

The time of my life.

Here is one definition of time:

The second is the duration of 9,192,631,770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the caesium 133 atom.

That is the official definition of the second used by The International System of Units, the organisation that defines seven basic universal units, also including the metre and the kilometre.

Here is another definition of time:

Man: Well, it's like this: supposing I were to sit next to a pretty girl for half an hour, it would seem like half a minute ...

Einstein: Braffo! You haf zee ideah!

Man: ... but if I were to sit on a hot stove for two seconds, then it would seem like two hours.

This is dialogue taken from a cartoon by Sidney Strube, an editorial cartoonist who worked for England's *Daily Express* in the 1930s, which attempted to describe some of the ideas within Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

Here, then, are two definitions of time: one with ambitions of universality and objectivity, and another deeply connected to personal, subjective experience. Both seem compelling definitions (though someone would need to explain 'the ground state of the caesium 133 atom' to me), however even more compelling, for me, is the vacillation that seems to happen between the two. Time does seem to be characterised by both objective and subjective qualities. Time is shifty: it does seem to stretch and condense, to go fast and then slow. And this mercurial quality of time can be both exasperating and exhilarating. How can that relentless hour spent wriggling in the dentist's chair or bored out of your tiny mind at some stultifying job really be the same as that oh-so-fleeting hour spent sitting drinking wine on the first sunny day of the year with the recently returned love of your life. One seemed to drag on forever; the other hardly even noticed, a mere wisp. How to reconcile this fickle nature of time? How to even define time? My favourite definition comes from St Augustine of Hippo (written a long time ago somewhere around 354-430). St Augustine cleverly – and somewhat cryptically – observed: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.' For when you are 'in time', embedded within it, time just is. But to explain it, to measure it, find the beginning and ends of it, and, worse, to account for it, is to contend with a riddle.

Stop the clocks

'A minute in the world's life passes! to paint it in its reality! and forget everything for that. To become that minute, to be the sensitive plate ... give the image of what we see, forgetting everything that has appeared before our time.' (Cézanne)

This lovely passage by Cézanne speaks of his ability to be exhilaratingly free of the concerns of time

through the practice of his art. Somehow art has a transcendent ability to place the painter thrillingly 'out of time'. Through his painting, Cézanne can stop the clocks and 'become that minute'. This passage speaks of an ability to be radically free, to disconnect from the dizzying complications of time and to care not that 'a minute in the world's life passes'. This is an unencumbered experience of time, a way of being present in the moment. It also speaks eloquently about a common motivation of artists, a desire to be 'the sensitive plate' and to leave an imprint or indelible mark that attests to being. Art can be a testimony that proves the *that-was-there-ness* of both the artist and the subject, and many artworks can seem a somewhat paradoxical meditation both on what is and what has ceased to be. Both these compulsions – to 'become that minute' and 'to be the sensitive plate' – exist in Jeremy Bakker's practice. Both desires thread themselves insistently throughout his practice.

Perhaps the longest durational work of art has been made by the maverick conceptual artist John Cage. Cage's *Organ²/ASLSP (As SLOW as Possible)*, a composition written in 1987 for the organ, is currently clocking in at an astounding 639 years. The work was an extension of the original *ASLSP*, a piano piece that was to be played, in a direction typical of Cage, 'as slow as possible', which usually meant durations of up to 70 minutes. For this second iteration of *ASLSP*, Cage omitted to specify 'exactly how slow the piece should be played' and also specified that it be played on an organ. This was an interesting provocation because organs, apparently, can play forever – unlike the rest of us, they never run out of puff. The decision to play for 639 years was made by a committee of musicians and philosophers who decided the length based on a nice synergy with the venue in which the work was to be performed. The organ on which the work was to be played, in St. Burchardi church in Halberstadt, Germany, was built in 1361, 639 years before the proposed start date in the year 2000. The length of 639 years, then, enabled a nice equidistance. With the year 2000 acting as the fulcrum, the work looked satisfyingly both forward and back. The composition sounds like a long, breathy – but breath-defying, because of its length – sound. Every now and then (every few months? years?) there is a tonal modulation, and this – almost absurdly – seems like major compositional event.

The sense of expanded duration has similarities with English artist Danny Hillis' *Clock of the Long Now*, often titled the *10,000-year clock*. Hillis' *Clock of the Long Now* is designed to be able to keep perfect time for 10,000 years. This is no mean feat – time is not uniform, and cannot be easily and neatly carved up. To keep perfect time for 10,000 years is to accomplish a complex mathematical formula that takes into account leap years and other tricky tricks of time. Describing his aims, Hillis said: 'I want to build a clock that ticks once a year. The century hand advances once every one hundred years, and the cuckoo comes out on the millennium. I want the cuckoo to come out every millennium for the next 10,000 years. If I hurry I should finish the clock in time to see the cuckoo come out for the first time.' The artist did indeed hurry and was able to have the, literally, once in *his* lifetime opportunity of witnessing the cuckoo come out. At midnight on New Year's Eve, the *Clock* chimed twice, the cuckoo came out, and the time changed from 01999 to 02000. (And, also, the world did not blow up as predicted by Y2K doomsayers, safety ensconced in their bunkers, rifle at the ready.)

Building a clock with such an expansive notion of time is a kind of provocation, one aimed squarely at our culture with its short-term and throwaway mentality. While earth is estimated to be around [4.54 billion years](#) old, in a mere few hundred years we have had a catastrophic effect on the earth. As custodians, we can't seem to think beyond our children's children, let alone 10,000 years or [4.54 billion years](#). Hillis' *Clock of the Long Now* asks us to – literally and metaphorically – take the long view. And,

also, the high road – it warns us that we need to do better, to cause less damage. The *Clock of the Long Now*, by its very title, encourages us to reconceptualise our sense of ‘Now’, to broaden it out and to think long and hard about what we leave after us. This is not dissimilar to Bakker’s work *Absorbed*, which is a kind of plaid carpet of the many ‘Nows’, if you will, which similarly provokes questioning around conceptions of time and our experience of it. This reframing of our human sense of temporality, is nicely summed up by Brian Eno, who writes of the *Clock of the Long Now*:

Such a clock, if sufficiently impressive and well engineered, would embody deep time for people. It should be charismatic to visit, interesting to think about, and famous enough to become iconic in the public discourse. Ideally, it would do for thinking about time what the photographs of Earth from space have done for thinking about the environment. Such icons reframe the way people think.

Thinking through relations between time and art also bring to mind the conceptual Japanese artist On Kawara. Kawara’s *Today Series*, often called the ‘date paintings’, comprise a series of minimalist paintings on which Kawara records the date on which the painting was made in simple white lettering on a black canvas. He has been doing so since 1966. His work is an extended – and very elegant – meditation on time, a simple but uncompromising statement about temporality. The project seems even more compelling because Kawara refuses to comment on it: the works exist as strangely silent testimonies to time, a kind of contemporary art version of Stonehenge. Kawara is also uncompromising in his process: if a painting is not finished by midnight, he destroys it. There is both a lightness and a heaviness in his practice, and the works also, intriguingly, have both a minimal and a maximal quality. They feel to me like an art version of a time-machine, able to shunt you, the viewer, back and forth along time’s highway. They prompt you to wonder, what you were doing on a random day? What were you doing on, say, January 22, 1987? Is there a series of dates listed before you were born? And, even more eerily, projecting into the future, what day do you imagine as the day of your own death?

Go gentle into that good night.

Jeremy Bakker’s work contributes to this lineage of artworks that meditate upon time. They variously consider both the small moments and the big questions to do with time. Writing about his work, Bakker has described his process as capturing ‘fleeting moments subjectively experienced’. The works do attest to his presence across time; often they exist as gentle, even spectral, resonances of him. *Iteration*, for instance, is a collection of hundreds of the artist’s thumbprints pressed into white wax, and then delicately pinned on a wall or placed atop a lightbox that illuminates them beautifully. They are as gentle and insubstantial as petals, but also strong and insistent as an index of Bakker. They attest, undeniably, to his specific presence, just like the fingerprints that police use to ‘nick’ criminals.

The artworks also attest to the time taken to make them. They literally embody time: like the whittled sticks made by old timers sitting on porches, they ‘while away the time’. Looking at *Collected Ends: 6365 Full Stops*, a work constructed by carefully cutting (and counting) all the full stops, 6365 in total, out of Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, it is impossible not to think about the time invested in the making of the work. Similarly, the act of writing ‘Now’ thousands of times over as in *Alone Together* is a time intensive procedure that, in a manner both mocking and anxiety inducing, perverts notions of ‘now’. Bakker’s very act of mark-making implicitly carries the idea of time passing, it is his labour spent, the work is the index of minutes in his life passing.

Sometimes the effect of his practice is to give a subjective experience of time passing, as in *Absorbed*, in which the artist has listened to the radio and the TV and faithfully transcribed the information, handwriting the overheard and random commentary to create a large canvas that looks like a plaid blanket. The 'blanket' attests to the time taken in making it, and the effect is almost funny in its implication of 'can you believe I spent my time doing this?'. *Iteration*, however, works differently. It is more about memorialising little moments in the artist's life. The work seems to quietly and beautifully say, 'I am here'. Sometime, the effect is less about experiencing subjective time and more about wrapping your head – in some kind of stoner moment – around some larger concept of Time. *Collected Ends: 6365 Full Stops* makes me think about eternal time: about where does the universe end, or when did time begin? Questions about time that are as big and deep as the universe itself. That little stoppered bottle seems to hold infinity. Similarly, *Resonate*, created out of little cones, each with a belly-button at the end, seems to unfold time. The effect could be dizzying – a kind of vertigo – but the way the artist has installed the work, a beautiful curved room created out of white plaster, enables a sense of intimacy and a kind of peace to accompany the work.

In search of lost time

'... you are there somewhere alive somewhere vast stretch of time then it's over you are there no more alive no more then again you are there again alive again it wasn't over an error you begin again all over more or less in the same place or in another as when another image above in the light you come to in hospital in the dark'.

Samuel Beckett *Comment c'est (How It Is)*, 1961.

Time. Did you spend it wisely? Did you spend it well? What did all that time amount too? Was it 'quality time'? What are your regrets? What were your fatal turns, the choices that led you to dead ends? Where did you get stuck? Where did you 'lose time' in wastefulness? Why did you spend so much time in that unfulfilling job, that terrible relationship? Why didn't you just follow what you wanted to do? Where would you be now if you did follow that other path? What were the fortuitous twists, the happy coincidences, the 'thank God I was there at that time' happenstances? Is there really a time for everything? How are you having the time of your life?

I admit to having a problem with time. I am one who has sometimes lived not wisely, but too well in that I have crammed too much stuff in. I am stupidly busy, my time is hyper scheduled, and often I am running to catch up (even now as I write this, I am over deadline). I appreciate the effect that Jeremy's work has on me: it stops me in my tracks. It is determined to slow me down. His work does require mindfulness, quietness and contemplation (which is in contrast to a world hell bent on going faster, ever faster). I like that he puts the brakes on. I also appreciate their gentleness. Rather than build bombastic artworks, full of bravado, Bakker's work – rather like himself – are in praise of gentleness. They tread lightly upon the earth, and speak kindly to the soul. The rhythm that attends them is a sort of gentle ebb and flow. They do not rage, rage against the dying of the light, they don't thrash about, fending off death but paradoxically effecting some display of death-throws. They go gentle in that good night. They admit to the fact of temporality: that this, and you, shall pass. I appreciate them also for that.

And so. How to sign off? Perhaps – as so often when dealing in matters of time and existence – the best words have been shaped by Samuel Beckett: '... it's time it ended ... and yet I hesitate, I hesitate to ... to end.'

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