

DEALING WITH—

SOME TEXTS, IMAGES, AND THOUGHTS
RELATED TO AMERICAN FINE ARTS, CO.

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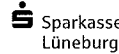
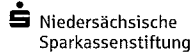
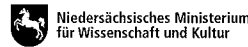
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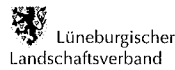
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PASSING TIME: PAT HEARN, 1980–81

In Pat Hearn's *New York Times* obituary, Roberta Smith includes a short remark so casual it seems to slip in the gap between the obit's cursory introduction and the near-legendary exploits of the late gallerist. Smith's line, not even a sentence, is brief enough that I wonder whether I only paid attention to it in retrospect. Perhaps its benign matter-of-factness simply pales in comparison to the mythic feats for which Hearn is better known. The line reads, "While working at an alternative space called Usine Pali Kao, [Hearn] began to realize that she was more interested in other artists' work than in her own."¹ Smith's passing remark is intriguing, not least because it points to Hearn's definitive transition from artist to gallerist, but because it also specifies the site and timing of this change: her move from Boston to Paris in 1981.

Immediately prior to her time in Paris, Hearn had been studying painting and video at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Developing a nascent interest in collaboration alongside her college peers and those at the neighboring Massachusetts College of Art and Design—a group that included artists Shelley Lake, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, Steve Stain, Stephen Tashjian, and Gail Thacker, among others—Hearn played in bands and coauthored and starred in films and videos with her friends.² In addition to their improvised coproduction, these Boston contemporaries served as one another's intimate and primary audience for their creative output, and much of the work that exists from this period is of casual participatory authorship rather than individual origin.³ The exuberant experimentation evident in various Super 8 films, photographs, and videos from the late 1970s shares a common sensibility of the group, where equipment, film, and videos were often shared through the incidental principle of availability rather than strategic deliberation.

A number of videos that bear Hearn's name have since been placed within the Kitchen's archive in New York.⁴ Some are straightforward studies,

1 Roberta Smith, "Pat Hearn, Art Dealer in New York, Dies at 45," *New York Times*, August 20, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/20/nyregion/pat-hearn-art-dealer-in-new-york-dies-at-45.html>.

2 These formats were not always considered distinct. For example, Stain recalls he and Hearn playing a gig alongside a performance of No Wave band DNA. Stain's Super 8 films were projected on a curtain, while he and Hearn played behind it. Edited by Stain, the films contained footage shot by Hearn and Morrisroe. Hearn was a regular contributor to Stain's Boston loft space and music venue, 38 Thayer Street. See Steve Stain, "Boston 1980: The Lost Films of 38 Thayer Street" (screening at Gene Frankel Theatre, New York, February 27, 2012).

3 This social grouping is often referred to as the "Boston School," a title initially coined, albeit tongue in cheek, by the artist Nan Goldin, and later popularized by the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art exhibition that took this name as the title of its show in 1996. See the catalog for the show: Lia Gangitano, ed., *Boston School* (Boston: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1996).

4 Duplicates also exist in the library at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York. Other videos dating from this time, not in the Kitchen/EAI collection, include *Newport R.I.* (1980) by Hearn, Lake, and Lizzie Borden; an alternate edit of *Bondage* (1980); and *Always in Space* (1980) by Hearn.

such as Hearn's *Grace Jones* (1980), which depicts its titular subject laconically swaying to "Warm Leatherette" amid a warm, yellow ripple of digital overlay applied by early computer-editing technology. Another video, *Artificial Intelligence* (1980), is a compilation of short works made in collaboration with Lake, comprising computer experiments with acid-color wipes against a soundtrack of a text-to-speech Votrax that repeats phrases.⁵ A darker video, *Bondage* (1980),⁶ meanwhile, is a demonstration of hardcore sadomasochism with a female subject, who appears bound and gagged with an exhaust pipe, strapped to a chair (then later a bed), and photographed by Morrisroe.⁷ These videos are short, experimental—naïve in some cases—but each shares a common aesthetic exploration of the value of visual pleasure, often to the point of excess.

There is one video by Hearn that stands out from the rest, however: *Seizure* (1980). Again made in collaboration with Lake, and shot at the Strobe Project Laboratory in Harold Edgerton's MIT studio after hours (Lake had access as Edgerton's student), *Seizure* is a video that finds itself expressing both the trademark style of the Boston group and an implication of another reality beyond that social sphere.

The video begins with the cool, inconclusive ambience characteristic of Hearn's other videos. Daubed head to toe in various colors of fluorescent paint, a nude Hearn appears in front of Lake's camera to a dance-music soundtrack played on a boom box. The strobe machine flashes light against Hearn's body as she moves and dances, and the light repeatedly throws the automatic exposure of the camera off-balance as the image vertiginously zooms in and out of the scene. Halfway through the video, the camera falls to the floor, the music cuts out, and panicked voices can be heard off-camera. The scene then switches to a static shot of Hearn again under strobe lights, this time within the context of a hospital EEG (electroencephalography) test.⁸ The off-camera voice of a female clinician calmly explains the EEG process, remarking that strobe lighting can artificially induce seizures, and that the fit zone of such a seizure is approximately sixteen flashes per second. The film concludes with Hearn's EEG recording captured on camera.

5 Lake recalls, "*Artificial Intelligence* was created at the Architecture Machine Group, now known as the MIT Media Lab. This is another experimental video that Pat and I created, and as far as I know, it was the first time anyone tried to make the Votrax sing. *Vomit* is one of many experiments in the *Artificial Intelligence* collection. I was a student of Nicholas Negroponte at the time, and was able to gain access to that remarkable studio." Shelley Lake to the author, February 17, 2012.

6 Credits include Pat Hearn, Steve Stain, Shelley Lake, and M. Dirt (Mark Morrisroe's alter ego).

7 It is likely that Morrisroe shot his bondage photograph *Untitled* (a toned gelatin silver print) at the same time as the video was made, given the visual similarity of the subject, though the Estate of Mark Morrisroe has dated the photograph circa 1981.

8 "About 30 minutes into production, Pat collapsed into an epileptic seizure. Pat didn't have epilepsy and it was thought that she either reacted to the paint, or the strobe lights." Lake, February 17, 2012.

Beyond its documentary aspect, *Seizure*—with its whiteouts, blackouts, dazed focus pulls, and anarchic handheld camera shots—appears to adopt the emotional attitude of its subject within the materiality of the video. The camera reads its subject, just as the EEG records Hearn's electrical activity. Regardless of artistic intentionality, there is nonetheless a call and response between camera and subject. *Seizure* thus exists in an affective register. Hearn and Lake first exhibited *Seizure* and *Artificial Intelligence* at Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT in 1980. And while Lake left Boston that year to move to Los Angeles, Hearn moved to Paris at the beginning of 1981 with the assistance of an art grant.⁹

Soon after Hearn's arrival in Paris, she met Thierry Cheverney and Christine Caquot. The pair were artists who had graduated from the École supérieure d'art d'Aix-en-Provence and moved to the French capital in 1978 with the desire to create a new art space. In 1981, they took a three-year lease on a disused paper-factory space in the Belleville neighborhood, on the border of the nineteenth and twentieth arrondissements of the city. The space adopted the name L'Usine Pali-Kao (Pali-Kao), in reference to the former occupant and the street on which it stood.

Historically, Belleville had been the home of staunch supporters of the Paris Commune, and by the 1970s and 1980s, it had also become a haven for various immigrant populations, including a large Chinese community, as well as Jews of German, Tunisian, and Algerian descent. Belleville largely avoided the city's architectural modernization of the mid-twentieth century, and young artists and musicians—Cheverney and Caquot included—began moving to the area, attracted by low rents and large studios.

Joined by Christophe Cusin and Bruno Rousselot, Caquot and Cheverney developed Pali-Kao into a busy hub for live performances and projects spanning visual art and music. It regularly hosted the emerging art and music scene of Belleville and invited those passing through. In its three-year run, Pali-Kao staged projects by Clair Obscur, Schleimer K, Bérurier Noir, Jean Gaudin, Les Rita Mitsouko, and Hector Zazou, to name only a few. It was, in many ways, a precursor to the model of the Trans Europe Halles.¹⁰ Cheverney notes that Hearn was intensely involved in the Pali-Kao program throughout 1981, and her participation culminated with her proposition to develop a link between the community of Pali-Kao and that of MIT. She titled it *Passing Time*—a project

9 On a technical note: the *New York Times* writes that this was a grant from the Museum School, *Artforum* states it was from the American Center, though it is likely a combination of the two. See Smith, "Pat Hearn, Art Dealer in New York, Dies at 45"; and Mary Heilmann, "O Pioneer!," *Artforum* 39, no. 6 (February 2001): 35–36.

10 The Trans Europe Halles has its beginnings in March 1983 in Halles de Schaerbeek, Brussels, where organizations including Pali-Kao met to discuss the development of an informal network of performance and exhibition venues across the continent. Since established into an official body made up of organizations based in over twenty different countries, the nonprofit group is a decentralized institution.

that would comprise a two-way slow-scan transmission, connected through telephone cables between Paris and Boston, which would transmit images of the respective spaces on New Years' Eve in 1981.

The system of slow-scan transmission is straightforward and, consequently, fairly primitive in appearance. Connected through the telephone, slow-scan uses audio tones to send video images via audio bandwidth; in other words, images are translated into sound and decoded on the other end. Created in the late 1950s, the technology was initially used to transmit live images of space exploration—most popularly used to record Neil Armstrong descending the ladder of Apollo 11 to walk on the moon. Although commercially available systems appeared in 1970, mainstream accessible software for encoding and decoding did not appear until the 1990s. What is certain, then, is that specialized equipment would have to be loaned for *Passing Time*.

Don Foresta, who was then the director of the Center for Media Art at the American Center in Paris, had set the artistic precedent for the first use of slow-scan transmission earlier that year. In collaboration with MIT's CAVS director, Otto Piene, and resident artist Aldo Tambellini, Foresta developed and produced *Interface* on February 1, 1981, with the participation of students from both schools. Using static, black-and-white image transmission, the French and American groups cut up press photographs of their respective country's president into sixteen pieces, captured the sections on camera, and sent the images down the telephone line. On the other end, the second team pieced together these image fragments to build up the other group's presidential portrait. The tenor of the portraits was no accident; there was undoubtedly a political as well as technological impetus that informed Foresta's project, which can be clearly evidenced in his communiqués to MIT, telexed in advance of the transmission.

"Until now," wrote Foresta, "this vast network of communication [...] has been exclusively in the hands of the systems; large administrative, political or economic entities; multinational corporations; states; etc. Never in the hands of individuals. Artists, by moving into this forbidden area, are implementing a socialization of the medium."¹¹

By the autumn of 1981, Hearn was undoubtedly aware of Foresta's technology, not only due to their MIT and CAVS links, but also because Hearn staged an exhibition of her work at the American Center in October, in addition to working at the Center part time, conducting video workshops, and organizing video festivals. With slow-scan technology, Hearn wanted to submit a proposal to create a ten-monitor video installation that would broadcast slow-scan between five cities—Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New Delhi—and

11 Don Foresta, telex to Otto Piene, January 6, 1981, in *Centervideo: Film, Video, TV and Telecommunication, 1968-1981 at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies*, eds. Otto Piene, Elizabeth Goldring, and Vin Grabill (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 5.

hoped to deliver the project at the Biennale de Paris the following year.¹² At Pali-Kao, however, her primary interest was to link the two communities in which she was creatively invested.

The Pali-Kao event required three days of preparation, in the run-up to which the space hosted a number of video screenings that included work by Lake and Hearn. Assisted by Cheverney and Caquot, Hearn organized and set up the equipment, which essentially comprised camera, microphone, monitor, computer, and telephone cabling. The initial attempts to communicate with MIT failed, but a line was ultimately established in time. On New Year's Eve, the artists of Paris met those in Boston. The transmission was built up of individually rendered scan lines that laboriously stuttered together to make a single coherent image. But despite the low resolution of the images, the Pali-Kao audience was fascinated by the technology and the possibility of such long-distance image communication. The live audio was delivered via contact microphone stuck to the mouthpiece of the telephone, and there were intermittent gaps of synchronization between sound and image. Cheverney recalls the strangeness of the live feed, describing *Passing Time* as full of "trembling black and white images, and bizarre vocal quality exchanges."¹³

Although not the first exhibition of the communication technology—with Foresta's experience, academic seniority, and funding he was able to premiere the process ten months prior to Pali-Kao—*Passing Time* nonetheless had a practical, exploratory, and celebratory attitude typical of Hearn.¹⁴ What is significant about the framing of the project is that *Passing Time* was, explicitly, not considered an artwork by Hearn; it was a production, a display method to connect unlikely audiences through interchange without the stamp of individual authorship.¹⁵

This was Hearn's final project in Paris, completed before she returned to the United States in February 1982. Back in Boston, Hearn moved into the ground floor of the Hemenway Hotel and briefly turned her apartment into a performance and event space, playfully titled Poly Cow. As she had done at points throughout her time in Paris, Hearn held public presentations of the videos she had made in Boston,¹⁶ but soon decided to move to New York with

12 Pat Hearn, correspondence to Mark Morrisroe, November 21, 1981. Cataloged in the ephemera of the Estate of Mark Morrisroe, Ringier Collection, Fotomuseum Winterthur.

13 Thierry Cheverney, correspondence with the author, February 21, 2012.

14 It is also worth noting the differences between the two slow-scan projects. Unlike *Interface*, which was primarily a photographic exchange (that Foresta went on to develop for his contribution to the 1982 Biennale de Paris), *Passing Time* included both an audio and video link.

15 Significantly, Hearn also credits herself as "producer" on the flyers she made and disseminated to promote the Pali-Kao event.

16 It is interesting to see that Hearn was still committed to publicly showing her work at this time, traveling in one instance to present her work at La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, Montreal, organized in collaboration with Articule on March 9, 1983. The videos screened at the event included the *Artificial Intelligence* series and *Always in Space*.

the intention of setting up a gallery. Built with the assistance of Cheverney, who had moved to join Hearn in April of that same year,¹⁷ Pat Hearn Gallery opened on Avenue B and Ninth Street in November 1983. The period that follows is well documented.¹⁸

* * *

The role of Hearn's artistic practice is significant, though one should be guarded about overstating its attributes. The work is, at its core, that of a young artist in her early twenties, experimenting with different modes, formats, associations, and collaborations. Indeed, Hearn apparently went to some lengths to shield her artistic career from public view during her career as a gallerist, presumably perceiving her formative artwork as an unnecessary distraction from her primary role as a gallerist.¹⁹ But there is nonetheless merit in exploring the formative attitude of Hearn's work as a primary means to come to terms with Hearn's eye, taste, sense of collaboration, and desire to connect audiences with individuals. Most of all, it is the period of transition, of shifting the emphasis from artist to producer, that is key to the time Hearn moved from Boston to Paris. *Pali-Kao*—and *Passing Time* in particular—offered Hearn an opportunity to develop a scenario where the role she carved out was not to create or even deliver an object, but to frame another type of visual transaction, to create an image of a community and find an audience for it. These elements are essential in understanding the early operations of Pat Hearn Gallery.

17 Entering its second year without Cheverney and Hearn, Pali-Kao welcomed Daniel Marques and Novae Akriik to its program.

18 At the beginning of 2012, Hearn's personal records and gallery archives were acquired by the library at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York. Moving from the hands of Daniel McDonald and Christine Tsvetanov, who were vouchsafed with both the estate of Hearn and her husband Colin de Land, these records are now being cataloged, likely to be available to researchers by the end of 2012.

19 See Lia Gangitano, "Mark Morrisroe: A Conversation," in *Mark Morrisroe*, eds. Beatrix Ruf and Thomas Seelig (Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2010), 357.