

# WHEN EXACTLY IS THIS DUE?

## MAKING ART AGAINST THE CLOCK

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I'll be the first to admit that I'm a procrastinator. As both a student and a curator, I live by the deadlines in my daybook and often work until the last possible moment to complete projects. I need the pressure of an impending deadline to be productive, but I also wonder if I'm at my best while working against the clock. And I'm not alone in this approach: working within restrictive parameters is the status quo for many students and artists. Whether scrambling to finish a final paper or racing to complete a project proposal, we are all used to meeting deadlines.

This deadline-driven approach to art making is the theme of 'Term Projects,' an exhibition of time-based and process-focused installations by five artists that explores the paradoxical relationship between restrictions and creativity. Working within self-imposed limitations of time, space and materials, artists create works in the gallery space that evolve through the ten-day exhibition. Creating work in situ implies unpredictability because results are determined by the environment. Yet the tasks the 'Term Projects' artists have set for themselves are remarkably structured and in many ways resemble assignments.

Drawing on art historical precedents such as the Fluxus movement and Hans-Ulrich Obrist's *do it* catalogue of "art recipes," these local projects use instructional language to engage viewers and establish the parameters of their participation. As Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July explain on their assignment-based web project *Learning to Love You More*, "The best art and writing is almost like an assignment: it is so vibrant that you feel compelled to make something in response."

In their collaborative project Dear Toronto, Petrina Ng and Shannon Phair assign visitors the task of writing a letter to Toronto. Setting up writing stations in the gallery, complete with customized stationary, they invite viewers to respond to their construction of Toronto and "mail" finished letters in knitted envelopes. As subsequent writers continue to correspond with their version of Toronto, a dialogue emerges between different interpretations of the city and its role in our daily lives. Although the project positions the artists as quasi-professional mediators, their tongue-in-cheek instructional diagrams, *Political Activism for the Apathetic*, raise questions about the effectiveness of community art projects and whether an impetus for civic action begun in the gallery will be carried over into the "real world" of civic politics.

Zeesy Powers' work is likewise concerned with the notion of a professional, service-based relationship between the viewer and the artist. In her performance *I Will Tell You Exactly What I Think Of You For \$5*, Powers sits at a table in the gallery with a hand-made sign and waits for brave viewers to instigate a transaction. Similar to her previous project, *3 Minute Girlfriend* (2007), *I Will Tell You...* conflates two activities that are supposedly separate in daily life: the public business transaction and the personal and intimate conversation between friends. The instructional interaction between the artist/professional and viewer/client is essential to this project and suggests a connection between role-playing in the gallery space and the performative nature of everyday life.

By forcing artists to create work in front of viewers, 'Term Projects' allows for unexpected interactions and provokes a dialogue about the experimental nature of artistic practice. While the "end-of-term" paradigm might facilitate creative potential, allowing artists to try new approaches because the parameters of the project compel them to, it can also foster anxiety. Working to a deadline implies there is something at stake in the work's completion: it *must* be completed, it *will* have a purpose after the deadline passes. Perhaps this investment is the reason so many time related phrases connote a kind of direness or even violence. Being "down to the wire," working "under the gun," and even the word "deadline" itself (which entered the dictionary in 1864 meaning "a line drawn around a prison that a prisoner passes at the risk of being shot") all call up the fear of failure that often characterizes the experience of working within time limits.

Fedora Romita explores this relationship between potential and disaster in projects that highlight the anxiety that accompanies our daily performance of individual identity. For her new video installation, Romita created a performance where she dressed herself from the wardrobe of each gallery staff and walked from that individual's home to the gallery in their clothes and shoes. The resulting documentation, filmed by the individual whose outfit she is wearing, is both funny and awkward, demonstrating the transformative powers of costuming and the anxiety that accompanies our attempts to perform a strange identity: even if only for one afternoon.

Jenn Sciarrino re-locates the humour and anxiety of working under a deadline to the gallery space by creating a site-specific installation and stop motion animation. Informed by her ongoing interest in delicate and meticulously created sculptures, Sciarrino's project involves working with everyday materials like string, paper and pulleys to create stalactites and stalagmites, which she animates during regular "office hours" in the gallery. Limiting her time and forcing herself to work with a new medium, video, in front of viewers, Sciarrino experiments in public, attempting to make a fantastical new creation but risking that she may end up with a ridiculous contraption instead.

Although the idea of failing at a task is daunting, self-imposed deadlines are instrumental in compelling us to take creative risks. Striving to meet a timeline forces an ongoing process of experimentation to coalesce into a final project: a project that is archived as completed work before the cycle begins again and we take on the next seemingly impossible task.