

# Anti-clockwise: Building a critical mass against clock time

**Helga Schmid and Kevin Walker**

**Author Accepted Manuscript (Postprint) PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation:**

Schmid, H. and Walker, K., 2020. Anti-clockwise: Building a critical mass against clock time. *Art & the Public Sphere*, 9(1-2), pp.39-61.

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/aps\\_00032\\_1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/aps_00032_1)

ISSN: 2042-793X

Publisher: Intellect Books

*© Ingenta, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in [Art & the Public Sphere, volume 9, issues 1-2, pages 39-61, 2020, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/aps\\_00032\\_1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/aps_00032_1)*

**Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.**

# Anti-clockwise: Building a critical mass against clock time

Helga Schmid | Kevin Walker

*Art & the Public Sphere*, Volume 9, Numbers 1-2, 1 December 2020, pp. 39-61(23). [https://doi.org/10.1386/aps\\_00032\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/aps_00032_1)

Received 6 Nov 2020

Accepted 23 Nov 2020

*This is a pre-print version which may contain errors.*

## Abstract

‘Uchronian Critical Mass’ exploits the historical opportunity the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantines has opened up to question societal time systems, which can conflict with natural rhythms, leading to adverse effects on mental and physical health. We describe an experiment in which participants step outside societal time, choose their own time-giver and live by it for up to one week. As an experiment in artistic research grounded in science, we specifically enlisted fellow artists and asked them to document their experiment using any chosen means. The results were unexpected social and spiritual qualities, evidenced increased concentration and productivity and drew attention to aspects of societal time generally taken for granted by introducing non-linear temporal elements. The experiment impacted each artist’s working practices and subsequent work. Collectively, the results show the potential of artistic practice to influence a broader questioning of societal time through multisensory means, highlighting the unique role artists hold as outsiders to lead the way in forming creative approaches to social and political issues.

Keywords: uchronia, *Zeitgeber*, time, COVID-19, quarantine, experiment

## Introduction

The time before COVID-19 was increasingly described as a ‘time crisis’ or *dyschromia*, characterized by a disruption of the rhythms that humans have shared with natural processes and other people (Han 2017). Following the worldwide adoption of electrical lighting and common time standards over the past few centuries, increasing automation and the partitioning of work into shifts has pushed most of the ‘developed world’ further away from natural rhythms (Crary 2013). Automation of much manual work has increased leisure time during the past century, yet most people still feel ‘pressed for

time' (Wajcman 2015), and the increasing replacement of manual labour with 'knowledge work' has created a primarily sedentary society (Levine 2014).

Digital technologies have simultaneously disrupted and cemented our complete enslavement to clock time. Already in the 1970s, Jeremy Rifkin described 'computime' as the 'final abstraction of time and its complete separation from human experience and rhythms of nature' (1989, p.9). Now our laptops and phones are synchronized to a global network of timing mechanisms, which ironically are related to natural, physical processes – the regular oscillations of quartz crystals and caesium atoms. Mobile phones in particular enable social synchronization protocols such as 'approximeeting' (Plant 2001), yet constantly tie us to the network, always on and available to others, including employers, such that boundaries between work and home have completely dissolved. Crary ties this 'relentless capture and control of our time' to accelerated, intensified consumption, reshaping our perception and experience, disabling collective memory and reducing the range of our responses to the formulaic (2013: 40).

But where Crary and others (e.g. Rosa 2013) see constant acceleration, philosopher Byung-Chul Han sees rather an atomization of time, a *dis-continuity*. Acceleration requires direction and a trajectory, and instead, according to Han, '[t]he present is reduced to the point of currentness. It no longer lasts' (2017, p.5). This contrasts with the century-old views of Dunne (1929) or Bergson (1889), whose notion of the continuous presents as *durée*, which cannot be represented visually. As a result, according to Han:

There are no stable social rhythms or cycles to unburden the individual's temporal economy. Not everyone is capable of independently defining their own time. The increasing plurality of temporal sequences irritates the individual human being and asks too much of it. The lack of pre-given temporal structures does not lead to an increase in freedom, but to a lack of orientation.

(Han 2017: 32)

Can we step outside of clock time, the same way a shift of perspective can show us alternative spatial dimensions, as in Abbott's *Flatland* (1884)? According to Chakravarty, '[t]he narrative of time that we choose to believe not only has profound implications on our own selves, but on the planet where we live' (2018, p.pag).

## **From time crisis to health crisis**

It took a global pandemic for many of us to realize that the non-stop society we have unwittingly created involves constant activity and consumption. Subsequent stress, overwork and lack of sleep result in physical consequences ranging from depression and obesity to cancer and a lower life expectancy (Roenneberg et al. 2013).

Under quarantine, reports surfaced of people sleeping better, losing track of the time and day and feeling more in touch with natural time-givers like daylight and birdsong. For many, time became meaningless (Love 2020). Many started questioning

previous working patterns – why travel on crowded public transport just to sit in front of a screen in a featureless office?

Most governments, in order to strike a balance between public health with economic disaster, have issued vague advice for employers to stagger work and travel times, and for people to work from home when possible. Economic imperatives are of course intimately linked to time protocols – Marx ([1939] 1973), for example, saw the physical conditions for exchange, which were enabled by communication and transport as the annihilation of space by time, the constant continuity of circulation.

But also during quarantine, the increasing colonization of our time and space by screens that Crary already observed in 2013 suddenly became complete, when work and school as well as leisure and shopping all migrated online.

## **Our approach**

We do not propose going back to an imagined agricultural idyll, rejecting all technologies and institutions. On the contrary, technologies such as mobile phones and practices such as remote working and flex-time can enable many people to live according to their own chronotype – the bodily characteristics, tied to age and preferences, that make each of us a ‘lark’ or ‘owl’ or something in between.

All of organic life on Earth are fundamentally based on time, dependent on rhythm to set processes in motion, and oscillation mechanisms are found in many of our cells and organs (Facer-Childs et al. 2020). The human circadian rhythm is based primarily on the light/dark cycle. But a specific cultural temporality becomes deeply encoded in each person during childhood, and from that point onwards, the perception of time becomes part of one’s personality as if no other temporality exists.

Chronobiological research (Roenneberg et al. 2003) has found that misalignment between external time cues (e.g. light/dark), social and work schedules and the natural body rhythms can exacerbate adverse health effects. The World Health Organization recently classified shift work that disrupts circadian rhythms as a carcinogen.

Recent research (Facer-Childs et al. 2019) shows that sleep timing patterns can be reset with beneficial effects, and positive interventions can be done in people’s homes during social distancing (Facer-Childs et al. 2020). Co-author Schmid (2020) has identified seven daily bodily phases associated with the circadian rhythm, based on chronobiological research and workshops conducted with a wide range of participants. Each bodily phase has characteristics and durations specific to each individual, but is generally associated with ideal bodily postures and lighting characteristics, natural daylight being the primary external time cue (Figure 1). This research has shown the potential for interventions that address these issues, by aligning cognitive and physical activity, sleep and rest patterns with individual chronobiology as well as natural and artificial time-givers such as the colour and intensity of light.

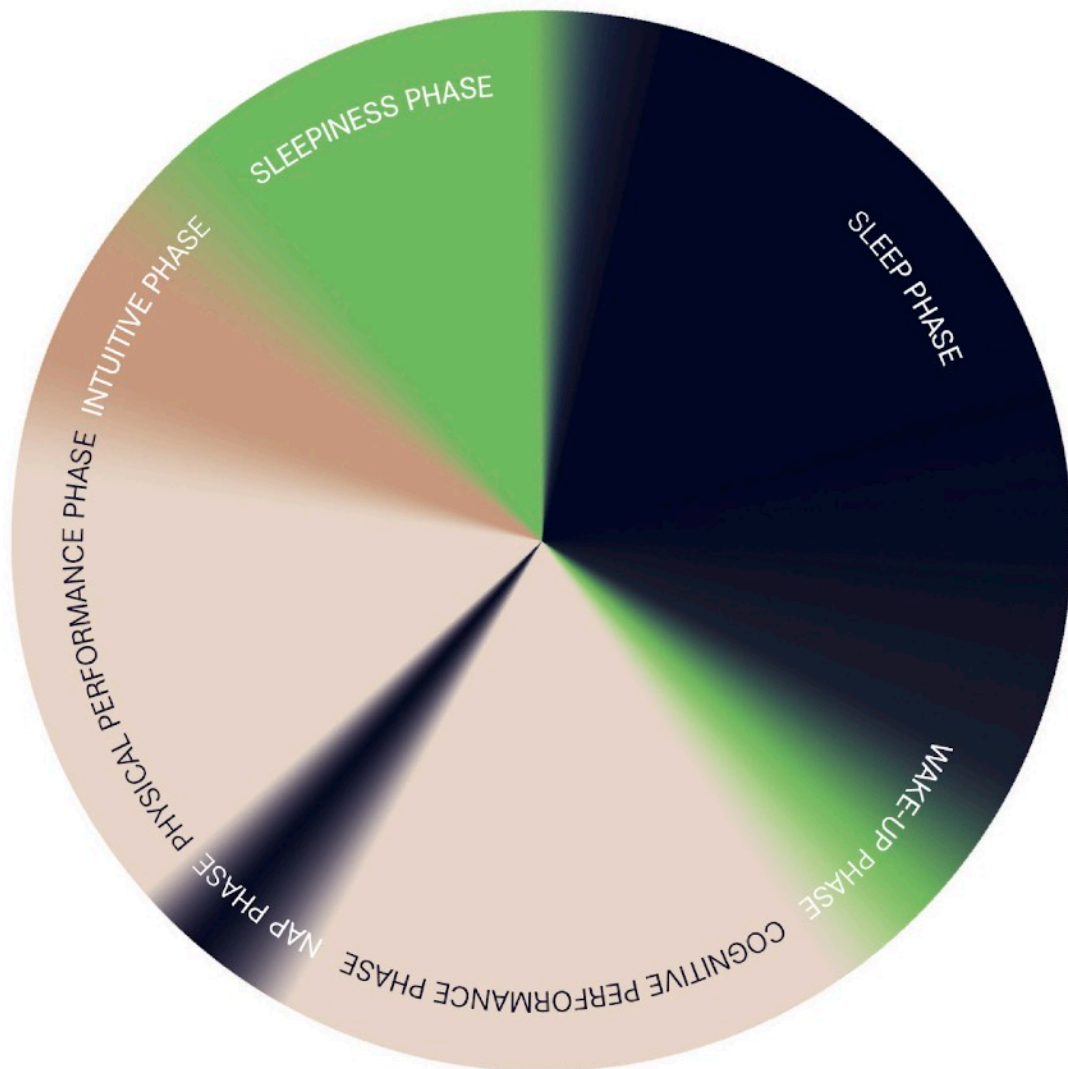


Figure 1: Helga Schmid, *Circadian bodily phases*, 2017, © Helga Schmid

## The role of artistic practice

However, we are not scientists, nor do we hold a positivist notion of design as aiming to solve the world's problems; rather, we agree with Bratton (2016), who believes that the role of design in the twenty-first century is primarily to undo many of the problems it caused in the twentieth. We operate across art and design, addressing the temporal through critical spatial practice. Indeed, spatial practice is always temporal, and in fact we believe that it does not make sense to think about concrete, static things but instead to consider every thing as temporal and temporary. Furthermore, we believe artistic research

is as valid as scientific research in generating new knowledge, and given the role of positivist science and engineering in many of the world's most pressing problems, we believe that critical artistic approaches are urgently needed to work with and against scientific research.

Accordingly, we believe in working across disciplines; for this strand of our research, we work with chronobiologists and sociologists. We consider ourselves both artists and designers, and most of our work is conducted in collaboration – not only between us, but also with other artists, architects, designers, programmers, engineers, etc. We also both teach across art and design, and consider the boundaries between research, teaching and practice to be fluid: we learn a great deal from our students, and they sometimes become collaborators.

Many artists have approached the topic of time, not only in time-based media like sound, moving image and durational performance. The artist duo Annie Vigier and Franck Apertet (*Les gens d'Uterpan*), for example, expose and disrupt shared social rhythms in impromptu urban performances that resist documentation (Vigier et al. 2017). For three years, artist Fiete Stolte lived according to an eight-day week he devised, which comprised 21-hour days, during which he shared time zones with people in other parts of the world. Among the many artists who have deconstructed or redesigned the clock, Ruth Ewan revived the French Republican Calendar, creating a 10-hour clock with each hour 100 minutes long, and installations based on the natural items used to represent each day of the year – the calendar was indeed originally created with artists and poets as well as horticulturalists

For our part, co-author Schmid creates immersive installations around various topics related to time. Walker uses long-duration drawing as an exploration of both time and space, sound work that aims to distort temporal perceptions, and curatorial practice structured explicitly around varying spatial and temporal scales. We have both engaged in performance, and have both worked with a wide range of participants and co-creators. We both use the bodily phases developed by Schmid to structure our days. Working together, we have used the bodily phases to curate public events at the Design Museum and Somerset House in London, most recently in February 2020.

Shortly after that, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the United Kingdom in its spread around the world. The resulting mass quarantines and the necessity for changing working and travelling patterns created a unique opportunity to rethink time systems on a large scale. This prompted us to revisit experiments conducted previously by Schmid (2020) in which participants devised and lived by their own time systems.

## **‘Uchronian Critical Mass’ experiment**

The term *Zeitgeber* (German for ‘time-giver’) was introduced to the science community by the chronobiologist Jürgen Aschoff, in experiments relevant to contemporary quarantines. Over 25 years, Aschoff isolated 446 people in two apartments embedded

inside a mountain in Bavaria, shielded against every external time cue: light, sound, vibrations and electromagnetic variations. He then measured body temperature, urine output, sleep–wake cycle and physical activity of the participants, and asked them to keep an in-depth diary about their physical and psychological well-being. After a short period of adaptation at the beginning of the experiment, most of the participants described the isolation as a very productive time, some even talked about an extended existence (Roenneberg 2012).

From this research, Aschoff identified *Zeitgeber* as entrainment signals: a *Zeitgeber* causes an impulse for a biological oscillator to react and synchronize to external rhythms (Foster and Kreitzman 2004: 245). For instance, one of the main influences on the human body is light, and therefore the daily day-and-night rhythm serves as a strong time-giver. This process can be compared to a swing, with the ‘pusher’ as external time-giver to the ‘swinger’ (Figure 2).

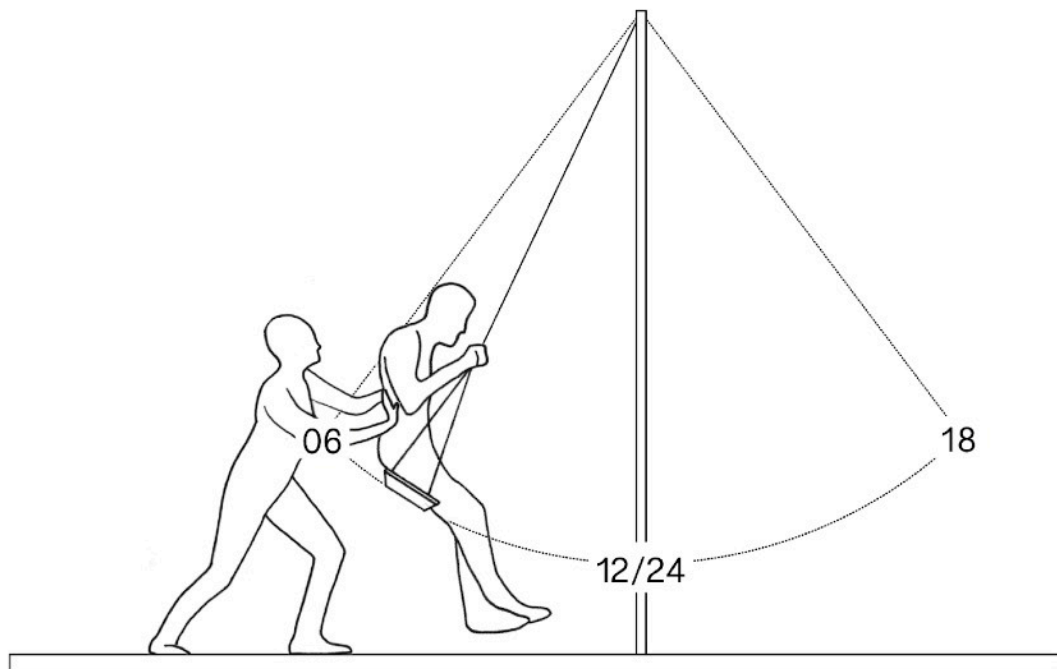


Figure 2: Helga Schmid, *The effect of external time-givers on chronobiological entrainment*, 2017, redrawn from Roenneberg, Daan and Merrow (2003). Drawing © Helga Schmid.

Schmid utilized the *Zeitgeber* concept as an *un-learning* technique, taking a cue from artist Olafur Eliasson (2012) who has suggested that we need to ‘un-learn’ our relations to space. To un-learn notions of time, Schmid has run experiments in various countries and with a range of participants, in which they devise their own time-giver, then hide all other time cues as much as possible and live according to their chosen time-giver

for a specified duration (typically from 48 hours up to one week). Participants are encouraged to document their experiment, and interesting forms of documentation have emerged when running these experiments with art and design students, such as collaborative knitting, large-scale collaborative drawing, manifestos and moving image works. As in Aschoff's experiments, many participants reported these times as highly productive, and often wished not to return to societal clock time (Schmid 2020: 90).

Therefore, during the quarantines brought by COVID-19, we conjectured that people would be uniquely willing and able to undertake similar self-experiments, and we decided to initially enlist postgraduate art and design students to create compelling outcomes that might act as an evidence base for engaging the wider population. This follows our general strategy set out above in which artistic research is employed to address (not solve) societal issues. The title of this project, 'Uchronian Critical Mass', therefore refers to building a critical mass around which alternative time systems might be discussed, disseminated and enacted more broadly – 'critical' also referring to a critique of existing time systems, and 'mass' suggesting large-scale participation. *Uchronia* is a derivation of 'utopia' rooted in the Greek words, meaning 'no' and 'time'.

For the experiment, participants are asked to step outside societal time and develop their own temporal system more suited to a chosen rhythm. Participants develop and live by their own time-giver in their own home for between 48 hours and one week, documenting the experiment through any chosen medium. We specifically set the following brief for self-selecting participants:

1. Set aside Monday to Friday (ideally) or at least 48 hours.
2. Pick a time-giver for this period of time. Develop your own time-giver (*Zeitgeber*), something that replaces clock time. It can be based on natural rhythms, the body, other mammals, technology, etc. For example, the time-giver could be a deck of cards and a set of rules – drawing a card could mean a change of activity, and the card indicates the length and type of that activity.
3. Plan the experiment in as much detail as you can, and document it in a way it suits you (video recordings, writing, sound recordings, drawings, photography, etc.).
4. Inform your network about the experiment (e.g. telling them directly, setting an automated e-mail, Instagram message) so they don't expect timely replies from you.
5. Remove yourself from clock time (tape over the time on your phone, computer, microwave, etc.).
6. Prepare things like food beforehand if necessary, so you don't need to leave your own temporal bubble (except if this is part of your time-giver). The less external interruptions, the better.
7. Do it and enjoy the temporal freedom. Stay safe and in your comfort zone!



‘Uchronian Critical Mass’ was initiated on 1 May 2020, with a live-streamed video presentation from London by Schmid who introduced the project, delivered the brief and answered questions from interested participants. She separately delivered the brief in person to students in a Master of Visual Arts course at LUCA School of Arts in Belgium, who undertook the project during quarantine as a part of their studies, in collaboration with Z33 gallery, where Schmid was concurrently showing her own work in the exhibition *The Work of Time*. Together, we communicated with participants and managed the documentation as it was completed, conducting some follow-up interviews.

## Results

We describe the reflections and documentation of four participants in the experiment. All agreed to be included, and we collected additional information on their reflections on the experiment, and how it influenced their work afterwards.

Larissa Nowicki



Figure 3: Larissa Nowicki, *Daytime view of the window as time-giver*, 2020. London,. Photograph © Larissa Nowicki.

Larissa Nowicki is an artist and designer, and a Ph.D. student at the Royal College of Art, London. Her practice mixes book design and graphic design with weaving, including

cutting up and weaving the pages of old books to create artworks. For her experiment, she chose her bedroom window as time-giver, simply giving up clock time and letting the light of day and night guide her time. This was helped by exceptionally good weather in London during the May lockdown, and a ‘supermoon’ clearly visible on cloudless nights (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Larissa Nowicki, *'Supermoon' outside the window*, 2020. London.  
Photograph © Larissa Nowicki.

‘Day one, morning afternoon I don’t know’, she wrote in an online diary, ‘but I do what I do when my time belongs to me’ (5 May 2020). She found the experiment productive, and the lockdown especially connected her with her houseplants.

It's all about a stitch, keeping time, counting time, losing oneself in time, letting time pass, the duration of time [...] but who's keeping track? The potato's growing and the postcard behind it reminds me of a place where I was highly aware of my time in the rugged landscape of North Dakota, time past.

(Online diary, 6 May 2020)

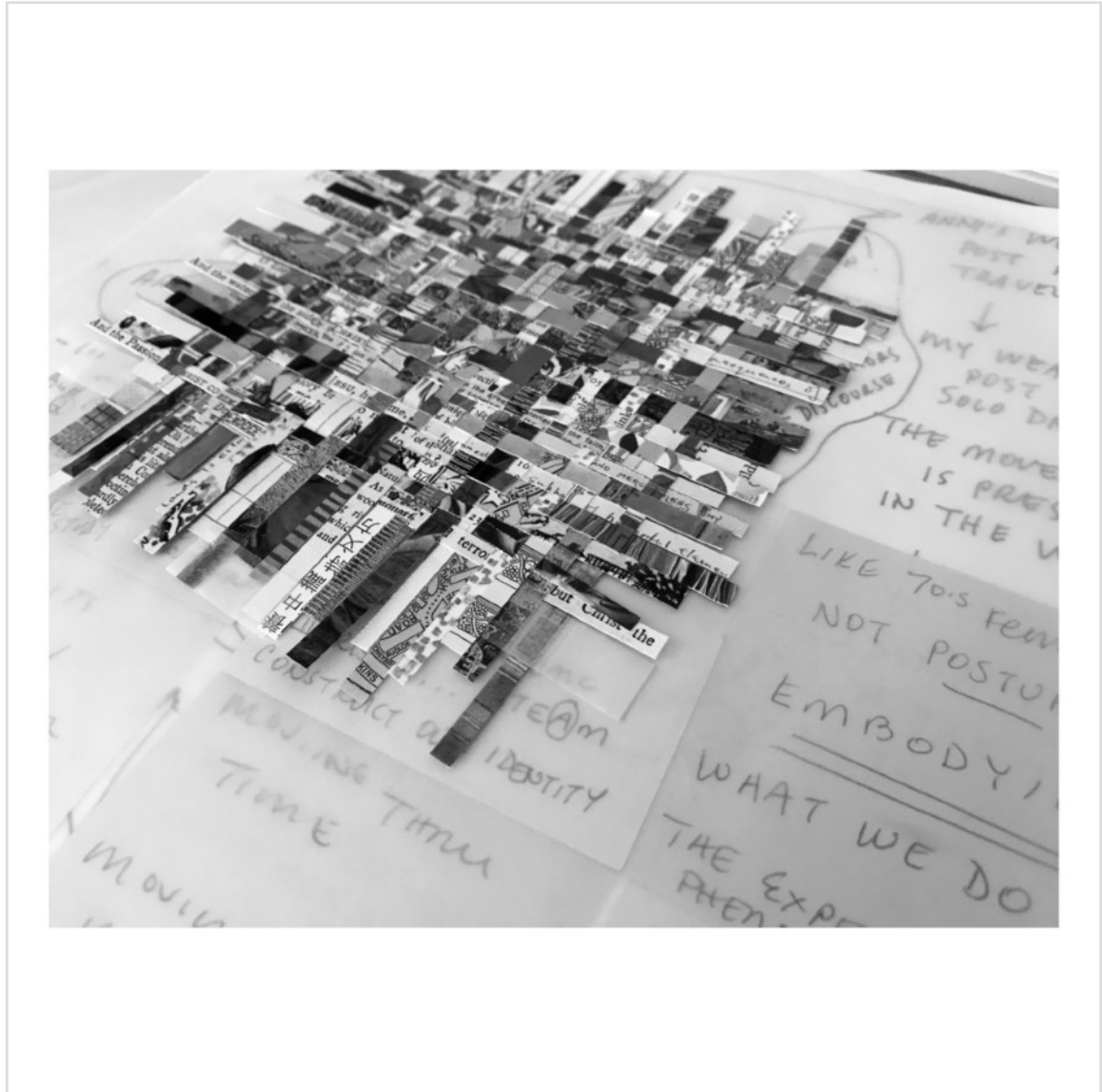


Figure 5: Larissa Nowicki, *Weaving* created during the experiment but unrelated to the topic and not as documentation of the experiment, 2020. London. Photograph © Larissa Nowicki.



Figure 6: Larissa Nowicki, *Plant*, 2020. London. Photograph © Larissa Nowicki.

Like most people who step outside clock time, she faced the challenges of coordinating with others:

Previously went for a walk at specified time, and timed it. How to know when it's 3 p.m. for zoom? I've got places to go and people to see, only I can't tell them exactly what time I'll get there.  
[...]

Day three brings the interesting challenge of planning to meet up with friends. Social distancing poses some challenges but we've started to become accustomed to it. When I explained I was not adhering to any time or schedule that added a new layer of strange to these weird days of Corona virus.

(7 May 2020)

She concluded the experiment by reflecting on these challenges:

Is it time lost or time gained? Eventually everything that once seemed other-than becomes more familiar, a new normal.

[...]

I think it was fairly easy to live without time in a lock down situation. The greatest challenge came when I had to interact with others. Time is a construct but it's also a language, a tool, a connective device, a part of being. The irony is I thought way more about time and my relation to the clock while I was out of time more so than I ever do when I'm in time. The unexpected finding was the observation of how many coincidences there can be in a day which may have profound impact on our thoughts and actions.

(8 May 2020)

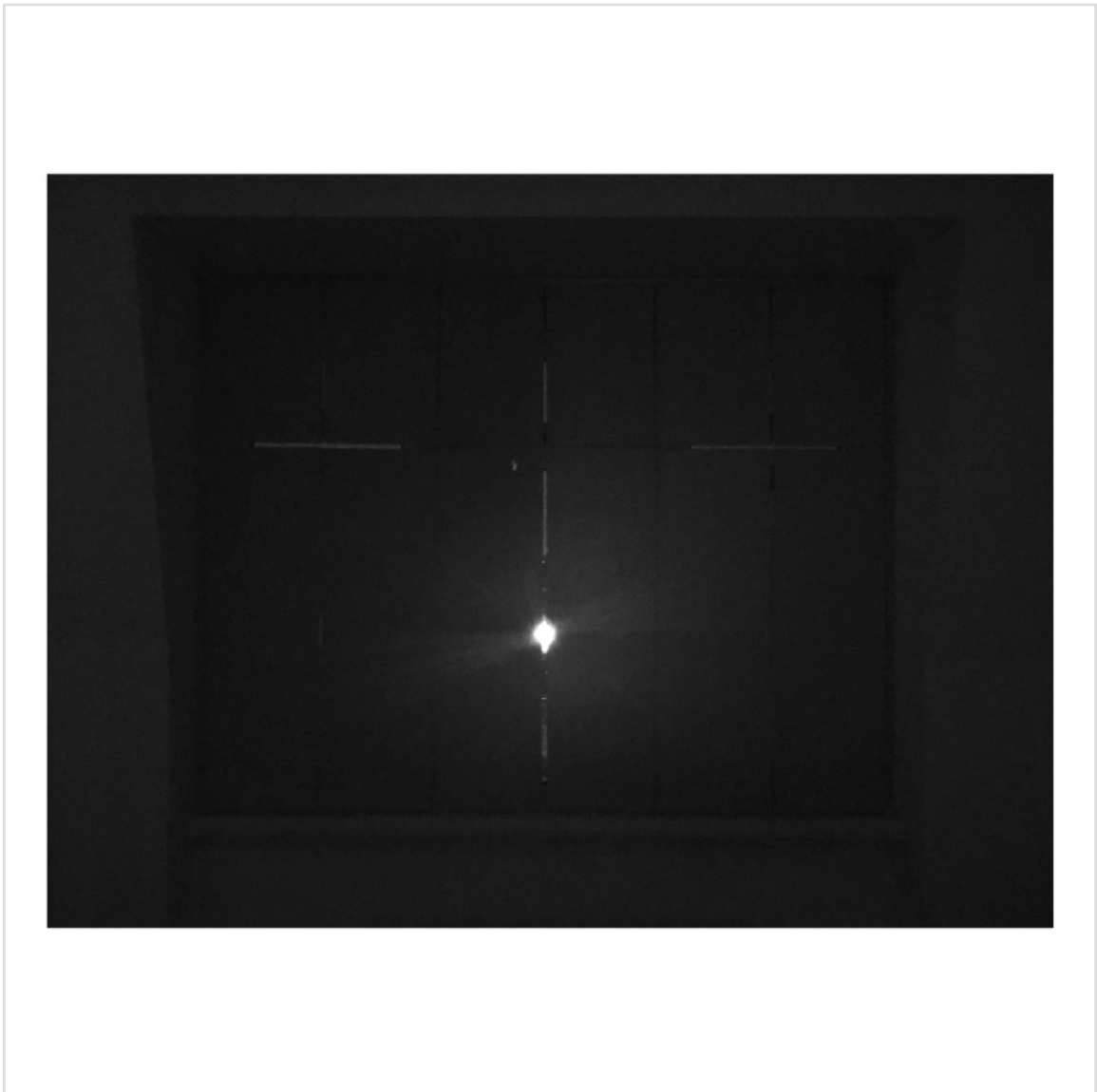


Figure 7: Larissa Nowicki, *Night-time view of the window with 'Supermoon' as time-giver*, 2020. London. Photograph © Larissa Nowicki.

Her experience reflects that of others in past experiments who became obsessed with knowing the clock time; in previous experiments, participants would be isolated in remote or unusual locations with their phones and other time devices taken away. In diaries, they frequently guess the time.

## Lore Sannen

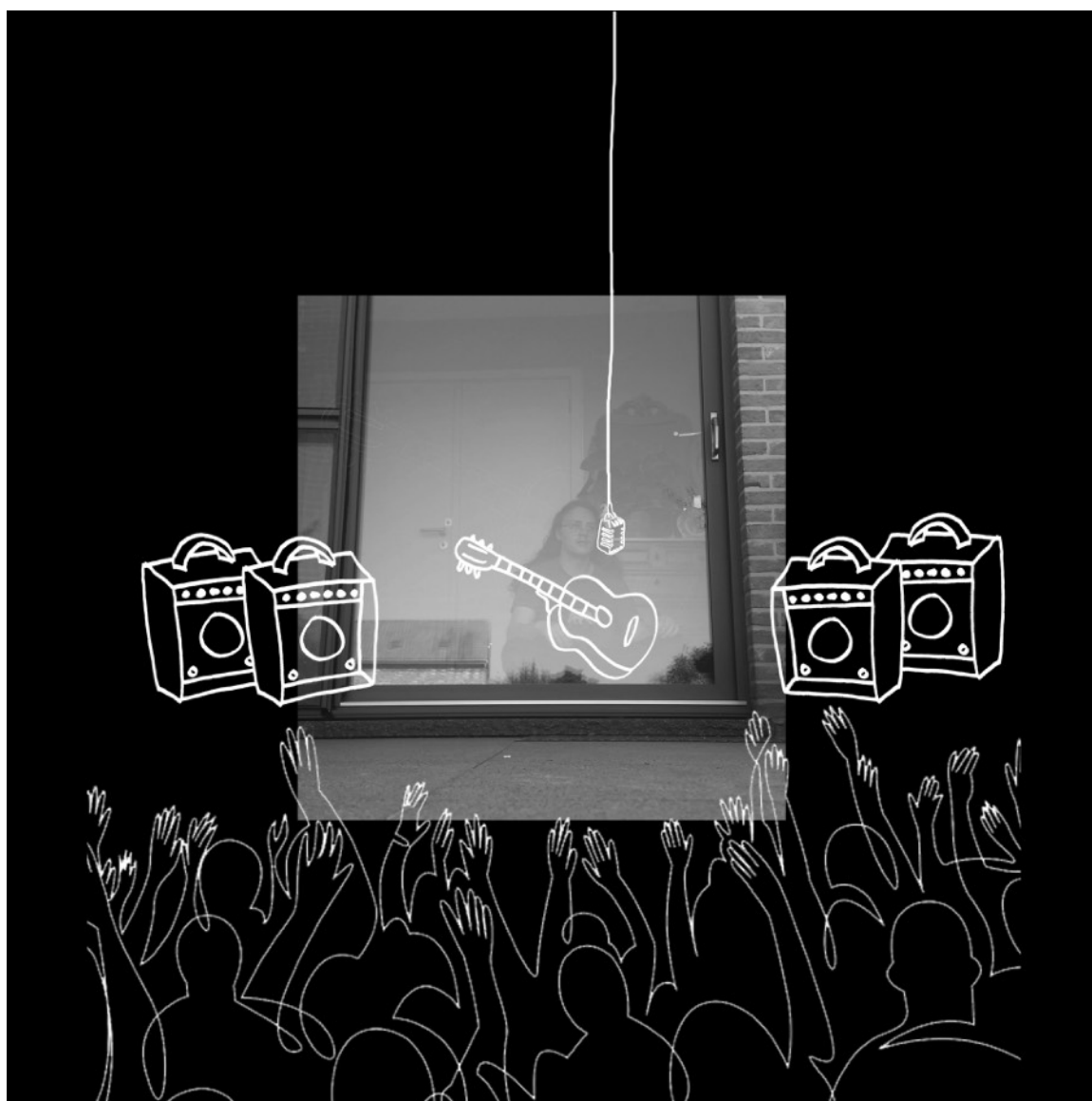


Figure 8: Lore Sannen, *Lennert: Wants to share his guitar skills with his friends again*, 2020.  
Photograph © Lore Sannen.

Lore Sannen is a photographer who completed the experiment during master's study at LUCA School of Arts. She began the experiment with the intention of locking herself in a room, only eating and sleeping for 48 hours and asking friends to follow what she was

doing. But in the event, Sannen found it exceptionally difficult simply to isolate herself in a room, and abandoned this idea. She wrote, 'I have realized that friends and being around them are very important to me'.

Following the themes of isolation and anxiety, she then visited her friends outside their homes and photographed each through a window, asking them what they most missed in isolation and what they intended to do when quarantine ended. Based on their responses, she drew on top of the photographs, and intended to exhibit them in a black box. She called the project 'Box of Expectations'. A selection of her photos, with captions, is presented here (Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 9: Lore Sannen, (a) *Britt: Wants to be able to go back on vacation with her friends.* (b) *Karen: She regrets not being able to go to the scouts anymore and misses the campfire.* (c) *Milan: Wants to go back to the skate park!* All: 2020, Ghent, Belgium. Images © Lore Sannen.



## Maïté Denolf



Figure 10: Maïté Denolf, *Site of an 'outside sound' from video documentation*, 2020. Eindhoven, Netherlands. Image © Maïté Denolf.

Maïté Denolf is a designer and interior architect, currently studying for master's degree at Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands. Her work is strongly material but incorporates elements of performance. She was already interested in the topic of time when we started our experiment, being inspired by social psychologist Robert Levine, who argues in the book *A Geography of Time* (2006) that the goal should be to try to live in a “multitemporal” society, in which we move back and forth among natural time, event time, and clock time. This of course resonated with our own understanding, and Denolf was eager to participate in the experiment.

For her time-giver, she chose external noises (those not made by herself). ‘It sounds strange’, she wrote in an e-mail, ‘but these sounds help me to work. It makes me think I have to work because others are working. But this is maybe too much because of the clock-time society’. For her experiment, she classified sounds into ‘manmade’, ‘nature’ and ‘people’, following an article (Bones et al. 2018) suggested by Schmid. When she heard a sound, she would structure her actions as follows:

**Manmade:** drilling, construction work, church bells  
Action: Only use digital devices

**Nature:** pigeon, wind, bir[d]s  
Action: Only work analogue (working with paper, drawing pencil, reading ...)

**People:** talking laughing, footsteps, Skype call  
Action: maintenance, housekeeping, eating, drinking, cleaning, sleeping



Figure 11: Maïté Denolf, *Site of a 'digital sound'* from video documentation, 2020. Eindhoven, Netherlands. Image © Maïté Denolf.

Upon hearing each sound, she undertook one of the related actions until hearing a new sound, and if the new sound was in the previous category, she continued her current activity. But after a chaotic first day, she simplified this, to instead continue on one activity until she heard the same type of sound again. She wrote, '[e]xample: When I hear footsteps (People) I start cleaning (maintenance) until I hear the sound of people talking (people)'. She went further to associate specific actions with specific sounds:

Pigeon noise: make fast drawing from w[h]at I hear  
Hearing someone laugh: drink a glas[s] of water  
Hearing doorbell ring from neighbours: Make a video (for documentation) and sound record

Undertaking the experiment for a full week, she found (unsurprisingly) a difference in activity between weekdays and weekends:

In weekdays/workdays, mornings start with a lot of mechanical sounds: construction workers, people starting their cars to go to work [...] In weekends/holidays, mornings start more with bird sounds, neighbours drinking coffee outside, etc.

Another difference is the duration and frequency of the sounds. During workdays, sounds became more frequent, so I choose my activities to be 'smaller': taking out the trash, putting pencils back, browsing Instagram, eating unhealthy snacks. On weekends I was: reading a book, cleaning my closets, baking pie ...



Figure 12: Maïté Denolf, *Site of a 'nature sound'* from video documentation, 2020. Eindhoven, Netherlands. Image © Maïté Denolf.

The experiment also affected her spatiality as well as temporality:

To make sure the experiment went smoothly, it was clear that when switching to other activities I needed to know exactly what I was going to do. This resulted in me using different rooms or areas in my home to do the activities. For example, when I needed to work analogue I was on my sofa and when I was working digitally, I was in my workspace.

This aligns with our previous work that maps bodily phases to different rooms. This was done at the event we co-curated at Somerset House, and Schmid (2020) had designed, with architects, a bespoke experimental living space following this approach.

On reflection after the experiment, Denolf wrote:

Living with a soundscape from your surroundings as a time-giver makes you function at the same pace as your surroundings [...] I noticed my activities were producing the same amount of noise and rhythm as the observed sounds from the soundscape. Working Digitally, I was typing harder when drilling noises were too loud. Working analogue, I tried to listen to bird sounds. Some sounds were pleasant to listen to, while other weren't and I would try to block them out. This is reflected in the activity.

Despite a chaotic start, by the end, she had settled into a particular rhythm and found it surprisingly satisfying:

For some reason, my concentration became better. I realised not visually seeing the passing of time made me focus more on the essential and made me enter a flow state, where I forgot to listen to what was happening around me.

But to be fair I think unconsciously I still have a connection to the rhythm that is related to the sound.

[...]

It also feels like I am restricted in my freedom almost like I am in a religion. I had to think of how orthodox Jews don't use electronic devices on Shabbat.

## Elise Corten



Figure 13: Elise Corten, *The Time Givers*, 2020. Ghent, Belgium. Photos © Elise Corten.

Elise Corten is a photographer already with several exhibitions and publications. Like Denolf, she conducted the experiment at her home, while completing her MFA at LUCA. She covered all windows to make sure she was not influenced by daylight. She then asked someone to be her time-giver, dictating occasional tasks, 'like for example, now it's time to do some yoga or meditate', she said in an e-mail. 'Majority of the day I would fill in myself but sometimes that time giver would tell me to take a certain action, like eat or drink'. She wrote after the experiment:

Very quickly I entered into a state of drowsiness. I felt tired and very relaxed. I slept a lot and upon waking felt very much connected to my inner self. I totally lost count of time, it is interesting how quickly we adapt to a new r[h]ythm. This new state of being actually gave me a lot of new inspiration. I started to question our time system and how we live according to it.

As a photographer, she said she uses her camera not only to document the world around her but also to ask questions, and this fed into a new body of work done after the experiment. ‘Within this work I focused on how layers of the past linger in space and affect the energy around us. I am very interested in how we give meaning through documentation of our surroundings’. The resulting series of photographs, called *The Time Givers*, is soon to be exhibited; a selection is included here (Figure 13). Corten describes the work in a statement:

The everyday life is wounded by the rupture between human and world. Humans are far removed from their natural world. We have lost touch with our internal tempo and live in a permanent state of routine. The experience of the spiritual needs to take place in order to give back the meaning of existence. Science denies these practices and relationships, but perhaps, as Borges said, ‘in the architecture of the universe there are unreasonable cracks that we cannot explain’. It is a search for the spiritual, the invisible transitions of everyday life and experiences that go unnoticed. I am mainly interested in the idea of how layers of the past might linger in space and affect the energy here today. The photographs were made out of a desire to connect visible spaces with those that exist within ourselves. In this, I propose a metaphoric interpretation of an image that moves between mind and the unconscious.

## Discussion

We believe the work collectively shows how the mass quarantines of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a broad new questioning of societal time systems. As artistic work it contributes new knowledge which cannot only be expressed linguistically, and this in turn reflects the value of artistic knowledge production. We identified the following themes:

### Time and spirituality

The religious connotations, which emerged in Denolf’s and especially Corten’s projects, were unexpected but unsurprising. Han (2017) follows Max Weber ([1905] 2002) in identifying Protestantism in contributing to a work ethic, which values ‘timeliness’ and productivity, where work can be seen as a spiritual activity, and time is equated with both work and money (Han 2017: 96). This is particularly relevant as the experiments we have described took place in traditionally Protestant, Northern European countries. But Han identifies ‘spirit’ alternately with his call for a *vita contemplativa*, a contemplative life counterposed to the *vita activa* he says dominates today. The experiments we describe here, along with the ones conducted previously (Schmid 2020) provide evidence that explicitly stepping outside societal time seems to foster contemplation.

Relatedly, we have worked with another philosopher, Federico Campagna, who combines theology with metaphysics. In his book *Technic and Magic* (2018), he looks beneath the level of ideology (e.g. capitalism) to the level of ontology, and similarly to Han, sees our current reality system as grounded in rational language, in which the only

things that can legitimately exist are those that can be described as units in serial production, e.g. a forest as 'timber'. A talk he gave at our last event was titled, 'When time stops', and posited that within this reality system, time is understood as a linear but has segments, and thus finite points when one segment ends and another begins; he sees our current time segment as coming to an end. Such a sense of a world coming to an end, and the need for alternative perspectives, has increased along with climate change, political unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing from mystical theology, Campagna proposes an alternative reality system in direct opposition to the current one, which values every thing for its own unique existence, not in terms of its essence, which groups and classifies things. Such existence of things, he says, is ineffable – it cannot be described in words. In this way, the work presented here, like much artistic knowledge, resists a complete description or analysis.

## Place as time, time as place

Quarantines suddenly made our interiors vital and visible, as evident especially in the work of Denolf, Nowicki and Sannen. We were reminded of artist and critic Brian O'Doherty, who in his book *Inside the White Cube*, describes the effects of the 'unshadowed, white, clean, artificial' spaces of the art gallery, in which art 'exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period" (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbo-like status: one has to have died already to be there' (O'Doherty, 1986, p.15).

Private homes are different from this. Light and sounds coming through a window impart a distinct temporality, and non-human occupants like plants and mould, when attended to, reveal their own timescales, which overlap with humans' (Uribe Forés and Walker 2019). To consider place as temporal is to equate the temporal present with spatial presence; therefore 'existence' as described above, is not a static quality. 'Emplacement', according to Lisahunter and Emerald, 'understands place as an "event", an "entanglement" of all components of the environment such as "geological forms, the weather, human socialities, material objects, buildings, animals and more"' (2016, p.31).

If time, in a rational ontology, is linear, we can see non-linear qualities in the alternate time systems of the work described here, for example, in coincidences mentioned by Nowicki, and seeming randomness in Denolf's experiment. While such experiments can sometimes start off chaotically and take unexpected turns, this can be balanced by contemplation and concentration, as described by Denolf in response to sounds; this contradicts with recent advice given for people working at home: to minimize ambient sounds, even to use earplugs to create further distance from the environment (Brown 2020). Denolf's novel approach to sound echoes artist Sarah Sze's (2017, n.pag) call (following Sontag [1966]) to 'recover our sense of time through tactility – through materials, through texture, through the senses'.

## De-synchronization

In Corten's experiment described above, she used another person as an external time-giver to assign tasks at random times. In previous experiments run by Schmid, participants have chosen another person as their time-giver. This is often unconsciously the case with couples who live together, who purposefully coordinate the timing of activities such as eating and sleeping. But participants in previous experiments took this further to mimicking gestures, habits and micro-level behaviours often taken for granted. When the partner is of a different gender or in a different time zone, this raises questions and complexities. Tsing defines rhythms as forms of temporal coordination (2013: 131).

Conversely, several participants mention the challenges of adopting an alternative time system in isolation from others. In physics, Rovelli (2018) follows Einstein in stressing the relativity of time: since each observer perceives time differently, time is best characterized as a network of events in which time itself does not matter (indeed does not exist), and only the relations between events matter. Time, he concludes, is what matters to us (Rovelli 2018, p.19).

Here we would be remiss if we did not return to the politics of societal time. Not everyone has the luxury of making a drawing every time they hear a pigeon, or locking themselves away for 48 hours; we acknowledge that children, pets, health conditions and survival needs act as necessary time-givers for many people. Artists occupy a privileged position, in that our society permits them to operate outside of social norms, and we expect them to question and challenge our perceptions. Yet even before the pandemic, companies were granting more flexible hours and allowing work from home, and this has been accelerated. As discussed, however, increasing temporal sovereignty sometimes comes with a price, for example in zero-hour contracts or 'gig economy' jobs.

We also recognize that if everyone lived by their own time-giver, this could indeed lead to social chaos. But the participants discussed in this article show their strong desire for connection, not only to their environment but to other people. Therefore, exposing and stepping outside societal time constructs opens up the potential for synchronization protocols, which are social, not societal – for example when Corten chose who should act as a time-giver, or when Sannen visited friends' windows.

We also recognize that contemporary society requires many levels and types of synchronization to maintain social cohesion and communication, and to transport people and things. But we believe that much of this has become a culture of convenience, which has sacrificed other values and resources. By stepping outside societal time, our participants ironically paid more attention to it, exposing societal time as a fundamental phenomenon we take for granted but which can have adverse effects on our mental and physical health and raising the possibility of alternatives. Whether or not our historic time segment is coming to an end, artistic practice can help to communicate aspects of time we cannot put into words, but which can help us to unlearn, and recover, time through our senses.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all our participants in the latest experiment, and to Z33 curator IIs Huygens, and Annick Geenen and Lieven Segers at LUCA who helped support and judge the projects there.

## References

- Abbott, Edwin (1884), *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, London: Seeley & Co.
- Bergson, Henri (1889), 'Time and free will: An essay on the immediate data of consciousness', Ph.D. thesis, Paris: University of Paris.
- Bones, Oliver, Cox, Trevor J. and Davies, William J. (2018), 'Sound categories: Category formation and evidence-based taxonomies', *Frontiers in Psychology*, **9**, p. 1277.
- Bratton, Benjamin (2016), 'On speculative design', *DIS Magazine*, 10 February 2016, n.pag., <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/81971/on-speculative-design-benjamin-h-bratton/>. (Accessed 21 Dec 2020)
- Brown, David (2020), 'Coronavirus: How to be happier while working from home', BBC News, 17 November, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54886125>. (Accessed 21 Dec 2020)
- Campagna, Federico (2018), *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Chakravarty, Arnab (2018), 'Unwinding the clock', *Adjacent*, vol. **4**, n.pag., <https://itp.nyu.edu/adjacent/issue-6/unwinding-the-clock/>. (Accessed 21 Dec 2020)
- Crary, Jonathan (2013), *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London: Verso.
- Dunne, John. W. (1929), *An Experiment with Time*, 2nd ed., London: A. & C. Black, Ltd.
- Facer-Childs, Elise R., Middleton, Benita, Bagshaw, Andrew P. and Skene, Debra J. (2020), 'Human circadian phenotyping and diurnal performance testing in the real world', *Journal of Visualized Experiments*, 2020:158, doi:10.3791/60448
- Facer-Childs, Elise R., Middleton, Benita, Skene, Debra J. and Bagshaw, Andrew P. (2019), 'Resetting the late timing of "night owls" has a positive impact on mental health and performance', *Sleep Medicine*, **60**, pp. 236–47.
- Flanagan, Alan, Lowson, Elizabeth, Arber, Sara, Griffin, Bruce A. and Skene, Debra J. (2020), 'Dietary patterns of nurses on rotational shifts are marked by redistribution of energy into the nightshift', *Nutrients*, **12**:4, p. 1053.
- Foster, Russell G. and Leon Kreitzman (2004) *Rhythms of Life: The Biological Clocks that Control the Daily Lives of Every Living Thing*, London: Profile Books.
- Han, Byung-Chul (2017), *The Scent of Time*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Levine, James A. (2014), 'Lethal sitting: Homo sedentarius seeks answers', *Physiology*, **29**:5, pp. 300–01.
- Levine, Robert V. (2006), *A Geography of Time*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications.



- lisahunter and Emerald, Elke (2016), 'Sensual, sensory and sensational narratives', in R. Dwyer, I. Davis and E. Emerald (eds), *Narrative Research in Practice*, Singapore: Springer, pp. 141-157.
- Love, Shayla (2020), 'Time is meaningless now', *Vice*, 10 April, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7qyev/time-is-meaningless-now> (Accessed 21 Dec 2020)
- Marx, Karl ([1939] 1973), *Grundrisse* (trans. M. Nicolaus), London: Vintage.
- O'Doherty, Brian (1986), *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, San Francisco: Lapis Press.
- Plant, Sadie (2001), *On the Mobile: The Effects of Mobile Telephones on Social and Individual Life*, Schaumburg, Ill, US: Motorola Inc.
- Rifkin, Jeremy (1989), *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Roenneberg, Till (2012), *Internal Time: Chronotypes, Social Jet Lag, and Why You're so Tired*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Roenneberg, Till, Allebrandt, Karla V., Mellow, Martha and Vetter, Celine ([2012] 2013), 'Social jetlag and obesity', (published correction appears in *Current Biology*, 23:8, p. 737), *Current Biology*, 22:10, pp. 939–43.
- Roenneberg, Till, Daan, Serge and Mellow, Martha (2003), 'The art of entrainment', *Journal of Biological Rhythms*, III:18, pp. 183–94.
- Rosa, Hartmut (2013), *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rovelli, Carlo (2018), *The Order of Time* (trans. E. Segre and S. Carnell), London: Allen Lane.
- Schmid, Helga (2020), *Uchronia: Designing Time*, Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Sontag, Susan (1966), 'Against interpretation', in S. Sontag (ed.), *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, pp. 10-17, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sze, Sarah (2017), 'How I solved it: The problem of suspense', *The New Yorker*, 11 May, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/how-i-solved-it-making-my-desktop-into-art> (Accessed 21 Dec 2020)
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt (2013), *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Uribe Forés, Mále and Walker, Kevin (2019), 'The relational surface', in H. Harriss, G. Brooker and K. Walker (eds), *Interior Futures*, pp. 82-95, Napa, CA: Crucible Press.
- Vigier, Annie, Apertet, Franck and Quinz, Emanuele (2017), *Uchronia*, Berlin: Sternberg Press and IDEFI-CréaTIC, Université Paris 8.
- Wajcman, Judy. (2015), *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, Max ([1905] 2002), *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings* (trans. P. R. Baehr and G. C. Wells), New York: Penguin.

Helga Schmid and Kevin Walker have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

Helga Schmid  
University of the Arts London  
Elephant and Castle, London SE1 6SB, UK  
[h.schmid@lcc.arts.ac.uk](mailto:h.schmid@lcc.arts.ac.uk)

Helga Schmid is an artist, designer, researcher and educator. She is a resident at Somerset House and course leader for BA in graphic and media design at London College of Communication. Previously, she was a designer in residence at the Design Museum in London, a researcher at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and senior tutor at the Royal College of Art. As an artist and designer, her work has been exhibited worldwide, including the Serpentine Gallery, Design Museum and V&A Museum in London, Dia Art Foundation in New York and Z33 in Belgium. She is the author of *Uchronia: Designing Time* (2020), published by Birkhäuser. She has received international awards including the Art and Type Directors Award, as well as Fulbright and DAAD scholarships. She holds an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, and a Ph.D. from the Royal College of Art.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5376-4096>

Kevin Walker  
Coventry University  
Frederick Lanchester Library, Gosford Street, COVENTRY, CV1 5DD, UK  
[kevin.walker@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:kevin.walker@coventry.ac.uk)

Kevin Walker works across art, design, technology and anthropology, exploring natural and computational systems through artistic and curatorial practice. He is an associate professor in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University, and a senior teaching fellow in the Interactive Architecture Lab at University College London. Previously, he ran the Information Experience Design MA programme at the Royal College of Art in London, and the Information Environments MRes programme at University of the Arts London. His research has been funded by the European Union and United Kingdom, and he has produced work for exhibitions and commissions since 2000. Author of *Hackers & Slackers* (2012), co-editor of *Interior Futures* (2019) and *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience* (2008), he holds a BA in anthropology and mass communications from the University of California, Berkeley; an MPS in interactive telecommunications from New York University and a Ph.D. in museums and technology from the University of London.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7922-7408>