

Is This So Contemporary?



TIME	DESTINATION	FLIGHT	GATE	REMARKS
12:39	LONDON	CL 903	31	CANCELLED
12:57	SYDNEY	UQ5723	27	CANCELLED
13:08	TORONTO	IC5984	22	CANCELLED
13:21	TOKYO	AM 608	41	DELAYED
13:37	HONG KONG	IC5471	29	CANCELLED
13:48	MADRID	EK3941	30	DELAYED
14:19	BERLIN	AM5021	28	CANCELLED
14:35	NEW YORK	ON 997	11	CANCELLED
14:54	PARIS	MG5870	23	DELAYED
15:10	ROME	RI5324	43	CANCELLED

Covid-19 pressed pause.

Life, in the shape of work schedules, travel plans, hospital appointments, exhibition programmes, school exams: on hold.

A delay is a period of time by which something is late, or postponed. It is retarded, slowed, slackened, behind in progress.

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Delay, or pause, initiates complex loops.

CORONAVIRUS: LOCKDOWN DELAY 'COST A LOT OF LIVES' SAY SCIENCE ADVISOR was the BBC headline on 7 June.

Black Lives Matter #BlackOutTuesday carried the Instagram hashtag, #theshowmustbepaused

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Spring 2020.

There is a poster on the front of the White Rock Theatre, Hastings.
My brain glitches, struggling to yoke what it says to something tangible
“27 APRIL TO 2 MAY!”

Is that the date? Are we going towards it, or already past it?

It's 22 May today, according to my iPhone.

Oh.

But it's not that I have missed it.

That multiply broken promise: it was going to happen; it had not happened.

It will not happen, either.

Covid-19 invents a new tense. A glitching time-hole.

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Two months into lockdown, time had started to feel immense and unformed. It cared less for my attempts to lasso it and try to drag it back to coincide with points in the old grid of the diary. Fixed calls or appointments punched holes in an otherwise giant and unwieldy rolling of nights into mornings into afternoons. Instead of being parcelled up into neat sections, time was pressing and huge: like the solid creep of a glacier; sometimes, at peak stress, melting and breaking off in chunks, losing giant pieces, whole.

The Disaster takes care of everything, Blanchot wrote.

Paul Preciado's heartbreaking Artforum article in March 2020, 'The Loser's Conspiracy', described writing a love letter to their ex, summing up the mood of new a-temporal permanence that the pause brought at first,

“Those who had not dared to tell the person they loved that they loved them could no longer make contact with them even if they could express their love and would now have to forever live with the impossible anticipation of a physical encounter that would never take place.”<sup>1</sup>

And so on.

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In his essay about what the internet might do to art, *Dispersion*, 2005, the artist Seth Price cites Marcel Duchamp's use of the term “delay”. Duchamp, ambiguously, called his painting a “delay in glass”. What is within ‘delay’? He never explained what he meant by it. But it seems, partly, to be to do with a signal from a temporal elsewhere. (what paint does to a picture of a thing, different from its literal register in lens-based media?)

Referring to Alexander Kluge's film “the assault of the present on the rest of time”, Price says the surfacing of archive material brings back remembering as a counterpoint to the relentless replenishing of the present; that the internet has enabled a vast resurfacing of the remembered. Richard Davidson-Houston, whose work was instrumental in shifting UK broadcast television culture online in the 2000s, wrote, “One of the things

¹ <https://www.artforum.com/slant/the-losers-conspiracy-82586>

that most profoundly clashed when the internet met the culture of broadcast TV was the extension of "now" from literally right now to an elongated-now to mean a week or 30 days: a new definition of the present.² "for internet "now", time is not really relevant. The natural affordance of the internet is to archive and make things permanent."³

Covid-19's pause, its effecting of delay, its apparent slowing of progress, has put us all very much more online. It has put us in that elongated now. At one level, the new, giant now of daily life in lockdown ought to meet the elongated now of online life perfectly.

So how does this – how do we, within this expanded now – move forward?

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"Moving with the times places you in a blind spot", Price continued, "if you're part of the general tenor, it's difficult to add a dissonant note. The "paradoxical slowness of archived media, which, like a sleeper cell, will always rear its head at a later date." he observes, means that, "the rear-guard always has the upper hand and sometimes delay, to use Duchamp's term, will return the investment with massive interest."<sup>4</sup>

Collectively, within the delay, which opened up awareness of sleeper-cell, future-pasts or conditional past-futures, we have started a kind of real remembering. We have been, variously, reminded of not only our past loves - there seemed to have been an initial panic, a flurry of reaching out to the people we cared about - but of our relationship to place and the ecosphere. We have been reminded of temporality as it is bound to the cycles of nature; remembering how to live more slowly and locally without flying or driving or consuming; and reminded, forcefully, to look at the resurfacing of the deeper roots of contemporary social injustice and institutional racism that have been exposed afresh during this societal undoing. Fundamentally, we are being reminded of our fragile existence, our precarity as humans. These things happened within and because of the delay. During the delay, a different kind of knowing has been given space to surface, whilst we are not in the seamless, blind spot of moving with the times.

The show must be paused.

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An article by Kim Stanley-Robinson in the New Yorker in April 2020 borrowed the phrase, "The Tragedy of the Time Horizon" from Climate Change discussion to talk about our attitude towards suppressing harmful information in the belief that it won't, in our lifetimes, affect us. The writer observes that, in the 21st century, our "structure of feeling" that is about "knowing but not acting" about knowing but repressing that knowledge, and acting otherwise.

² RDH, Webinar June 2020 "Broadcast TV people are absolutely hopeless at looking back, pausing or considering what they are doing. They are like runners on a treadmill, constantly in the now and looking to the next, driven by the schedule and filling it in an endless competition for attention. It's like a DJ trying to keep the dancefloor happy playing records from a bag that's being constantly depleted and re-filled with new, unknown music and only just-in-time."

³ Webinar June 2020

⁴ Seth Price, Dispersion 2005?

So this delay has, at least temporarily, forced us to confront that delay in acting. Delay is a double-headed phenomenon; a paradox.

In this delay, in this hole in time, stopped and slowed, we have had to inhabit the knowing, to feel it, share it, without – for once – simply running ahead of ourselves. And that delay has caught up with us.

“Paradoxically [Modernity’s] cult for novelty has foreclosed the future” the sociologist Rolando Vazquez⁵ had said, as part of his paper titled, *The Museum, Decoloniality, and the End of the Contemporary* at the Van Abbe Museum in 2017. Our desire for repeatedly replenished newness had been blocking our capacities for remembering; capacities that would help us to shape our futures better.

“The End of the Contemporary.”

After the progressive ideology of chronological evolution, came the contemporary. And now?

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When Covid 19 hit, in mid March 2020, I was onsite at Tate Modern with the artist Faustin Linyekula. We had to decide, rapidly, what we would do about the project he had been due to present. We made a film of his performance – *My Body, My Archive* - to share online, instead of the planned live event. In the film, Faustin sang and danced, and performed his poetry, but he also talked about our fragility as humans on this planet. We could, he said, learn about fragility from Africa: “on the continent we have been dealing with fragility forever”.

In the planning for this piece, Linyekula spoke, specifically, about concepts of time coming from his native language, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Lingala: “there is something that I find fascinating about Lingala, which is that we use exactly the same word to signify yesterday as well as tomorrow. The word is ‘lobi’. So it’s only the context of the sentence that will make it clear for you if you’re talking of the past or the future.”

“For a long time, I thought that the ancestors who invented this language, Lingala, were limited. How can they not imagine a different word to tell these realities? But recently I thought, what if in fact it was a way of saying everything is connected. And so suddenly,

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<sup>5</sup> KEYNOTE ROLANDO VÁZQUEZ: THE MUSEUM, DECOLONIALITY AND THE END OF THE CONTEMPORARY  
Van Abbe Museum COLLECTIONS IN TRANSITION: Decolonising, Demodernising and Decentralising?  
22/09/2017. “The hope of decolonial aesthetic, including decolonial curatorial praxis and public formations, does not lie in a competition to take control over the field of enunciation. The hope lies in enabling possibilities for listening to the pluriversality that has been relegated to oblivion under the modern/colonial order. The decolonial task of listening calls for the humbling of modernity. Can modern and contemporary art institutions confront the task of listening to what exceeds their frameworks of intelligibility? Can the museum forego the privilege of controlling the locus of enunciation, overcome its epistemic enclosure and listen to the pluriversal?”

the future and the past are connected through those who are present today<sup>6</sup>, so you can say that the ancestors and the unborn are connected. And so those who are present here have a responsibility on one hand you receive, and what do you pass on.” The complexity of this understanding of time was a revelation for Linyekula, he said.

With reference to the concept of *lobi*, Linyekula talked about his conception of temporality within the performance situation: he described his sense that the telling of stories - historical, and political stories, often about colonial and post-colonial atrocities in his birthplace, the Congo - within live performance, with an audience present, created a state of live negotiation: a struggle to share, to be together, to be simultaneous; a struggle to collectively inhabit the space-time of that fractured present. It was a space in which to negotiate the present tense he observed. Performance as a space to negotiate the ways in which we, the audience, could stay with him in this unique situation of extended now, live, as co-presence: the fractured temporalities of individual perspectives shared. It’s really a question about how to consciously inhabit and negotiate the present, collectively? The present as the “time in which we decide”.

What have we received, and what will we pass on?

Now is, “the time in which we decide.”  
That’s what the present is.

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“what is the present but a constant test: in this muddled in-between one struggles to understand what about oneself has to be changed, what accepted, what preserved. Unless the right actions are taken, one seems never to pass the test to reach the after.” Yiyun Li wrote in her hospital memoir, *Dear Friend, From my Life I write to you in Your Life!*, in 2017

Struggling to inhabit the present, to tell stories, to be together within the “time in which we decide”, its “test” in the performance situation dramatises these tensions that we are living: the projection of future narrative against the moment of existing, together.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold observes – after Ortega - the extent to which we humans project stories ahead of ourselves, and then live into them. “The movement of human life is temporally stretched. Out in front is the ‘not yet’ of aspiration, bringing up the rear the ‘already there’ of prehension. At once not yet and already, humans – we might say – are constitutionally ahead of themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

This contradiction – the not yet and already - is something that feels fundamental to historicising the concept of “contemporary art”: art that apparently moves with the times; art that marks an idea of a “now” that we are both within, and always about to live into. Contemporary art, coming after the presentness and suspended timelessness of

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<sup>6</sup> This, as Tina Campt observed in conversation with Simone White, is a political necessity, that, “Connection between those who are present and those who are not. ... Our community is fundamentally rooted in a relationship to those who have gone before us, and those who were taken from us.” Tina Campt with Simone White (school of temporary liveness, June 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Ingold, XX P.118

Modernism, is rooted in a continuous striving towards current-ness, relevance, and future prescience. “Time-based media”, i.e. film and video, and performance, have been a substantial part of this attitude. Early pioneers of the meeting point between the Sony Portapak and performance, notably Joan Jonas, played with the collision of temporalities that new media effected. Her pieces *Delay Delay* 1972, and *Song Delay*, 1973, mimicked that fracture between the immediacy of video relay and live performance, the de-synchronisation between sound and image, using words spoken into megaphones and clapped blocks echoing across distance in tableaux of gesture and movement. Jonas understood, early on, that the test of the present had been unalterably fissured, and complicated, by its mimicry in electronic media and its potential for infinite regress.

And then, as this particular narrative goes, one of the works that defined the 2000s, representing the next wave of art seeking to live in the present-tense, but radically imagined lens-free and whole, was a work by Tino Sehgal, literally titled, “This is So Contemporary!”<sup>8</sup>. Sehgal’s three-person song and dance appeared as an absurd eruption in gallery protocol which turned uncomfortable attention back on the visitor who is placed in the spectacle’s centre. Definitively against the strategies of Performance Art proper, as it was conceived in the 1960s, Sehgal banned documentation and invited a mood of show-business to meet the oral tradition, jollying us along with the action, pulling us through time in such a way that we were swept up in it, rather than stolidly invoking duration to counteract entertainment as his predecessors, like Yvonne Rainer, had done. His work parodied the blind spot of the contemporary, dazzling the audience and giving us stage fright: we were right in the midst of it, and we could feel it. Stock still, frozen by having the gaze turned upon ourselves, it was slightly terrifying.

“... one seems never to pass the test to reach the after.”

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In her durational live installation, *Sex*, 2019⁹, Anne Imhof – a one-time enactor in Sehgal’s work, as a student, and the artist who presented work in the *Tanks* the year before Linyekula et al¹⁰ - cast her performers mostly standing still, defying the liveness of performance time, holding firm against its flow. Her figures were surrounded by symbols reminiscent of the *Memento Mori* tradition of European still life painting – fire, flowers, candles, smoke. Contrary to the title’s implication, perhaps, there was a quality of melancholy, of mourning.

Within the piece, Eliza Douglas sang a lament:

“What could have been, If we only knew,
how time, reveals the truth.

⁸ The piece comprises three figures, who appear to be gallery attendants, leaving their positions once a visitor enters the gallery space, and beginning to circle and dance around the visitor, gesturing and singing, entertainment fashion. They repeat the sung chorus, “This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary.”

⁹ Presented at Tate Modern, curated by Isabella Maidment and Catherine Wood, in March-April 2019; Presented at the Art Institute of Chicago, curated by Hendrik Folkerts, June 2019 and due to be presented at Castello di Rivoli in autumn 2020 (Covid delay: tbc).

¹⁰ Linyekula was due to appear in *Our Bodies, Our Archives* with Okwui Okpokwasili and Tanya Lukin Linklater. The show will be postponed until 2021.

Broken plans, broken bones.
Broken dreams, broken hope.

(...)

It's too late
It's too late
Can't go back.
It's too late."

As the performers walked slowly around the arc of the glass wall at the end of the last iteration of the piece's four hour duration, there was an emotional high pitch, as though we were witnessing the end of something, not simply the end of this work. Both online – heavily instagrammed – and in real space and time, Imhof's work was already stubbornly dislocated from moving with time. Did it mark an ending, the ending of the blind spot? A state of de-synchronisation that opened the floodgates between the internet's extended now, the giant now of the present tense that we have come to experience lately, and the universe we're in: vast and awe-inspiringly ancient. At the centre of that show was a giant painting – a delay in acrylics – of our red sun setting; burning.

The tragedy of the time horizon.

A memorial to our age of knowing but not acting?

It's too late.

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Perhaps the paradox of the delay teaches us that moving with time stops us seeing, by giving us time to see. Moving seamlessly contemporarily insists on an outdated notion of "progress". Inhabiting the present isn't a smooth feeling of travelling in one direction, it involves feelings of lag, drag, of stubborn irresolution, of dissonance. Mindfulness it isn't. Being in the twenty-first century present is - isn't it? - about allowing space for the co-existence of a wide band of alternate temporalities as realities: haunted, dreamed, learned, experienced.

The glitch, the irreconcilable part in the story, the muddled in-between, the hole in space-time: this is where we are, where we co-exist, where we gather.

After contemporary art, are we going to understand art as the space in which we gather to feel the juddering halting of the show, even whilst the show presses on, ongoing?

Stop moving. Keep moving.

{The White Rock Theatre, Hastings, faces the beach. These waves have been hitting this shore for 4 billion years.}

In *The Order of Time*, physicist, Carlo Rovelli says that latest in quantum physics has discovered that time doesn't only move in one direction. "The difference between past and future, between cause and effect, between memory and hope, between regret and intention ... in the elementary laws that describe the mechanism of the world: there is no such difference."

Between knowing and acting?

He argues that our perception of time's flow depends entirely on our inability to see the world in all its detail, and that time – in fact – has multiple stratae and directions.

" we are beginning to see that we are time. We are this clearing opened by the traces of memory inside the connections between our neurons. We are memory. We are nostalgia. We are longing for a future that will not come."

The present is the time in which we decide.

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post-script

Miranda, the Victorian school girl who disappears climbing Hanging Rock in Peter Weir's 1975 eerie classic, responds to her teacher's question about the whereabouts of her "pretty diamond watch" before she leaves for the ascent, by saying, "I don't wear it



any more. I couldn't stand its ticking above my heart". The rock is "350 million years old", against the relative brevity of human life on earth, the teacher observes.

Throughout the film, there is a mystical undercurrent of non-human time suggested by the focus on the rock's ancient ochre trachyte columns, set against nature's rhythms: leaves unfurling, insects waiting, glimpses of the watching gaze of preying animals and birds.

The thin band of temporality that colonial, western society inhabits – with its pendant watches, tolling bells, and grandfather clocks pacing a life of laced corsets, social etiquette and corporal punishment – is represented as just one dimension in an expansive universe, and one that occupies ancestral, indigenous land. Outside of that narrow seam is a sense of immanence to which Miranda is, ultimately and fatefully - or transcendently - drawn. "Everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place" Miranda says dreamily, already half-possessed. Anne Imhof and I talked, whilst preparing her 2019 work at Tate, about *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as our favourite, and most feared, childhood film. Chillingly, after the girls' disappearance, Sara - the girl who had been punished and left behind on the day of the trip - kills herself by jumping onto the glass roof of the greenhouse. The school's headteacher, an austere representative of institutional authority, is already sitting in her study, in front of the clock, dressed in her black lace mourning clothes when she receives news of the girl's death: as though time was in reverse.

It's too late.

As a child, it was the lack of resolution to the story that I couldn't stop thinking about: the unexplained bit. In the missing final chapter of Joan Lindsay's original novel, the teenage girls who are to disappear encounter what is described as "a hole in space", by which they physically enter a crack in the rock, following a lizard. Marion follows, then Miranda, but when Irma's turn comes, a balanced boulder (the hanging rock) slowly tilts and blocks her way. The chapter ends with Irma "tearing and beating at the gritty face on the boulder with her bare hands." The story's suggestion, although nothing is fully explained, is that the adolescent girls have encountered some sort of time warp, which allows them to escape the conventions for which they are destined. Sara, who did not go with them and whose destiny is a return to the punishing orphanage, kills herself to escape her fate. Their transformation into animals recalls traditional Indigenous Australian beliefs, and the notion of dreaming recurs in ways that are at odds with the marking of time: akin to dreamtime. The theorist Mark Fisher cites Justin Barton's description of the atmosphere of the film, as, "solar trance".<sup>11</sup> The film is a poetic meditation on the slipstreams of temporality that might open consciousness to an expanded imagination, as well as a brutality of foreclosing the future with the progression of certain fate.

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<sup>11</sup> P. 122-123 Justin Barton has called the atmosphere "solar trance" and it is manifested in a kind of positive fatalism. P.128 (Imhof)

