A Time of Uncertainties – Remodelling Reality

Dane Mitchell at Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

by Zsófia Danka

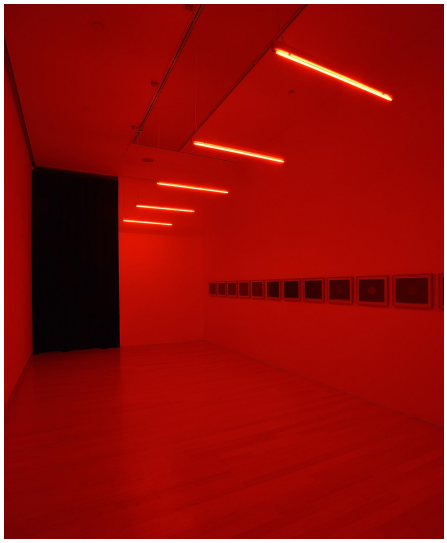
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Extended Present – Transient Realities, installation view, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2022. © Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Dániel Végel.



Nika Radić, *Bubble*, 2021. Digital print on composite plates, sound, light. 120 x 220 x 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Dane Mitchell, *The Smell of an Empty Space Perfume Plume (Solid)*, 2011–2022. Aroma molecules, unfixed photographic paper, light filters, frame; 48,2 x 38 cm each. Courtesy of the artist. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.



Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg, *Some Boundary Transgressed*, 2016. Installation view, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2022. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.



Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze*, 2010. Installation view, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2022. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.

Amid mounting social, political, and environmental crises, the world finds itself at a crucial and strange turning point – one in which old structures are collapsing but new ones have yet to emerge. In reference to this "bizarre vacuum of transition", curator and art critic Zsófia Danka looks to Extended Present – Transient Realities*, a group exhibition featuring Aotearoa New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell at Budapest's Ludwig Museum, to consider our altered experience of time in a moment marked by emergence and emergency.*

> The old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.

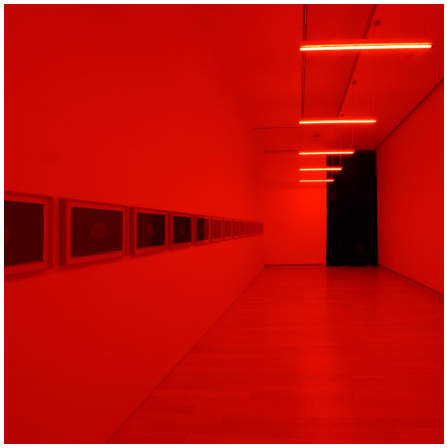
– Antonio Gramsci

Humankind is already at a point where its own destructivity and inertia to change is clearly recognisable. We find ourselves in a bizarre vacuum of transition as we become aware of this exposure. A turning point, a new world order will only come if we are able to map the mechanisms governing environmental, social and economic realities. This should be a just, healthy and sustainable world, in which humans do not exist above nature but as part of it, respectful to the other links in the chain. Until this transition happens, we have no shelter but our faith in the future and in the solutions that may bring. These issues have been central to the discussions of the curatorial team at Ludwig Museum, Budapest, in recent years. A large-scale research project, undertaken in 2021 by the curators of the museum, resulted in a comprehensive international group exhibition this year, *Extended Present – Transient Realities*.

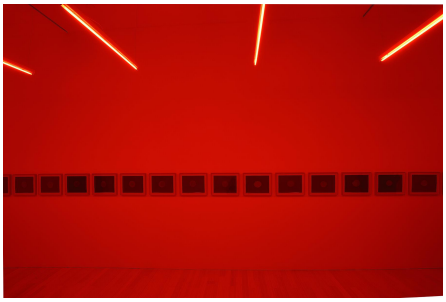
At its core, the exhibition considers the permanent temporariness that characterises our time of overflowing information, which is much more extensive than ever before. Defining one's identity becomes a constant struggle here, and our understanding of the contemporary human condition is disrupted. Today's world is not one of certainties anymore, socioeconomic and ecological causes and effects are tangled in a multi-faceted system too complex to orient ourselves in. As Frank Webster put it in his *Theories of the Information Society*, "We exist in a media-saturated environment which means that life is quintessentially about symbolisation, about exchanging and receiving—or trying to exchange and resisting reception—messages about ourselves and others".[01]

Combining the terms anthropocene and entropy, Bernard Stiegler called this age the enthropocene,[02] to describe today's technological, economic and sociological emergency, which brings our ecosystem to a dead end. The catastrophe of the digital age, according to Stiegler, lies in the decline of independent reflection: constantly doubting our own rationality, we rely on computer search engines, thus gradually damaging our memory and concentration abilities. Online content encourages consumption and constricts the individual's independent and self-identified

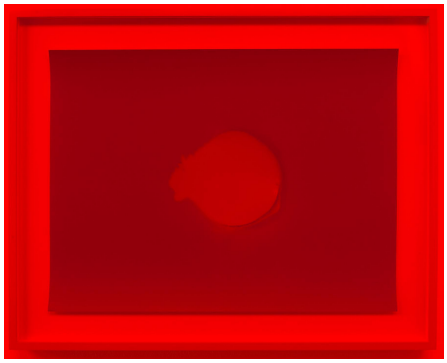
decision making. As a result, however much physical distances have seemingly decreased in the ‘global village’, social distances increase along with disappearing shared rituals and customs. Eroded empathy and a missing sense of belonging pave the way for social crises.[03] *Extended Present – Transient Realities* is an attempt to reflect on these problematics. The exhibition explores the notion of transience, with the failure of modernity, the present as seen from the future, properties of the expanded present, questioning linearity and the possibility of change as organising principles. The selection of the artworks[04] was arranged under these subtopics. Exploring the nature of our changing perception of reality and time was the key to engage with the main theoretic framework.



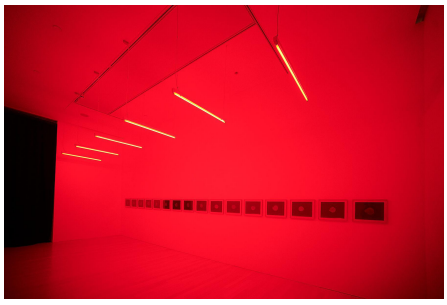
Dane Mitchell, *The Smell of an Empty Space Perfume Plume (Solid)*, 2011–2022. Aroma molecules, unfixed photographic paper, light filters, frame; 48,2 x 38 cm each. Courtesy of the artist. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.



Dane Mitchell, *The Smell of an Empty Space Perfume Plume (Solid)*, 2011–2022. Aroma molecules, unfixed photographic paper, light filters, frame; 48,2 x 38 cm each. Courtesy of the artist. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.



Dane Mitchell, *The Smell of an Empty Space Perfume Plume (Solid)*, 2011–2022. Aroma molecules, unfixed photographic paper, light filters, frame. 48.2 x 38 cm each. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sam Hartnett.



Dane Mitchell, *The Smell of an Empty Space Perfume Plume (Solid)*, 2011–2022. Installation view, Ludwig Museum, Budapest. © Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Dániel Végel.

Dane Mitchell's contribution to the complex narrative of the show engages with the shaping quality of time. His multi-sensory, scientific approach might seem somewhat alienating from the social aspects and effects of transience, letting aside the changes and crises taking place in society. The artist—whose name has become known worldwide since he represented Aotearoa New Zealand with his project Post Hoc at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019—has been active for more than twenty years now, with more than thirty solo shows internationally. In his practice, a great emphasis is put on research, sensory experience and intangible mediums. Mitchell's *The Smell of an Empty Space Perfume Plume (Solid)* (2011–2022), exhibited in *Extended Present – Transient Realities*, examines the notions of temporality and transience. He uses fragrances as sculptural tools to extend the language of the medium, defining aroma molecules as fleeting materials, which penetrate the body and mind. Scientific studies confirm that smell triggers the recall of memories better than vision does.[05] Alongside the capability to bring back memories thought to be forgotten, smell is a very momentary and elusive experience. The artist captures this transitory quality by spraying perfume onto unfixed photographic paper, leaving an organic mark on it. Exposed to various chemical reactions, the circular perfume spot and the light-sensitive paper surface undergo a constant evolution. Yet the artist tries to literally stop, or at least slow down, the erosion with the artificially maintained state he creates in the exhibition space.

The perfume used by Mitchell was created especially for this project in cooperation with French perfumer Michel Roudnitska. The artist took part in designing the exhibition space and was present when the curators installed his framed pictures as well. Mitchell's works are in an area of the museum that is reminiscent of a darkroom, separated by temporary walls and curtains from the rest of the exhibition. The heavy black curtains, the dazzling red light and the strict line of the works create a spiritual vibe. As the artist notes, the aim was to create an olfactory vacuum, a 'fragrant object' that speaks of absence. One of its most dominant notes is synthetic ozone, a molecule that is produced during electrical discharges. This "artificial air"[06] smell is described by Mitchell as the scent of cartoon movies or virtual reality. Mitchell originally created this 'composition' for three separate rooms for the

exhibition *Radiant Matter III* (2012), at Artspace Aotearoa, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, where the smell of the empty room was successively presented/experienced in its solid, gaseous and liquid states. In *Extended Present – Transient Realities* the smell has a secondary significance—as the title of the work states, only the solid phase was presented, and the focus in this exhibition was to examine the meaning of suspending the passage of time.

Making the scent and its composition accessible to our noses in this exhibition would have overwritten the real purpose of the presented work and the process of the creative logic, which was based on the separation and isolation of these experiences. On the other hand, people's imagination could also be moved by this inaccessible quality, by a scent that was there all the time, represented visually, but hidden from their olfactory senses. Capturing these intangible processes, the artist alludes to the power of forces often invisible to the naked eye that surround us and shape human existence.



Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze*, 2010. Installation view, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2022. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.



Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg, *Some Boundary Transgressed*, 2016. Installation view, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2022. © Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: József Rosta.



Nika Radić, *Bubble*, 2021. Digital print on composite plates, sound, light. 120 x 220 x 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Leaving Mitchell's heavy curtains behind, the next highlights of the show revolve around new aspects of the human existence. These works intend to reflect on temporariness in a more socially centred way. Argentina-born, New York-based artist Mika Rottenberg uses absurdity and humour as tools to have us look at the social reality of women's work through a kind of twisted mirror. Her ironic, yet disturbing, video *Squeeze* (2010) deals with issues of the female body and the exploitation of human labour. In the 20-minute looping film, she mixes clips of a lettuce field in Arizona and

an Indian rubber plantation with shots of a surrealist workday in a fictional factory. Besides Rottenberg's work, there is another piece in the exhibition that echoes this critique of consumer society. Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Anzai's installation *Unsettled* (2021) presents squirming and colourful, Lego-like plastic robots scattered all over the floor of the exhibition space. Upon observing these moving sculptures more closely, we discover some familiar everyday tools, but due to their makeover, they have been endowed with a new identity. Similar to mass-produced consumer goods, which become obsolete with the development of technology, the functions of Anzai's objects are unknown, their lifetimes are limited and their usefulness is doubtful.

In the following exhibition hall of the museum, questions on community structures are posed by Croatian multimedia artist Nika Radić and British artist Cornelia Parker. Nika Radić's work *Bubble* (2021) focuses on the perception of human relationships, and reflects on "a social construct that has been one of the most defining realities of human experience in the last decade."[07] The closed geometrical sculpture glows right next to the wall and voices can be heard from it. You cannot enter and even if you listen carefully, you can only hear fragments of people talking. Connection and understanding are hindered, the work seems inviting and inaccessible at the same time, similar to the structure and spaces of social media, which is the most defining platform for social interaction today. Cornelia Parker's work brought the topic of social inequalities to the show. *No Man's Land* (2018) evokes the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, with its slums made of crumbling wooden boards and plastic tarpaulins stretching out to the outskirts of the city, at the foot of the luxurious skyscrapers. Parker hung elements of dilapidated buildings in the centre of the gallery space, emphasising the exposure of the impoverished social strata.

Rather than addressing the problems of society as a whole, some of the artworks unravel the challenges of the individual. The Swedish duo living in Berlin, visual artist Nathalie Djurberg and sound designer Hans Berg, have been working together since 2004. At first glance, the Plasticine figures in their films could be interpreted as pop-culture references, but on closer inspection we can discover a deeper and more complex layer. Their grotesque,

often toy-like characters, despite their caricatured features, speak of people's vulnerability and defencelessness. Their distinctive stylistic language articulates stories of insecurity, and the complex connections between shame, addiction, desire and sexuality, where the protagonists' struggles are both personal and universal. Berg creates unique music for each of their works, mixing hypnotic beats, pulses and electronic noises to create a novel audiovisual universe. Their work *Some Boundary Transgressed* (2016) recalls the fine line between conscious waking and unconscious dream-like states. Instead of screening one of their films, however, the curators have chosen to exhibit only the protagonists of them—but without the motion and sound of the films, we miss important aspects of their work unfortunately—an angry looking pizza slice, naive ponies or exhausted dinosaurs, all projections of the unsophisticated human emotions.



István Felsmann, *Family Porcelain Set (contribution by Dániel Somló)*, 2014–2022. Performance, porcelain, drum set. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Csaba Aknai.



Cornelia Parker, *No Man's Land*, 2018. Found wood, wire. 240 x 442 x 83 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

Perhaps we are now leaving behind the most serious waves of the pandemic, but recently humanity had to quickly learn a kind of radical adaptation that had been entirely unknown before. After two years of isolation, and instead of a fresh start, as the culmination of deep-rooted political and geographical conflicts, war broke out in Ukraine. Some works in the exhibition reflect on the all-consuming quality of war, the aesthetic and social issues of transience and annihilation. Cyprien Gaillard's video *Geszny*a*nský rajon* (2007) presents the result of one of the utopias of modernism. The symbol of panel houses[08]—large-scale apartment blocks—created with a clean spatial structure, serving the needs of practical life, were the promise of a new era of development and

prosperity. The video shows a bird's-eye view of these buildings and their surroundings in four different locations—pictures of decay from St Petersburg, through Kiev and Belgrade to Meaux in France. In the closing sequences of the film, we can see light patterns projected onto the façade of a wrecked apartment block and mesmerising fireworks, then the sudden, cathartic collapse of the entire building.

The theoretical questions of the show seem overwhelmingly complex and intangible, but the experience of elusive time is increasingly present in our lives. Rather than the inverted perception of time, the phenomena that cause it are the essence of the exhibition's curatorial concept. In that concept there is as much room for social transformation, globalisation or artificial intelligence as there is for all-pervading digital capitalism. The curatorial team's refreshing approach connects seemingly detached concepts to reveal and provoke questions about our present.

Footnotes

01. Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), p. 20.

02. Bernard Stiegler, *Too Late? The Final Warning*, Work Marathon, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2018.

03. Sara H. Konrath, Edward H. O'Brien, and Courtney Hsing, "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no, 2 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395

04. Artists exhibited: Tsuyoshi Anzai, Nina Canell, Jeannette Christensen, David Claerbout, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ejtech, Felsmann István, Matthias Fritsch, Cyprien Gaillard, Fabien Giraud & Raphaël Siboni, Hiwa K, Oto Hudec, Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, Koronczi Endre, Jill Magid, Dane Mitchell, Yuko Mohri, Cornelia Parker, Nika Radić, Mika Rottenberg, Superflux, Andrea Zittel. Curators of the exhibition: Fruzsina Feigl, Borbála Kálmán, József Készman, Ajna Maj, Katalin Timár, Krisztina Üveges

05. Rachel S Herz, James Eliassen, Sophia Beland, and Timothy Souza, "Neuroimaging Evidence for the Emotional Potency of Odor-Evoked Memory," *Neuropsychologia* 42, no. 3 (2003): 371–378, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2003.08.009

06. Video interview with Dane Mitchell, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2022.

07. Katalin Timár, "Nika Radić," in *Extended Present – Transient Realities*, edited by Fruzsina Feigl, Borbála Kálmán, József Készman, Ajna Maj, Katalin Timár, and Krisztina Üveges (Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 2022), p. 93.

08. Built mostly in the Eastern Bloc countries, they were the predominant urban housing type in the Socialist era.

Biographies



Dane Mitchell's practice is concerned with the physical properties of the intangible and visible manifestations of other dimensions. His work teases out the potential for objects and ideas to appear and disappear. His practice evokes a connection between the sensual and the conscious. It speculates on what is material and explores systems of knowledge or belief and people's experiences of them.

Dane's exhibition history dates back to 1999; since 2008 alone he has held 30 solo exhibitions and in the same period participated in more than 50 group exhibitions. He has presented solo exhibitions both nationally and internationally in Germany, France, Brazil, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Australia, United States and New Zealand. He has also participated in a number of biennales, including Biennale of Sydney 2016, Australia; Gwangju Biennale 2012, South Korea; Liverpool Biennial 2012, United Kingdom; Singapore Biennale 2011; Ljubljana Biennale 2011, Slovenia; Busan Biennale 2010, South Korea and the Tarrawara Biennial 2008, Australia.



Zsófia Danka is a curator and art critic, based in Budapest, currently working at the Ferenczy Museum Centre. Apart from curating exhibitions and art events, Danka regularly publishes articles and essays. Her main theoretical interests include the Hungarian neo-avantgarde, post-digital art and anthropocene art theories.

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