e-flux Criticism

Ralston Farina's "Time // Time"

by R.H. Lossin

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

Ralston Farina's archive arrived at Artists Space in 2025. It had been maintained privately by Farina's close friends Dennis Hermanson and Richard Skidmore, who came into possession of it in 1982, three years before the artist's sudden death at the age of thirty-nine. This, the first ever exhibition dedicated to his work, takes its name from Farina's writings, many of which were titled "TIME // TIME" (all caps, separated by two backslashes) to indicate that they were part of his "time studies." TIME // TIME also signifies a concept of time that Farina appears to have been exploring in his performances and writings, but never quite defines.

Farina's presence in the Soho performance art scene was hardly marginal. His name appears in articles alongside such luminaries as Laurie Anderson and Vito Acconci, and his work was remembered fondly by John Cage. But until the private archive was turned over last fall, evidence of Farina's career consisted of four recorded performances and a handful of flyers.[1] Farina took the ephemerality of performance seriously and rarely allowed documentation. His medium, he repeatedly stated, was time. Specifically time that, in Farina's words, "retains a vital aspect of life." For Farina, the resistance to commodification valued by others working in the ephemeral medium of performance might have been secondary to other concerns. Documentation would simply escape the specific temporality of the works' enactment, and that temporality was the work. He kept many things and left them for safekeeping with friends, but few of his performances are preserved.

Farina was born Steven Robert Snyder in 1946 in Philadelphia. He made a name for himself in adolescence as a "mentalist" and magician, and the exhibit's first vitrine contains several photographs and news clippings documenting his life as a young showman performing under his first pseudonym, Steve Raven. Above the vitrine, dramatically lit headshots show the future Farina with furrowed brow, fingers to temple, presumably attempting to read someone's mind.

Both magic and art require intellectual operations that might be characterized as a particular, non-narrative version of the suspension of disbelief. Both mediums require one to accommodate the knowledge of their illusory character while simultaneously enjoying the illusion. The success of this illusion, the ability to fascinate, is not in any way related to narrative coherence or the realism of a representation, but is dependent on strictly formal competence. Magic shows and mind-reading require that the audience perform as well, in the moment; documentation of someone else getting their mind read is just dull. Contemporary art might not require one to suspend disbelief in quite the same way as a magic show or narrative film—there isn't really anything to believe or pretend to believe in most of these performances—but it does require some consensus around its legitimacy. People have to think that it is, for reasons probably not quite clear to them, *worth their time.*

All contemporary art is arguably purchasing audience time with a cultural currency floated by that audience's confidence in art's social, political, or intellectual value. But if you really want to make the point that art is trafficking in time rather than space, the more banal the performance, the better. Emptying two Heinz Tomato Ketchup bottles in a parody of the brand's long-running ad campaign (*A Portrait of a Half Hour* at I.C.C. Antwerp, 1977) certainly raises questions about the value of the audience's time. But Farina's insistence that his "medium is time," and "nothing [he does] is intended to be symbolic," was either naive or disingenuous. The ketchup bottles were both boring ways to spend and mark time— in Farina's words, "moments of punctuation and phrasing"— and symbolically important. Included in the photocopied catalog that accompanies the show is a piece of writing where Farina sketches out versions of a series, "A Portrait of a Half Hour," whose variations were different episodes. Thirty-minute blocks, the runtime of a sitcom, punctuated by advertisements, were, after all, one of the more common commercial uses of time in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Objects that weren't in an advertisement on television that took as its theme the value of slowness would not have meant the same thing.

More importantly, they would have said something entirely different about time. It might not have been explicitly stated, but the cumulative argument that emerges from the work in the show is that time is terribly material, only exists as it is experienced, and is only experienced as something punctuated by external sources. Sure, it is the audience that produces the symbolism; the audience that has the expectations; the audience's expectations that are affected by the time of the performance. But it is Ralston Farina who controls the time and thus claims to control "the spectator's private show." And Ralston Farina controls the time symbolically and referentially, whether he wants to admit it or not. It remains unclear whether the connection between manipulating the spectator's wholly internal experience of time and mind-reading was as obvious to Farina as it seems in retrospect.

Projection (mechanical, not psychic) was important to Farina's work. *Random Eyerolling Exercises for Esthetic Immortality*, performed at 112 Greene Street in 1978, consisted of a bright empty square of projector light, in which Farina hastily unrolled adhesive tape and stuck it to the wall, alternating with projected images of pornography. If time were the medium, then desire and its relationship to attention were, in this case at least, the content. Presenting the spectator with such a blunt contrast between mundane and titillating produces an awareness of the desire to see that can go unnoticed when fulfilled through sustained viewing. The time between the legible images becomes noticeable precisely because of this frustrated desire.

It is unclear to me whether the desiring effect was related to the erotic content or if any easily deciphered image would have fulfilled the desire to see something. But the pornography does suggest that time is altered by the presence or absence of desire, sexual or otherwise. This may just be a synonym for "anticipation," a word Farina used often in his writing about TIME // TIME, but where anticipation has only one direction and is a term explicitly related to time, desire is multidimensional. It is a successful piece. Farina's punctuation by porn makes time into something legible, palpable. But the idea that desire and its absence are time's content makes the whole project seem more interesting and, in a way, more urgent.

Time of course changes and is, as anyone could point out, profoundly altered by communication technologies and media forms. This makes the show seem both pertinent and melancholy. One can't make the argument that the world would be a better place if people did more forty-five-minute, zany, porn-and-tape performances instead of making fifteen-second TikToks simply because one is longer than the other. And you certainly can't argue that duration is better because it was produced by a better society. The 1970s were exciting, but they were also infused with the violence of the Vietnam War, terribly racist, and marked the moment that neoliberalism took hold and began the work of reversing any gains made by the US working class. And yet a real sense of loss permeates the show.

The vitrines containing selections of Farina's copious, handwritten notes and annotated books are relics of another time. These tools are simply not in use anymore. Imagine going to a drawing show and realizing that the pencils entombed in cases will no longer be used to make marks. Or maybe this is just the melancholy that accompanies the archive, a place necessarily obsessed with posterity, which is to say, obsessed with death and its avoidance. The archive that Farina did leave seems to have been largely personal: annotated books and notebooks filled with drawings, diagrams, notes, and plans. The small gallery is evenly split between performances for others and notes to self. The traces of Farina's private thought-life are also a rather depressing reminder of what is forfeited with the abandonment of these now vintage apparatuses. Perhaps the real loss is not duration or content but the ability to refuse documentation and recording and, by extension, the morbid, anxious time of the archive that we currently inhabit. What a relief to be reminded that somewhere outside of this relentless documentation, time might still be ordered by desire.

Notes
1 John Howell, "Art Performance: New York," *Performing Arts Journal 1*, no. 3 (1977).