

Time is an image is a space is a poem

On *It is...* by Stéphanie Saadé

Fatma Cheffi

Does time escape when a hunter steps on it?
—Etel Adnan¹

It is early in the morning and
later on it becomes late
Never the other way round
though *el tiempo* goes
in circles
—Nouria Behloul²

Tuesday, November 26, 2024. It is just after 8 PM in Paris when an unexpected call brings news to Stéphanie Saadé and me: the family members of an acquaintance have just been killed in the latest massive Israeli bombings of Beirut. Less than eight hours remain until the fateful moment when the ceasefire in Lebanon is scheduled to take effect: 4 AM, November 27, 2024. An hour and a date have been marked on the standardized, universal timeline to make the truce official. Yet the reality on the ground tells a different story. Several violations of the ceasefire by the Israeli army have already been reported in the early hours of the truce. In South Lebanon, war and occupation persist, compounded by the local population's prolonged waiting, during which minutes and hours seem to stretch on endlessly. Such violations are not new in a region long subjected to the tyranny of imperial and capitalist time.

For several years now, Stéphanie Saadé's works have subtly articulated a form of agency within this space-time mutilated by war and conflict. Her works stand in stark contrast to the exogenous rhythm imposed on her country and region, offering an intimate and alternative experience of the passage of time.

The in situ installation *It is...*, currently presented at P////AKT, builds on the series of works that started with *Days Spent Inside Minutes* (2020), a systematic poem on subjective time, developed by the artist

at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the first in a series of paper works that she refers to as "calligrams",³ alluding both to the eponymous poems by Guillaume Apollinaire,⁴ written during World War I, and to the most famous calligram, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance, 1897) by Stéphane Mallarmé.⁵

In *It is...*, Stéphanie Saadé creates a graphic system to write time as we have learnt to measure it. Hours and minutes are written out in full, one by one, following the trajectory of an analog clock's hands, with a 0.5° shift between each minute and a 30° shift between each hour. This protocol materializes as a wallpaper that gradually unfurls across the exhibition space as time is inscribed upon it. The lines of time are gradually transferred onto the walls, saturating the space in a clockwise motion. Visitors are invited to navigate them and extend the artist's gesture by marking the minutes themselves, out of sync with the actual flow of time. Volunteers and visitors also dedicate hours each day to writing time. The result is an interactive, playful work— a collective experience in which time is no longer monetized but becomes an organic, malleable material that the artist shapes.

Saadé constructs a dense image, a dizzying universe of signs—a *total poem* that expands beyond Apollinaire's calligrams. His poems-drawings were a formal innovation for their era, enabling the poet, then mobilized on the front lines of the war, to reconnect with a primordial creative impulse and preserve his humanity in the face of barbarism. By manipulating the arrangement of letters, words, and verses on the page, Apollinaire broke with conventional poetry to create visually fragmented works that reflected his personal experience of war. But whereas he often links the signifier with the signified, Saadé shifts the focus toward the sensory experience of an experimental form that evolves

with each contribution. In that sense, *It is...* belongs to the tradition of concrete poetry:⁶ it is no longer so much about deciphering the signs as it is about contemplating their profusion and losing oneself within them.

In his reflections on play and toys, philosopher Giorgio Agamben asks whether the realm of art might not be “the lumber room for gathering in these ‘unstable’ signifiers, which do not properly belong either to synchrony or to diachrony, either to ritual or to play.”⁷ Ritual, Agamben explains, structures the calendar, while play, by subverting it, opens a space of indeterminacy and potentiality where we are free to experiment and reinvent ourselves, beyond the constraints of social and cultural codes. This “Playland” is what he evokes through the story of Pinocchio, a land where life is entirely governed by play. In this land, the week consists of six Thursdays and one Sunday, and holidays begin on January 1 and end on December 31. Agamben makes this land of toys a metaphor for pure childhood, where being, liberated from historical time, is in perpetual transformation, in a constant state of becoming. This reimagining of Pinocchio is particularly significant for Saadé, as it pertains to the unusual and arbitrary. In *It is...*, the artist plays with both space and time: the latter overlaps with the architecture, which in turn reveals, through the same movement, all the time it can contain according to Saadé’s system: nearly an entire day.

It is... could not be realized without deep, contemplative attention. In its repetition, Saadé’s writing becomes a form of meditation that reconnects with a cyclical conception of time, not as an endless and vain spiral, but as a duration that permits rupture and accident, as they emerge in the long and laborious inscription of hours and minutes.

Separated from her country, her dear ones, or her love, and immersed in waiting, Saadé conceives a machine to count the time prior to reunions or the end of conflict. Her machine stands apart from modern instruments of time objectification: *It is...* restores to time all its depth, its plasticity, and its materiality. *It is...* is undoubtedly part of a broader reappropriation of time, in a world shattered by wars and rapid dematerialization. *It is...* reminds us of the cruciality of art and poetry in reconfiguring a more humane time and rhythm.

— December 2024

1. Etel Adnan, *Le destin va ramener les étés sombres*. *Anthologie*, Points Poésie, 2022, p.37. Translated by the writer.
2. Nouria Behloul, *Poetry is the only way out of here*, Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite, 2022, p.45.
3. The term “calligram” is a contraction of “calligraphy” and “ideogram.” Popularized by Apollinaire in his eponymous collection, it refers to a visual poem in which words and letters are arranged in such a way as to form an image or shape that illustrates the poem’s content.
4. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes : Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre* (1913–1916), Gallimard, 2024. First published by Mercure de France in 1918 and by Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française in 1925.
5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, Gallimard, 1914. The poem was first published in the journal *Cosmopolis* in 1897.
6. Concrete poetry is a poetic movement that emerged in the 1950s, mainly in Brazil and Switzerland. Influenced by Dadaism and abstract art, it emphasizes the materiality of language—that is, the visual and sound aspects of words—while favoring a non-narrative approach. Key representatives include Kurt Schwitters and Haroldo de Campos.
7. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History. The Destruction of Experience*, Verso, translated by Liz Heron, 1993, p.80.

Fatma Cheffi is an independent curator, artist, and Tunisian author based in Paris. She studied art history at the Sorbonne before pursuing a master’s degree in curating and art criticism at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, Lebanon. Her curatorial projects explore the intersections of contemporary art and literature, as well as the politics and imaginaries of language in diasporic contexts. Informed by decolonial theories and experimental literature, Cheffi’s artistic practice often draws from her lived experience and personal writings on language, love, and music. Her work takes shape through installations, objects, performances, and writing workshops.

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