

Ralston Farina: *Time // Time* by Elizabeth Wiet



Installation view of *Ralston Farina: Time // Time*. Image Courtesy Artists Space.
Photo by Carter Seddon.

Performance artist Ralston Farina (b. 1946, d. 1985) was a mind reader. I do not mean this metaphorically: he began his career in the 1950s as Steve Raven, a child magician who specialized in extra-sensory perception (ESP). At a time when Cold War machinations had spurred widespread paranoia about surveillance, Raven turned the prospect of entering the recesses of another's psyche into a spectacle—into entertainment. Broadsheet advertisements for his adolescent performances extol his ability to mystify “discriminative” audiences through mentalism.

On the flip side, I have no idea how Farina's mind worked. He adopted the name “Ralston Farina” after moving to New York in the 1960s to make loft performances alongside Laurie Anderson, Jack Smith, and their ilk, and his recently unearthed archive, on view in the densely packed solo show *Ralston Farina: Time // Time* at Artists Space, evinces his startlingly rigorous yet ultimately elusive mental process. Watching me intensely jot down notes as I pored over diagrams delineating the exhibition's titular concept on the day I attended, another visitor leaned over and asked me if I'd “cracked the code.” I told her I was nowhere near close.



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Given that I was, in that moment, looking at a piece of graph paper where Farina described his “easily coded” sequences, my admission was playfully ironic. But that playfulness feels apropos: straddling the bounds between magician and clown, Farina was a prankster par excellence. Though there are no actual whoopie cushions to be found in the Artists Space show, the works on view still display Farina’s embrace of the fact that illusionists delight through deception. A small figurine of Walt Disney’s dimwitted Goofy, nested into a vitrine at the end of the exhibition, straddles the shoulders of a man in Grecian robes (Plato? Aristotle?), his fingers obstructing the possible philosopher’s gaze. Anyone who’s been to a magic show will likely identify with the gesture. A well-executed effect can leave you questioning your powers of perception, your trust in what you see before your eyes.

As a magician, Farina would have been trained to anticipate audience reactions—his job was to always be one step ahead. It is therefore no surprise that once he became an artist, he made time itself his medium. Like his art-world mentor, John Cage, did with sound, Farina approached time with resolute literalism. “Nothing I do is intended to be symbolic,” he wrote in an artist statement. Drawing on phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl, Farina’s performances were strictly charted experiences that toyed with how we experience the temporal unfolding of routine acts (the eating of a bowl of cereal, or the leisurely passing of a half hour). One of his favorite props was a rubber clock that he would stretch and smooch with his hands. Farina resisted metaphors, but the clock itself is a metaphor for how he understood time: it is both material and malleable.



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The Artists Space show privileges Farina’s largely indigestible diagrams because they are the bulk of what remains from his practice. A handful of videos and slideshows from venues like The Kitchen and Holly Solomon Gallery are included on the checklist. But their mode of display—small monitors embedded within a much wider material kaleidoscope—betray a curatorial acknowledgment that they are mere fragments of work that is now lost to time. Like other members of his cohort, such as Jack Smith, Farina vehemently detested documentation. Contemplating the content of his work, I think I understand why. His references are not contemporaneous to his setting, but instead evoke the fifties and early sixties, a period when both Farina and most of his audience members would have been children. In video of *TIME//TIME: Portrait of a Half Hour*, Farina traces a projected drawing of a naked woman while “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” by the Shirelles plays from a loudspeaker. The projection is eventually removed, leaving only the woman’s trace. It stirs a feeling of love and innocence lost. Though very few of us have ever molded a rubber clock with our hands, we have certainly manipulated time in other ways—through nostalgia and memory.

Like an impish apparition, Farina pops up in studies of New York performance history only to vanish from view. But a recent friendship with a performance artist who also began her career as a child magician compelled me to dive deeper into his work, to investigate why this trickster could be so troubling. From my friend, I’ve learned just how much secrecy shrouds the field of magic. Knowledge is passed hand-to-hand, from mentor to mentee. I speculate that Farina’s resistance to conventional documentation has as much to do with his background as a magician as it has to do with the valorization of “liveness” and ephemerality within performance art. Perusing his archive in *Time // Time*, I found much that I was unable to understand. But I’m also humbled knowing that I’m not supposed to.