoberman

He called his work "Zeitkunst" (Time Art), directing it not to the audience's perception but to their memory of what was perceived.

—David Polonoff, "The Nether World's a Stage," *East Village Eye*

All I remember was he performed in the dark with a suitcase on his lap. Opened it, shut it, and the next thing I knew the lights were back on.

—Michael Smith, email to the author

I REMEMBER RALSTON FARINA. Or rather, I remember being aware of the name Ralston Farina back in the mid-1970s, in the context of work that was not yet called *performance* but was something newer and funkier than Happenings.

Maybe I saw the wise-guy Pop-art moniker Ralston Farina—half dog food, half breakfast cereal—on a poster in a Lower Manhattan bookstore or on a postcard from some alternative art space. Or more likely I'd seen the two-page spread in the downtown giveaway *Art-Rite* that appeared under a facsimile of the artist's signature and began with the ringing declaration "Ralston Farina is an angry man who came too early and stayed too late," intriguingly called him "a vagabond without home or tangible art," and included a few blurry, underlit, barely legible photographs of someone (perhaps this metahippie trickster himself?) sitting in a chair, holding a valise (an enigma clutching a mystery).

To my knowledge there are no videotapes of Ralston Farina in performance and surprisingly few photographs—largely because he was an artist who not only eschewed the art object but objected to any documentation of his activities; his works were meant to survive only insofar as they imprinted themselves on the spectator's mind.

You could say that Steven Robert Snyder (1946–1985), aka Ralston Farina, is simultaneously the Zelig and the Invisible Man of old SoHo. He began his anti-career around 1969 1965 at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, performing under the name Steve Raven, a pseudonym he had taken as a twelve-year-old in Philadelphia, where he played the Elks Club circuit in a mentalist act with his father. Stage magic predated poetry and performance. Raven's longtime

friend artist and graphic designer Dennis Hermanson remembers a 1969 performance the artist gave in the window of a magic shop on Broadway and Twelfth Street. "He held objects. . . . He would change objects in the window. . . . It was more of a narrative."

Raven continued this form of object theater—what he called "hovering"—when, rebranded as Ralston Farina, he branched out into the alt-space art world in the early '70s, appearing in downtown lofts as well as in the occasional store window. There's a photograph taken in January 1974 of Farina in the window of Gallery Stops, a storefront in an apartment building directly across from the blue-chip galleries at 420 West Broadway. The artist is seen holding a bottle, concentrating, crouched over an outsize timepiece and two plates of food, performing something called *Eat the Clock*, 1973. (If you look closely at the crowd reflected in the window glass, you can see someone who looks awfully like John Cage, smiling approval.)

Cultivating a mysterious persona, Farina was "a guy who came and went," in Hermanson's words. He crashed on people's couches, carrying his props in a suitcase. Like fellow performance pioneers Acconci and Anderson, he was a self-produced character in the theater of downtown art. Short and wiry, with a mass of dark curly hair and a trimmed Zapata mustache, he had a look and an attitude as well as a name. His performances (or visitations) were advertised with cryptic collage posters. His persona was easily recognized but his pieces were not easily described; a press release put out by the alternative space 112 Greene Street to announce a series that included Farina's April 1, 1978, performance *Random Eye-Rolling Exercises for Aesthetic Immortality* lapsed into uncharacteristic obviousness with a reference to the artist's "unique Chaplinesque antics."

Ralston got around. In early 1974, soon after he shared an all-star New Year's Day bill at St. Mark's with William Burroughs, John Cage, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Byrd Hoffman [Robert Wilson], Taylor Mead, Ed Sanders, Patti Smith, Anne Waldman, and Lewis Warsh, and several months before *Art-Rite* editors Edit deAk and Walter Robinson began their epochal evening (not yet "performance") series "PersonA" at Artists Space, Onnasch Galerie at 139 Spring Street (the first German art space to open in SoHo) booked—I know no better word—the two least commercial not-yet-performance artists in town, Jack Smith and Farina, for evening appearances. To do who knows

what? Does anyone remember? "Yes, I do remember Ralston Farina," the playwright and critic Daryl Chin replied when queried by e-mail. "And I did see him several times in performance."

I remember that he was one of those people who was manipulating objects, but he also had a stand-up shtick to his act. (The early performances of Eric Bogosian, when he would do stand-up in the art world context, were influenced by Ralston Farina.)

His art was called "Time Time," and he'd often do something like set a timer somewhere, then use the objects he had around . . . but often not as expected. (Like if there was a record player, he'd put a pillowcase on the turntable and let it spin around.) And he'd tell some sort of story . . . which I never remember as particularly memorable. And then the timer would ring (after say 15 minutes) and he'd say something about giving you the time. And that would be it.

Throughout the '70s, Farina played 112 Greene, 3 Mercer Street, Artists Space, Idea Warehouse, and the Kitchen as well as several of the original SoHo galleries (OK Harris, Paula Cooper, Holly Solomon). He showed up unannounced at "Soup and Tart," the group show organized by French Fluxus artist Jean Dupuy at the Kitchen in November 1974, performed a magic trick, told the audience he'd be back in "a minute," and split the scene, leaving them to experience the minute in his absence. In 1980, *SoHo Weekly News* performance critic John Howell cited "Soup and Tart" for its art-historical significance, and named Farina, Carolee Schneemann, and Jack Smith as the three prophets of performance art—"their influences known more by reputation than example."

And yet performance historian RoseLee Goldberg makes no mention of Farina (or Raven) in her books, the downtown-theater chronicler Stefan Brecht evidently kept no file on Farina's work, and neither the *Drama Review* nor *Artforum* ever covered his act. Howell's comments aside, Farina seems never to have been reviewed in the *SoHo Weekly News*—although the paper did feature a fabulously unreadable photograph taken at a 1976 Museum of Modern Art performance, of which the museum has no record. *The Village Voice* ran a photograph in the Scenes column of the "vignette artist and skit impresario" staging a race between two bottles of Heinz ketchup (to see which would empty out first) at a benefit for the White Panther publication *Sun/Dance* in December 1971. A few years later, in March 1973, *Voice* staff photographer Fred Mc-

Darrah posed him standing in front of the 126 Prince Street storefront, the window emblazoned with the words FATHER TIME TIME and signed RALSTON FARINA.

Farina did make a memorable appearance in Annette Kuhn's 1976 *Voice* article "Why Is Performance Art Different from All Other Art?," complaining that his ideas were being "ripped off right and left" (in Kuhn's paraphrase) and telling her that his major precursor was TV host Ernie Kovacs, whose morning shows he had seen in Philadelphia as a child. Among other things, the "pushy and prolific" Mr. Farina was among the first artists to acknowledge Kovacs's vulgar modernism or even the impact of television on his consciousness.¹

RALSTON FARINA'S EARLY PIECES were notably brief. John Cage, who corresponded with the artist, wrote him a recommendation: "In a very elemental way time for him is of the essence. Where Robert Wilson's theater can be thought of as prose (or epic poetry) since his performances last so long, Ralston Farina's theater is like poems one can read in one sitting." The poet Larry Fagin recalls an open reading at St. Mark's Church in which Steve ("Nobody I knew called him Ralston," Fagin notes) placed a boom box on a table and, as Judy Garland sang "Over the Rainbow," sat down under the table and ate a bowl of cereal.

But window installations such as *Time Art* (part of a fall 1973 group show at 112 Greene) involved drawing with food coloring and glass wax in a process of continual change that went on for weeks, and some performances were quite elaborate. The filmmaker and media consultant Richard C. Skidmore, who assisted Farina with *The March of Time-Time*, performed at St. Mark's on the evening of March 29, 1972, described the piece for me in detail.

The artist had created a huge cross in the main sanctuary by taking the extension ladder used to change bulbs in the nave's ceiling lights and strapping a bicycle across it, two-thirds of the way to the top. "A fellow on the right side of the ladder was fixing a flat tire for the entirety of the piece," Skidmore recalls.

In front of the ladder were two trestle tables covered with white tablecloths, and seated there were a dozen beautifully dressed women who all had in front of them a bowl, a quart of milk, a box of cereal, and a spoon. In front of that, closer to the audience, Ralston sat at a card table. He had a bowl, spoon, milk, and cereal, and he also had a toaster.

As things commenced, I played an audiotape that I had recorded and edited off the TV, of sounds and descriptions of the Vietnam War. (There were other elements to the soundscape, including the old pop song "It Had to Be You.") At a certain signal, the ladies started pouring cereal into their bowls, pouring milk into the cereal, and, at first starting slowly, picked up to a pretty good pace, first spooning and then shoveling the stuff into their mouths.

Skidmore estimates that it took ten or fifteen minutes for the women to empty their cereal boxes, although not all of them did, and that in the process they splattered their dresses while leaving "a general mess around the bowls." The artist had until then sat unnoticed, but now "caught the attention of all as he slowly reached over and poured his box of Raisin Bran. Instead of flakes, out came roaches"—live, dead, and made out of plastic. According to Skidmore, the performance lasted less than half an hour and ended with an ice-cream vendor noisily wheeling his cart into the church: "At this novelty, people got up and left or got up and bought an ice-cream sandwich!" Asked if he knew of any photographs of the performance, Skidmore emphasized that Ralston "didn't want his work documented."

In an artist's statement published in the 1981 catalogue raisonné *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street* (and also found in an undated French catalogue), Farina declares that his medium was time: "The materials I work with, the objects, images, and styles are merely moments of punctuation, phrasing, and articulation." According to Skidmore, Ralston was "most interested in programming his audience's memory," that it was all a matter of timing. *The March of Time-Time* had no script. Rather, the artist mapped the performance by laying out index cards that helped him to determine the duration of a particular section, and the piece was thus composed according to a "rhythm he was consciously creating to aid in the programming of his audience."

While Skidmore's memory is impressive, other pieces defied description even as they were happening. Published in the *Poetry Project Newsletter* 26, Mary Stewart's account of "Steve Raven's Time/Art show," performed three years later, in 1975, at St. Mark's, is itself a poem:

Ralston raving, the F. is for fingers, red, yellow, and white. They fall off in the

suitcase light. The audience is dark and above a bald head shines, out of which protrude two legs, thus forming a dialogue. But it's Steve Raven's monologue, with borrowed hands.

The tapping gets louder and moves inside, the table shakes harder, peaches float in their own sweet time, twice as fast out of the can, faster than the speed of catch-up, able to leap tall tables, more powerful than powder. You see him, you think you see him, you think you see him as someone else, maybe you do. He's behind a cloud of smoke, constant, nothing, and everything you just forgot, like And Most of All I Remember, turn it over and it reads LS/MFT. Put it in your pocket and walk out. For days you wait for the show to end.

LS/MFT, for what it is worth, are the initials for "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco," still found on every Lucky Strike package. Does anyone remember if Luckies were the artist's brand?

Billed by Farina as "a portrait of a half hour," presented as would be a thirty-minute TV show with "strategically embedded moments," *Time/Time N° 994 or No 995*, performed at 3 Mercer Street in 1977, was given a fairly detailed and objective account by John Howell in that year's winter issue of the *Performing Arts Journal*. The audience sat in darkness listening to the sound of a ticking clock. After a while, a slide-projector beam flicked on to illuminate the artist's outstretched palm, on which he performed the trick of making a matchbook stand up and sit down. Then there was more darkness, although this time, the sound of the clock was overpowered by that of Caruso singing. The final "commercial interruption" again featured the projector beam, this time used to exhibit cheap reproductions illustrating the life of Jesus, thus concluding Farina's half-hour meditation on the nature of show-biz, miracles, and time passing.

The use of "time time," Hermanson told me, was meant to distinguish between the experience of the performance and the spectator's recollection of the experience. Ralston was "doing 'magic' with images in time—a matter of appearances, disappearances, sleight of hand, and audience expectation." (In his longest interview, published in the first issue of *Performance Art*, 1979, Farina refers, without elaboration, to his "trade secrets.") Hermanson assisted Farina in what might have been the artist's last solo SoHo performance, *An Illustrated*

Non-Lecture on the Phenomenology of My Avant Garde Aesthetics—also advertised as *Aleatoire je ne sais quoi (A Certain Random Quality)*—at the Kitchen on May 8, 1980. The presentation involved the use of transparent cels and overhead projectors to create a series of additive drawings that made time material. Hermanson's function was, apparently, to distract the audience by standing before the projections, dropping pages torn from gay and straight porn magazines. It was, he says, the only sequence he remembers from what was likely a half-hour show—and, although not precisely random, this memory fragment, which Hermanson still carries with him thirty-three years later, constitutes, in accordance with Farina's notion of "time time," the work of art.

FOOD FIGURED PROMINENTLY in Farina's presentations—perhaps to suggest that his pieces were in some way recipes, perhaps because the artist's father was a short-order cook, perhaps because eating is so integral to our internal clocks, or perhaps because he saw himself as providing food for thought.²

If Stuart Sherman's performances were often described (by myself, among others) as deliberately failed magic tricks or television sales pitches, Farina's performances seem to have been more like philosophical versions of TV comedian Ernie Kovacs's perceptual pranks. In 1978, the rock critic David G. Walley, author of *The Ernie Kovacs Phile* (1975), wrote a letter to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, characterizing Ralston as "Kovacs's foremost pupil," but Farina was also a reader of philosophy, notably Edmund Husserl, Alfred Korzybski (the inventor of general semantics, who entered Farina cosmology as "Mr. Zip"), and the theorist of "lateral thinking," Edward de Bono.

Despite his clownish pseudonym, Ralston Farina was an art-world intellectual, albeit one who never published nor ever seems to have spoken publicly about his theories. To support his "time time" aesthetic, he apparently drew on Husserl's phenomenology and Korzybski's notion that humans are defined as a species by their capacity to pass on knowledge over time. And more than likely he took de Bono's notion of *po* (a form of provocative, open-ended, "lateral" thinking) as a validation for his performances. At least that's what Hermanson and Skidmore remember.

There were other concepts that the artist enjoyed for their own sake. Farina was evidently fascinated by Null-A (to use

science-fiction writer A. E. van Vogt's term for Korzybski's non-Aristotelian logic), AI, fuzzy logic, and computer science and could knowledgeably employ the three-parallel-line symbol ("iff") for biconditional logical connectives (see the *March of Time-Time* poster) as well as the mathematical formula known as the Hadamard matrix. At the close of the '70s, Farina taught a course on "the aesthetics of time" and "serial pattern design" at the American Center for Students and Artists in Paris, researched "time multiplexing and multiprocessing" for a software firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and vainly tried to interest the New York public television station WNET in an espionage serial called *En Rapport*, to be composed of ten three-minute episodes, set in the art world, with some characters playing themselves. A Super 8 version was shown once, on November 17, 1979, at Artists Space (on a bill with Willy Lenski's *Relatively Tortured* and Charlie Ahearn's *Deadly Art of Survival*, both 1979); does anyone remember that?

Having come early, Ralston Farina stayed late, but not late enough. He maintained some connection with the early '80s performance scene, appearing at A's, Arleen Schloss's storied loft space at 330 Broome Street, and at Danceteria, as part of Haoui Montaug's performance cabaret *No Entiendes*. In early 1985, he participated in "The Artist in the First Person," a seminar/performance program organized by Plexus International at New York University. That spring, Farina moved to Berkeley, California, and there, at age thirty-eight, he quite suddenly died.

Plexus organized a commemorative event, featuring 350(!) artists, on July 17, 1985, at C.U.A.N.D.O., and that same month the *East Village Eye* ran an obituary by his friend the writer David Polonoff. Noting that Ralston Farina was better known for his persona than for his art, Polonoff added that "perhaps, like those performances through which he sought to affect the 'future of memory,' his importance will emerge in retrospect."

Rejecting documentation, the artist formerly known as Steven Robert Snyder would seem to have taken to heart Korzybski's famous dictum "The map is not the territory"—but what is the territory in the case of Ralston Farina, if not a map pieced together from dispersed, shredded, half-forgotten memories?

Notes

1. For more on Kovacs's work, see my "Avant la Letterman," *Artforum*, May 2011, 85–86. Although many underground cartoonists must have been deeply impressed by the vintage Fleischer brothers cartoons recycled on '50s television, the first downtown artist to claim TV as a crucial influence was filmmaker George Landow (aka Owen Land), born two years before Farina. Landow's epiphany was the Saturday morning kiddie show *Winky Dink and You*, which encouraged watchers to participate in the animated hero's adventures by crayoning on a plastic sheet affixed to the TV screen. Traces of *Winky Dink* might be found in the additive drawings in Farina's later performances.

2. There was the ketchup race, a pouring-out of two boxes of Domino sugar to literalize the notion of a "sugar tit," and the various cereal ingestions. John Howell remembers a piece in which "a night on the town [was] illustrated by a date between a box of cereal and a box of dog food"—products that not coincidentally represent the two halves of the name Ralston Farina. (Ralston Purina was a major manufacturer of pet food and cereal; farina is the generic term for a form of cereal also known as Cream of Wheat, as well as the name of a featured character in the widely televised *Our Gang* comedies.) The 1976 piece *I Had a Dream That Leo Asked Me to Do a Show*, performed at 112 Greene Street, ended with the projection of a clip from Roger Corman's 1967 *St. Valentine's Day Massacre* and an explosion of popcorn bouncing off the screen just as the gangsters were seen being machine-gunned. *Fun with Time Time*, a 1977 performance at Artists Space, involved throwing Jell-O and painting with Campbell's soup.

Special thanks to Dennis Hermanson who generously shared his knowledge of Ralston Farina's work.

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Annotated corrections, December 2025



Ralston Farina Remembered

John Cage

Ralston Farina's art seems to me in the area between music and happenings (action poetry). It is not that Farina makes sounds, but that in a very elemental way time for him is of the essence. Where Robert Wilson's theater can be thought of as prose (or epic poetry) since his performances last so long, Ralston Farina's theater is like poems one can read in one sitting: a large and various experience has been put into a very short period of time.

Everything that he has performed that I have seen is mysterious, unexpected, and strong. Were I to say his work is beautiful it would only mean that it "clicks" for me (which it does).

Daryl Chin

Yes, I do remember Ralston Farina. And I did see him several times in performance. I remember that he was one of those people who was manipulating objects, but he also had a stand-up shtick to his act. (Other people in that object-manipulation category: Stuart Sherman, Tom Murrin who went under the name The Alien Comic.) I might be wrong, but the best way I could describe him is as a mash-up of Stuart and Michael Smith, only with more of a stand-up edge. (The early performances of Eric Bogosian, when he would do stand-up in the art world context, were influenced by Ralston Farina.)

His performances (the ones I saw) were set to timers: he would begin by setting out a series of objects and then he would turn on the timer; while he was manipulating the objects (always in ways which were incongruous), he would rattle off a story (a very distinct memory is the sound of his voice, which had a kind of carnival-barker quality, though low-keyed). I don't remember that any of the stories were particularly memorable, but they were always puzzling, as if he were saying something which might be a double-entendre, but he left that as an enticement. When the timer would buzz, he would end the performance (he never did one that I saw that was longer than 20 minutes) by saying that he had just given you the time. And so that was the "import" of his piece, that he had given you an event within a specified time.

I should also add that he was an art world person who acknowledged pop culture as influence: when asked, he would mention Burns and Allen (particularly for their TV show, in which George Burns would break "the fourth wall" and directly address the audience) and Ernie Kovacs.

Jane Crawford

I did finally find one of my old Foundation of Art Performances and Projects catalogues. Below is what Ralston wrote for his entry:

I am a time artist. My medium is time. My art reflects the surprises and the unexpectedness of everyday events. I'll pour a box of dog biscuits and portable radios fall out...The timing will surprise you and the music will make you laugh. I use stylistic tendencies as a painter would color. Every show I do is different and of the time.

He was available for performances, lectures, residencies, and special projects. I had arranged a series of performances by five or six American artists at De Appel in Amsterdam. The lovely woman who ran the venue, Wies Smals, prepared a lovely dinner to welcome us all to Amsterdam. The meal, of which she was very proud, was a type of casserole of eels, her specialty. Most of us were bravely trying not to betray our timidity at facing food so foreign to us. Ralston, with his humor and gallantry, dove right in, relishing each bite and saving the meal from becoming a disaster.

Ralston was a friend and a pleasure to work with. He always gave more than we ever expected!

Edit deAk

Since Mr. Farina has never allowed to compromise his work by the inefficiency of photo-documentation conveying ideas of the performances, the media neglected him for a while. Also his pieces have a non-verbal quality which tends to make audiences speechless, like when one receives a perfect gift. So even the grapevine about him has been less of an oral myth than that of a reputation created by eyewitness enthusiasm for an indescribable brandname: Ralston Farina. —Letter to C.A.P.S., 1975

Larry Fagin

Steve (nobody I knew called him "Ralston") took part in open readings. I don't know if we scheduled him in the reading series. (The Project would have it in its records.) In one piece I remember, he put a boom box (?) on a table playing Judy Garland ("Over the Rainbow," I think) then sat under the table eating a bowl of one of Corn Flakes or Rice Krispies (not Farina!). We were friendly but he could be imperious and needy. What I liked best about him was his seriousness and earnestness. I always treated him with respect. I never knew about the Snyder.

Vincent Gallo

My first creative works when I moved to NYC were all conceptual performance art pieces and all performed on New York City streets. I started this around age 16. At that time I was not aware of anyone else's performance artwork. I was more interested in film and music with almost zero art-world interest. I started doing what I was doing for reasons I do not really recall. No reasons.

One day right after performing a piece intended to heavily upset the public, a gentleman named Dieter Froese said to me that I should know the work of Ralston Farina. He said we were comrades. I had not heard this name before but smiled at the great made up name.

I would get to know Dieter and liked him very much. He was a smart fella. I never met or saw the work of Ralston Farina but I threw his name around then to make myself seem like I knew things about art.

Whoever he is or was I will never forget his name. And somewhere in that alone he influenced me.

Jene Highstein

[T]here were comedians like Ralston Farina and a couple of other comedians, all who died young. They were amazing stand-up people who did a cross between, it wasn't comedy, it was performance art. Farina had a little suitcase and he'd rattle it around then put it on the table, open it and something would happen. It was very stretched out, very surreal, and very much about pushing whatever boundaries there were. —Unpublished interview by Erik La Prade, c. 2013

Bob Holman

Believe me, nothing would make me happier than to help out but I have only the vaguest memories of Ralston Farina, except I loved his pseudonym!

John Howell

Imagine a cross between Ernie Kovacs and Henri Bergson and you might come up with Ralston Farina. That he cites both as sources pretty well describes his performances, which look like comedy shows of thought. They are composed from a score which organizes units of time rather than incidents. — *Performing Arts Journal*, Winter 1977

Alan Kay

The name "Steve Raven" registers a little (just barely).



Richard Kostelanetz

The name, so patently a pseudonym, turned me off long ago, which is too bad, because the little guy is obviously learned and interesting. He told me that his works are concerned with time (and that he went to Princeton), and his announcement for this performance showed in the top frame a drawing that was then cut apart to reveal a second frame.

This image is about the recomposition of space, not time; and in his piece, time became a similarly slippery concept. Nonetheless, it was funny, as Farina (named after a breakfast cereal) tossed Jell-O around, put Campbell's soup on the white boards (the ersatz paint recapitulating the history of modern painting, and the like). His short performance piece had a false ending that briefly faked me out, for the final image was a poster of Ernie Kovacs, acknowledging Ralston's indebtedness to television's inspired Hungarian. (May 22, 1977)

—In *On Innovative Performance(s): The Decades of Recollections on Alternative Theater*, 1994

Anthony McCall

I did see Ralston perform a few times, one I think at Holly Solomon on West Broadway.

My memory snapshot is of him sitting on a chair with a small suitcase on his lap while declaring "my medium is time." For a short couple of years he seemed to perform often. I didn't really get to know him. In retrospect his performance style seems related to the similarly fast-paced, densely compressed action-riddles of Stuart Sherman, another completely original artist who died too soon.

Maureen Owens

I'd just set up the little contributions table and swung open the heavy wooden front doors of the St. Marks Poetry Project in anticipation of what promised to be a much attended poetry reading. Early soft night airs tumbled in and with them my friend Steve Raven stepped over the stone door sill. "Hey!" I greeted, then immediately noticed he was holding what seemed to be a thickly shellacked dog leash arching forward into a fancy leather collar embedded with rhinestones, and also with its shape stiffened by shellac. Steve held the leash quite naturally out in front of him as though walking a dog. "Is... that....?" I fumbled... "Yes," he nodded smiling. "This is my invisible dog. This is Mr. Zip."

Ron Padgett

Recently we received an anonymous postcard informing us that "Steve Raven's real name is Steve Snyder (Snider, Sneider)..." Raven, also known as Ralston Farina, denies the charge. —*The Poetry Project Newsletter #5, 1973*

David Polonoff

Like many artists for whom life itself is a performance piece, Farina had difficulty dealing with those, patrons and performers alike, who sought to ghettoize the new form. Secretive and at times abrasive, he refused interviews and would not allow his performances to be photographed, but in later years grew despondent at the acclaim his techniques received when massacred by lesser hands. — "The Nether World's A Stage," *East Village Eye*, July, 1985

Kathryn Ray

I met Ralston while walking around Soho in the early 1970's. I remember him reading in Soho cafes, completely absorbed, taking notes, writing numbers and series and codes, considering complicated mathematical and theoretical possibilities that underlay the time scores for his performances. He introduced me to Andy DeGroat at the Bryd Hoffman loft across the street from my babysitting home on Spring Street. He was curious and playful and liked adventures and art. He got himself

into trouble with people sometimes but I got along with him very well! The simple objects he used in his performances maybe held memories like from childhood and so were themselves magic. Remembering people is time travel. He should not have died. Maybe Ralston was a genius!

Walter Robinson

Ralston was great! But he kept himself shrouded in mystery. He wouldn't tell us what his real name was. I remember one performance, which was brief but dramatic, and took place in the so-called Idea Warehouse that Alanna Heiss had secured on Reade Street not far from the Municipal Building. Ralston sat on a chair in front of the audience —there was no stage or anything—with a suitcase resting on his knees. The room was dark, but he somehow achieved a strobe-light effect with a bright light that he jiggled nervously up and down, to impressive effect. He took items from the suitcase and showed them, but I don't think he talked—though I'm not sure! It was otherworldly. Later I asked him what he was doing and he talked about phenomenology, but I couldn't really follow him. Then he disappeared, and I heard that he had died. I never knew more.

Richard C. Skidmore

He didn't want his work documented, he most interested in programming his audience's memory through his performance imagery, and each performance, of what at the time he termed "visual poetry" was designed to build upon the last and prepare you for the next. It was an arty and relatively pleasant, if enigmatic form of brainwashing.

Michael Smith

He kinda looked like one of the Hall and Oates pair. Was not at all communicative the time I met him and the performance I saw was in total darkness, it was like, what happened? If I could remember anything about Ralston I would gladly write something, but seriously all I remember was he performed in the dark with a suitcase on his lap. Opened it, shut it and the next thing I know the lights were back on. Martin Creed to the nth degree.

Mary Stewart

Ralston raving, the F. is for fingers, red, yellow, and white. They fall off in the suitcase light. The audience is dark and above a bad head shines, out of which protruded two legs, thus forming a dialogue. But it's Steve Raven's monologue, with borrowed hands.

The tapping gets louder and moves inside,

the table shakes harder, peaches float in their own sweet time, twice as fast out of the can, faster than the speed of catch-up, able to leap tall tables, more powerful than powder. You see him, you think you see him, you think you see him as someone else, maybe you do. He's behind a cloud of smoke, constant, nothing, and everything you just forgot, like And Most of All I Remember, turn it over and it reads LS/MFT. Put it in your pocket and walk out. For days you wait for the show to end.

—*The Poetry Project Newsletter #26, 1975*

Anne Waldman

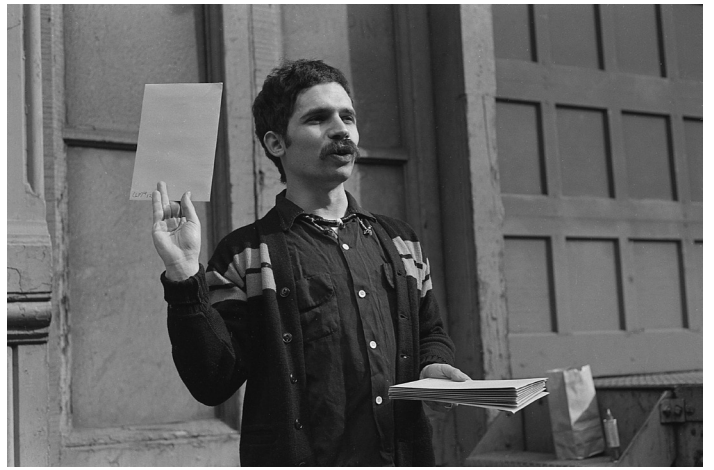
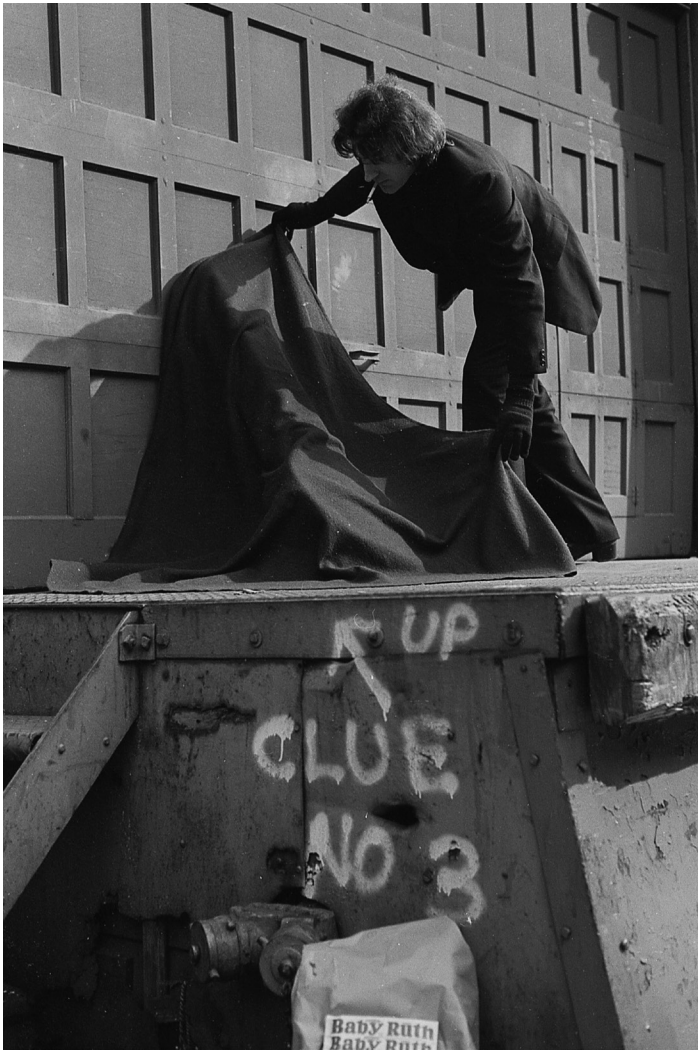
Ralston was an interesting presence and quirky performer at the Poetry Project in the early years. I remember a conversation with him about Harry Houdini having performed a magic act at St Mark's. He was intense, funny, surreal, serious, driven? Seemed to be trying out a number of identities. I liked all of them.

David G. Walley

I first met Ralston Farina in the winter of 1968 when he was doing his "time art" performances. The experience was unique because the only other person who did anything like him was Ernie Kovacs. Later I discovered that Ralston had spent his formative years in Philadelphia watching Kovacs "live" on Philadelphia morning TV. Ralston never learned to spell but he has learned Kovacs' techniques, and he is Kovacs' foremost pupil.

Lewis Warsh

My only remembrance of SR/RF is that he was a terrific person, but I didn't know him at all. We did take a long bus ride together, simply by accident, from Port Authority in Manhattan, to Chicago, to participate in the protests around the Chicago 7 trial. This was September 1969. I had no idea where I was going afterwards, and Ralston was kind and attentive, in the most sincere way, more than you could ever ask for. Sometimes all you need is a moment of time with another person, and this was ours.



2
8M

INTRODUCTION

1 2 3
E-U-A
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1
8M

STATEMENT

4 5 6 1 2 3
U-A-D W-X-A
0 - ±

0

DEVELOPMENT

7 8 9 4 5 6
A-F-U X-Y-B
- ± 0

+
1

CLIMAX¹

10 11 12 7 8 9
B-U-A Y-Z-C
+ 0 -

+
2

RESTATEMENT

13 14 15 10 11 12
U-A-C Z-A-D
0 - ±

+
3

CLIMAX²

16 17 18 13 14 15
A-A-U A-B-E
- - 0

5M
FLASHING

10M
CREATING
FLASHING

15M
SPRAY
(NO FLASH)

JC
FLASH

0

+
4

Provocative Operations: Ralston Farina's Archive

The Ralston Farina archive arrived at Artists Space on October 7th, 2025, lovingly stewarded by his close friends Dennis Hermandson and Richard Skidmore since Farina entrusted it to them in 1982. We had no idea how it would be packed or organized, and quickly discovered that it bore no clear organizing principle. We began documenting the material exactly as it was and then, in effect, processed the archive for the first time—developing a system that would allow us to locate and decipher its contents. This led us to group the material into several overarching categories: hand-written performance notes, diagrammatic studies, flyers, photographic and video documentation, props, and autonomous artworks such as drawings and “Time boxes.”

One of the archive's major surprises is the sheer volume of lettered diagrams, numerical work, and reading notes. Until now, the tangible traces of Farina's art in the world consisted of a handful of meticulously designed flyers, a dozen or so photographs, and four known video recordings of select performances (Farina famously resisted documentation). Here, it appears, is the full record of his studies and compositional methods—a body of research whose breadth across philosophy, technology, mathematics, and other fields far exceeds our own expertise. After combing through piles and piles of loose papers and notebooks, it is clear that Farina's dedication to his studies was consuming and highly intentional. As far as we can understand them, the performances are guided by concepts of time drawn from his self-directed readings in philosophy, math, and science. These ideas are outlined in his writings and are then worked through in diagrams that structure both the durational and aesthetic aspects of his performances, creating an iterative feedback loop. We are deeply grateful to our friend Philip Ording, a mathematician and writer working with artists, for joining us on a series of weekly explorations through these materials and for expanding our understanding of Farina's intellectual terrain. Here is an edited dispatch from the longer conversation that we've been conducting with Philip over the last months.

Hi Jay, Stella, Nusheen,

Thanks for sending the RF announcement. Your description of his homespun aesthetic inflected by cutting-edge thinking is one of the things about his work that I find so rare and disarming.

I phoned Julie Martin about his having possibly collaborated with Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.). She didn't remember RF's name but recognized the name he lists as his collaborator: Tracy Kinsel was one of the Bell Labs engineers available to work with artists.

She was curious to hear about that 1979 letter where RF describes his research into time multiplexing (the process of communicating several different signals across one channel by alternating samples of each in a sequence that ultimately is sorted and reassembled at its destination), and the structure of the “random” Matisse drawing or the Elvis movie clips in *TIME//TIME Portrait of a Half Hour* (at the Internationaal Cultureel Centrum Antwerp).

Julie said it sounded like RF took math and made it his own. I think she's right. The diagrams can get pretty detailed but they retain a provisional quality, layered with selections, elaborations, and redactions, often in alternating colors. They're not scores, per se. They seem to be functional diagrams—models for coordinating (or clashing) the parts of a performance, like a Gantt chart for project planning. If there's a unique way to “read” one of these diagrams, I hedged, we have yet to find the decoder ring.

She asked if I thought he was doing high level magic tricks. (Not really.) She said I should do a book on the lure of mathematics, call it *Seduced by Math*. I asked her if E.A.T. ever got a call from an engineer who wanted help from an artist. (Not really.)

At the end of our third (fourth?) day combing through the boxes Jay asked what I'd say if I had to describe to a mathematician who didn't know RF what he was doing. I rang Spencer Gerhardt, the mathematician/composer/author I told Stella about. He writes lucidly about logic, time, and avant-garde music, and should also be co-opted into your T//T reading group.

I described how RF's notebooks copy key terms and operations from his readings about phenomenology, music, and math (Husserl, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Cage, Schoenberg, probability, signal processing, visual perception, set theory, topology, category theory, etc.). Select statements are then cast into performance terms.

These aphorisms look a bit like axioms for a performance art *Tractatus*. Except they're written in brightly colored marker, in dime store composition notebooks, in all caps.

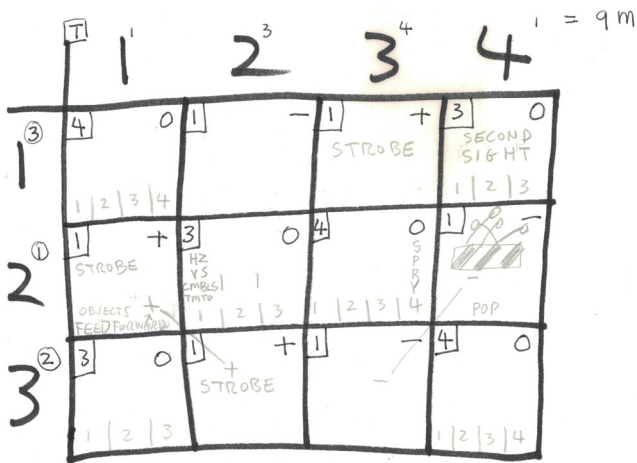
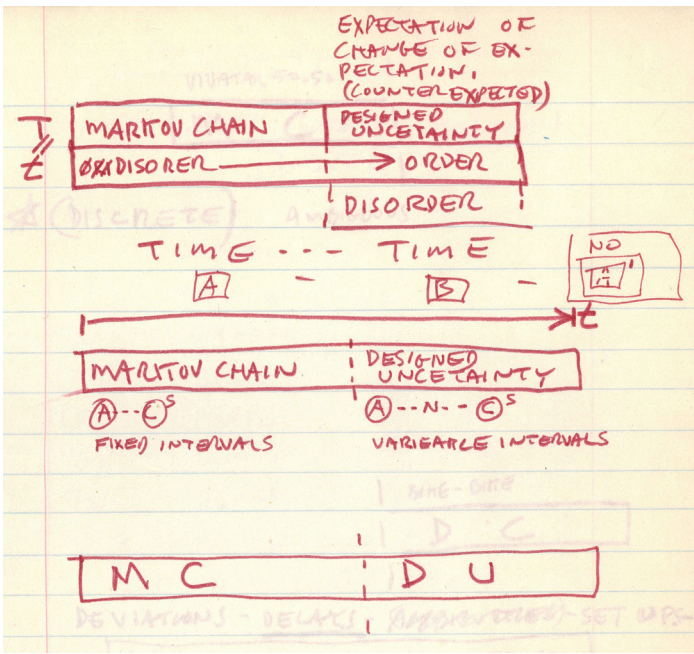
Farina draws a range of diagrams, but most are tabular or matrix-like. A rectangular array of numbers and letters are coordinated by a pair of time scales. Often one scale measures time in increments of seconds or another time unit, and runs across the top labeled by T with an overline. The second scale at the left side of the tableau, labeled T with a vertical line, separates the action into categories often labeled by letters. In that way, these arrays map quantitative vs. qualitative properties of time. A page of notes in archival Box #1 associates T overline with *KINDS OF CHANGE* and T sideline with *KINDS OF DURATION*.

Other diagrams look like state diagrams for a Markov chain (a discrete stochastic process with the property that the likelihood of the system transitioning to another state depends on its present state alone). Nodes correspond to different activities and arrows extend from one node to another or loop back on themselves to indicate possible transitions among “subroutines.”

Then there are the 3x5 notecards that Stella thinks may be the step between the diagrams/matrices and the performance, even if we can't say exactly how. The performances themselves, in contrast to the diagrams, appear to be loosely choreographed, fragmented sequences of object manipulations, gestures, drawings, projections, etc. His performance material is totally colloquial—simple actions with simple objects: popcorn, paper, soft drinks, lights flashing on/off. I mentioned the note that Nusheen found pointing to a duality between content and context. It often feels like RF's performances are the result of mapping content from one temporal context (signal processing, TV commercials, etc.) into another.

Like us, Spencer was struck by the charm of this personal practice. Unlike a Xenakis or Stockhausen (or Adrian Piper or Dorothea Rockburne), who partake of mathematical labels, RF cultivated a confidence in his ephemeral compositions through a private process.

Another part of his charm has to do with his comic timing. There's a passage in Bergson's essay on laughter that seems relevant: “A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different



CONTENT FREE
CONTEXT

CREATE THE CONTEXT AND
THE CONTENT FOLLOWS

meanings at the same time." Bergson uses an optics metaphor, calling this "reciprocal interference of series."

There's actually a brainteaser [see right] that illustrates this effect in Edward de Bono's *The Mechanism of Mind*, a 1969 book in RF's reading notes. It's a toy model of apparent complexity. Can you decipher the pattern's organization? (Hint: optical waves.)

This book comes pretty close to an RF decoder ring, come to think of it. It synthesizes Bergson, Korzybski, computing, etc. all through functional models that are as informal as they are vivid: jigsaw puzzles, 1000 lightbulbs, a dish of red jelly. Math isn't held up as an ideal to strive for but a multipurpose model building kit. There's something homespun about this view. It also happens to resemble my sense of a working scientist's perspective—structural and contingent—more than the stereotype of the genius who summons truth in a flash.

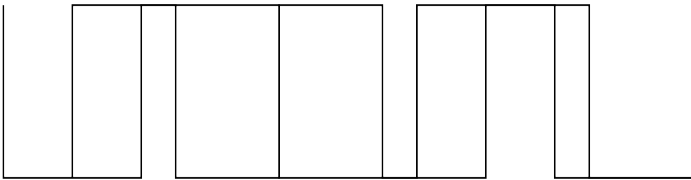
It also echoes what you've shared with me about Alfred Korzybski and the Polish-American philosopher's principle of non-identity. His Anthropometer, that bizzaro sieve-like contraption that RF drew multiple times, what Korzybski called a "plastic diagram" for manifesting levels of abstraction. Abstraction entailed by a symbol (A) to represent an object (B) extracted from an event (C) perceived. The non-equivalence or "non-identity" of these levels is a common source of confusion and inherent limitation of science.

For de Bono, this limitation seems to present an opportunity. Science rarely constrains itself to logical pathways to its solutions, despite its reputation. He encourages his readers—including, apparently, RF—to forgo the linking verb "is" for a new word: *PO*. Any straightforward definition of *PO* is out of the question. Stella's "provocative operation" sounds as good as any. Here's an example of RF giving it a spin:

*THE KNOWLEDGE WE CAN
ACQUIRE (IS) -> PO KNOWLEDGE
OF A (STRUCTURE OR PATTERN)
CONTAINED IN THE ACTIONS.*

PO might help with the question you asked about separating his study notes from his working notes. It seems like he adopts *PO* as a way to translate philosophico-computer-scientific concepts into performance ideas. For example, the idea stated above that the mind perceives only what is ordered in time, becomes, in RF's out-of-the-jack-in-the-box interpretation, a strategy for composing novel perceptions from arbitrary events suitably patterned.

In math, aesthetics typically pertain to



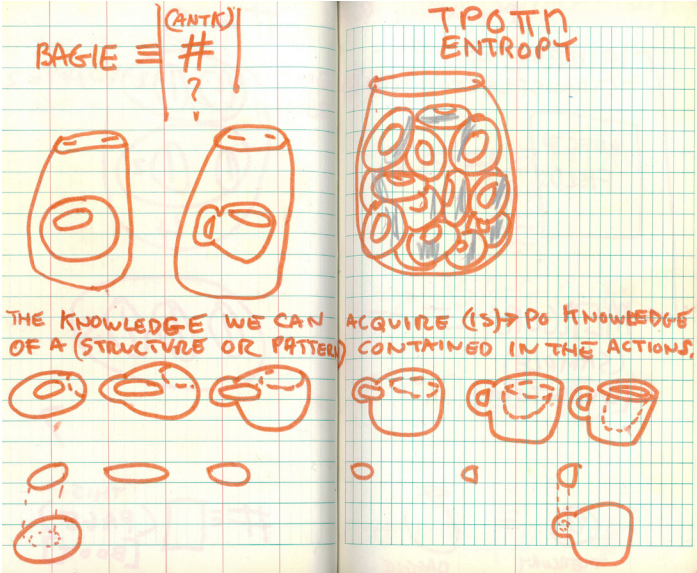
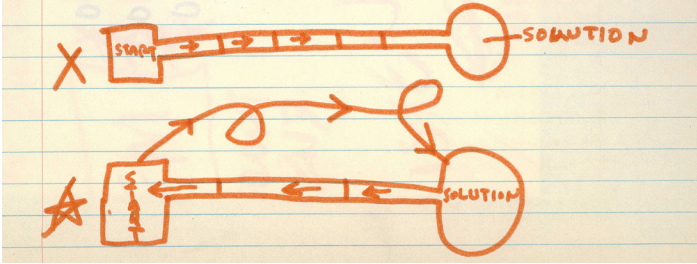
ideas and solutions. When someone says a theorem is beautiful, they don't usually take their satisfaction from its symbolic notation much less its diagrams and performance, no matter how refined, but from the insight that the theorem and its proof reveal. But it's interesting to think of other kinds of aesthetics for math, outside intellectual clarity alone, ones closer to considerations in art. The classicist Reviel Netz has argued that Archimedes was inspired by Hellenic poetics to imbue his proofs with tension between certainty and surprise. Maybe the combination of insight and uncertainty is more compelling than insights explained. Farina's statement "The Aesthetic Paradox" seems to get at this:

THE PROBLEMS OF ART ARE THE PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTING; MOST AESTHETIC DISPLAYS ONLY PRETEND UNCERTAINTY. TIME ART RETAINS THIS VITAL ASPECT OF LIFE.

So does his archive! Even as we untangle more of his notes, diagrams, and sources, the uncertainty that persists has kept RF very much alive in my mind. Every time I return to the archive I find something new that calls into question the organization we've assembled so far. Maybe this is a feature of his diagrammatic practice, not a bug? Maybe this page Jay and I came across in box #7 says it all.

WHAT MAKES THE DESERT BEAUTIFUL IS THAT THERE IS A WELL HIDDEN WITHIN IT.

Philip



Performance chronology

1965

Then, Then, Then and Now, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY

1966

Ti-Me, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY

1967

Untitled performance, Goddard College, VT

1968

Performed 2 minute shows every Monday night for one year,
Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY

Untitled performance #2, Goddard College, VT

Time Art, solo Wednesday night performance, Poetry Project,
St. Marks Church, NY

1969

Untitled performance #3, Goddard College, VT

Unidentified performance in the window of Michael's Magic Shop
on Broadway and 12th Street, NY

March of Time Time, Wednesday night performance, Poetry Project,
St. Marks Church, NY

Private performance for the Pata Lama (Karamapa), head magician of
Tibet, D.M.K Buddhist Monastery, Sweimbu, Nepal

1970

Reading: Ralston Farina, Merrill Gilfillan, Alice Notley, Poetry Project,
St. Mark's Church, NY, October 14

Performance-lecture, School of Visual Arts, NY

1971

Benefit Group Show, 98 Greene Street Loft, NY

Funk and Phenomena (group show), O.K. Harris Gallery, NY

Performance at Art Auction sponsored by Patty Oldenburg,
LoGiudici Gallery, NY

Ralston Farina and Friends Hovers: *Time Time Tattoo*, 98 Greene
Street Loft, NY, November 23, 8:45pm

Group reading, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY, September 22

Benefit for *Julliard Magazine*, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY,
December 22, 8:30pm

Benefit for *Sun/Dance*, St. Peters Church, Broome Street, NY,
December 23

1972

The March of Time-Time, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY,
March 29

Zeit Kunst Amusements, Look Puzzle (Blick Rätzel), O.K. Harris
Gallery, NY, July 14

Time Ard, Paula Cooper Gallery, NY

O-Zoned, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY

New Year's Group Show, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY

1973

Ralston Farina Hovers: *Zeitkunst*, 112 Greene Street, NY,
February 8, 9pm

Valentine's Day Group Reading of Love Poems, Poetry Project, St.
Mark's Church, NY, February 14

Look Puzzle Phase 3, Street work and store window drawing,
West Broadway store window, NY, March 23

Group show, 112 Greene Street, NY, September 1–October 18

Film screening: Ralston Farina, Willy Lenski, Charles Ahearn,
Artists Space, 155 Wooster Street, NY, November 17, 8pm
Group Reading, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY, November 21
Air Aid, James Yu Gallery, 93 Prince Street, NY, December 8,
8:30pm
Eat The Clock, Store window show, 425 West Broadway, NY,
December 22

1974

New Years day reading, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church,
NY, January 1
Group Reading, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY, January 2
Eat The Clock, Store window show, 425 West Broadway,
NY, January 12
Time Time, Onnasch Galerie, NY, February 1
Time Time Tattoo: souvenirs sur Henri Bergson, Princeton University, NJ
Performance-lecture, Boston Museum School, MA
Fun With Time Time, Paula Cooper Gallery, NY, October 8, 8:30pm
Time painting, Group Show, 112 Greene Street, NY
Soho Comes to the Suburbs Artist's Rights Benefit, Clarkstown, NY
Group Portrait Show, Fine Arts Building, 105 Hudson Street, NY,
November 15-25, 3-6pm
Ralston Farina And Friends Hover: *Rubber November*, Holly Solomon
Gallery, 392 West Broadway, NY, November 25, 9pm
Performance at John Dupuy's *Soup and Tart* show (unannounced),
The Kitchen, NY, November 30
Time Art, Princeton University, NJ

1975

Ralston Farina And Friends: *Time Art*, Artists Space, 155 Wooster
Street, NY, January 7
Time Art (exhibition), Paula Cooper Gallery, NY
Time Time, Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, NY, May 15, 1975,
8:30pm
Time Art, Idea Warehouse, NY, June 16, 9pm
Futures, Fine Arts Building, 105 Hudson Street, NY, October 18
Rubber November, Holly Solomon Gallery, NY, November 25, 9pm

1976

Time//Time, Line Up, MoMA (Founders Room 6th Floor), NY,
February 27, 8:20-8:30pm, 9:20-9:30pm, 10:20-10:30pm
I Had a Dream That Leo Asked Me To Do a Show, 112 Greene Street,
NY, May 1, 8pm
Time//Time #994 or 995, 3 Mercer Street Store, NY, September 21
TIME//TIME #966 This is a time art study for a portrait of a Half Hour,
9 Jay Street, NY, October 17, 9pm
Reading, Franklin Furnace, 112 Franklin Street, NY, A benefit series
Tuesday evening at 8:30pm, November 30
One Minute Visual Transition Interval, performance painting,
Organized by Anina Weber, Fine Arts Building, NY
Private performance for Anina Weber, NY
Time Painting, Berlin Festival, Germany
Time Art, 112 Greene Street, NY
Unidentified street performance in SoHo, NY

1977

Time//Time (Odalisque Permutation), Philadelphia College of Art,
PA, May 13
Fun with Time//Time, Artists Space, NY, May 22
Portrait of a Half Hour, Documenta VI, Kassel, Germany

TIME//TIME: Portrait of a Half Hour, I.C.C. (Internationaal Cultureel
Centrum Antwerp), Belgium, November 9
TIME//TIME, Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp, Belgium
Portrait of a Half Hour, 10th Biennale de Paris, France, November 23

1978

Random Eyerolling Exercises for Esthetic Immortality, 112 Greene
Street, NY, April 1, 1978, 8:30pm
Time Art Lecture, Sam Hunter's *History of 20th Century Art* course,
Princeton University, NJ

1980

*Aléatoire Je Ne Sais Quoi "an illustrated non-lecture on the phenom-
enology of my avant-garde aesthetics,"* The Kitchen, NY, May 8,
8:30pm

1984

One Man Painting Exhibition//Time Art, The Shuttle Venue,
523 East 6th Street, NY
Time Art, The Shuttle Club, 523 East 6th Street, NY, July 21,
12:30am
Escape From Purgatory, The Artist In The First Person (group
exhibition), The Shuttle Theater, 523 East 6th Street, NY, August 10



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