Text by Riccardo Venturi

Body of a Landslide

> *For what would ultimately remain of a star, a sun surrounded by a host of planets, asteroids, moons and meteorites whose light had died out billions of years ago?*
> —Christoph Ransmayr, *Cox, or The Course of Time*

An exploded or a rising star, with a luminous heart in the shape of a pentagon and five black and blue tips scattered in space. A geometric but imperfect shape, and one which betrays the hand of Sophie Ko.

Flashback.

Settling

Over the course of one of our conversations, Sophie mentions Ernst Jünger. It strikes me immediately because it is difficult to associate the author of *Storms of Steel* or *Fire and Blood* with the work and persona of the artist. However, the reference is so precise, precious and rare — the second and last one goes to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* — that I sense there is more. It is *Das Sanduhrbuch* (1954), a powerful scientific essay on the art of clockmaking, on natural clocks and the resistance to their discarding in favour of mechanical ones. But it is also a philosophical essay on the nature of time. At least four of its qualities bring me back to Sophie's work.

Time is produced. According to Jünger, clocks are not simply instruments that mark out time but machines that actually produce it. Before the invention of the clock, time was approximated: "Day and night each measuring twelve hours is a relatively recent convention. Terms such as sunset, evening, morning, afternoon define fluid units of time." We used to orient ourselves by looking at the sun or, at night, at the stars, like the fall we now find in *Prima che la notte cada* ('Before Nightfall'). In a world where punctuality did not exist, no one was in a hurry and no one was late. Apparently, there were only two public clocks in Tokyo: one on the post office and one on the station, and they rarely coincided. Or when the sky was overcast, the Chinese would tell the time by observing the pupils of cats.

Time becomes visible. In the hourglass, "clamped between its metal rods like a cage for crickets," the sand flows like a liquid into a funnel in the upper vessel and like a cone in the lower one. And here Jünger glosses over an enlightening observation that, I am sure, also struck Sophie: the sand that piles up in the lower ampoule, instant after instant, is and lies where it falls, "a consoling sign that time dilutes but does not vanish. It grows deeper" — a time that grows deep: is this not a sensitive comment on Sophie's work? Time settles and, as it does so, remains visible rather than disappearing, akin to dust in a still life or a *vanitas* rather than geological stratification.

Time becomes quiet. The flow of sand is silent and accompanies the stream of thoughts wandering through our minds. It exudes a sense of peace, a calmly flowing existence, a contemplative state historically associated with erudite study and domestic intimacy. Because "in the age of the hourglass, everyone had more time than today when we are surrounded by clocks," and the more clocks multiply, the more time becomes scarce; "so it is in metropolises, in airports, in front of station entrances." It is no coincidence that in those 'refuges of thought' that are hermitages, no clocks are needed. In a book bursting with scientific illustrations, Jünger refers to two works by Dürer — *Melencolia I* and *Saint Jerome in His*

Study (both 1514) — where the sand is halfway through its descent, the sign of a fluid time flowing, not frozen in an instant. Part past, part future, this time is both memory and promise.

Time becomes approximate. As they rub against one another, the grains of sand inside the hourglass smooth out and, with wear and tear, flow ever more rapidly through the bottleneck, consuming one another with each passing second. A variability of measured time that Jünger associates with a saturnine trait, one which is also characteristic of human existence, for as we grow older, the years seem to pass ever faster. To cope with this problem, the treatises on clockmaking gave advice on how to collect marble dust, wash it, cook it in a pan, boil it in wine several times and dry it out in the sun. A reliable time must be cooked, as if there were a raw and a cooked time, and the former were alien to the human sphere.

Flowing

I understand more clearly why Sophie is interested in this book by Jünger, focusing on *elemental clocks*, as Domenico Martinelli called them in a treatise published in Venice in 1669, the full title of which reads: *Horologi elementari fatti con l'Acqua, con la Terra, con l'Aria, con il Fuoco, alcuni muti, e alcuni col suono.* Tutti facili e molto comodi ('Elemental clocks made with Water, Earth, Air and Fire, some silent, some with sound, all easy and very convenient').

Jünger is careful to distinguish the action of these elements; I shall mention just two points. First, the sundial is independent of man and his *techne*: it works with radiated light and the path of shadows. Apocalyptically, Jünger imagines the shadow of an obelisk following the orbits and revolutions of an Earth on which there is no longer any trace of living beings. Compared to such a cosmic gauge, water and sand clocks are telluric instruments that work with gravity and the weight of matter. They may be used even when the sky is overcast and, by interacting with sand, they facilitate the measurement of time. This is why hourglasses dictated the duration of speeches in court or prayers, why they punctuated everyday convent life. Lectures, sermons, orations, guard duty, pulse beats, the time it takes to cook an egg… There are so many uses for hourglasses, not forgetting the history of astronomy and navigation that Sophie is interested in. The boat is made of wood that rises from the earth; it is guided through the water by observing the stars and its movement is driven by the air blowing into the sails — a condensation of elements in action.

Elemental clocks, and this is the second point, are quite unlike cosmic clocks. The latter follow a cyclical movement, that of the celestial revolutions, and thus measure time in a circular sense; the former follow a linear or progressive movement, for matter flows, sliding from one point to another. This gives rise to two opposing worldviews: in cosmic clocks, time returns. What returns in cyclical time? "First, the sun itself, with all the other stars: an ancestral fear of mankind — one of the reasons behind many sacrifices — is that it may not return, swallowed up forever by the darkness. Hence the festivals recur" — and with the festivals the processions, the hunting and fishing, the sowing and harvesting, the fertilising and flowering, high tide and low… Progressive time, on the other hand, is a uniform one.

And so here we go again: on the one hand there is remembrance (cosmic time), on the other hope (linear time) — and while the return "is determined by forces foreign to our world, hope […] is human and earthly; it is a sign of imperfection." I try to imagine Sophie's *Temporal Geographies* caught between these two forces.

Ticking

Now, with the jerky movement of the hands of the clock, we enter a time that is no longer cosmic nor elemental, with a rhythm unknown to nature, now subject to mechanical impulses, akin to the world of machines and automata.

In elemental clocks, time was measured by "continuous, flowing movements: the shadow moves, the water drips, the sand 'flows', the candle shortens as it melts, the flame burns in the lamp. […] Time is still time moving, flowing, dripping and vanishing." In cogwheel clocks, on the other hand, movements become uniform, periodical and interchangeable.

Neither earthly nor astronomical, neither telluric nor cosmic, time becomes abstract or intellectual. "It is not a time that is offered to us as a gift, like sunlight or the natural elements, but a time that man bestows upon himself and of which he alone disposes." A time tamed, imprisoned in clockwork contraptions. Compared to the hourglass, we have entered a new phase of human civilisation, one marked by progress. With its ticking, the mechanical clock marks the time of work; with its sirens, it summons workers to the factory; with the monotonous mechanics of the stopwatch, it makes sport the continuation of work; with its trickling seconds, it keeps us awake and makes us sleepless. The timetable of automated work sculpts an abstract unit of measurement,

> …and time measured by the clock is one of the most important abstractions among those that characterise our world: it is a 'derived' time, a distillate. It is evident that, as such, it constitutes the prerequisite of our historical existence. It is not just money, as the naïve American proverb states, but essence, which makes it far more indispensable. The hunter, the fisherman and the farmer were strangers to the horizon of measurable, abstract time. Theirs was a concrete time, as it was marked by the activities they performed. Each of them defined the hours and their value, whereas most of our occupations are regulated by time, marked by the clock.

Might there be refuges from such temporal abstraction? Might *Temporal Geographies* offer an art of concrete time?

Perpetuating

I close Jünger, along with his rants against technology and automatism, to show how we have become time-poor. I shall close this reference with the idea that if Sophie makes neither cosmic clocks, nor elemental clocks such as hourglasses, nor mechanical clocks, that if no one would synchronise their clock or measure time by observing her *Temporal Geographies*, there remains a correspondence with such forms of time measurement.

And it is here that I really ought to leave a few lines of empty space, because this is where I had got to before coming across another German novel about clocks: *Cox or The Course of Time* (2016) by Christoph Ransmayr. There are two protagonists: Qiánlóng, Emperor of China, an invisible presence locked up in the Forbidden City, as discreet (his throne is always empty, his face covered by a fan) as he is all-seeing. Accompanied by concubines (the real emperor of the Qīng dynasty had three thousand of them) who would enchant Western guests with a single glance, a refined lover of poetry and a patron of the arts, he is also a ruthless ruler who disposes of the life and death of his subjects. Alister Cox, the clockmaker, builder of automata and sophisticated mechanical creatures, is here the fictional character who bears the surname of the famous eighteenth-century English clockmaker.

Together with his three helpers, Cox embarks on a ship full of clocks that takes him from London to the Forbidden City, where the Lord of Ten Thousand Years guards the Pavilion of Clocks (which really exists). Uniting these two men from so far apart is that "skill for making mills that measure the course of time."

"How quickly time passes": these are the first words the Emperor utters to Cox, accompanied by the veiled request to build a clock that measures the different perception of time of each human being, whether a lover or a condemned man. A slow or impetuous flow, suspended or excited, depending on whether it is perceived by a child or a dying person, by someone whose dedication to play subtracts him from the grip of time, or by a man counting down the hours he has left to live. True to the tradition of natural clocks, Cox comes up with time-measuring machines driven by breath and wind, fire, embers and ashes — rather like the ashes of burnt images used by Sophie. Some are reminiscent of real clocks, of which we are provided with no more than a description. I am led to think of the hydraulic mechanisms of Ctesibius and his pupil Heron in Alexandria in the second century BC as described by Vitruvius: "A Cupid leaning on the column of tears shed, as if mourning time subtracted from love," Jünger recalls. Or that clock in his town square described by Procopius of Gaza that "culminated in a bronze Gorgon's head, which at the expiration of each hour began to roll its eyes."

After prevaricating, the emperor finally formulates his innermost and craziest wish:

> …a clock mechanism capable of measuring seconds, instants, hundreds of thousands of years, and beyond those millennia, the eons of infinite time whose cogs would still be turning when its creators and all their offspring

had long since vanished from the face of the Earth. A clock that struck out beyond the whole of human time into starry space, never standing still, its sole limits the permanence and mystery of matter itself.

The hourglass, as Qiánlóng and Cox know well, has a structural problem: it needs to be turned. One can increase the size of the ampoule and reduce the flow of sand, like those hourglasses that lasted a whole day as recalled by Jünger; one can construct hourglasses that, with devices operated by moving balls, turn over automatically. But Qiánlóng's and Cox's dream remains unfulfilled: that of the *perpetuum mobile*, the timeless clock, a gear that turns and turns and that by dint of turning is unshackled from time to caress eternity. Qiánlóng would like it for himself in the Forbidden City; Cox would like it for the grave of his daughter who passed away at the age of five.

What will be its driving force? Cox finally chooses mercury, dilated and moved by differences in air pressure. An atmospheric clock that will follow the capricious alternation of fair and bad weather and chimed "the hours from the centre of time out into timelessness."

An unparalleled exploit and diabolical spell, a sublime work of magic and technology, it is the fulfilment of the art of clockmaking but also the funeral of the clockmaker. "We are building it so it no longer needs humans. Not a single one. Not even us," so Cox exhorts his assistants. Without realising it, is he jeopardising his own existence? A clock that chimes the lives of the born and the unborn, and which, by stopping, will decree the end of time: is there not a risk that such devilry will be taken by the Emperor as a threat to his own power, to his kingdom and his person? How might one emerge victorious from such a skirmish with eternity?

Desiring

An exploded or a rising star, with a luminous heart in the shape of a pentagon and five black and blue tips scattered in space. A geometric but imperfect shape, and one which betrays the hand of Sophie Ko.

Reprise.

Sophie knows the risks of those who wish to make time their substance, she who desires to map it with the colours of her own geographies. To arrange the coloured pigment without binders, place it under glass, frame it together with butterfly wings and immediately suspend the gesture, and to stare into the void. And now? Let the work open up to time by generating its ripples, its splinters like those of the celestial body found in *Prima che la notte cada.* Let the work embrace the astronomical, as if it were a rising star or one exploding in the galaxy, but also to the geological as if it were the body of a landslide. Let time be shown and not just suffered by imagery. Let time to open up to desire beyond hourglasses and ceaseless motion.

Indeed, "desire must never be disavowed," writes Rilke in a passage from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, which Sophie read to me when the exhibition was yet to be set up. Depending on how one treats the prefix, *de-sire* has a double etymology and may refer to staring intently at the stars or looking away from them. Yet the opposition is only apparent. The north star guides our path through the night; the shooting star prompts our wishes. Likewise, Sophie manufactures stars but confesses to being attracted to the ground, and often walks with her head down, on the lookout for fallen leaves and perhaps even celestial traces.

Sporgersi nella notte ('Leaning out into the Night') — that was the title of Sophie Ko's solo exhibition in 2018 — yet ceasing *before nightfall.* Remaining in that tension of waiting, one for which there seems to be no timepiece.

Notes
Ernst Jünger, *Das Sanduhrbuch* [1954], translated here from the Italian version *Il libro dell'orologio a polvere*, published by Adelphi, Milan (1994).

Christoph Ransmayr, *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* (2016); *Cox or The Course of Time* English translation by Simon Pare, Seagull Books, Kolkata (2020).

Colophon
Text by Riccardo Venturi written for the exhibition *Prima che la notte cada* by Sophie Ko at Galleria Renata Fabbri, Milan, 27 September — 18 November 2023

Translation: Ben Bazalgette

Via A. Stoppani 15/c, 20129 Milan
info@renatafabbri.it | renatafabbri.it