

Chapter 9

Time and Temporality: Creative Reception and Repetition



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Abstract *Spoons* is a sculpture that holds contextual reference through its relation to time. Temporality is made visible as the sculpture randomly collapses in the gallery space over a period of time. It looks at the way time and temporality interact with creativity to bring meaning to an artwork. A proposition is made that meaning is constructed through a process of relational connection between the artwork and the viewer. Communication and meaning are contingent on an ever-changing interaction between origin and reception. This is a creative act, and as such meaning is creative and contingent on the time and the temporality of the moment of encounter. However, moments are always changing, so, meaning is always changing too, as time alters our socially agreed cultural contexts, interests, and concerns. The proposition is that through art thinking, creativity becomes a social event, constructed between origin and reception, fluid and relationally positioned in time and space through repetition. The case study reveals that meaning can be creative and transient, as opposed to specific or fixed, and that these creative constructs depend on time, culturally agreed contexts, and relational conditions. Consideration is also given to how the digital space can disrupt our understanding of time and temporality, as it traverses the analog and digital worlds.

Keywords Time · Temporality · Digital space · Analog space · Creative context · Exhibition · Cultural currency · Repetition

9.1 Introduction

Large and temporary installations, such as *Till Rolls*, exist only during the fleeting moment of their construction. They present visual art as an event which is received in time, as opposed to an art object as a more permanent artifact. The temporal nature of this form of practice offers the opportunity to move away from the traditional materials of painting or sculpture often chosen for their strength and stability for the future. Stone or oil paint tend to create immutable objects in a fixed or memorial space. In the twentieth century a new tradition evolved, using temporary materials or processes, sometimes even presenting their own decline. This is evident from auto destructive art (Metzger 1960s) to art practices that sit closer to time-based

events such as happenings (Kaprow 1960s). The use of film or video has allowed for documentation beyond the temporality of these works. This permits temporary artwork to evolve and sit alongside other time-based creative disciplines, such as theater, dance, and the screen.

In an age of easily replicable technology and digital documentation, photography, and video, including the new non-fungible token (NFT), the repetition of a live event or singular object is now possible. This offers re-presentation through time and place. In this way, repeat viewing can shift from an original encounter, into an ever-expanding range of settings, and across many timeframes. The digital format which can be accessed through the camera and screen, offers an alternative technological place. This has extended the possibility of the object beyond its materiality or time-limited contingency (however long). Objects contingent on time and space can now offer future influence, beyond the moment of their existence. This is made possible by digital means.

9.2 Case Study *Spoons*—Temporality, and Art Thinking

Spoons is a sculptural artwork that was created in the digital and analog worlds simultaneously (Fig. 9.1). The period of its existence as an object is transient. It is made to collapse and exist only in the moment of its multiple constructions. However, the video documentation of the very first collapse is always replicable, accessed through video documentation, and published online and periodically available in gallery exhibitions.

The sculpture consists of a large pyramid standing 2.5 m high. It is made from 9273 plastic spoons and 3091 rubber bands. The latticework of the pyramid is constructed by tessellating tripod shaped, repeated units, consisting of three plastic spoons tied together with a rubber band (Fig. 9.2).

The pyramid is delicately balanced, with each tripod unit offering structural support, all working to realize the complete form. However, over time the rubber bands that hold the tripods together rot and break, resulting in the whole sculpture experiencing a random decay. As the pyramid collapses, the materials return from components in a sculpture to the original plastic spoons and rubber (Figs. 9.3 and 9.4).

Originally created in 2008, the first material collapse was recorded with time-lapse video, capturing one frame every 20 min over four months. Each time the sculpture is rebuilt for exhibition this original video is shown alongside the newly formed pyramid. Presenting the digital documentation of a past event, alongside the analog present. This offers a comparison of differences over time. Viewers can read between the video documentation of the original collapse, and the live moment of a decaying sculpture. The formula for the creative object is always the same, the same number of spoons, the same number of rubber bands, the same process of construction, and yet the same event can never be replicated through time. Each presentation of collapse is different, and each creative moment is experienced differently.

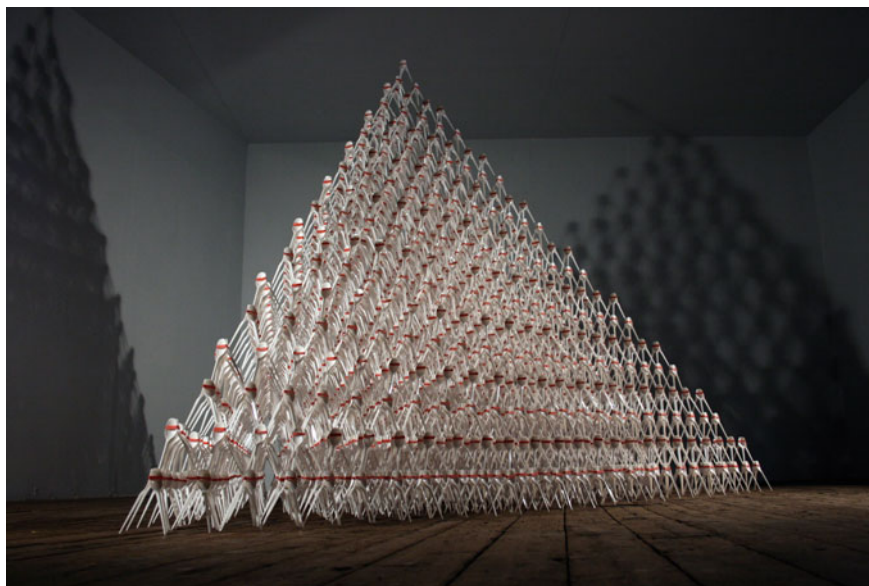


Fig. 9.1 Townsley J. *Spoons* Material 9273 plastic spoons and 3091 rubber bands (2008), copyright © Jill Townsley, reproduced with permissions

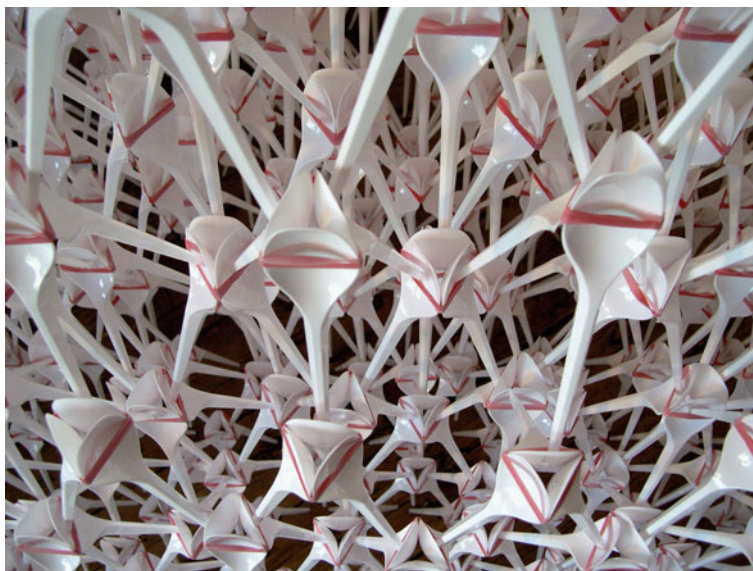


Fig. 9.2 Townsley J. *Spoons* Detail, copyright © Jill Townsley, reproduced permissions

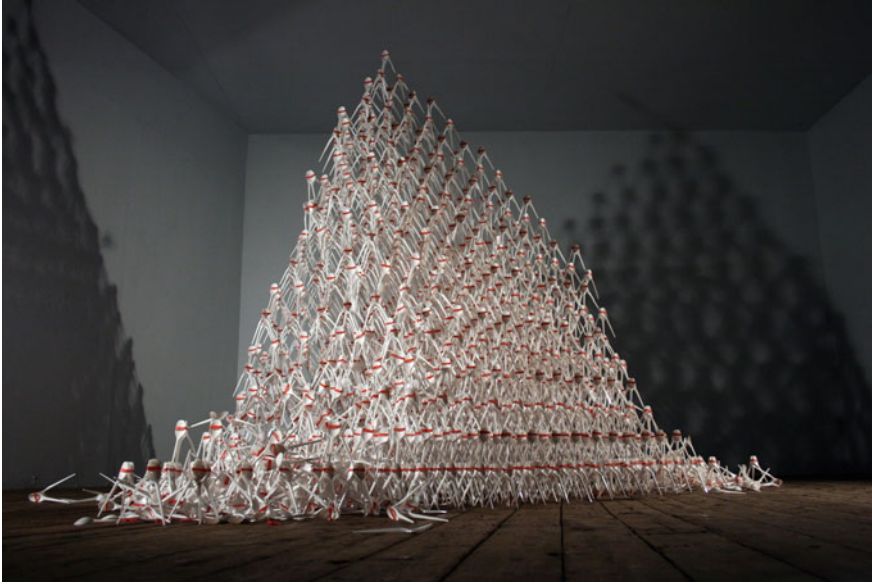


Fig. 9.3 Townsley J. *Spoons* still from video, copyright © Jill Townsley, reproduced permissions

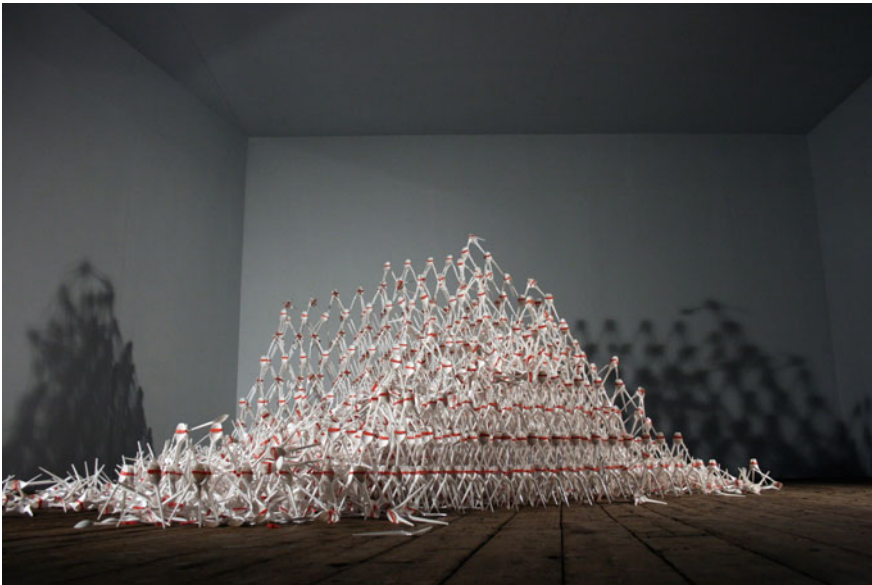


Fig. 9.4 Townsley J. *Spoons* still from video, copyright © Jill Townsley, reproduced with permissions

This difference is also accentuated by the different timeframes held within the digital and analog presentation. A hyper-real digital video can show a speeded-up collapse by presenting only one frame every 20 min, and also the real-time, slow collapse of the analog sculpture.

9.3 Art Thinking Meets Contextual Thinking in Time

To identify art thinking within *Spoons* we may, (though not exclusively) take directly from its material form. The materials themselves, multiple, mass-produced, low value plastic and rubber objects, have cultural currency beyond their original appropriation. They have obvious economic, and process reference, and for that reason have some influence over what may be considered a creative communication or meaning. The idea of meaning here is a difficult one, the object of art is not didactic. The artwork was not conceived as a place for a factual statement, but a space for creative discussion. The nature of that creative conversation is also never fixed, it is transient, existing in an ever-changing context through repeated reception, time, and the relational influence of any current cultural concerns of the viewer.

In 2008, during a time of economic collapse, *Spoons* featured within the context of the exhibition, *Second Lives Remixing the Ordinary*, at the opening of the Museum of Art and Design in New York. Along with other artifacts in this curated group exhibition it instigated discussions of process collapse, including Fordism, appropriation, reappropriation, and renewal. Over time and through later reconstructions, the meanings assigned to *Spoons* have changed and the contextual references have shifted, and the understandings are different.

Potential references for *Spoons* today capture more broadly the ecological dangers of cheap multiple plastic objects; from the toxicity of their production, to their microplastic influences on animal and plant eco-culture. The work is now exhibited in group exhibitions that specifically curate these concerns, e.g., *Plastic Matter* exhibition (2020) at the Art and Design Gallery, University of Hertfordshire. This curated exhibition emphasized that a link between our climate catastrophe and our means of production has become more collectively understood. Statistical evidence has consolidated our understanding of the negative environmental consequences of human production. Consequentially the work has drawn some equivalence between an increasing environmental context and the social relationship to mass produced goods, processes, and objects.

This new context also activates meaning for the random collapse of the pyramidal object, where comparisons can be drawn between the structural collapse and our own human footprint as transient, both individually, and collectively. This understanding is possible despite our culturally agreed understanding of the pyramid as a symbol of stability and longevity, contextually referenced through historic or memorial site (e.g., Egyptian pyramids) and the conceptually complete regular solid presented in mathematical theory.

These two implications for *Spoons*, compared across two group exhibitions in 2008 and 2020, offer distinctly different potential meaning, if indeed references can be identified as meaning? What is clear however, is that these two examples separated by time present creativity in relation to socially-based contextual and cultural concerns. Art thinking is prominent, but this work does not answer questions or fulfill fixed needs. Its influence is significant only through the type of creative cultural connections that Ogawa outlines [1]. Understanding is contextually referenced through critical thinking and reflection. For this reason, the references are transient, and meanings are always changing over time, through moments of encounter and reception, positioned relationally to each viewers individual context, and collective social concerns.

9.4 Creativity—Reception and Repetition

There is a wealth of philosophical documentation around reception theories, especially in relation to literary text, where the analysis of communication models provided a space for the readers creative interpretation. This needs to be acknowledged. Stuart Hall ascertained that ideas are ‘encoded’ through text (and other means) then ‘decoded’ by the reader or receiver of the creative form.

Traditionally, mass-communications research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity—sender/message/receiver—for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations. But it is also possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction [2].

This understanding further indicates that the creative form is not fixed. Hall goes on to categorize how a text may be received, and outlines differences, through cultural profiling and collective cultural forces. An upload download model of creative communication can never produce a repeat of a singular original, as a ‘loop’. Each viewer receives the information in a way particular to themselves, individual representation happens. The categories posited by Hall (the dominant, oppositional, or negotiated reading) offer a general way of thinking through this complex creative relation (between art object and viewer). This is a relational and creative communication no longer binary in form. The possibilities are infinite and in constant flux, due largely to the impossibility of repetition.

There are also questions arising when thinking about creative communication as a binary encode and download structure, despite an understanding that repetition can never offer a singular object or event. This model is much more aligned with design thinking, it is determinative and direct, it meets a need for stable communication. It remains untouched by aspects of transient cultural constructions of meaning reflecting human relational complexity.

9.5 The Digital Context and Repetition

In the digital space the terms encoding, and decoding have a much more concrete relation with repetition. Repetition is possible through the replication of the digital form, in perfect repeat (glitches aside) from one digital file to another, making the digital source much more constant through the process of repeatability. Meanwhile the variant of human reception, through re-presentation or repeat observation, is still always changing, always transient. Multiplicity as outlined by Hall is clearly operating, despite the digital space having more control over repetition. Offering the original repeatedly is still open to constant change through repeat reception over time.

The vast possibility of singular relational creative outcomes brought about through the multiplicity of reception, has some similarity to Walter Benjamin's theory of repetition [3] referring to the new technologies of print reproduction booming in the early nineteenth century. Benjamin observed the egalitarian and more general access to printed material, cutting through the strata of cultural privilege. However, he simultaneously lamented the lack of direct lines of communication from author to viewer (or reader) brought about through access to the original, the singular creative object. Benjamin perceived objects of creation, replicated in print, as changing their creative state. In the process they were undergoing a loss of 'aura', or closeness to the authors human creative origins, something only available through the singular object. In Benjamin's construct, something is lost or becomes less powerful, as it moves away from the singular source and the body of the artist, altered through technological repetition.

Digital replication is at source constant in a way that print could never be. But whether we are thinking about the replication of a printed image or a digital image, all become unstable in their communication with the analog world, through reception, this is always a creative space.

Multiplicity here becomes a tool of creative re-generation. In *Spoons* that multiplicity also operates in many ways; there is the multiplicity of the material, the process form of the structure, the multiple failures of the materials (rubber bands) that instigate a failure of the singular pyramidal form and its ultimate collapse. We also have structural failure operating across video and analog settings. However, with each collapse there is a regeneration, as the sculpture is rebuilt, or the video is looped. But finally, more powerful in its generative power is the communication between viewer and object, this never completes, but is always re-generative.

In *Spoons* all these repeated processes happen over time, material, reception, and in analog and digital spaces. All are opportunities for contextual reference toward identifying a creative meaning for this work. Meaning that is not static but changes in relation to repeat viewing, material state, and across the digital-analog divide, and referenced within a collective relational and cultural setting, resulting in multiple creative destinations.

9.6 Socialized Time

The idea that creativity can be collectively authored in culture, realized in permanent flux, ever-changing and ever-emerging, has some resonance with Henri Bergson's theory of *durée*: "*Bergson's culture is socialised time actualised in experienced duration or durée—culture is always in motion*" [4]. He argues against thinking about components quantitatively, and advocates that change is experiential and intuitive, socialized time, experienced through the body, "*in social experience—in short an embodied conception of culture*" (ibid.).

he argues for a view of time as qualitative; intuition as situated within experience rather than about it (ibid.).

Bergson also uses the material characteristics of an elastic band as a metaphor. He talks about an elastic band being stretched, as an illustration to interrogate what may be understood as duration.

Bergson tells us first to contract the band to a mathematical point, which represents "the now" of our experience. Then, draw it out to make a line growing progressively longer. He warns us not to focus on the line but on the action which traces it. If we can focus on the action of tracing, then we can see that the movement — which is duration — is not only continuous and differentiating or heterogeneous, but also indivisible (ibid).

In the process of *Spoons* the breaks are literal, the rubber bands snap, causing the pyramid to collapse. This is perhaps equivalent to '*the now of our experience*'. This is the moment of 'snap'. However, it is the slow decay of the pyramid that better represents duration, the act of tracing from the complete pyramid to piles of spoons landing on the floor. Most importantly that duration is played out in different ways in the digital video, time speeded as one frame every 20 min into a condensed animation of time. A speeded-up simulacra of the real time slow duration decay of the analog sculpture.

While Bergson's visual metaphor has material reference with *Spoons*, through the rubber band, he is clear that for him no image can truly represent duration, "*An image is immobile, while duration is 'pure mobility'*" [5]. However, if we were to apply the concept of duration to the communication between *Spoons* and audience reception or experience, we are getting much closer to *durée*. There is an invisible space offered through encountering the art object, which could also be considered qualitative and descriptive of *pure mobility*.

Let us take our mind off the space subtending the movement and concentrate solely on the movement itself, on the act of tension or extension, in short, on pure mobility. This time we shall have a more exact image of our development in duration [6].

The art object is offering interpretation through reception to the viewer and so forming a relational position within the complex cultural contexts positioned within a milieu of creative possibilities. Socialized time makes creative interpretations have mobility and duration beyond a fixed moment, allowing mobility of meaning to 'stretch' beyond any singular origin. Through reception the object is much more

broadly durational, as meanings shift through time and space. These encounters are relational, forming creative meaning through a culture that is always in motion.

9.7 Conclusion

Art thinking embodied in the art object is by its very nature positioned within a broader context, linking across multiple destinations and transformative through time, and situation. This may produce a transient object; capable of raising questions of life from within, always re-drawn through critical contextual reference to time in the present. The lack of focus on destination is positively habituated toward offering outcomes that are less totalitarian in reception or fixed in meaning. Allowing space for the viewer in visual art terms (listener in music terms et cetera) to complete the authorship through reception. This can result in a more diverse creative milieu, forming a creative space between origin and reception that can initiate and raise debate.

Creativity located in art thinking does not always mean that we are all nudged toward the same conclusion or even the same destination. Instead, creativity in art thinking can be inclusive and embrace complexity. Reflection through creative art thinking can identify differences in understanding or thought from within, enabling us to perceive ourselves as individual yet connected to a greater whole. In relational terms, creativity employed in art thinking is always subject to community, society, and context. The opportunity to question perceptive norms, or societal structures, even help identify self within a community, is adding to a relational understanding, across time, space, subject, and experience.

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