

Tom Morton

In Robert Zemeckis' 1985 film *Back to the Future*, Michael J. Fox inadvertently time-travels from the mid-eighties to 1955. Stranded in the past, he meets his teenage mother, who develops an infatuation with him that threatens his very existence – if Fox cannot persuade her to transfer her affections to his nerdy father, Fox himself will never be born. Racing against the clock (itself a paradox in a time-travel movie), he tries to secure their union, haunted by the spectre of a childhood photograph of him and his siblings which grows increasingly faint the further he gets from his goal. After much to-ing and fro-ing, Fox brings his parents together, and travels back (or is it forward?) to the eighties again. Here he finds that, as a result of his various interventions in his parent's yesterdays, his present-day life has undergone a number of transformations. His previously melancholy mother and father are now a happy, confident couple, his father's long-term nemesis has been taken down a peg or two, and Fox has a new pick-up in his drive and a new sweetheart on the event horizon. The future has saved the past, and the past – it seems – has saved the future.

Zemeckis' film is, in a sense, about maintaining that which has gone before, and by that act improving that which is to come. The past, in *Back to the Future*, is not so much radically rewritten as subtly tweaked. At the end of the movie, the events of yesterday retain the same broad shape as they always did, but Fox's presence in 1955 has had a butterfly effect, his smallest actions effecting significant change over the intervening years. In response to the task set me tonight, and in keeping with this event's title, my proposal is to make only a modest modification (and perhaps, in the end, not even that) to the past, in the hope that this modification will be amplified as the years wear on and the future becomes today.

In my proposed project, the exhibitions, displays, and ancillary paraphernalia with which Tate Modern opened will remain utterly unchanged. The themed floors will remain, as will Louise Bourgeois' Turbine Hall installation, the temporary show 'Between Cinema and a Hard Place' - even the food in the restaurant and the fabric of the gallery guards' uniforms will go untouched. The only proposed tweak to history as it happened is that every piece of text originally displayed in the building at the time of its opening (aside from those that make up part of, or wholly comprise, a work of art) is to be printed in invisible, bio-reactive ink. There are two direct consequences to this. The first is that when my modified Tate Modern opens, it will appear to be a text-free zone. The second is that, as more and more visitors pass through Tate Modern's doors, their physical presence will very slowly cause the ink to darken, and the printed texts to emerge.

Full textual clarity is expected to be reached 47 days after the museum's opening on the 28th of June, 2000, when Tate Modern's original millionth visitor, a 17 year old A-level art student named Laura Horwood from Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, steps into the Turbine Hall.

Let's rewind, for a moment, to the opening night of my Tate Modern. Visitors to the private view will arrive in Southwark clutching seemingly blank invitation cards. Looking up towards Herzog and De Meuron's lightbox, they will see only illuminated glass. After being handed a blank programme by a security attendant (who, of course, will be wearing a blank name-badge), they will make their way to the gallery's exhibition spaces, where they will be confronted with room after room of 20th century art and, here and there, with squares of blank white paper fixed to the walls. Moving from one section of the themed collections displays to another, it is only the juxtaposition of one work with another that will suggest whether they are passing through 'Still Life, Object, Real Life' or 'History, Memory, Society'.

The next day, when the gallery is open to the public, visitors' experience will be somewhat similar. Those who wish to pay to see 'Between Cinema and a Hard Place' will be issued with blank tickets, late-coming journalists will be issued with blank press releases, and diners in the café and restaurant will be issued with blank menus. Slowly, however, as the weeks go by and the body heat and air-borne skin and sweat particles of the gallery's audience act on the bio-reactive ink, pieces of text will begin to emerge, a reversal – in every way – of Fox's disappearing family snapshot in *Back to the Future*. Tate employees responsible for tracking visitor behaviour will find these gradually materializing texts a useful resource. The darker the wall caption, the more popular the exhibit; the darker the logos on the branded napkins, the more popular the coffee concession. A history of attention will be imprinted upon the institution itself.

My proposed modification of Tate Modern involves a temporary loss, but also perhaps a long-term gain. In the 47 days it will take every one of the gallery's texts to achieve full clarity, the public will have a unique opportunity to view Tate Modern's exhibits unimpeded by notes on authorship, date or provenance, or any interpretative spin. Curatorial filters will still be in place (to position even one work next to another is a curatorial filter of sorts), but these will stand and fall on the strength of their visual impact and conceptual savvy, rather than a pre-emptive written apologia. Lacking any contextualisation apart from other examples of their kind, artworks from across the 20th century will have a rare opportunity to breathe, to occupy – if only for a few weeks – the contemporary. For the curious visitor, information about the exhibits must be gained through on-site conversation or off-site study, promoting sociability and independent learning. For British citizens (for whom, after all, the Tate holds its collection in trust) these wordless days offer the

nearest thing possible to seeing 'their' property in the manner of a moneyed collector – how many collectors, after all, choose to garnish works in their possession with a panoply of interpretative texts? For Tate Modern's corporate sponsors, whose names and corporate indents will also be temporarily out of site, my proposal is a chance to reflect on the impact of their generosity unclouded by self-interest, a chance to think through what the concept of 'giving' really means. Finally, for Tate Modern, deprived of its fuzzy-edged logo, these 47 days will be a time in which to consider what really lies at the heart of its brand.

Once the bio-reactive ink on the institutions texts has become fully visible, history will, in a sense, have reset itself. On a visual level, what we will be left with is what we had prior to my time-travelling intervention – Tate Modern as it was on its original opening day. Change, however, will have taken place. For a brief moment in time, new mental and experiential spaces will have opened up, pointing to and perhaps producing new pleasures, new freedoms and new responsibilities. Like Michael J Fox's Delorian time machine, my proposal will have left the imprint of its tire treads on yesterday and tomorrow.

Roy Lichtenstein 1923–1997
Born and worked USA
Whaam! 1963
Acrylic and oil on canvas
Purchased 1966
T00897

Like other Pop artists of the 1950s and 1960s, Lichtenstein looked for inspiration from popular culture, and found it in the graphic art of the comic strip. Whaam! is based on an image from All American Men of War, published by DC Comics in 1962. Lichtenstein was interested in the way that such a violent and emotionally charged subject could be conveyed using a detached, almost mechanical painting technique. Though critics complained that Lichtenstein simply copied his source material, in fact it is significantly altered to create a more stylised image.

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