


Forget New Year's resolutions. This art prompts thinking in 'deep time.'

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Between daily meetings and weekly appointments, long-term thinking often falls by the wayside. These artists aim to foster appreciation for the "long now."





Four 'millennium cameras' situated around Lake Tahoe document the long-term effects of climate change.
This pinhole image of the lake was taken from Eagle Rock in Homewood, Calif.

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TWO WAYS TO READ THE STORY

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By Eoin O'Carroll, Staff writer

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AMHERST, MASS.

“**B**eware of the bat guano,” says conceptual artist Jonathon Keats.

Few people venture up the cramped staircases leading to Stearns Steeple at Amherst College. The 150-foot Gothic Revival tower is typically closed to visitors. But that’s part of what makes it a suitable setting for a centuries-long art project.

There, in the steeple’s south facing window below the belfry, sits Mr. Keats’s “millennium camera,” a device with no moving parts or electronics designed to capture a 1,000-year exposure photograph.

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The camera itself, a small copper cylinder with a pinhole at one end, was installed in the steeple in 2015, with the pinhole facing south toward the Holyoke Range through a window. If all goes to plan, the light entering through the pinhole will strike the pigment inside, producing a single image of the landscape over the next 10 centuries.

Earlier that year, an identical camera went up at Arizona State University, capturing the ever-evolving city of Tempe. In November 2018, an installation organized by Tahoe Public Art placed four more millennium cameras around Lake Tahoe to document the long-term effects of climate change.

Keats is the first to admit that, despite his efforts to make the cameras durable, including using non-reactive 24-karat gold for the pinhole, it's unlikely that any will actually make it to the 31st century. The project, he says, is to prompt thinking about "deep time" in an age when lives are more frenetic than ever, and when humanity's effect on the planet is more consequential than ever.

"These are philosophical instruments," he says. "These are means to reckon with the unreckonable. And they are very much products of our times. But they are also meant to allow us to see the world, the future, and the greater context of human experience outside of the limited experience and the limited framework of our times."

The plans for Keats's camera are currently on display at the Mead Art Museum, in Amherst, Mass., as part of an exhibition on time and temporality that runs until early March. Several other projects around the world also aim to inspire long-term thinking.

Since 2001, a specially built organ in St. Burchardi church in Halberstadt, Germany, has been playing John Cage's composition "As Slow as Possible" in a performance expected to end in 2640. In Norway, 1,000 spruce saplings await the year 2114, when they will be cut down and turned into previously unpublished novels written by contemporary authors such as Margaret Atwood and Han Kang. And hewed into the cobblestones in the Dutch city of Utrecht is an ongoing poem begun in 2012, where every Saturday, the city's poets guild adds one new letter. Each sentence takes about three years.

“This whole endeavor about art and time is pretty interesting,” says Bill Fox, the director of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. “It’s a complicated endeavor on a lot of different levels, from the effort of the individual creator to the institutions that try and preserve what she or he has done.”

The long now

Perhaps the most prominent deep-time undertaking, supported by a \$42 million donation from Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos, is the Clock of the Long Now. Constructed inside a limestone mountain near Van Horn, Texas, and standing hundreds of feet tall, it is designed to tick for 10,000 years.

Keats partnered with the Nevada Museum of Art to create a biological counterpart to the mechanical clock, using one of the longest living tree species. A grove of bristlecone pine, which can live up to 5,000 years, just happened to be on land in eastern Nevada owned by the Long Now Foundation, the San Francisco nonprofit behind the clock. Keats’s idea – a calendar – would surround pine trees with double spirals of stone pillars marking the expected girth of each tree as it grows over 100 years, 500 years, 1,000 years. As carbon dioxide concentrations and other climatic factors fluctuate, the growth of the trees would fall out of step with the solar year, serving as a physical measurement of environmental changes.

Long-term thinking, says Alexander Rose, executive director of the Long Now Foundation and the 10,000-year clock’s project manager, can inspire confidence. “Imagine somebody asked you to solve climate change in just a few years, you would just think they’re crazy,” he says. “But if someone asked you to imagine how you might solve climate change in two or three or four hundred years, you could imagine how you might get started on a project like that. So by giving yourself that time frame, it makes these kinds of intractable problems tractable.”

Fostering long-term thinking requires overcoming people's natural tendency to think on shorter time horizons.

“Human scales, they're days, weeks, sometimes months,” says Andrew White, a quantum physicist at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. “We're not really comfortable thinking of years.”

Professor White is the custodian of what Guinness World Records calls the “world's longest continuously running laboratory experiment,” although he insists it is not an experiment but a demonstration.

Started in 1927, the Pitch Drop Experiment consists of a funnel full of pitch, a derivative of tar that looks like black concrete, mounted above a beaker. Pitch is more than 100 billion times as viscous as water, so it takes about a decade for each drip to form and fall into the beaker. The ninth drop broke away in 2014, and now a live webfeed monitors the demonstration.

“In there you can see the drop that dropped before you were born, and the drop that dropped before your parents were born,” says White. “It's slower than continental drift.”

“Anything that raises awareness of timescale,” says White, “I'm very much in favor of.”

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