Connections in Time:
Notes on the Kuusiluoto Island Chronopod

David Wood

1. Experience as an Open Adventure

It is not just art that has challenged the adequacy of the traditional, linear, one-dimensional sense of time. Philosophical challenges to this model are legion, and include Kierkegaard’s ‘repetition’, Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return’, Freud’s ‘nachtraglichkeit’, and discussions of trauma, Heidegger’s ‘ecstatic temporality’, Derrida's ‘invention’, and ‘interruption’, Levinas’s ‘time of the other’, Foucault’s multiple genealogies, Lyotard’s critique of grand narrative, and so on. In literature, one could not fail to mention Joyce’s stream of consciousness, Proust’s evocative memory, Virginia Woolf’s fractured narrative imagination, and Calvino forked narrativity. And playing with time in film is now almost de rigeur. My own book The Deconstruction of Time, makes a contribution to this historical movement, arguing that the battle against metaphysically reductive models of time requires us to pursue and develop alternative models and schemes, and that these models both reflect and feed into different forms of experience. To the extent that ‘metaphysics’ was associated with the philosophy of presence there has been a tendency to eschew experience when trying to rethink temporality, that is to make temporality serve the ends of emancipation both from teleology and from (mere) chronology. But equally we might say that experience ‘itself’ needs releasing from the demands of premature closure. There has been much discussion of this motif (in Blanchot, and Derrida for example). What it points to is a different grand model of experience, not as a closed synthesis, but as an ‘open’ adventure. But what does ‘open’ mean here? And what is the status of this model?

The idea of open adventure is meant to function both as an analytical tool, and as a guiding image or schema. It has a tacit evaluative dimension in the sense that it operates as a critical norm in connection with those ways of experiencing time that are closed to the possibilities it contains.

There is however, a fundamental existential premise that we need to be clear about. The shape of our experience is limited by and corresponds to the kind of identity-

---

1 This article has been published in framework, the finnish art review, 1/2004, pp.96-100. See http://www.framework.fi/1_2004/framew1.html
3 Speaking of models and schemes may seem rather abstract, but I believe that they represent very concrete possibilities.
4 In another study, it would be important to pursue the connections between the emergence different models of time, and the grand fractures of history represented by war, revolution, economic crisis etc., the incubators of trauma, of broken dreams, or post-colonial discontinuities, of the renewal of hope, etc.
5 I expand on these issues in “The Return of Experience”, Chapter 2, Thinking After Heidegger, Cambridge: Polity, 2002
formation to which we have been subjected.\(^6\) What is required of us to understand experience as an open adventure? It is not air-headed distraction – quite the opposite – we could call it an engaged receptivity. Such an identity is not driven by the desire for closure, even when coupled with an expansive omnivorous appetite for more experience. If it seeks the strange, it is not to domesticate it. And it is receptive to what it does not predict, without simply putting the unexpected in the service of greater predictability. It has lost, if it ever had it, the need for constant self-confirmation, though not for lack of interest. Experience, for such a self, is open in these various ways – open but significant, significant but not over-interpreted, invested but receptive.

If we can understand how such an identity subtends its experience, we open the way to seeing how models of time other than simple teleological closure, or linear succession can come into their own. And we do not need to abjure references to experience in pursuing them. Rather, our grasp of ‘experience’ itself can be transformed.

2. The Time-Capsule

The basic idea of a time-capsule is that of sending something present into the future. It is, to use J.W. Dunne’s phrase, *An experiment with time.*\(^7\) It is also an exercise in the imagination. Objectively, what we are doing is extracting a collection of significant perishable items from the usual course of decay and destruction, transporting them, as it were, into the distant future where they may resurface in a new world, perhaps to new beings, and acquire a new future. Imaginatively, the act of sending these things on their way in this way, allows us a certain disclosive detachment from their present significance. They become uncanny in the act of sending-off.

In each of these time-capsules, we have a work of friendship, a virtual collaboration in which the part each plays in the whole is unpredictable and never completely determined. At the event site, these relationships only begin to be collected in the minds of the participants. At the off-site\(^8\)/web-site, more connections are made, but the interconnections are open to reinterpretation. These items are gathered, they accumulate, through invitation, and they reflect the discrete passions of the invitees, their willingness to set aside time to contribute something. They come together, finally, at a moment, on a blind date, cousin of the Dadaist ‘fortuitous encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table’. We do not know what sparks will fly, or for whom.

---

\(^6\) Or, as Sartre would say, that we have managed to rescue from what we have been subjected to. It would take another paper to discuss ways in which more or less successful human identity formations are tied up with our different capacities for experience. I would contrast experience as an open adventure with both damaged and traumatized identity formations, and those wedded to a certain confirmatory teleological closure.

\(^7\) J.W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* [1927], Hampton Roads Pub Co., 2001

\(^8\) I have modified Robert Smithson’s distinction between site and non-site. See The Writings of Robert Smithson, edited Nancy Holt, New York, 1979, pp. 64-5, 101. I work instead with site and website; this time-capsule will shortly appear as a dedicated website, available through: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/philosophy/faculty/wood.html
This time-capsule is the fourth in a series connected to the others in various ways, with some repeat donors. And with some overlapping themes. The last time-capsule was buried under the twenty-first tree in a circle of trees constituting a Peace Grove, planted in Tennessee (USA), to commemorate the victims of the US invasion of Iraq. The Kuusiluoto Island time-capsule was buried in the hole left by a fallen tree, about four feet down, with a seedling maple tree planted over it. {See photo.] We may imagine at some future date, the new tree will be blown over, perhaps to cast up its capsule, clasped high in its roots.

But this time-capsule is devoted to a special theme – that of the NOW. What, you might ask, is this Now? Does it mean this year, this instant (and in each case which ‘this’?), my now, our now, or what? Well of course the point of using this word, the experiment we are making with Time, is to explore the manifold meanings of the Now, in part to see whether and if so how, they can be brought or held together – whether we can have a multi-layered experience of the now, how far we can share this, what happens when we try, etc. The burial of this chronopod is meant to create the conditions for a modest open adventure – not just to discover the truth about the Now, but to create a sense of the Now, at least for a while, a sense that in our ordinary practical engagement with the world, we only rarely approach. It raises the question of whether intensity of experience can arise through expansion of its layers and aspects, or whether that only leads to dissipation. In religious ritual it seems one can get both – e.g. the fusion of the cosmic, the communal and the personal. But this is made possible by repetition, by the knowledge that one is participating in something with established codes and forms. Perhaps there cannot be a ritual that only happens once. So – can an analogously layered experience be constructed? This experiment with time is also an experiment with community, and with the possibility of experience.

3. The Layers of Experience

The layers from which this experience is being ‘constructed’ include the following:

1. Cosmic time: this chronopod includes a diagram of the history of the cosmos from 13 billion years ago until Now. If the cosmos began with a ‘Big Bang’, can we even begin to imagine, or respond to this? What responses are appropriate, intelligible, productive? We also include an image – Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate, from the *Compendium of Diagrams*, by Zhang Huang (1623) – that attempts to represent the deep shape of the real. Do we betray time, or disclose its truth, when we find slow patterns and rhythm beneath surface contingency?

2. Geological time: a piece of lava rock from Hawaii is included (courtesy of Graham Parkes). And we have photographs of rocks in Japanese gardens. These rocks are both ancient in themselves, and the gardens attempt to capture a certain resonance between the human and the cosmic.

---

9 A full list of the contents of the chronopod and the names of all the contributors can be found on the website, available Spring 2004 through my Vanderbilt webpage. See note 8.
3. Evolutionary time: this chronopod contained a snail from a Turkish beach, in whose whorls it seems evolution stares out at us. It contains reports of ecological devastation through which the course of evolution is being reversed. What took millions of years to evolve is being wiped out in decades. The chain-saw sense of Now.

4. Human time: the seductions of the Now are hard to gainsay. Those who advise us to live for the moment are not blind to what is being sidelined. Concentration on the present yields its own unfathomable intensity. Time is fractally expandable. Dosso Dossi’s painting of a man painting butterflies is perhaps an attempt to pin down the sensuous fragility of the instant. Joanna Hallsten’s photographic image ‘Breath Trap’ suggests without identifying an organic instant. Gina Zavota’s painting, ‘A moment of perfect balance’, suggests the precariousness of the Now. But opening up time in this way is also a veiling of the abyssal past, of excruciating disappointment, tragic loss. In this time-capsule will be found a commemorative notice for a young woman, provided by her grandfather, an American philosopher, who cannot forget her promise. And an obituary of the great Arab-American Edward Said, who struggled with leukemia for the last ten years of his life, and struggled for justice for Palestinians. He will not be forgotten. Human time is inextricable from the dance of life and death, of death in life, and life in death.

5. The interpenetration of human, cultural and botanical time: a leaf from an off-shoot of the very bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment is included in this capsule. The tree’s provision of shade itself expresses this interweaving, interleaving, of dimensions. The idea of botanical continuity redoubles it. At the same time this motif of botanical preservation plays off against news of old growth deforestation in Finland, and the enactment of laws to curtail protest. Faced with the reality of potentially disastrous climate change, the role of trees in damping these effects makes deforestation into the very opposite of enlightenment. Trees knit together in powerful ways many different levels of time. This leaf is a metonymic marker of this multilayering. Finally, from a Danish philosopher, we included a small piece of quartz, a talisman echoing back to its discovery by a ten-year old boy, and its identification as quartz by an uncle, a geographer and ecological activist, who recently died. The quartz lives on.

6. The Now is often a place of shallowness, of worn-out everydayness. And yet here are two poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins, celebrating the divine fusion of the sensuous and the symbolic in the passing moment. The quotidian can be overcome. John Llewelyn’s memories of his father’s clock, and the quote beside it from Robert Louis Stevenson, urging us to transcend the pettiness of daily repetition, speaks to a many foldedness of time’s complexity.

7. The clock and its arrogance of measurement, is often taken to be the enemy of time, reducing it to calculation. And yet it also offers its own possibilities of intensity. We included in this chronopod, a wrist watch, crushed and stopped at the exact moment of the burial, echoing such instants of disaster as the half-eaten meal preserved in volcanic ash in ancient Macedonia. And a small electrical clock that will accurately tick and
measure underground for some long time to come, the beating heart, so to speak, of the capsule.

8. It is perhaps strange to record here two items not included in the time-capsule. In preparation for traveling to Helsinki, I happened upon a tiny teddy bear, which seemed to call out for inclusion as an astrobear. And to spare him (?) loneliness I bought a companion bear. One pink, one blue. On site, to help two young girls pass the time, I asked them each to ‘look after’ one bear. When the time came, they would not give them up to what they perceived as the reality of time-travel - prolonged dark burial. So the time-capsule was launched sans bear. Another absence was a disc from Rob Stone bearing an original piece of music combined with an auto-erase device, so that it would only exist once. This disc, promised ahead of time, arrived in Helsinki after the event, and so could not be included. So far it has not been played. In what sense has it been ‘included’ here?

4. A Machine for the Production of Experience?

It would be tempting to describe an art-event as a machine for the production of experience. But if a machine offers predictability, and a certain determinacy, this art-event, at least, resists everything machinic. The ‘theme’ of the event was Now. But in terms of the experience it wrought, this theme might be thought to have been something of a ploy. Where and when does this experience take place? And to whom, for whom? The items included in the time-capsule were not selected. Rather everything remitted on time by the contributors was included. The contributors were self-selected from a larger group of friends from whom contributions had been solicited some three months prior to the event. [See original invitation below.] I have described these capsules as works of friendship. But for the most part, the contributors were not themselves present for the event itself, and did not know how their own contribution would connect up with those of others. The witnesses/participants at the actual event only became aware of the contents at the time, and somewhat impressionistically.¹⁰ As the producer of the event, it might be thought that the event would find its fullest intensity in me, in some epiphanic moment of synthesis, ideally peaking as the last spade of dirt is thrown over the buried capsule. But there was no such moment. And even in the subsequent construction of a website, and various reviews of the materials, the narratives keep changing, the kaleidoscope of images and ideas keeps rearranging itself. This is not to say that there was no Now. There were many. But there was no ideal conjunction of the thematic content (“Now”) and the moment at which it was realized. Rather the idea of the Now trailed before us a lure that we could not help chasing, even as, even now, it keeps thickening, fragmenting, folding itself over, and receding. And with the development of a dedicated website, the exoticism of the Now only multiplies. Of course the ultimate twist in the whole adventure is that this launching of a chronopod into the future is both an imaginative act, and in principle, ¹⁰ They included Eero Haapanen, Kristian Klockars, Jessica Calonius, Lauri Aitolahiti, Marja Aittamaa, Riikka Stewen, Hanna Johansson, Kaneli Johansson, Vilja Johansson, and Vilja and Kaneli, I must especially thank Eero Haapanen, Riikka Stewen, Lasse 'Rehn', and most especially Hanna Johansson for the different ways in which they made this event possible. The accompanying photos are by Kristian Klockers.
one that may be realized in something like the way intended. Either way, what is being anticipated is a future present whose parameters escape anticipation – a culture, or perhaps a species mutation, whose response to what they find is not calculable. And in this anticipation of the uncanny, this event has the power to de-realize the present, to return it to us intact, but utterly changed.

5. But is it art?

In my view, philosophy comes into its own precisely when it discovers contradictions, limits, boundaries, difficulties – some of its own making, some not. Sometimes, philosophy can, at this point, make helpful distinctions, by which artificial problems are dissolved, if we bear in mind these distinctions. More often, philosophy can teach us a liminal fluency, or aporetic agility – the ability to deal productively/creatively with boundary problems. This includes dramatizing, exposing, the way boundaries operate both to make thinking (and experience) possible, and also to limit it. There is a particular area in which philosophy and art have much to offer each other. I have in mind the schemata with which we are constantly operating: inside/outside, before/after, original/image, part/whole, one/many, identity/difference and appearance/reality. At the point at which philosophy comes to realize that it needs to performatively acknowledge and explore the complexity of these schemata quite as much as analyze them, art becomes an indispensable ally. And the same claim can be made in terms of representation, increasingly central to philosophy, and creatively explored more effectively in art.

This burial of a time-capsule is the ritualized exploration of a primitive temporal schema – that of the Now. If the animation of boundaries is the common property of philosophy and art, we might add that philosophy principally does this symbolically (via words, concepts, schemes), while visual art does this through images, intuitions etc. Obviously this symbol/image distinction itself needs to be deconstructed. The modes of ‘transcendence’ we associate with both art and philosophy (and with religious and erotic experience) can each be understood in terms of the opportunities they offer for the animation of boundaries. Religious ritual aims by this means at a unifying confirmation of a certain structure of dependence shared by a community. Art-events, on the other hand, attempt less codified intensifications through participation in the experience of the animation of boundaries, exploring in this way the multi-layeredness of experience, both drawing attention to what is there, and creating scenes and monuments that serve to renew, enhance and multiply these boundaries and layerings. Not all time-capsules are art, in this sense. But perhaps all works of art are time-capsules, sending into an uncertain future a folded secret challenging successive audiences to participate in the event of their unfolding.
Addendum:

What follows is the original invitation to participate in the time-capsule event:

**Invitation to contribute to the chronopod**

Contributions (texts, and other small items, real and imaginary) are invited for inclusion in a time-capsule to be buried on Kuusiluoto Island, Helsinki, Finland October 4/5 2003. In the first instance, they should be mailed or e-mailed to me in Nashville. See below. Images and texts will also be posted on a dedicated website. The theme of this Event is NOW.  

David Wood

**Now: An Event**

Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past. (Joyce)

What, then, remains for Man? Perhaps ... to give the highest possible significance to ... those moments when ‘the light of sense goes out, but with a flash that has revealed the invisible world’. (Leishman)

A pebble is thrown into still water, and concentric ripples radiate outwards. Perhaps everything depends on the depth and scope we allow to the Now, or the Now allows to us.. If we skate across its surface, Now will seem but a vacancy. But if we slow it down, allow it to fill up and intensify, perhaps Now will become the promise of experience itself.

This Event will celebrate, elaborate and intensify the Now. Assembled over time, the items collected will be brought together at a Helsinki NOW for conceptual conflagration, imaged and posted on the web, and buried in an earth-time-capsule.

This is the fourth in a series. The story so far:

1. **Parting.** A time-capsule buried in a copse at the end of a garden in Warwick, UK, in July 1993, on the occasion of leaving England for the US. It contained objects and gifts from friends who were present at the ceremony.

2. **Apology.** A time-capsule buried in dunes on the coast of Australia in November 2000. The US presidential election was in crisis; the newspaper we buried did not know whether Bush or Gore would win. We buried the capsule, full of items sent to Sydney from all over the world, in part as an attempt to apologize to aboriginal Australians for the declaration of Terra Nullius by the colonists – that the land was uninhabited.

3. **Peace on Earth.** A time-capsule buried under one of 21 trees planted in a Peace Circle at Yellow Bird, Woodbury, TN in April 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq. This sent a
message (many messages, poems, texts, and print-outs of our Vanderbilt Forum for Peace web-site) to the long-distant future, just in case history forgets, that this war was not universally supported by the American people. We insist on the possibility of conflict resolution by peaceful means. And we commemorate the lost of innocent Iraqi lives, and of US soldiers, sent into action on the basis of systematic official misrepresentations. The plaque attached to this capsule is attached to this message.

4. **Now.** October 2003 in Helsinki. We will bury a time-capsule and post images, photos of small objects, and texts on a dedicated website. The theme NOW is meant to provoke reflection on the manifold experience of time, the different orders of the present, the difference between my now and our now, and on the distinct ways in which art, poetry and philosophy can give voice to this complexity.

Participants will be listed at both sites; underground and in cyberspace.