

# Speed Limits

David Rifkind

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Canadian Centre for Architecture (May 20 to October, 12 2009) and The Wolfsonian-Florida International University (September 17, 2010 to February 20, 2011).

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Figure 1

Clock, Pirelli tire, c. 1950

Designer unknown

Manufactured by Junghans, Schramberg, Germany

Rubber, metal, plastic

The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida

TD1992.137.1

Photo: Silvia Ros



The recently closed *Speed Limits* exhibition at The Wolfsonian-FIU was prompted by an anniversary: the centenary of F. T. Marinetti's "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909). Yet the exhibition is intended less as a commemorative event and more as a critical interpretation of western culture in relation to a single, overarching concern. Curator Jeffrey T. Schnapp framed the show and its accompanying publication around a central theme—speed—which serves as the point of departure for a series of meditations on the very nature of modernity. While Schnapp takes pains to argue that speed alone does not explain the vast range of cultural production over the past hundred years, he makes a compelling case for telling the story of modernity in relation to this elusive concept.

The exhibition appeared at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) (May 20 to October 12, 2009) and The Wolfsonian-Florida International University (September 17, 2010 to February 20, 2011), and most of the materials displayed are drawn from the two institutions' collections. The exhibition's source material conditions its conceptual structure. Architecture and design weigh heavily in this narrative, as do the ephemera of visual and material culture that Schnapp uses to construct a social history. At times the limitations of the two collections affect the show's arguments; yet a strength of the CCA/Wolfsonian collaboration is the exhibition's success at including works by prominent designers alongside the anonymous production of everyday artifacts.

Schnapp, the Pierotti Chair in Italian Literature at Stanford University and the founder of the Stanford Humanities Lab, is a

gifted curator with an eye for the common thread that binds high culture and quotidian life. While trained as a Dante scholar, Schnapp has spent much of the past two decades studying the forces that propelled modernism. *Speed Limits* draws on his deep expertise in Italian Futurism, but the exhibition is not restricted to this avant-garde movement. Rather, he has put forward a broad study of modernity inspired by, yet not limited to, Marinetti's proclamation of "a new beauty: the beauty of speed."

The rapid pace of modern life brings with it a compulsion to measure and represent speed, and the exhibition opens with a room dedicated to this theme. Communications, transportation, commerce, warfare, and tourism all provide examples of the ubiquity of speed and the corresponding urge to arrest the fleeting. A series of mechanical objects—several clocks, an anemometer, a machometer, a pedometer, a metronome, and a radar gun—illustrates the twin concerns with quantifying and recording the ephemeral. Some of these devices, along with such accompanying artwork as a Tullio Crali *aeropittura* painting, demonstrate another long-time concern of the visual arts and design disciplines—namely, the need to represent rapid motion in static objects (a concern visible in the streamlined Art Deco architecture of the Wolfsonian's Miami Beach neighborhood). Yet Schnapp also introduces the important counter-theme of resistance to speed through the inclusion of a 50-minute excerpt from *Empire*, Andy Warhol's 8-hour film of the Empire State Building, which makes clear from the start that speed has also always been understood in relation to its opposites and its absence.

Another film clip—this one taken from Frank Gilbreth's motion efficiency studies of American workers—accompanies the second theme, efficiency. Here, Schnapp focuses on moments of knowledge transfer in which disciplines translate insights gained from other contexts. Christine Frederick, who adapted Taylorist industrial efficiency methods to home economics, appears here, though in the guise of her 1925 book, *Efficient Housekeeping*, rather than her landmark 1919 work, *Household Engineering*. Frederick's legacy is demonstrated through photographs of two projects—JJP Oud's design for the kitchen in his 1927 Weissenhof houses and Le Corbusier's kitchens for the Unité d'habitation; both are shown juxtaposed against the ultra-efficient transportation-sector kitchens that inspired them.

Nowhere are the exhibition's limitations more acute than in the room devoted to efficiency. The Canadian Centre for Architecture and The Wolfsonian-FIU have incomparable collections, but they are not comprehensive, and so Schnapp has limited source material with which to weave a complex set of narratives. It is instructional to see Oud's kitchen compared to one of the Zeppelin galleys that inspired it, but it is misleading to use a photograph of the LZ129 (Hindenburg), which postdates the house in Stuttgart. The same is true of the extraordinary images of a Boeing 707 galley, gathered

as research material by Le Corbusier after 1957; they are presented with his sketches of cookware and a kitchen, all of which appear alongside Lucien Hervé's photograph of the Unité kitchen, which preceded them by half a decade. Nonetheless, Schnapp's argument is an important one: that modern architecture's interest in efficiency, standardization, and serial production are tied to larger societal concerns with speed.

Architecture also dominates the exhibition's third theme, construction, which provides several contexts through which to consider the overarching question of speed. One perspective has to do with attempts to quicken the construction process through prefabrication and standardization, as illustrated by a 1920s Sears, Roebuck and Co. brochure, *Ready Made Buildings*. Another comes from the unintentionally uncanny effect of stop action animation created through documentary photography of construction processes, which draws on a strength of the CCA collection. As quickly as these buildings were erected, however, the modern world has found even faster ways to bring them down, and the room dedicated to construction includes video loops of building demolitions via implosion and rapid disassembly.

A great strength of the exhibition is Schnapp's interest in provoking critical reflection through the juxtaposition of historical scholarship and contemporary artistic practices. In the fourth theme, pace, the curator sets aside the archival material and approaches the question of speed through a pair of video installations that compare natural and artificial movement. A video projected onto the floor in triplicate portrays human movement at numerous speeds, including by foot, bicycle, automobile, airliner, and Saturn V rocket. This sequence (presented as a 55-second loop) contrasts with Alain Laforest's 28-minute video, *Snails in Motion*, which portrays three gastropods embodying the epitome of slowness. A mirrored wall opposite the one on which the snails are projected creates a space of contrasting paces, in which the museum-goer's attentive ambulation is seen as one of numerous tempos and provokes contemplation on the relative nature of speed. As the wall text aptly explains, "what counts as slow depends upon what counts as fast."

The room dedicated to the fifth theme, circulation and transit, includes an alcove containing nine slender, black monoliths, each holding an iPad. The devices play recursive loops of simulated car races through cities (including London, Quebec City, and Tokyo) seen from the driver's perspective. The extraordinary speed at which the streetscapes pass in and out of the frame of view defamiliarizes us with these familiar places and illustrates just how much our perception and memory depend on the pace of experience. The materials presented here—from Virgilio Marchi's 1919 *La città di cemento* to Norman Bel Geddes's publicity film for General Motors at the 1939 World's Fair—reinforce Schnapp's argument that the increasing speed with which we move at metropolitan and

regional scales produces a form of knowledge inextricably linked to modernity. At the same time, the inclusion of Gordon Matta Clark's 1974 work, *Anarchitecture (Train Derailment)*, demonstrates the fragility underlying our dependence on technologies of circulation and transit.

*Speed Limits* concludes with a room that examines the physical and mental limits of human speed. On one wall, Usain Bolt runs the 100m sprint at Beijing, both at full speed and in slo-mo. The two side walls—one presenting a dizzying loop of Erik Akkersdijk solving a Rubik's cube in the world-record time of 7.08 seconds, the other displaying six plates from Eadweard Muybridge's 1887 studies, *Animal Locomotion*—include strips of mirrors that fragment these images and intersperse them with the viewer's own reflection. Behind a fourth wall (displaying stimulants and sedatives), the exhibition ends with the 1982 Federal Express commercial, *A Fast-Paced World*, featuring speed-talker John Moschitta, Jr.

The exhibition's design plays a significant role in its success. Miami architect Rene Gonzalez designed the installation at The Wolfsonian, which differed significantly from the version seen at the CCA (designed by Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan). Gonzalez explores the idea of pace through a series of graphic notations on the floor and walls against which the viewer measures her progress through the galleries. At times, these notations become three dimensional in the form of display pedestals and, in the room dominated by the projections of snails and traffic, a bench at which to pause and reflect on the pervasiveness of speed. Schnapp edited the accompanying publication, which replaces the conventional exhibition catalog with a collection of texts meant to supplement and expand on the discussion initiated in the galleries. Ten commissioned articles that consider different implications of the show's theme and an anthology of historical writings are sandwiched around a "visual essay" composed by Schnapp. The first section, titled "Speed Writings," includes fascinating pieces by an impressive range of scholars from numerous disciplines. The anthologized works in "Speed Readings" give a historical context to the exhibition through excerpted texts that document two centuries of anticipation and anxiety provoked by the theme of speed. Schnapp's provocative "Rush City: A Visual Essay" presents some of the exhibition's most compelling (and least well known) material, interspersed with condensed texts that are as richly insightful as they are brief. The book version of *Speed Limits* is a valuable documentary resource that serves as a critical complement to the exhibition.

Together, the book and exhibition make the case that the increasing speed of movement, communication, and commerce has affected every aspect of social and individual life since the advent of the industrial revolution. Schnapp presents a complex portrait of speed in its many guises—as velocity, swiftness, rapidity, simultaneity, ephemerality, and urgency—contrasted against the

moments of slowness, traffic jams, and obsolescence that further reinforce the concept's centrality to our engagement with the world. Yet, speed is by no means an exclusive explanatory device for the great transformations of western societies over the past three centuries, a point Schnapp concedes forthrightly. One could argue that the changes in epistemology and ontology provoked by scientific and geographic exploration have had just as epochal an effect on human consciousness, in a manner better described through other conceptual frameworks. Nonetheless, *Speed Limits* offers a compelling study of modernity, refracted through the lens of its most pressing attribute, speed.