

**Note:** This essay was translated and published in Chinese in *Chinese Photography*.  
[Full reference: Baldacchino, J. 2011. A Poetics of Timefulness: Gao Jun's Art and the Trope of Duration. In *Chinese Photography*, 1(379). January. Chinese Photography Press, Beijing.]  
It is available online at: [http://news.artron.net/show\\_news.php?column\\_id=546&newid=149523](http://news.artron.net/show_news.php?column_id=546&newid=149523)

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## **A POETICS OF TIMEFULNESS: Jun Gao's art and the trope of duration**

John Baldacchino

**A**s one tries to share Alma Mater's view of Columbia University's Quad, one hopes to enjoy a vista that promises a unique experience. This is further enhanced by the architectural setup of the Quad itself, whose neo-classic space captures the imagination of its many visitors. Rousing musings over ideals of academic freedom, creativity and fruitful speculation, Alma Mater seems to invite the viewer to take another look—this time *with* her—at this magnificent space and maybe even question our aesthetized view of the ivory towers of academia. Anyone who finds herself in the space that is “seen” by Alma Mater, cannot fail to be overwhelmed by a mood of presumed tranquillity and a desire to freeze time where, one would hope, the yoke of knowledge is carried with ease and where the burden of truth becomes somewhat light.

In freezing the *moment* of one's desired ideals, one could claim several vantage-points that appear to remain above any other vantage-points given by immediate perception. While in normal circumstances an immediate perception helps us experience a moment in time without necessarily stopping it, often we seek to transcend this sort of immediacy because some moments are more precious than others. This is what we do when we decide to take snapshots of a place and time that we want to save for posterity.

Yet in the series *Alma Mater: The Providence of Columbia University* (2009), Jun Gao does something radically different from the many visitors who immediately fall in love with the bronze effigy of the lady crowned in laurels overlooking Columbia's Quad. Jun Gao is not happy with a snapshot. Instead he takes 12 hours to capture the lady's view of the Quad. He does not economise on time, but invests it with a duration whose image becomes a trope—indeed, a rhetorical turn—that makes time last longer than the presumed moments which “normal” photographs usually capture. While Zeno's theory multiplies time in a continuum that captures an infinite number of *moments at rest*, Jun Gao's approach to time goes the opposite way. In *Alma Mater* he has a go at the continuum by freezing not one moment, but a whole 12 hours. Rather than simply depicting a continuum, he re-articulates Alma Mater's vista as an expression of multiplicities whose moments are not only blurred, but clumped in one entity that takes a being of its own. Somehow, this reverses Zeno's approach and puts it in question.

What is multiplied in Jun Gao's *Alma Mater* series? Far from simply capturing the movement of the sun, or the comings and goings of those whose recorded presence is refused by the fact that the long exposure cannot capture them fully (unless they are ready to stand still for 12 whole hours) Jun Gao's work captures *duration*. Henri Bergson takes duration out of the usual sequential, linear, assumption that brackets a series of moments

in time. He gives duration a lived *sense* in that it becomes a state that belongs to us. Indeed, duration is *ours*. In his *Creative Evolution* Bergson claims that “our duration is not merely one instant replacing another.” If that were the case, he says, “there would never be anything but the present—no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration.” Instead, Bergson states that duration “is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation.”

Here we find ourselves *embodying* a peculiar sense of duration that “grows”, as if this were not simply a space within which we confine the idea of a time continuum that is defined by past present and future, but where we become time ourselves, where time “grows” in us and we become it. In this respect we do not simply *make* time because we live it. Somehow we develop a peculiar relationship with *the time we make* and *the time that makes us*. We find ourselves somewhere in the middle of the two agencies of making, trying to be both while probably we fail to cope with any. Like those who come and go in the Quad, but whose presence is never recorded (because they are too fast for the medium by which duration is beholden), we find ourselves eliminated in a duration whose agents we might well be but in whose space we always remain invisible as if enveloped by its ever-growing *fullness*.

In Jun Gao’s work, we find a similar situation. Time becomes a medium just as photography is a medium that not only captures time, but also creates a time that begins to envelope us in its growing invisibility. And by “us”, I do not simply mean our gaze, sight or imagination, but our own sense of being in a clump that we call “time.”

Jun Gao’s work invariably provokes predictable questions, such as: “What is the process used in your work?” or “What sort of camera do you use?” But when one discovers that all Jun Gao uses is a pin hole camera or a basic contraption that opens its shutter at some point and closes down after a number of hours—or even weeks in works like *Sunset at Brookline and Boston* (2007) and *150 days in the Macy Art Gallery* (2009)—one’s interest in the medium soon disappears. Instead, one’s attention is taken (indeed captured) by what the image begins to unfold. Just as in Bergson, one begins to redefine time not in terms of a counted continuum but as a sense of a growing being, so in Jun Gao’s work the medium disappears and makes way for the invisibility by which the audience finds its way in a narrative that it needs to rearrange by repositioning one’s gaze according to an ever-changing re-enactment of what might have passed in front of the camera. Here, time as a continuum is replaced by a sensation of being that in and of itself begins to surpass being per se while finding itself captured between *what is*, *what might have been*, and *what could possibly happen*.

As art urges us to reconsider the philosophical dilemma of time—from Zeno to Augustine, from Bergson to Heidegger, from Deleuze to Virilio—we are invited to re-tell what philosophy itself could never fully recount. Here, time as paradox seems to come to a halt—or is at best suspended by art’s normalization of paradox.

This has something to do with what Wittgenstein identifies in philosophical puzzles that ask the wrong questions. Interestingly Wittgenstein uses the example of time in his argument. In his *Blue Book*, he recounts the case of the man who is philosophically puzzled by the fact that he “sees a law in the way a word is used, and trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results.” Wittgenstein cites as an example the question “What is time?” “This question” he says, “makes it appear that what we want is a definition.” As we assume that a definition will solve the problem, then the question “is answered by a wrong definition; say: ‘Time is the motion of the celestial bodies’. The next step is to see that this definition is unsatisfactory.”

The relevance of Wittgenstein’s example is not found in whether a definition of time is ever satisfactory (even when it erroneously equates one thing with another) but whether we should ever seek a definition of time in art. Such a definition would pose no ground for paradox because in art paradox is normalized. This is because art does not operate on words, but on images that may be described by words that immediately become superfluous.

As words turn superfluous and become redundant in art, one’s approach to JunGao’s works has to take a detour both from trying to establish a pattern or law to define time, and also in terms of whether the technical feats that his work presents—particularly in terms of speed and exposure—hold any relevance to the images themselves.

When confronted with works like the *Nature Poem* (2006) series and *The Birth of a House* (2009) the temptation to narrate the story is always strong. These works capture the imagination. Viewing *Nature Poem* one cannot escape legitimate questions such as “What is that light?” Likewise one would be right to remark how strongly poetic is the captured movement of the sun; and how equally apt and precise is its depiction of the passing of time. In the case of *The Birth of a House* one cannot escape the poetry of the sense of “history” that *makes* the house. Jun Gao’s work is primarily intended to depict the house as a life form that grows from bare foundations to a fully established edifice. And yet because of his choice of time through which the image builds itself through long exposure, the foundations are more visible than the rooftop, which becomes translucent and poetically suggestive of a certain transience by which we are eluded into thinking that the older is stronger while the most recent addition remains to be tested by time itself.

Yet, though rich and poetic, such descriptions risk impoverishing these works. In trying to enhance these works with a description of what these works represent, one would reduce them to a descriptive level that weakens their criticality. To reduce the image to a process and follow the development of time is to take away from what I would call the *trope of duration*, which I see as characterizing this genre in Jun Gao’s work. By *genre*, here I do not mean simply a manner or style that is identifiable in the use of an overexposed image. That would be another definition that would reduce the work to a description of process.

This is where I would emphasize the criticality of Jun Gao's art. Rather than style or manner Jun Gao's work presents art's normalization of the paradox of time. While in language a definition of time is trapped into a philosophical paradox that lends itself to a definition of definitions where the work's "meaning" regresses in a *mis-en-abîme* of continuous semantic deferral, in art the paradox is normalized by its reversal of the abyss, into an ever growing *mis-en-scène* where the possibilities never stop emerging.

In Jun Gao's art the trope of duration inaugurates a scene—indeed a horizon—that keeps *growing*. Even when it depicts a process of decay, as in his *Floral Life: Daffodils* (2010) and *Floral Concerto* (2010) Jun Gao's art presents its audience with a strong sense of growth. This growth is not a reversal of decay, or a consolatory form of surrogate progressivism. Rather, as viewers we are regaled with a sense of growth that breaks off from regressive-progressive duality in order to inhabit a space that spreads and contracts as it pleases. In many ways the word "growth" proves itself insufficient because here what *grows* are neither the flowers nor the recounted time in which these flowers were supposed to wither away. This is perhaps most evocative in *Floral Life: Crystal Vase* (2010) where the sense of growth is more pronounced as a sense of immanence, not only through the vivacious colours that mark the work, but also the voluminous body that characterizes the vase and the flowers. Yet immanence here is only indexed by colour and form in a contingent way. The sense of paradox that moves between a sense of immanence and a sense of externalized transience somehow plays to the variegated conventions by which this work is viewed. This also includes easy historical parallels that one might make with the depiction of flowers in 18<sup>th</sup> century paintings which inform Jun Gao's decisions of composition, colour and light.

Yet beyond historical influences and the complex "readings" that such works provoke, what we have in these works is a good example of art's normalization of paradox, where the work of art embodies a notion of growth in the act of wilting. As the flowers wilt in the narrative that we make for ourselves as we experience the work, the *mis-en-scène* that the work presents is characterized by a sense of growth. The formal fullness presented in *Floral Life: White Roses and Orange Rose* (2010) is another great example. Here the sense of growth is found in the meaning of the wilting flowers. Yet the wilting flowers are also sustained by the memory of their past, which in this work retains and signifies a strong *presence* in the *present*. This is wholly paradoxical, and yet in art paradox plays a normalizing role. In art, paradox accentuates the aporia by which works of art lead us into avenues that refuse to present mere stories or mere meanings, but instead we are placed on a horizon where we are urged to seek for ourselves meanings and stories that we continuously change at will.

Thus while time is transformed into a *trope of duration*, genre sets a *mis-en-scène* in which time itself becomes secondary to the autonomy by which art gives us the freedom to move in and out of the conditions where words become superfluous to any definition—be it that of time or art. In fact, while time is a protagonist in Jun Gao's work, it is only one of *many* protagonists. Even when Jun Gao uses time as the medium by which he constructs his works, like all media it recedes in the background.

This leaves us with a major question: what is the subject of Jun Gao's work? Perhaps, as Wittgenstein warns us, the question itself is insufficient, or even wrong. We might not be wrong to state that Jun Gao's work is moved by the concept of time. However this statement cannot be the answer to our question. This is because the question itself must not expect an answer. I would dare suggest that in Jun Gao's work, time is a trope, a rhetorical occasion, and an excuse to do many other things. More than *about* time, Jun Gao's art is *made* of time. It is a poetics of *timefulness* where time is so ever-present that it remains in full transparency. In being *timeful*, the role of time in art is that of a medium. It's a medium for a wider and ever-growing *mis-en-scène*. It is certainly not a philosophical puzzle, nor a paradox in the philosophical sense. Rather it is a moment of fullness, where time is everywhere and thus normalized within the wide-ranging horizon that we regale ourselves through art.

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14 November 2010