

# Daniel Crooks's photography displays present sense

Christopher Allen | [The Australian](#) | November 09, 2013



Daniel Crooks, *Static No 19 (Shibuya Rorschach)* (2012). From the exhibition: Daniel Crooks, Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, to December 20. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery. *Source:* Supplied

**IN one of Daniel Crooks's most absorbing works, an elderly Chinese man is doing tai chi in a park in Shanghai; slowly he executes the rhythmic gestures of this ancient practice, which began as a martial art and has evolved into a sort of dynamic physical meditation, rather like yoga, yet as quintessentially Chinese as yoga is Indian.**

The movements are concerned with the flow and direction of energy, and as the attention is directed into the sequence of motions, we feel mind and body - so often separated by the anxieties of the one and the appetites of the other - quietened and brought into harmonious alignment. And then the most remarkable thing happens: the body begins literally to stretch and grow elastic, extending beyond itself with each movement.

This piece is an example, as I observed in an earlier discussion of Crooks's work, of digital technology being used in a truly motivated and aesthetically significant manner: the stretching is a poignant metaphor of the expansion of the mind and body beyond the limits of self in a practice of this nature. Here, new media gives shape to an experience that could not be represented easily in any other way.

As the piece unfolds, the expansion of mind reaches another level: the moving body stretches across the screen but leaves after-images of itself behind. It is as though past moments, instead of vanishing to be succeeded by the present, remained suspended in simultaneity; as though time itself had been stopped or slowed down in its apparently continuous and unrelenting stream. Finally motion ceases and the extended body dissolves altogether.

This too is an effect of meditative practices of all kinds, for the psychological experience of time is produced by desire and fear of the future as well as memory, longing, nostalgia and regret of the past. When the mind is fully engaged in a practice that concentrates it in the present, time seems to stop and we discover what the now really is.

In the ordinary course of our lives, the present is oddly elusive, like the geometric concept of the point as a location with no extension: little more than the instant in which the future pivots into the past, in which anticipation turns to memory, and the most vivid pleasures and sufferings become suddenly and disconcertingly remote.

This is why the philosophy of Zen, for example, is entirely concerned with achieving presence. Extrapolating from the Buddhist critique of desire, Zen teaches that even seeking enlightenment is an oxymoron; it is like looking for an ox when you are riding on it. Enlightenment, in fact, is what you find when you stop seeking and wanting altogether.

The quest for rational understanding of what cannot be understood but only experienced is also considered a distraction, and this is why Zen masters are so fond of paradoxes, known as koan, of which the most famous concerns the sound of one hand clapping. The purpose of the koan is to lead the mind to a realisation of its own powerlessness and to surrender to the incomprehensible.

Crooks's works have the quality of the koan, defying the mind to resolve the puzzle of their making and inviting us, in the end, to accept and meditate on the spectacle before us. But one in particular seems to evoke the figure of the Zen sage, so often presented in the tradition as eccentric, clownish, mad and even superficially impious - tearing up the sutras for example, because true enlightenment does not arise from an accumulation of erudition.

Appropriately, this work is set in Tokyo. A bearded old tramp stands in front of Shibuya station, dressed in rags and immobile among the bustle of commuters hurrying past him in all directions. He smiles benignly, as though all this movement were merely illusion, and gradually motion freezes and empties on either side of him as we are drawn into his stillness. Then, as the crowds gradually close in again, he bows and takes his leave.

It was not only oriental philosophies that considered the experience of time. Seneca, in his essay *On the Brevity of Life*, points out we constantly complain that our lives are too short, while wishing time would pass more quickly. Much earlier, Zeno, who was also fond of paradoxes, demonstrates that Achilles - whose stock epithet in Homer is "swift-footed" - would never be able to catch a tortoise: the space between them is infinitely divisible, and as even the smallest interval of space requires some finite measure of time to cross, it would of necessity take an infinite length of time for Achilles to catch up with the slowest of creatures.

Of course Zeno did not really think it impossible for Achilles to reach the tortoise. What interested him was the disconnection between the order of reason and that of experience, and no doubt his real point was to demonstrate the illusory nature of what we know as time. The Eleatic school, founded by Zeno's master Parmenides, taught that all being was one and that multiplicity and change were fallacious appearances.

Philosophers and theologians have speculated ever since that time cannot be a property of essential reality. For Kant, temporal sequence, like spatial extension, is a way the human mind experiences reality; in the mind of God, what we know in these modes presumably would be simultaneous and whole, as we glimpse at the end of Dante's *Paradiso*. In the *Timaeus*, Plato envisages a primal world

of being that is uncreated, timeless and whole, and then a created world of becoming that unfolds in time.

In this world at least, the temporality of the seasons, of the rhythms of crops and trees, of the lunar month and the solar day, are all practical realities that frame human existence. But these at least are natural, organic and cyclical; in the past few centuries our lives increasingly have become shaped by the inelastic, homogeneous unrelenting time of mechanical measurement: the clock time of factories, offices, schools and the public transport systems that move the population to and from these places.

It was the development of railways, in particular, that established the tyranny of clocks and timetables, and it is not surprising that trains have a special relation to time. In Christian Marclay's *The Clock* last year at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, a great many of the film clips he had collaged together dealt with the arrival or departure of trains, inevitably charged with expectation, tension and fear.

One of the most striking works in the Crooks exhibition is devoted to train travel, although it could almost have been intended as a reflection on Zeno. It extends across nine screens, each of which, on closer inspection, is subdivided into 20 vertical slices, so that the first thing that occurs to the viewer is that we are seeing a simulation of a 180-degree field of vision, flattened on to a wall.

The piece, like all video work, is repeated on a loop and, unlike most of this kind of thing, is so involving that one wants to watch it several times through. It becomes a bit easier to grasp what is going on if one starts at the beginning, when it is apparent that all 180 slices show exactly the same thing, a segment of a railway platform, which is thus repeated and extended in impossible uniformity across the whole extent of the screens.

As we watch, a train comes in from the left. Then the whole view begins to move to the right, and we realise that our point of view is from a train on the opposite side of the platform, which has now begun to move to the left. What we experience next is a bewildering level of animation that seems at once to approximate to what we should be seeing from our moving train, yet to be, in a sense, far too noisy and lacking in continuity.

In part this is due to a phenomenon we can experience in any train ride: things close to us seem to flash by while those farther off move far more slowly. But this simple optical effect, caused by the angle of our visual field, is greatly exacerbated by what the artist has done: the whole view has been filmed as thin vertical slices that now march across the screen in a mechanical sequence from left to right, as our viewpoint from the train progresses from right to left.

What this does is to force us to see each slice, with its distortions of velocity and perspective, separately and successively. This exacerbates the distortions, but more profoundly it makes us realise that we do not really perceive the world in this way at all: the brain filters the purely visual data, conflates what stays broadly the same, compensates for the differential speed of foreground and background, and smooths the whole scene into a visual continuum. By forcing us to view, as it were, the raw footage of perception, Crooks makes us ponder how much time and space as we know them are produced by the mind.

Trains are again the subject of a huge new work that occupies the whole of the lower gallery, spread across five enormous screens that stand on the floor and thus imply a continuity with the space of the audience. The work is based on material filmed in the New York subway, and the basic movement of the camera is a slow pan from left to right. The core of the sequence is composed by

the second and third panels, where we soon realise that the third is showing the same sequence as the second with a short delay.

Thus a man waits, on the second screen, to get on a train that he has just boarded on the third; the same train pulls out on one screen and in on the other; and in a particularly uncanny sequence, a group of people seem to follow themselves up two flights of stairs. Asynchronic but parallel time sequences seem to join up in defiance of logic, recalling some of the speculations of contemporary string or membrane theory in theoretical physics.

But here we seem still to be contemplating the indeterminacy and transience of the present; what lies on either side of this narrow focus - what we think of as the future and the past - is even more disconcerting: we meet the same figures again in the outer screens, but now they are like lost souls, barely moving against a background rushing past, or melting away into the oblivion of the underworld or the darker emptiness of human memory.

*Daniel Crooks, Anne and Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, to December 20.*



*Static No 12 (seek stillness in movement) (2009-10), by Daniel Crooks. From the exhibition Daniel Crooks, Anne and Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, to December 20. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery. Source: Supplied*

- See more at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/daniel-crookss-photography-displays-present-sense/story-fn9n8gph-1226754396166#sthash.IGfN5khZ.dpuf>