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# Temporal Poetics in Thomson and Craighead's The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order

Prior, Andrew

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# Temporal Poetics in Thomson and Craighead's *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order*

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*This paper considers The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order (2010) by Thomson and Craighead as an exploration of contemporary media technologies and their problematisation of time. After a brief hermeneutic reading of the work's narrative, aesthetic and semiotic registers, the paper undertakes an analysis at the level of materiality and processuality. This approach concludes by drawing out some connections between hermeneutic and material/processual characteristics of the work as an exploration of mediality. Key to Thomson and Craighead's approach is the simultaneous foregrounding and manipulation of both these levels of meaning, for example through their technological and mediatised take on Oulipo's constrained writing techniques. Finally, these findings are brought to bear on wider understandings of time and temporality, as well as their significance for contemporaneity.*

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ANDREW PRIOR

## Introduction

*The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order* (Ill. 1) is a single-channel video piece by Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead that appropriates material from the film *The Time Machine*, directed by George Pal (1960). As the title of their work suggests, the artists present the film in edited form, re-ordering it so that in their version each utterance within the dialogue appears in alphabetical order.

This paper considers the way in which Thomson and Craighead's work problematises contemporary experiences of time, though not simply because both Pal's *The Time Machine* and H.G. Wells' 1895 novella, on which it is based, overtly deal with the subject of time and time travel. In fact, Thomson

and Craighead's work offers a quite different reading of temporality to those within Wells' narrative. Their treatment of *The Time Machine* according to rule-based editing invokes a sense of atemporality that is at the heart of contemporary discourses on (and experiences of) temporality. By referencing this particular film, the artists have raided the past for visions of both its own past and future; yet the editorial process of alphabetisation, and the broader meanings signified by using archival materials, also allude to practices of filing and administration. The result is that their intervention speaks to a cultural moment in which banal acts of time travel are carried out daily, in both work and play, through our reliance on digital technologies that routinely warp and complicate time in a multitude of ways. Indeed, media technologies radically shift our understanding of time, as the philosophers Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik discuss in relation to 'post-contemporaneity':

If the leading conditions of complex societies are systems, infrastructures and networks rather than individual human agents, human experience loses its primacy as do the semantics and politics based on it. (AVANESSIAN AND MALIK, 2016)

The networks Avanesian and Malik refer to here are not the objects of philosopher Michel Foucault's discourse analysis, characterised by semantics and epistemology, but what media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst would describe as the 'non-discursive' elements of media: material infrastructures, processes, technologies and so on (ERNST, 2013). Reading Foucault's exploration of discourse analysis through media theorist Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1990), Ernst uses the term both to signal the difference between media content (the discursive level) and media



ILL. 1

Publicity for Thomson and Craighead's *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order* (2010).

technologies (the non-discursive), and to emphasise the importance of non-discursive technological processes within meaning making.

The prevalence and primacy of such structures complicate time at every level, from the microtemporal calculations of algorithms orchestrating stock markets, to the sense of co-presence achieved within conference calls, which bridge time zones and weave a common, mediated experience. Perhaps most obvious are the ways in which contemporary life is logged, captured and stored through a variety of media practices (personal photographs, tweets, financial transactions, search habits, likes etc.), each a crystallisation of past action that, stored within networks and hard-drives, exerts influence in both the present and the future.

In such a situation, aesthetic practices that investigate the discursive and non-discursive levels together are vitally important, and *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order* (hereafter referred to simply as *The Time Machine...*) does exactly this. While the artists make significant use of the narrative and semiotic elements of Pal's film that reference time, their making process foregrounds technological intervention as an active signifier within the work. Indeed, the real subject of this piece is the exploration of *mediality* (AGAMBEN, 2000; CROCKER, 2007; STERNE, 2012) – that is, a medium-reflexive approach to interrogating not only the characteristics of a medium (exploration of materiality and processes involved in media), but also the relationality of mediation: the connections between devices, protocols that govern their use, and cultural expectations that influence their reception. As theorist of culture and technology Jonathan Sterne puts it: “the mediality of the medium lies not simply in the hardware, but in its articulation with particular practices, ways of doing things, institutions, and even in some cases belief systems.” (STERNE, 2012, p. 10) Consistent with this understanding of mediality, their work operates simultaneously at semiotic and material-processual registers, allowing it to shed light on issues of time and temporality in much wider contexts.

### **Hermeneutics of *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order***

The most distinctive aspect of *The Time Machine...* is the juxtaposition of an iconic piece of 1960s science fiction cinema – which employs typical continuity editing to absorb the viewer within the narrative – with the jar-

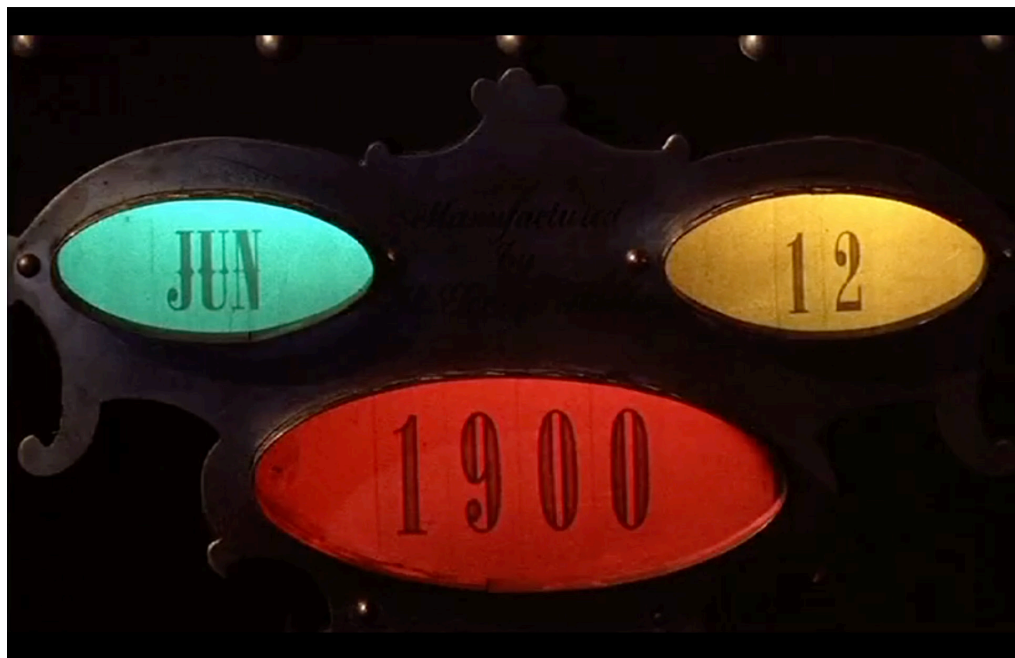


ILL. 2

The time traveller meets the Eloi. Promotional poster for *The Time Machine* (1960). Directed by George Pal, screenplay by David Duncan.

ring ‘cut-up’ editing aesthetic that Thomson and Craighead use to intervene within this material. The following sections examine these contrasting elements individually, beginning with a consideration of Pal’s film as source material.

The protagonist of the original narrative is a time traveller who starts out with a utopian belief in the potential of science and technology: the time machine will allow him to observe the progress of science through the centuries, and bring back knowledge and techniques to his own present that will aid the human race. Once he travels into the future, this utopianism is challenged as he observes a series of wars, ecological disasters, and the evolution of humans into two new races: the apathetic *Eloi*, who are completely uninterested in learning and knowledge (Ill. 2); and the *Morlocks*, a race of cannibals who breed the Eloi like cattle. In the original novella, Wells used the narrative as a class critique,<sup>1</sup> but also cast doubt on



ILL. 3

Instrument panel of the time machine (29:09) from *The Time Machine* (1960). Directed by George Pal, screenplay by David Duncan.

an unquestioning belief in technology, as the time traveller increasingly realises both the failures of progress and the inability of his invention to bring about positive change.

While Thomson and Craighead's intervention obscures the details of much of this narrative, the audiovisual content of the film clearly conveys concepts of time and time travel: clocks, ticking, calendars, dates detailed on the interface of the time machine itself, time lapses, retro-futuristic mises-en-scène and costumes feature throughout (Ill. 3). Such temporal themes are continued by their contemporary appropriation of old media content in which we witness a very dated vision of the future. The painted sets, clunky props and costumes – even the actors' mid-atlantic accent<sup>2</sup> – all situate the material firmly in the mid-twentieth century (though in the narrative, the time traveller is from the end of the 19th century). Despite Thomson and Craighead's edits, Wells' dystopianism is also still apparent; this is evidenced



ILL. 4  
Ruined monument (48:19) from *The Time Machine* (1960). Directed by George Pal, screenplay by David Duncan.

in the appearance of volcanoes, earthquakes, bombs, fires, and derelict or destroyed buildings and monuments, the traces of humankind worn away to nothing (Ill. 4).

### Aesthetics of the Cut

Thomson and Craighead's rule-based re-edit of Pal's film introduces complex ideas around temporality that drastically change the reception of this material. The artists describe their approach as a form of "time travel on the movie's original time line through the use of a system of classification" (Thomson and Craighead, 2018). Their approach was to manually re-edit the movie over a period of six months by using the beginning of each legible word spoken as the start of a clip that ran until the beginning of the next legible word. Jon Thomson explains:

We worked our way through the movie in ten-minute chunks naming each clip as the word spoken and the timecode point of the movie. In this way once we had worked our way through the whole thing we could automatically alphabetise our video editing bin and then drag the entire reworked movie back onto the timeline. (PRIOR, 2017)

Each word spoken in the film marks the start of a new clip (and the end of the previous clip), synchronised to the beginning of the word uttered. Clips were labelled by the single word they contained, and re-ordered alphabetically on a new video timeline, so that successive clips/utterances proceed through the alphabet from start to finish. For example, all instances of the word “this” throughout the script are grouped and appear consecutively within the edit, followed by “those”, and then “thought”, and “thousand”, and so on. Consecutive shots with no dialogue play back in their original order (although their overall position in the timeline has changed), but these are interspersed by flurries of highly edited dialogue. This technique is jarring, partly because audiences are so familiar with the conventions of continuity editing, in which thousands of clips are sometimes joined together to “maintain a continuous and clear narrative action” (MAGLIANO AND ZACKS, 2011, p. 1490). By keeping spatial and temporal relations consistent between shots, continuity editing creates a sense of immersion within a story. Individual editing choices recede from the viewer’s awareness, so that audiences can better identify with characters, follow the narrative and willingly suspend disbelief. Although continuity techniques remain with the sections of *The Time Machine...* that do not contain any dialogue, the new edits destroy any sense of narrative coherence, refocusing the viewer’s attention specifically on Thomson and Craighead’s intervention, and the alphabetised logic it follows.

The artists describe their approach as a “constrained editing technique” (THOMSON AND CRAIGHEAD, 2018). This term references the work of Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle or “Workshop of Potential Literature”), a group of writers and mathematicians interested in leveraging rule-based techniques to produce literature.<sup>3</sup> Oulipo referred to such rules as “constrained writing techniques” – for example, Jean Lescure developed the “N + 7” rule (known as the “S + 7” rule in original French), in which all nouns within a text are replaced by the seventh noun appearing after it in a given dictionary. The use of “N + 7” allows a generative approach to writing, which maintains the underlying structures of the original text, while some of the actual wording is replaced. As a result, the reader experiences a somewhat arbitrary collection of words that nevertheless contain within them the trace of more recognisable grammatical structures, and structural features of the original text.



As a retina, the reappearance explores a somewhat arbitrary colloquy of workloads that nevertheless contain within them the trademark of more recognisable grammatical studies, and structural fells of the otter theatrical.<sup>4</sup> (THE SPOONBILL GENERATOR, 2018)

The shift in emphasis from constrained *writing* to constrained *editing* is highly significant here. As music theorist Mark Katz argues, when discussing a distinction between musical quotation (based on the written score) and digital sampling (which is arguably a kind of editing technique), sampling captures not only the notes or rhythms, but also the performance of the music (KATZ, 2004, p. 141). By recording amplitude values 44,100 times a second (or 48,000 times in broadcast audio formats), every nuance of breath, dynamics and intonation is documented. Similarly, to re-edit *The Time Machine* film (rather than the novel or screenplay) is to manipulate not only words and language structures, but also gestures, utterances, movements and expressions. In short, we witness the mediated control of human beings, the crystallisation of time regurgitated back to us in discrete packets. So while the rule-base that Thomson and Craighead use references Oulipo, the differences are quite marked. What is transferred from constrained writing to constrained editing is the generative and surrealistic possibilities of rule-based approaches. But if “Oulipeans realized that such a system had the potential to define a new type of computer mediated textuality [...]” (WARDRIP-FRUIIN AND MONTFORT, 2003, p. 147), their interest was in the applications, rather than implications of these new techniques. Once such rule-based thinking takes on a mediated focus, and in particular is linked with the particular narrative of *The Time Machine*, the shift in emphasis becomes quite pronounced: the playfulness and generativity remain, but a critique of computational culture is added into the mix.

So [this is a] quite a good example of where one of our core interests lie[s], which is about our agency as artists, in looking at the cracks between things. [We try] to look at systems and architectures that surround us in the world, [...] how they control us [...] and] inform how society is generated or cultures built... (THOMSON AND CRAIGHEAD, 2016).

Thomson and Craighead’s recontextualisation of *The Time Machine* as source material to undergo constrained editing refocuses our attention on the ma-

teriality and processuality of mediation, using the original narrative to think through the implications of our own time-travelling technologies. Interconnections between narrative, semiotic elements and the non-discursive level of media technologies become the driving force of this work, foregrounding mediality and the implications of media technologies within our lives.

### Mediality and *The Time Machine*...

The concept of mediality ('mediatic' in its adjectival form) describes and interrogates the characteristics of not only technical media but also phenomena of mediation (of all kinds, technical and otherwise), while foregrounding the fundamental connections between means and ends. For example, philosopher Giorgio Agamben discusses gesture – on film and in life – as “the exhibition of a mediality: [...] the process of making a means visible as such” (AGAMBEN, 2000, p. 58). For him, the essence of mediality concerns “breaking the false alternative between ends and means” (AGAMBEN, 2000, p. 57). Discussing technological mediality specifically, media theorists Ludwig Jäger, Erika Linz and Irmela Schneider (2010) and Jonathan Sterne (2012) also use this emphasis on ‘means’ to study the characteristics of mediation beyond the borders of a given medium reductively defined by its format or hardware. They use mediality to refer to the ways in which meanings arise through relations between and across technologies, media channels, institutions, protocols, traditions and so on. Such ideas that foreground the importance of interconnection between media are partly indebted to media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s notion that “the content of any medium is always another medium” (MCLUHAN, 2005, p. 23), or media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of *remediation*,<sup>5</sup> which concerns the “representation of one media in another” (BOLTER AND GRUSIN, 1999, p. 45). Nevertheless, as Sterne points out, mediality replaces the emphasis of these writers on the ‘newness’ of media – that one medium comes after, or contains another – with a “sense of cross-reference as routine” (STERNE, 2012, p. 9). Mediality avoids implying the a priori progression of media away from a more fundamental reality (STERNE, 2012, p. 9).

If mediality foregrounds the role of mediation, technological or otherwise, recent interest in this subject is, in part, a corrective to a purely

semiotic or aesthetic analysis. The work of Thomson and Craighead is useful here because they consistently foreground both semiotic and technological (non-discursive) registers within their praxis, as well as the wider cultural significance of ideas and the connections between these elements. With respect to this, and the hermeneutic reading of their work above, *The Time Machine...* can be regarded as speaking to a digital culture awash with technologies that extend our ability to manipulate time, just as they problematise our relationship with it.

As the art historian Terry Smith points out, there is a tendency for ‘contemporary’<sup>6</sup> artists to work with temporality, dislocation, affect, and the transformativity of mediated imagery – which is “at once pervasive yet foreign [...] images stick, banishing others, but then unravel and dissipate” (SMITH, 2008, p. 268). If this list of topics appears at first somewhat heterogeneous, these categories are united by the effects of digital infrastructures upon them: temporality, spatiality and affect have all been utterly transformed by such technologies, of which mediated imagery is only the most visible example. Such a tendency within contemporary art can be seen as the direct result of media processes and artifacts figuring more and more prominently within our lives – we are increasingly living with records of the past within our present; or we experience multiple locations, previously separated by time, stitched together asynchronously in so-called ‘real-time’. Indeed, all media constitute ways to “construct and constrain time”: writing stores otherwise ephemeral words and thoughts, photographs freeze the visual, films sequence still images which are then played back at a speed of multiple frames per second (CUBITT, 2014, p. 235). Digital information takes temporal control several steps further, as Cubitt outlines:

Visual media govern time through the cinematic principle of successive frames, interlaced scans, the clock function governing the period of latency in digital capture, the flickering of DLP micro-mirrors, the TTL of packing switching, and the Fourier transforms of fiber optics, the analysis of the frame into discrete and temporally separated sub-frame components (CUBITT, 2014, p. 257).

The temporality of media becomes abundantly clear with the possibilities of replaying images and sound in slow-motion, fast-forward, reverse or – as with *The Time Machine...* – when there are jarring cuts from shot to shot,

based on the alphabetisation of clips. But while audiovisual media have always been understood as a means of capturing time, memory and history, once they exist within a digital paradigm the increased possibilities of temporal manipulation become quite pronounced. As digital information, such slices of time can be reconfigured computationally to such an extent that they usher in entirely new temporal characteristics: audiovisual records become networked, databased, nonlinear. Discussing Ernst's consideration of the archive, Liam Young argues that digital technologies transform our relationship to "categories and practices of memory and history which emerge as a corollary of the ways that media-technics process and store time" (YOUNG, 2013, p. 40). Not only do traditional archives become increasingly informal and fluid as they are systematically digitised and made available online, but our personal records – from finances to family memories – are increasingly stored in the archive-like files and folders of digital computers.

Repositories are no longer final destinations but turn into frequently accessed sites. Archives become cybernetic systems. The aesthetics of fixed order is being replaced by permanent reconfigurability (ERNST, 2013, p. 99).

The extent of such technological impositions into culture is one reason that Ernst pushes for media-archaeological processes that privilege machinic, rather than human, analysis – an approach he describes as *archaeography* (ERNST, 2013, p. 55). By adopting a resolutely media-technological focus, the ambition is to develop new forms of historiography that operate at informatic registers capable of revealing the technological conditions of "the sayable and thinkable" (CHUN, 2015, p. 5). But this is also a profoundly human problem – what is needed is to find ways to fuse the gap between Ernst's examination of the non-discursive, and the sociocultural levels we experience.

As Avanesian and Malik suggest, infrastructures and networks are beginning to take precedence over the human emphasis on narrative and communication. Both past and present are produced through a rich interplay of processes, ranging from the micro-temporality of signals, storage processing and packet-switching, to the macro-temporality of historical events. The result is an increasingly 'dense' present, filled with a multitude of mediated times, and with access to a multitude of mediated spaces, people

and objects. This also problematises the notion of the present and presence, since such concepts become populated by past and future times, near or far-flung locations, a situation that could be described as a characteristic of contemporary temporality. The mounting weight of the techno-cultural past that engulfs the present in a tide of fragments forms a kind of noise, bringing to mind David Joselit's emphasis on 'intelligible patterns' within contemporary art: "...what now matters most is not the production of new content but its retrieval in intelligible patterns through acts of reframing, capturing, reiterating and documenting" (JOSELIT, 2013, pp. 55-56).

As media and communications are transformed into patterns that pass through near-frictionless digital architectures, their manipulation and configuration become central, introducing new arbitrary temporal, spatial or logical configurations. Forms native to computation take precedence. As Lev Manovich, discussing database cinema, argues:

Indeed, if after the death of god (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database. (MANOVICH, 2002, p. 19)

One could think of such a poetics as making sense of, or reconciling, issues of fragmentation; yet as Thomson and Craighead's work hopefully makes clear, such a response need not simply resolve these tensions, but can also embody them. Their work diffracts such issues through the prism of *The Time Machine* as both a media artifact (the archival film, their material-processual interventions) and allegory (its narrative). That is to say, they do not re-inscribe a meaningful narrative into the fragmented, database cinema, but instead prompt the viewer to reflect on the status of communication, meaning and media usage today.

As Ernst argues, in contemporary experience, "the symbolic order of time into past, present and future is ever more compressed into one dense time window of the extended present" (ERNST, 2017, pp. 9-10). Media technologies, thoroughly imbricated into day-to-day interaction, squash and stretch time, archiving and streaming it in real-time: "on the one hand there is an

instant archiving of the present [...] while on the other hand, the past is immediately coupled with the actual present in online communication: representing the archive” (ERNST, 2017, pp. 9-10). This situation creates both a multiplicity (and a coming together) of temporalities that are “necessarily uneven and layered” (COX AND LUND, 2017, p. 12). The experience of this is, at least in part, a result of computational (asynchronous) logics taking precedence over the more familiar linear progression of temporality. By undertaking a constrained editing technique, and applying this to a film which uses time travel to critique teleology and the efficacy of technological progress, Thomson and Craighead frame the temporal mediations of digital media as our own form of time travel. The referencing of Oulipean techniques, which themselves anticipated digital remix approaches, can be thought of as a critique of computational media – a response to the concomitant haemorrhaging of the past into the present, and the newfound malleability of time. Their deployment of an iconic narrative, and a media artefact from the 1960s, does not simply re-engage the techno-dystopianism of the original plot, but also thinks through our own relation to media as technologies of time travel, which share the same hubris and limitations as Wells’ time traveller.

*The Time Machine...* is a reflection on mediality, since constrained editing techniques are the true subject of the work – signals and processes become signifiers in themselves. Thomson and Craighead enact a mediated version of Oulipean techniques in which media-technics are no longer novel tools, but banal facts of daily life. Indeed, they recast the potential of time travel into the bureaucratic and office-like practices of filing and alphabetisation. The nervous energy of their editing constitutes both a critique of archival (historical) collapse and a post-humanist recognition that human perception is no longer the dominant organisational structure of time and culture. Simultaneously, as a playful, fun piece of work, it is also an example of database aesthetics and temporal poetics that provides a strategy for human involvement, even as “human experience loses its primacy” (AVANESSIAN AND MALIK, 2016). As the artists put it: “We execute the rules – I don’t see this as giving up control but as allowing [the work] to live and breathe” (THOMSON AND CRAIGHEAD, 2014).

*Andrew Prior is an artist and educator. He received his PhD from Aarhus University in 2015. He has exhibited and performed internationally, including New York, Tokyo, Aarhus, Roskilde, Brno and Žilina. His research interests are concerned with contemporaneity, post-digitality, media archaeology and artistic research, explored both through writing and hands-on engagement with coding, performance, hacking, still-image, moving image and sound.*

## NOTES

- 1 The Eloi, who have become lazy through the overabundance of food and lack of challenge, are descendants of the upper classes; while the Morlocks, once working-class, provide for the Eloi materially, but only in order to eat them.
- 2 In the 1930s and 1940s, it was standard for Hollywood actors and actresses to be trained to affect an accent that was neither American nor British. Named the transatlantic or mid-atlantic accent, it was intended to blend British received pronunciation and American English.
- 3 For example, the palindrome, or the lippogram (in which the use of certain vowels is forbidden).
- 4 This quote has been generated by altering the preceding sentence with the N+7 rule, using an online Spoonbill Generator: <http://www.spoonbill.org/n+7>
- 5 At first glance Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation seems to restate McLuhan, an influence they readily acknowledge. However, Bolter and Grusin furnish McLuhan's ideas with a semiotic emphasis, emphasising that media remediate one another by incorporating signifying elements of one another in both a competitive and complementary way.
- 6 The quote marks here signal that Smith's comments – and his research more generally – are about the interrogation of *contemporary art* and *the contemporary* more widely.

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