Kissing in the Shadow

Paul Thomas, Tim Morton

In late August 2012, artist Paul Thomas and philosopher Timothy Morton took a stroll up and down King Street in Newtown, Sydney. They took photographs.

If you walk too slowly down the street, you find yourself caught in the honey of aesthetic zones emitted by thousands and thousands of beings. If you want to get from A to B, you had better hurry up.

Is there any space between anything? Do we not, when we look for such a space, encounter a plenitude of other things—a slice of plaster, an old vinyl record, a flattened piece of aluminum, painted metal surfaces, nameless interstitial powder, the reflection of sky, some letters of the alphabet, roughened concrete. Between what we take to be things there exist other things, as if the universe were jammed with entities like clowns in a crowded Expressionist painting. An abyss of things that emanates from them, not a yawning void that threatens to engulf them, but a sunlit nothingness filled with dust that seems to spray out of them like dry mist sparkling with firefly swarms.

In these so-called spaces, we encounter the work of causality. Look: someone painted over this crack, some sunlight rippled in a mirage, a hole appeared. When we look for causes and effects, we don’t encounter a basement of efficiently whirring machinery. Rather, we encounter these in-between spaces, where we had not thought to look. What we see are stage hands moving the scenery about—they are doing it in plain sight, the best place to hide, right in front of you, in the place we call the aesthetic dimension.

In Tibetan Buddhism these spaces are called bardo, which just means the between. There is no such thing as a moment of your life that is not a between, according to this view. There is the between of living. There is the between of dying. There is the between of the transition between lives. There is the between of dreaming. There is the between of meditation. There is the between of two humans holding cameras walking down a street in Sydney. The between of two buildings, a space bursting with objects as if a billion jack in the boxes had exploded at once. Some of the lids are stuck, sometimes a nose bursts out and the hinge won’t open any further; at other times, the jack in the box flies right out and pulps against the wall on the opposite side of the room.

Time opens up. Each surface is a poem about the
past. A myriad stories begin to proliferate, as if a thing were a crisscrossing of books, a whole library of them, each page whispering parts of paragraphs and broken pieces of word. The stories tell us things—they are quite literal, look, this guy painted part of this wall, then they came and stripped off the panel and touched up the holes. Form is the past. When you look at appearance, you are looking at the past. Where is the present?

And essence is the future. The hints of unknown, unseen things, the absolute impossibility of grasping everything about this plastic pipe, the way photons entering the camera lens obey a speed limit and splash onto receptors, going into and out of coherence. At the electronic level, it’s quite clear that causality is aesthetic. I can’t see an electron without deflecting it. Everything is a refrigerator with a light on—or off—inside. For me, for you, for this arrangement of tiles sandwiched between a door and a slab of marble. To a photon, an electron is a refrigerator with a closed door, and a light that might be on—or off—inside. How can you know whether the light is on inside? Why, you open the door of course. But then you are looking at the past. You never see the light in the refrigerator before you open the door.

This future is not a predictable future that is a specific number of now-points away. You will never reach it. You will never be able to sneak up from the side and see through the refrigerator. Nor can a photon see through the refrigerator of an electron. Nor can paint see through the refrigerator of this plastic pipe. You take a photo—click—the past appears, another open refrigerator. But the thing you have just made, the photograph, the graphing of the photons—it is another thing, another story. You can read the words, but the meaning always eludes you. It always lurks just off the edge of the sentence, just at the very edge of this ragged slice of paint, just at the edge of this building, between this one and that one. Thousands of secrets, everywhere. Masks that lie and tell the truth at the same time: this pink paint is not blue paint, that's true. But the thing, the thing in itself, that paint sliding off a brush onto that pipe—it is nowhere to be seen, like a light behind a closed door.

When you walk too slowly down the street, you begin to realize that Zeno had a point. You can seemingly divide each moment, each step, infinitesimally. So perhaps there are no moments, no steps. Or perhaps time is not a box that everything goes in. Perhaps time is, as Einstein argued after all, a way that things send out ripples.

When you walk too slowly down the street, you start walking into millions of levels of pastness, levels emitted not just by the humans or the dogs and cats, but also by this garbage can, this mottled pink surface pockmarked with nail holes. You walk surrounded by as many futures as there are things. You walk, or rather you occupy a peculiar shifting ground of nowness, created by the relative motion of the past sliding against the future, not touching. You begin to realize that the present does not exist. A thing is a train station where one train is always arriving and one train is always leaving. Hundreds of train stations everywhere, hundreds of relative motions. The idea of a universal, regular, atomic sequence of instants that contains everything is absolutely ludicrous, the philosophers have known this for thousands of years, and to hide the absurdity, to get from A to B, Houston to Sydney, crossing the International Date Line without too much laughter, you have embedded piezoelectric devices in as many pieces of hardware as possible, devices in which quartz talks to electrons, making train stations where the trains seem to run on time.

When you walk too slowly down the street, you begin to realize that Zeno had a point. You can seemingly divide each moment, each step, infinitesimally. So perhaps there are no moments, no steps. Or perhaps time is not a box that everything goes in. Perhaps time is, as Einstein argued after all, a way that things send out ripples.

Where one house touches another house, there arise hundreds of things, hundreds of meeting places (Old English thing, meeting place). Hundreds of times. I have a thing for you. Come over here, let's do a thing. Stay in the sunlight and shadow between worlds, in the sunlit canyon between this building and that building. See how paint touches this pipe, caressing then leaving, no one will notice if a surface is left exposed, not quite filled in. See how shadows are reflected in pale cream glass—see the luminous abyss of causality spreading out before your very eyes, right in front of security. All kinds of beautiful crimes are committed right here, and as American cars keep telling you, and you never notice, OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR. They are here, or rather, here is them, and now is them. Kissing in the shadow.

Tim Morton
Rice University