

## *In the Nooks of Time and Space, in the Crannies of Language*

On the work of Vlatka Horvat and Tim Etchells  
on the occasion of the show *Same River Twice*

There is a video by Vlatka Horvat from 2021 titled *Until the Last of Our Labours Is Done* that contains many of the key themes explored in the artist's practice: the relationship that bodies have with the built environment and the natural landscape they occupy; their interaction with the surrounding architecture and the objects they encounter; the exploration of the mundane, the marginal, the obvious, the Perecian infra-ordinary and that which already exists in the everyday; as well as the focus on gestures and processual strategies that are repeated and fragmented, entailing attempts, failures and variations. Understood by Horvat as 'preoccupations' and 'insistences' of her work, these interests drive the artist to carry out actions aimed at spatially and temporally redefining, organising and reorganising her stance within specific environmental and social frameworks. These actions can be seen as attempts at negotiation: "constantly taking a measure of where you are and newly positioning yourself."<sup>1</sup>

*Until the Last of Our Labours Is Done* is not on view here, but I find it particularly relevant in starting to think about *Same River Twice*: the first two-person exhibition by Vlatka Horvat and Tim Etchells to be held at the gallery. Structured along a linear narrative of linked actions in which five performers (including both Horvat and Etchells) interact independently with an array of objects and materials – tyres, spools, fuses, pipes, scraps of wood, plastic and fabric<sup>2</sup> – the video is concerned with immobility and mobility, and focuses on the efforts of human beings to endow inanimate items with some kind of movement and vitality. The objects are manipulated, pushed around, dragged, rolled and are constantly put under stress in a game that is as uninhibited and unfettered as it is concentrated: a kind of cross-country steeplechase in which the protagonists appear to both compete and collaborate with what the artist refers to as a "motley collection of detritus."

A similar attitude of enlarging and recording gestures transferred from the natural environment to the gallery can be seen in the show at Renata Fabbri. Linked by the two artists' reciprocal interest in the

processes of repetition and in the exploration of structures that both produce and eschew variation, the works on view – made specifically for this project – unfold on the basis of a semantic matrix that evokes the ebb and flow of nature, bodies, time and language. The fragment *Same River Twice* – extrapolated from the expression "You can't step in the same river twice"<sup>3</sup> and adopted as the title of the project – perfectly captures this vision. As the artists state: "We like the aspect of repetition inherent in the phrase, and also the implicit idea of change, transformation and instability."<sup>4</sup>

Etchells's neon installation on the main floor of the gallery works closely with this idea, alternating the repetition of two identical words with elements of rapid, lively and incisive variation. The sequence of *Beautiful Words* (2023), made up of six modules differentiated by typeface and colour, stretches over nine metres. It evokes various expressions and nuances of 'beauty', associating them with thoughts, utterances and intuitions that, summed up in the space, explore the limits of representation, especially with regard to the power of the lexicon and its more contradictory aspects. With a practice largely influenced by performance and informed by a 'performative understanding' of what language does and can do (as well as by what it fails to do; its limitations, misunderstandings and confusions it can produce), Etchells creates works that demand openness and an encounter with the audience, with works that 'become' *something* which is always the same and yet always different. This encounter takes place in that flexible and in-between space where unpredictable or even unforeseeable reactions occur simultaneously, and where contradictory meanings come into play, opening up evocative narratives, intimate speculations and playful poetic crannies. "Most important for me is the idea of gaps, or space... so the things that go unsaid are often as important as those that are said."<sup>5</sup> Thought and its opposite; its manifestation and its concealment in the folds of time, place and space.

Fascinated by corners, edges, interstices and liminal spaces – both in the two-dimensionality of images and the three-dimensionality of space – Horvat

adopts a site-responsive way of working that often includes a set of self-imposed restrictions and rules, and that in *Same River Twice* establishes a dialogue with Etchells's neons. "The body, objects and materials in my work tend to be treated as vulnerable propositions, caught in the dynamic processes of their own multiplication and fragmentation."<sup>6</sup> At the core of all the exhibited works are deceptively simple yet paradoxical sculptural gestures. Created at various scales and using familiar techniques such as folding, cutting and joining, the pieces are revealed to the eye as delicate propositions derived from carefully combined materials: paper, thread, fabric, felt, ceramics and wood. In the works on paper *Sentences I and II* and *Stream of Consciousness I and II* (all 2023), Horvat manipulates the page like an object, tearing it into horizontal strips. These pieces are then sewn together with bookbinding thread and displayed from the front and back. The sequence of these traces is reminiscent of abstract and automatic writing, as well as bringing to mind a simple tally of the passage of time, in the relentless patience of a gesture that repairs, relieves and leaves marks. *Soft Spine (Open) I* and *Soft Spine (Open) II* (both 2023), on the other hand, appear as rudimentary books with two open pages held together (or held apart!) by soft fragments of fabric, giving the object both flexibility and fixity. In their essential structures, these works contain a certain tension between two opposites – between the continuation of movement and a state of stillness. This dynamics between motion and stillness is also evident in *Wave Form I* and *Wave Form II* (both 2023), two felt sculptures that toy with the repetition of the same geometric module. Placed on the floor and collapsing at the ends, the works refers to the energy of organic form, to the flow of water, to the continuous multiplication of a circular half, but also to a form of gestural writing that consists of a repetition of the letter 'U'. In that sense it resonates with Etchells's string of connected luminous signs and Horvat's other work on the floor, *Phases of the Moon I–VIII* (2023), a series of pieces comprising cylinders and partial cylinders in glazed ceramic. Intended by the artist as a kind of morphological exploration of the circle – with its various (possibly lunar, as the title suggests) phases and reversed forms – the singular elements and their dissections also refer to ruins, sections of columns, pipes, wells, vases, containers, elements of infrastructure and severed tree trunks. Finally, curved lateral wooden corners contrast with each ceramic fragment, both materially and formally, acting as enveloping supports that 'adapt' to the cylindrical shape of the ceramic – and vice versa – conferring it a material curvature that re-signifies the space surrounding the work itself.

A visual reflection on the boundary between positive and negative space, or more simply on what remains and what has been removed, is also the thrust of *Excavations (02)*, *Excavations (09)* and *Excavations (19)* (all 2013): three single Giclée prints in which Horvat repeatedly reproduces the removal of forms whose 'matrices' are the shapes held up by the hand.

Situated on the lower floor of the gallery, two further neon works from Etchells exploit the absence of

natural light to playfully evoke two different narrative scenarios that accelerate the perception of time passing, 'producing' an instantaneous shift between two opposing temporal states in the viewer's imagination. Indeed, *Suddenly It Was Morning* and *Suddenly It Was Night* (both 2023) play with the rapid contradiction and palpable uncertainty of two statements that 'step out' of the exhibition space and into an exterior landscape where all temporal coordinates appear to collapse.

As you make your way out of the gallery, another piece by Horvat seems to respond ironically to the evocation of morning and night in Etchells's works presented in the basement. In *And Counting (Six)* (2022) – part of a series of stopped historical clocks re-claimed from factories or railroad stations – the artist carries on her investigation into objects whose consolidated function is repeatedly and playfully questioned. Here, the clock hands "hang permanently in a limp state, pointing down" and the clock face is filled with a tangled rubber string that alters any hypothetical reading, emanating a fictitious swirl of time which cannot be measured.

Night and day, mobility and stasis, inside and outside, front and back, opening and closing. Running through the works in the exhibition to different degrees is a play with the tension between opposites that are never given as absolutes. Exploring this tension, *Same River Twice* restores an essential vision of the relationship between objects, materials, bodies and the processes of encounter they trigger. These processes differ in the very act of their repetition, working on our memory and imagination in a singular yet never-unique way.

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1 See "Vlatka Horvat's collaged landscapes," *recessed space*, 8 February 2022. <https://recessed.space/00013-Vlatka-Horvat-s-collaged-landscapes>.

2 Originally conceived as an idea for a live durational performance and later produced as a twenty-five-minute video, *Until the Last of Our Labours Is Done* was commissioned by KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen in Hannover in 2021.

3 The origin of the expression is often attributed to Heraclitus, who reportedly said: "No man ever steps in the same river twice.

For it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

4 Email exchange with the author, February 2023.

5 See "Interview with Tim Etchells about Qu'y a-t-il neon for Centre Pompidou," 13 October 2021. <https://timetchells.com/interview-with-tim-etchells-about-quy-a-t-il-neon-for-centre-pompidou/>.

6 See the artist's statement. <https://www.gaepgallery.com/artist/vlatka-horvat/>.

7 Evident here, as the artist states, are those "attempts to contain which fail in some ways [...] when a circle is broken, the inside and the outside become 'up for grabs.'"