In 1964, Gordon Matta-Clark laid out large sheets of agar (the gelatinous remains of boiled algae) to which he added mixture of such substances as vegetable juice, chicken bone, mold, trash, and various unmentionables. The air-dried results, a series of reliefs with scultted surfaces and still chemically mutating materials, were hung from ropes and first shown as a group. Museum was the title that the artist gave to the ensemble.

In more recent times, artists’ production of objects of various mediums largely conforms to art’s traditional aspirations to eternalizing (after all, artworks, like memorials, are meant to be eternal and unchanging). Their messages might be radical and their intentions critical, but their aesthetic forms are all too often fixed forever. Let Everything be Temporary, or When is the Exhibition? brings together the work of a group of artists that consistently and very differently explore temporality and, more specifically, the possibility of temporal instability in the work of art. This is manifest not only as a subject (although it is sometimes also that), but rather as a constitutive element, shaping the artwork’s fragility as well as the evanescence of its subject’s experience of it. Whether primarily motivated by the political, aesthetic, economic, or the intimate, these practices perform conceptual and emotional temporal questioning. This project, rather than being a theme show with a series of singular illustrations of an idea, instead aims to reveal a persistent questioning at the center of these artists’ practices; it endeavors as well to suggest that in these practices might be found some of the most salient questions being asked concerning the limits and nature of art today.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ famous pile works—from which viewers are allowed to take a piece of candy, a photocopied paper or poster—are by one of the best known recent examples of the artwork as a system of formal precariousness or diminishment. The “ideal weight” for one such candy pile, “Untitled” (Rrose in L.A., 1984), is 176 pounds, the weight of Gonzalez-Torres’ AIDS-afflicted lover at the time. In these works the exhibitor manages to equal or permanently reproduce.

The floor and the wall are surfaces Michel Blazy uses often, less as sites on which he situates or hangs something than as the word disappears. Differently, Ça là [That there] (1994) shuffles between original and copy, form and formless. As a perfect, rectangular cube of ordinary baker’s flour, it sits monumental-like on a table at the start of the exhibition. Held together by nothing except the invisible tension that allows the floor’s temporary and irreproducible replication of the cube when it was once, Ça là could at any moment give way to being a collapsed heap of the minute and disparate particles of floor that constitute it. A sketch of the model on which the piece was based hangs nearby, suggesting the necessary gap between the planning of the work at all necessary unsteady and unpredictable, like life itself.

The fragile balance between the emergence and annihilation of form is repeatedly explored in Joëlle Tuerlinckx’s oeuvre. Stubbles stekken on dingen, dingen stekken on stukjes [Particles and objects, objects and particles] (1994a), a square meticulously outlined with confetti on the floor, it inevitably transforms itself—indeed, it might be defined as a geometic shape—by gushes of air in the exhibition space or the footsteps of unsuspecting visitors. The artist’s playful and ethereal riposte to the seriousness and solidity of so many Minimalist works (think Carl Andre’s cubes), perfectly exemplifies the temporal rethinking of the complexity of her body of work. Equally typical to it is the slippage between materiality and language and between the original and its copy or representation. (2007), a projection of the dually crossed out word “wall,” written with a marker on a single glass slide, fades over the course of a few minutes of the heat of the projector lamp on the ink. The slowly effacing word, already twice crossed out (which is to say, already declaring: This is not a wall), reveals and instead spotlights the actual wall behind it as the word disappears. Differently, Ça là [That there] (1994) unfolds between original and copy, form and formless. As a perfect, rectangular cube of ordinary baker’s flour, it sits monumental-like on a table at the start of the exhibition. Held together by nothing except the invisible tension that allows the floor’s temporary and irreproducible replication of the cube when it was once, Ça là could at any moment give way to being a collapsed heap of the minute and disparate particles of floor that constitute it. A sketch of the model on which the piece was based hangs nearby, suggesting the necessary gap between the planning of the work at all necessary unsteady and unpredictable, like life itself.

The floor and the wall are surfaces Michel Blazy uses often, less as sites on which he situates or hangs something than as the ground that the artwork might act upon and defy. A whole
array of organic substances—from pasta and cotton to bee juice and mashed potatoes—are the staples of a practice that recent ers the art world mandate to “compose” and makes com position the motor of an unstable, mutating body of work. His wall paintings, including, Mir qui pèle [Wall that peels] (1972), are made of homemade mixtures of agar or vegetable purées that contaminate the architectonics of the exhibition space. By introducing perishable materials, pungent odors, and decay into the exhibition and onto the white gallery walls, Blazy makes that otherwise ignored backdrop (because taken to be pristine, neutral, and timeless), the explicit and progressively changing subject of the viewer’s attention. (1993), made of a roll of ordinary paper towels, approaches decomposition in a different way: coiling like a true trunk’s age rings or Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, the unfurled upright sheets make up an elaborate structure of spirals that wane and col lapse—literally undoing their form—over time and under their own weight.

Waiting, that banal quotidian act that perhaps better than any other reminds us of the inexorable passage of time, is a recurrent motif in Gabriel Kuri’s work. Tied to it is a complex relationship between leisure and production, expenditure and speculation, which finds expression in the prosaic items that populate Kuri’s oeuvre: cash register receipts, waiting stubs, daily newspapers, disposable shopping bags, and fruit labels, to name a but a few. In The Recurrence of the Sublime (2003), a trio of avocados carefully wrapped in newspapers dated 21 July 1969, juxtaposes mundane practice (any Mexican would tell you that an avocado in newspaper rips faster) with monumental history (America’s triumphant first steps on the moon). The pile of newspapers beneath the avocado bowl slowly diminishes as the papers are used to envelop new avocados in the play of consumption and accelerated obsolescence that the wrapping sets in motion. The list goes on—it all of using ever more different pages, each with lunar landing announcements alongside car ads, pästry recipes, or other newsworthy events of the day; every elegantly swathed ball flaunting the anachronism between the then of 1969 and the now of an avocado—makes for its fragile sculptural grace. Untitled (2007) provokes different but no less evocative questions about the march of time. A take-a-number machine enables the visitors to take their turn and an ongoing number-calling sequence is displayed, but no definable reason for the wait is given. The visitors are left to deposit their stubs in a voluntary, arbitrary way so that the advancement of numbers and consumption of tickets accumulates into the progressive erection of an ad hoc and indeterminate sculpture—a testament or commentary on its continuous evolution, but the truth is that it will always remain an artwork despite its being nothing more than a value, which happens to be nothing.

Oska Pasaioko’s Short Sad Text (based on the borders of 14 countries), (2004–2005), a small sculpture made of soap and strands of sea that marks the contours of several former Eastern Bloc countries, is not physically present in the exhibition. Pasaioko left the sculpture in a public bathroom in Oslo where its soap dissipation might literalize the transformation and effacement of actual borders. No documentation or other evidence tells of the expediency of the work, but a postcard of its pristine original state was made, providing the exhibition visitor with the possibility of a “souvenir” of an artwork they will never see.

Kuri’s One Sad Text, Short Sad Text, and Untitled mark the end of a legacy of works that did not operate this way, that resist being finished or fully available. In so doing, they refuse the illusion of the commodification of the artwork at any given moment or consult the artwork at any given point the artwork will be worth nothing. You may inquire at apex about the value of the artwork at any given moment. You may consult their website.

When do these artworks take place? At what moment can the visitor be said to have effectively seen or experienced them? When, then, is this exhibition? Duration and exposure (in its dual sense of display and the wearing away of something) both determines and undermines the forms of all the pieces in the show. They are premised on their fleetingness, instability and, at times, their disintegration. As Matta-Clark knew well, any such artwork raises the question of the conditions under which art is bought and sold, comprehended and historicized, exhibited and collected. In so doing, they refuse the illusion of the transcendent experience of the work of art at the same time as they undermine the logic of the author as its unique activator. There is something impetuous, violent even, about artworks that resist being finished or fully available for visual consumption. Visitors are invited to return to see the show again and again so to experience something of its continuous evolution, but the truth is that it will always escape them because, in between every visit, these artworks—like time—will go on without anyone noticing.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Untitled

1991

The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Courtesy of Andreas Roven Gallery, New York.

Michel Blazy

Rouze, 1993

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Art:Concept, Paris.

Tomo Savić-Gecan

Untitled

October, 2007

Courtesy of the artist.

Gabriel Kuri

The Recurrence of the Sublime

2003

Courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

Oksana Pasaioko

Short Sad Text (based on the borders of 14 countries)

2004–2005

Courtesy of Eros Foundation, Amsterdam.

Johanna Tuurlinckx

Stukjes stukjes en dingen, dingen dingen en stukjes

1994

Courtesy of the artist and Stella.Lotus Gallery, Amsterdam.

invisible logic, Untitled recalls a previous project in which Savić-Gecan changed the temperature of a public pool in Tallinn, an act of censorship that had been the subject of an exhibition in Amsterdam. In both projects, the individuals whose data conclusively makes up the “artwork” are separated in time and space from those who will experience the sensorial—that is to say, properly aesthetic—results of the changing temperature. A second piece, entitled (like all his projects), Untitled (2007), Savić-Gecan declares that the value of the art at any given moment is the artwork itself, and the value is in a continuous process of devaluation throughout the dura tion of the show. Problematising the commodification of the artwork, Savić-Gecan erases the ambiguity between the commercial price and the “art.” If one attaches importance to value, then the piece will have destroyed itself, indeed ceased to exist, at the very moment that the show ends; if, however, one can abstract an artwork from its market price, then Savić-Gecan’s piece will remain an artwork despite its being nothing more than a value, which happens to be nothing.

Oska Pasaioko’s Short Sad Text (based on the borders of 14 countries), (2004–2005), a small sculpture made of soap and strands of sea that marks the contours of several former Eastern Bloc countries, is not physically present in the exhibition. Pasaioko left the sculpture in a public bathroom in Oslo where its soap dissipation might literalize the transformation and effacement of actual borders. No documentation or other evidence tells of the expediency of the work, but a postcard of its pristine original state was made, providing the exhibition visitor with the possibility of a “souvenir” of an artwork they will never see.

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—Elena Filipovic, 2007