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music+life



LOOKING FORWARD

Slow Art

Visions unfolding into the future

By Mark Mobley

CHIHELLINO ATHERTON



Slow down. Longplayer Live at the Roundhouse, London, 2009 (opener and far left); camera in Tempe (above left); the organ in Sankt Burchardi church in Halberstadt performs John Cage's *Organ²/ASLSP (As Slow as Possible)*, with a projected duration of over six centuries. The performance began September 5, 2001.

While physicists glimpse fleeting subatomic particles, and Vine users strive to create the perfect six-second clip, there exists a tribe of much more patient thinkers. These are people who believe slow and steady could help save the human race, and are willing to forego seeing how — or if — their work turns out.

Around the world, in cities and towns and forests, projects are underway that will not come to fruition in our century or even during this millennium. They range from

monumental sculpture not unlike great works of antiquity to musical performances stretching out for six, eight, ten centuries. Some are as simple as a tin-can camera, others as elaborate as a twenty-story alarm clock designed to chime millions of melodies over ten thousand years. Each has a different relationship between process and result, producer and audience. The one thing they have in common? Their creators' optimism that mankind will be around as long as their art is.

Among the more modestly scaled of these projects is American artist Jonathon Keats' *Millennium Camera*, which began its single thousand-year exposure in March. It is a small pinhole device mounted on the third-floor

terrace at the Arizona State University Art Museum in Tempe. The camera is similar to the one hundred he distributed in 2014 for a century-long project in Berlin; there, for a ten-euro deposit, a participant could take one of the cameras and hide it, making sure to eventually reveal its location to a child who could retrieve it in 2114. The images will then be collected for a gallery show that, Keats says, would document long-term urban change, as the ghosts of structures would theoretically be visible in proportion to their time in the cameras' field of vision.

"Essentially, I posed these as being surveillance cameras that were in the hands of those not yet born, those who are most affected by the decisions that we make yet least powerful

CHIHELLINO ATHERTON

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE ASU ART MUSEUM; PETER FÖRSTER

to affect those decisions directly," Keats says. "And the idea was if you got people putting those cameras out there, they would be interacting with the next generation in a way and be able to see themselves from the perspective of that next generation."

Readers a couple of generations from now will be the first to see books printed for the Future Library, a brainchild of imaginative young Glaswegian conceptual artist Katie Paterson. A stand of one thousand trees is growing in Nordmarka, a forest outside Oslo, Norway, for the express purpose of producing paper for one hundred novels, written one per year and not printed — or read by anyone other than their authors — until 2114. Lumber from the trees cleared to provide growing

space for the Future Library saplings is being used to create a reading room, co-designed by Paterson, in the public library opening on the Oslo waterfront in 2017.

"It's very optimistic to believe, to do a project that believes, that there will be people in a hundred years, [and] that those people will still be reading," says Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood — the first writer selected for the Future Library — in a video created by the project's producers. A book, Atwood says, is "always a communication across space and time. This one is just a little bit longer."

Nine hundred miles south of Oslo, in the small German city of Wemding, a monument is going up at the rate of one refrigerator-sized concrete or stone block every ten years. Manfred Laber's *Zeitpyramide* (Time Pyramid) is scheduled for completion in 3183, having been started in 1993 to mark the twelve-hundredth anniversary of the city's founding. A smaller German town is hosting a shorter but stranger artistic action, an event that involves one of the least likely forms for hyperdurational scale: music.

The German hamlet of Halberstadt is where, in 1361, one of the most important early pipe organs was built. A panel of modern musicians and philosophers decided that the year 2000 would be an opportune time to celebrate the instrument's creation six hundred thirty-nine years before with a piece that would last that long. Instead of commissioning someone who writes long pieces, like

Philip Glass, they hit upon the idea of taking quite literally (if not as was intended) the title of John Cage's late work *Organ²/ASLSP (As Slow as Possible)*. It is a gentle, subtle work in spare chords and without precise direction concerning how long each note should last. It has been recorded at just over half an hour, though some performers have stretched it out to ten-to-twenty times that and even more.

On September 5 (the anniversary of Cage's birth) in 2001, on a specially built small organ with changeable pipes and weighted keys that require no one to press them, the Halberstadt performance began — with only the sound of the organ's bellows system. The piece starts with a rest, which in this case lasted until February 5, 2003. The next chord started the following July. The chord that is sounding now (and which can be heard online) began October 5, 2013 and will last until 2020. As long as there are volunteers to swap out the pipes, thus changing the notes, the piece should end on Cage's birthday in 2640.

Music that's even lengthier and was actually meant to be is *Longplayer*, a thousand-year-long electronic piece by Jem Finer, a founding member of The Pogues. It launched in the closing moments of 1999, is streaming continuously online, will conclude at the very end of 2999 and then immediately begin again. It is scored for electronic simulations of Tibetan singing bowls sounding non-repetitive combinations of various fragments of six pieces of music. Live performances of



Thinking long-term.
The Chime Generator Table is built from the chime generator prototype for the 10,000 Year Clock.

**‘SOCIETY GROWS GREAT WHEN OLD MEN PLANT TREES
IN WHOSE SHADE THEY KNOW THEY WILL NEVER SIT.’
— GREEK PROVERB**

thousand-minute (sixteen hour, forty minute) versions with actual singing bowls have been staged in London and two more are being planned for London and Mexico City.

In 2010, the short *Longplayer* was performed in San Francisco under the auspices of the Long Now Foundation, a group founded in 1996 (the group employs the initial zero to avert a potential Y10K problem). Finer is far from the only musical futurist; one of Long Now’s founding board members is composer, producer and artistic polymath Brian Eno, who is providing music for one of the organization’s signature projects, The 10,000 Year Clock.

Tech inventor, engineer, entrepreneur and Long Now Foundation co-chair Danny Hillis invented this mechanical clock as a way to foster long-term thinking. As its myriad parts are machined in Seattle and California, the massive clock is now under construction near Van Horn in West Texas. A five-hundred-foot shaft has been cut into a mountain on land

owned by Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, who has donated forty-two million dollars to the project. No completion date for this monumental project has been set, but human-scale, steampunkish prototypes of the clock and its various components are on display at the Science Museum in London and at The Interval, Long Now’s bar and event space in San Francisco.

The self-regulating 10,000 Year Clock of stainless steel, titanium and ceramics will operate on thermal power if necessary. But it will not display the present time until visitors make their way to the remote Texas location, walk deep into a dark cave, climb up a long set of stairs carved into the mountain shaft and rotate a turnstile-like winding wheel. The display will then rest until the next guest arrives.

“As somebody who did a lot of work in the machine shop in high school, seeing the beautiful machinery in its own right, it entralls me,” says Keats, who spoke at The Interval in April. “The fact that the clock will

have been running for a very long time, and will continue to run for a very long time, and that you are momentarily interacting with it by making that pilgrimage to go in to see it, puts you in some place that is very small relative to the clock, but also makes you part of a more continuous process of pilgrimage that makes it so that you belong to this larger community. You belong in and belong to deep time.”

After being wound, the clock will sound ten bells tuned by Eno — in a different order each time. As heard on Eno’s 2003 album *January 07003: Bell Studies for The Clock of The Long Now*, they are soothing, open-ended little tunes, each accented with the distinct toll of the deepest bell. The decay — almost certain to be longer in the mountain cavern than on the synthesized realization, where each melody is heard within seconds, not a day, after the preceding one — is as warm as the melodies themselves. They are welcoming doorbells at the threshold of the future. ■

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