

Les Temps inachevés, by Patrick Bernatchez: Where It's At

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Patrick Bernatchez, Video still of *Lost in Time*, 2014. Colour film transferred to digital support, 46 min, sound. Co-produced by the Musée d'art contemporain and Casino Luxembourg.

LES TEMPS INACHEVÉS,

BY **PATRICK BERNATCHEZ:**



Patrick Bernatchez, *Chrysalide 6*, 2006. Graphite on paper; 28 x 21.5 cm. 33.7 x 27.5 x 4.1 cm (framed). Collection Nathalie de Blois, Montreal.



Patrick Bernatchez, *Goldberg Experienced.01*, 2010-2011.

From October 17, 2015 to January 10, 2016, curators Lesley Johnstone of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and Kevin Muhlen of Casino Luxembourg presented *Les Temps inachevés* by interdisciplinary artist Patrick Bernatchez at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.¹ This exhibition brings together, for the first time, major works drawn from two cycles of creation, production, and presentation: *Chrysalides* (2006-2013) and *Lost in Time* (2009-2015). The series of works, which include drawings, photographs, films, sound pieces, and installations, begin in the Rotunda and continue in several galleries on the second floor, tackling the overall theme of decline and post-apocalyptic future that is particularly resonant with the early 21st century.

Thus assembled, the two series proliferate the dialectical relationships between the works, while at the same time making the artist's organic and process-oriented methodology tangible. The installation gives the work the appearance of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the museum the appearance of a sound box. As the series were developed concurrently over several years, during which time the artist regularly documented their progress, the series transform the notion of the exhibition into a time marker and, symbolically, into an intermediary step implying future transformations.²

In this step, the dialogue created between the elements offers an unprecedented opportunity to gauge the artist's special relationship to sound, from both a material and a musical perspective,³ and to showcase key collaborations in his polymorphous practice.

Are You Experienced?

The first variation begins in the Rotunda, as the sound from eight loudspeakers circumscribes the circular space, immersing visitors in the latest reworking of the variation theme: *Goldberg Experienced.04 / GE0433RPM*.⁴ The tone is immediately set.

For this work, Bernatchez collaborated with composer Patrice Coulombe to "sample" musical motifs similar to the ones created for *Goldberg Experienced.03 / 77 K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd movements*,⁵ which were then (re) composed through a process of collage to reflect the mechanical movements of the eight vinyl records. The resulting score for eight pianos flood the museum's bright architectural space with polyphonic spirals, which, like sovereign *luciola* [fireflies], articulate the subsequent spaces through their sound.

It is by walking from loudspeaker to loudspeaker to hear each spatialized score individually that listeners sense *time being made visible* and articulate the gesture between the archaic and the modern, while the beats of the tempo—or of the wings—suggest that the pulsating and fragile light of *luciola*⁶ exposes one to a collision between the past, present, and future. The re-envisioned "counterpoint" creates a "horizontal" listening experience of the music, while the harmony provides a "vertical" experience,⁷ reminiscent of works by Steve Reich and Morton Feldman.

Chrysalides (2006-2013)

"We stand before the image as before time, since, in the image, time is also watching us."⁸

Stirred by the gentle notes of a piano, spools of thread unwind, wrapping their thread around a revolving speaker like workers from a former era diligently spinning a cocoon. Of indeterminate duration, the labour is orchestrated by a piano score the artist "composed" using a rigorous procedure,⁹ aiming to transpose the forgotten effort of manual workers into music. This is the installation *Fashion Plaza Nights*.

On the wall, an Ariadne's thread, arising from 91 phantasmagorical and dystopian drawings, echoes the installation. The fusion between the installation and the series of drawings exudes a sense of decline, whose mythopoetic space-time¹⁰ is endowed with a kind of bestiality. This allegorical genesis, in which vegetal, animal, human, and minotaur forms are subjected to different degrees of transformation, transgression, and even contamination, evokes the vertiginous nature of survival.

All the elements of *Chrysalides* revolve around questions of life and death, the passing of the seasons, metamorphosis, mutation, and transformation. It was during a six-month stay in Berlin that the artist came to fully understand the significance of the Fashion Plaza building.¹¹ For a more intimist experience of the building, viewers can watch the film trilogy *I Feel Cold Today*, *Chrysalide* and *13*, whose tense cinematic and audio style underscores the various kinds of erosion of life relative to the place.

Lost in Time (2009-2015)

"If noise is always violence, music is always prophecy. By listening, we can predict society's future."¹²

Luigi Nono and other avant-garde artists demonstrated this notion in the early 20th century. If we trust in the rhythmic signature gradually woven in the

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second part of the exhibition, music does more than anticipate society's future: it sounds its death knell. What first appears as an "odyssey" slowly turns into a countdown.

To go from the *Chrysalides* series to *Lost in Time*,¹³ visitors must first pass unscathed through the dimly lit corridor displaying *Black Watch*,¹⁴ while six loudspeakers amplify the ticking of its mechanism. Clearly, our hours are numbered. This wristwatch, whose single hand will take a thousand years to make a full rotation, subtly leads visitors into the vertiginous and labyrinthine foray of *Lost in Time*.

Exiting the corridor, visitors face the monumental "tableau vivant" *Goldberg Experiend.01 / Berlin Session*¹⁵ and its listening station. In this work, Bernatchez explores the elasticity of Johann Sebastian Bach's original score of the *Goldberg Variations* by integrating a "still life in the Dutch Baroque style" into the workings of a grand piano—more or less in the manner of John Cage—in order to generate potential audio material.¹⁶ At the listening station, visitors can move the arm of the turntable to play the variation of their choosing, while watching the still life decompose in the stop-motion film projected in the background.

With the installation *Lost in Time 33-66*, Bernatchez once again challenges the notion of time. A structure encases a turntable spinning at 33 1/3 RPM (revolutions per minute) and a metronome beating at 33 BPM (beats per minute). Though initially marking the tempo in unison, the metronome and turntable gradually diverge to ultimately complement each other and reach 66 BPM. The tempo thus shifts from a quarter note to a half note, as though any attempt to control time resists the subtlest subversions.

Fascination with opposing various notions of time—past, present, and future, lived time, performative time, time travel, the space-time continuum—along with manipulation and material exploration of these notions through sound form the

basis for the artist's new modes of "composition." This opposition becomes even more obvious when the particular characteristics of the mediums—or supports—involved affect each other.

"What If..."

As curator Lesley Johnstone explains in her overview of the artist's practice,¹⁷ the "what if..." is a powerful leitmotif for Bernatchez, as well as a quest for timelessness, in which space and time clash against and bounce off each other, compress or overlap. Furthermore, Bernatchez's long-term projects make it necessary for him to break down the steps. Thus, while the feature-length film *Lost in Time* was being completed, "satellite artworks" emerged to interact with each other, such as *BW* (the wristwatch), *Protagoniste 1, 2 and 3*, *Casque intégral pour cheval*, *Goldberg Experiend.03 / 77k, 1st, 2nd and 3rd movements*, *Goldberg Experiend.04 / GE0433RPM, 180°*, and *Piano orbital 01, 02, 03, 04*. Echoing each other, the works fill the museum with unusual polyphonic motifs and structures, where the sound textures ultimately create a composition, somewhat in the manner of Ligeti.

Each series gradually moves from a conceptualization stage to the experimental and production stages, then to the satellite works, until the cycle completes itself. Some works, such as *Casque intégral pour cheval*, are displayed "under glass," which borrows a "museumological" format that questions the "archive" and thus positions them somewhere between a cabinet of curiosities and jewellery. The object can be viewed, but at a certain distance behind glass. The object is exhibited, but the aura—"the strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance"¹⁸—is nevertheless preserved.

In addition to these multiple works and collaborations, there is a limited edition vinyl LP, *Lost in Time / Murcof*,¹⁹ the sound track of the film with the same name. The



Patrick Bernatchez, *Goldberg Experiend.01*, 2010-2011.



Patrick Bernatchez, *BW*, 2009-2011. Installation. Wristwatch measuring millennia. In collaboration with watchmaker Roman Winiger. Collection of the artist.

recording also includes the aria of the *Goldberg Variations*, performed by the Petits Chanteurs du Mont-Royal choir and directed by Gilbert Patenaude.

Future Conditional

A techno-symphonic poem and an elegy of escape, *Lost in Time* reminds us that “seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted succession; it is broken in the middle, at the point where ‘he’ stands; and ‘his’ standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which ‘his’ constant fighting, ‘his’ making a stance against past and future, keeps in existence.”²⁰ Furthermore, “it is the use of the world that allows one to create new narratives.”²¹

The exhibition closed with a concert of *Goldberg Experienced.04 / GE0433RPM*—eight pianists interpreted the eight scores, the same ones that revisited *Goldberg Experienced.03 / 77k, 1st, 2nd and 3rd movements*. In this moment, the cycle came full circle. Until the next odyssey, when the exhibition travels to The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, in Toronto.

Maryse Morin

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

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1 *Les Temps inachevés* is a co-production of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2015–2016) and the Casino Luxembourg – Forum d'art contemporain (2014–2015). See <http://www.macm.org/patrickbernatchez/en/>, <http://www.casinoluxembourg.lu/en/Casino-Channel/Patrick-Bernatchez-Les-temps-inacheves>, and <http://www.macm.org/en/expositions/patrick-bernatchez-2/> and <http://www.patrickbernatchez.org/>

2 Bernard Schütze, “Time to Tell,” in *Patrick atchez: Lost in Time*, ed. Mélanie Boucher (Montreal: Éditions de la Galerie de l’UQAM, 2012); *idem*, “An Allegorical Diagnostic of an Imminent Cataclysm,” in the booklet published by the Centre des arts actuels Skol during the exhibition *Chrysalides*, by Patrick Bernatchez (April 4 – May 3, 2008); Patrick Bernatchez, *Les temps inachevés* (Luxembourg and Montreal: Forum d'art contemporain, Casino Luxembourg, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2015).

3 See soundcloud.com/bernatchez-1.

4 A composition for eight pianos and eight loudspeakers, created in collaboration with composer Patrice Coulombe, pianist Marybelle Frappier, and sound engineer Adam Cavaluzi.

The term *experienced* comically evokes *Are You Experienced*, the iconic album of legendary guitarist Jimi Hendrix, who started the rock band The Jimi Hendrix Experience.

5 Eight vinyl LPs made or “prepared” based on the *Goldberg Variations*, which were composed by Johann Sebastian Bach and interpreted by Glenn Gould. The artist set up obstacles on each LP to make the needle skip, which fragments the sound and changes the duration. Over time, this creates loops and physically erodes the records. Later in his career, Glenn Gould also revisited his first recording of the *Goldberg Variations* and (re)interpreted Bach’s score.

6 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survivance des lucioles* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), 38.

7 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counterpoint>.

8 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps* (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000). [Our translation.]

9 Using an archival and playful process, the artist repeatedly photographed, for one night a month over one year, the randomly lit windows of tenants working late into the night, in order to transpose their labour into music. This led to a series of explorations and procedures, which developed in close collaboration with the Avatar artist-run centre, in particular with Mériel Lehmann and Jocelyn Robert.

10 For more details, see Schütze, “An Allegorical Diagnostic of an Imminent Cataclysm.”

11 An industrial building in Montreal where the artist had his studio for many years.

12 Jacques Attali, *Bruits. Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Fayard / PUF, 2001). [Our translation.] Murray Schafer also proposes this notion in his book *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 7: “There can be little doubt then that music is an indicator of the age, revealing for those who know how to read its symptomatic messages, a means of fixing social and political events.”

13 This series developed with the invaluable collaboration of Brigitte Henri.

14 Original idea by Patrick Bernatchez, *BW (Black Watch)* was designed and made in collaboration with Roman Winiger, a well-known Swiss watchmaker. The work’s title, *BW*, represents the initials of the watch itself, as well as the initials of the artist’s and the watchmaker’s last names. See Schütze, “Time to Tell.”

15 In collaboration with classical pianist David Kaplan, winner of the 2010 Sobey Art Award.

16 Applying a prepared piano to a classical musical composition breathes new life into this work frozen in time, making it “living material.”

17 Bernatchez, *Les temps inachevés*, 4.

18 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 104–105.

19 Made in collaboration with sound artist Murcof: soundcloud.com/murcof/lost-in-time-chapter-01, soundcloud.com/murcof/lost-in-time-chapter-04.

20 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 11.

21 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lucas &