

13:43

Language forces us to think of time in terms of space. We speak of something which flows, flies, drags; we picture events in our lives as points along a road. Phenomenologists such as Bergson, Husserl and Deleuze struggled with this fact as they sought to articulate the true nature of time in their writing on Duration, but again and again they turned to space with metaphors of pyramids, coils and folds.

In his latest series of works, Owen Herbert uses rainfall to investigate this complicated relationship between time and space, wherein each is bound inextricably to the other, and yet, the artistic potentiality of this bind can be manipulated and translated through multiple, anagrammatic iterations.

The cathexes of rainfall are plural and paradoxical - rain is associated with the mundane everyday and yet its emotional valence is rich and varied. In cinema it can signify melancholy and loss, but also romance or threat. We know that it isn't exactly 'random', and yet we're unable to predict it with total accuracy. The weather comes and goes as it pleases, but often seems to arrive (or stop) at precisely the wrong (or right) moments.

13:43 is the time of an exposure: the moment that a frame of wet plaster was exposed to rainfall in order to record a 'piece' of time, not unlike the membrane of light-sensitive crystals in an analogue camera. The surface of the plaster acts as a kind of cross-section in time: a snapshot, an exposure - a moment of time stored in space.

In Owen's ambient sound work, the cast has been re-translated from space back into a time-based medium. A scan of the cast is analysed by software designed to map and measure craters on the moon's surface. Then, the horizontal plane of the cast is turned vertical to become an axis, and the position and size of rain-drop craters treated as notes on a score. The vertical positions of the raindrops determine pitch; their radius determines volume. In this way, the cast can be 'played' from left to right through an analogue synth to generate an ambient, uncanny soundscape.

The final iterations in this series are the laser-etchings, which transmute the same data from the original moment of rainfall, though now returning to the stillness of space. The rings mapped by the crater recognition software have been aligned and superimposed around a common centre-point. The darker, denser areas are the result of a cluster of raindrops of similar size. In order to make these images, a pre-programmed laser beam burns into the paper, removing and displacing the surface. The resulting image is unavoidably reminiscent of the grooves on a record - which is itself an irresistible metaphor for time: the needle as a singular 'now'; the groove as a track it must follow, fate-like.

The crux of this series is its play between chance and control. Underpinned by algorithmic certainty and code, these works reference the intricately deterministic nature of experience - but also raise questions about metaphor and emotional communication. Despite its mathematical production, the ambient sound generated by the cast has been described by viewers as melancholy and meditative - it somehow 'sounds like rain feels'. Likewise, the etched prints remind us of celestial bodies, tree-rings or ripples in a pond. Owen's emphasis on process and data speaks of the human compulsion to map and harness chaotic, abstract forces, but his results never lose the redolence and poetic contingency of nature, or the simple wonder we have all felt at the apparent coincidence of rain.

Bryony Dawson

Owen Herbert's work was exhibited as part of
Flat Instance at Soft Spot in September, 2020