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About Time: Temporality in American Art and Visual Culture

Hélène Valance and Tatsiana Zhurauliova

How do we understand time? Over the past decades, a number of studies have demonstrated that time is not a straightforward or neutral framework.¹ From discussing the emergence of standardized, rationalized time as concomitant with the rise of industrialization to analyzing the temporalities of colonialism, scholars have shown that the concept of time is historically determined and that it constantly evolves under the pressures of technological, social, and economic factors.² This collection of essays aims to contribute to the conversations about time that appeared over recent years in the field of art history.³

Time is a widely encompassing theme that calls for a diversity of methodologies but also forces us to question the models we use as art historians.⁴ Making time the central focus of art-historical examination can be destabilizing precisely because it opens up a fertile ground for rethinking art, as well as our own connection to it, in a multiplicity of ways. Considering temporality encourages us to investigate a wide range of issues. What are the temporalities of art making and art perception, and how do they unfold? Can we consider the image as a way of arresting time, or, on the contrary, is there inevitably a durational quality integral to art? What is the role of memory and anticipation in the making of the artwork, as well as in its viewing? In what ways can an artwork bridge the past and the future? How does time affect the circulation and reception of artworks? What roles can archives and historiographies play in artistic creation? How do some works challenge the development of time lines (and developmental time lines) of art history? And, on the contrary, can artworks also reinforce the concept of art's ahistoricity?

Some works of art explore the concept of time explicitly, such as, for example, John Haberle's (1856–1933) painting *Time and Eternity*. Made between 1889 and 1890, the painting reflects the tension inherent in the turn-of-the-century concept of time,



Fig. 1. John Haberle, *Time and Eternity*, c. 1889–90. Oil on canvas, 14 x 10 in. Collection of the New Britain Museum of Art

emphasizing, on the one hand, standardization and efficiency and, on the other, the corresponding anxiety about the rapid social, political, and technological changes affecting the everyday life of Americans (fig. 1). For Haberle, time was a recurring theme, from the recent history of the United States (which he explores, for example, in the playful *Changes in Time* [1888; Manoogian Collection]) to a longer historical view (which, as Amy Werbel demonstrates, manifests in his interest in geological time).⁵ In *Time and Eternity*, Haberle balances two fundamental yet contradictory concepts, a dichotomy long used in Christian rhetoric: temporal, or secular, order, embodied by the pocket watch on the left-hand side of the painting, stands in contrast to divine order, symbolized by the wooden rosary hanging down the right side of the canvas.

Yet, as one looks more closely at the painting, the easy certainty of this dichotomy starts to dissolve in a manner familiar to the trompe-l'oeil genre.⁶ The three glass beads of the rosary echo the cracked glass of the clock, connecting the two objects visually and blurring the lines between the supposedly opposed ideas that they symbolize. The complex nature of the relationship between the two elements is further highlighted by a newspaper fragment painted just below the watch, on nearly the same height as the cross. The clipping bears the painting's title, but in place of the expected artist's signature, we find another name—"Bob Ingersoll." Haberle appears to be referring to Col. Robert Ingersoll (1833–1899), an infamous orator who captured the public imagination with his controversial lectures on agnosticism and free thought. In fact, the newspaper clipping in the painting also reads, "In the county jail . . . awaiting trial," evoking two instances, in 1880 and 1895, when Ingersoll was tried and acquitted for blasphemy.⁷ Haberle's contemporaries would have been familiar with Ingersoll's viewpoints, and they would have been well aware of the fact that Ingersoll did not believe in eternity. Haberle, who throughout his career defied the censorship of currency reproduction and obscene imagery,⁸ is very likely aligning himself with the freethinker, acknowledging him as the authoritative source of the artwork (the rendition of the orator's printed name thus appears as a double for the artist's signature, illusionistically carved at the top-left corner of the canvas). Between the cracked watch face and the undermined notion of religious eternity, what Haberle offers here is a vision of temporality dominated by ambiguity and doubt rather than by certitude.

A further look at the elements gathered around the crucifix of the rosary also complicates the notion of time displayed on the canvas. The cross sits on top of several items that one would more readily identify with the secular rather than the divine: show tickets, card games, and the photograph of a youthful, alluring woman. The juxtaposition might be interpreted as a way of accentuating the contrast and asserting the primacy of the cross over these symbols of earthly pleasure. But the cross itself, on second inspection, would have definitely appeared to Haberle's contemporaries as belonging to history, a relic of the past. With its crudely carved, stylized features, the wooden cross differs markedly from the modern Western tradition of religious sculpture. Although difficult to identify, the cross's appearance evokes the concept of the "primitive," which was, in the late nineteenth century, associated with both European traditional craft practices and non-Western artifacts. In the slippage between the two, the object appears to be embedded in time, indicating a long history of religious practice both in Europe and its colonized territories.

Haberle’s painting encapsulates several key features of temporality as it was perceived by his contemporaries, with both “time” and “eternity” emerging as unstable categories that are subject to change. The crucifix from a different time (and perhaps a different place) overlaying secular marginalia evokes the shifting perception of historical time within an increasingly secularized society, in which audiences were now receptive to scientific discoveries on the age of the earth and the evolution of humankind. The newspaper fragment, ripped and weathered, seems to speak to a particularly modern temporality, where events, objects, and people can be quickly absorbed and discarded, becoming yesterday’s news. The pocket watch, an increasingly common possession in the late nineteenth-century United States, also indicates a new relationship to time shaped by the demands of industry and technology.⁹ Standardized time was adopted by US railroad companies in 1883, only six years before Haberle started *Time and Eternity*. Concurrently, the painted clock’s cracked face hints at the pressures exerted by such demands on individuals. The crucifix, on the other hand, suggests a global extension of these Western transformations through imperialism—with, ironically, religion becoming the vector of these historical transformations rather than an alternative space outside of secular history. With this complex web of references and implications, *Time and Eternity* is both *about* time and *of its* time. Yet, crucially, it also places time at the heart of its mode of address—typical of trompe-l’oeil genre painting, the work and its various elements unfurl in the eyes of the viewers as they continue looking at the work and deciphering its messages.

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This In the Round collection of essays aims to offer renewed perspectives on the concept of time in American art and—rather than aspiring to be comprehensive—to create an opportunity for further discussions of temporality. These essays represent a small selection from a broader conversation among many scholars that has been ongoing for the past three years. This examination of temporality in American art first arose from the preliminary work on two events that were both canceled at their final stage of preparation due to the COVID-19 pandemic: the *Anachronisms* symposium, organized by H el ene Valance and supported by Mus e du Temps and Universit e de Franche-Comt e (March 19–20, 2020); and the study day *Picturing Tomorrow: Future-Directed Imagination in American Art*, organized by Tatsiana Zhurauliova as part of the Terra Foundation Research and Teaching Fellowship at Universit e Paris Nanterre and Universit e Paris Cit e (March 19, 2020). We built on these previous efforts by convening a symposium bearing the same title as this In the Round section in November of 2021 at the Universit e Paris Cit e, with the goal of broadening the scope of our investigation and exploring the theoretical overlaps between approaches to time and temporality. While this publication represents only a fraction of the papers presented at the conference, we want to acknowledge the contributions of all its participants. We are grateful to Jennifer Chuong, G eraldine Chouard, Jonathan Dentler, Eliane de Larminat, Cyrielle Durox, Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quiros, Helena Lamouliatte-Schmitt, Magdalena Nieslony, James Nisbet, Antonia Rigaud, Calvin Schmidt-Rimpler Dinh, Jenni Sorkin, Alex J. Taylor, and Laura Vallette—a lively group of international scholars and artists who, through their various points of view and methodologies, fostered stimulating exchanges and nourished our reflections.

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The essays gathered here illustrate the variety of ways works of art can interfere with the linear conception of time—collapsing moments, arresting time, or, on the contrary, accelerating or reversing its course. Caroline Culp's essay on the "pendant across time" created by John Singer Sargent for the Sitwell family analyzes the painting as part of an effort to reassert the family's status by pictorially connecting its generations. She reads Sargent's pendant as an attempt to fuse past and present in order to create a sentiment of simultaneity and timelessness—a form of stability encouraged, ironically, by a growing sense of time's unsteadiness at the turn of the century and by social transformations that threatened the centuries-long domination of the aristocracy. Margaret Schmitz similarly focuses on works based on repetition of preexisting images but which, contrary to Sargent's portrait, embrace the subversive potential of visual resonance between old and new images. Analyzing the visual production of the anticolonial journal *Akwesasne Notes* in the 1970s, Schmitz shows how its editors reappropriated historical photographs of Native people to contradict the imperialist narratives that these photographs often supported, reorienting them to create alternative forms of representation, remembrance, resistance, and solidarity.

José Segebre Salazar's exploration of the performances of Lorraine O'Grady as Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire in the early 1980s considers another aspect of a political weaponization of time, namely O'Grady's thematization of waiting. While exposing the (racist, sexist, and even ageist) power relations at play in the act of waiting, O'Grady's performances ultimately reversed those relations and positions, transferring the power of making others wait into the hands of the performer. Despite the limitations to such explosive moments as O'Grady's interventions, Segebre Salazar demonstrates that Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire also offers a complicated understanding of waiting as, ultimately, a form of resilient protest. Andrew Witt examines another form of arrested time, that of collective outdoor leisure photographed by Irina Rozovsky starting in 2011 in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. For Witt, not only the park but those very moments captured by Rozovsky form an entire world themselves, a bubble outside of the flux of time, which can also act as a site of resistance through its emphasis on community. To complement these academic voices, this *In the Round* collection also features an interview with artist Fabiola Jean-Louis that focuses on the importance of time in her art, from temporalities of the creative processes to her works' multilayered relationship to history and the notion of time.

The concept of time, understood through multiple lenses, figures prominently in the work and writing of many contemporary artists. The idea for this *In the Round* was particularly informed by the work of Black Quantum Futurism (BQF), the Philadelphia-based collective created by Rasheedah Phillips and Camae Ayewa. Phillips's writings have been influential in our consideration of time as a category of investigation, highlighting the persistent political meanings attached to what we take for granted as a universal and rational approach to time.¹⁰ Most recently, BQF was the only US collective to be represented at *Documenta 15*, with their works *The Clepsydra Stage* and *Black Grandmother Clock (Oral Futures Booth)*, which both emphasize the communal and experiential aspects of time as opposed to the regimented temporalities of capitalism. Similarly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's ongoing installation *Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afro-Futurist Period Room* is an important intervention into the history of American art and institutional critique, offering a new museological strategy for restoring the erased history of

communities. Taking as a point of departure the affluent African American community of Seneca Village, displaced and destroyed by the creation of Central Park and, later, the Met itself, the installation weaves together the past, the present, and the future in the spirit of Afrofuturism to imagine what might have been.¹¹

What these and other contemporary projects underscore is how the present moment, rife with intense reckoning with past trauma and the arresting inability to imagine a future threatened by the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global rise of nationalism indicative of the crisis of late capitalism, creates an urgent need for a comprehensive reconsideration of the notion of time. The goal of this compilation is to foreground the notion of time as an essential category in the history of American art and to offer new vectors for conceptual, historical, and methodological exploration. The essays gathered here cannot address all these issues exhaustively, but they can nonetheless propose a number of transversal lines of investigation across periods and mediums. A close examination of temporality demands, in the first place, a reconsideration of genealogies—beginning with those of the people or places represented in the artworks, which can take the form of visual filiation (as, for instance, in Sargent's family pendant), stratification, or archival exploration (as in the case of *Akwesasne Notes*). But these genealogies also extend to the multiple interpretations of images across time and their continued legacy: our contemporary reading of Haberle's *Time and Eternity* is very dependent on twentieth-century postcolonial theory and new understandings of time in its relation to technology and capitalism. This approach, in turn, forces us to consider the work of art as a co-creation, bound to evolve through time and to recognize its contingency, as well as the power and perils, associated with such malleability. Viewed after the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Witt's essay, the photographs of people relaxing in a park, enjoying the close company of one another, take on a new significance.

Keenly aware of our own position in history and true to our contemporary perception of time, the authors in this collection converged around the question of the contrasting velocities of time, articulating temporal forms, such as waiting, delaying, latency, and expectancy, with urgency and revolution. Additionally, the imperialist entanglements of temporality we disclosed in our discussion of *Time and Eternity* are also the focus of several of the essays, which reveal decolonization as a combination of temporalities challenging the linear paradigm of history and the colonial project's interest in time as a vector of "development." They examine temporal forms of control to show that time itself can be used to work against the imperialist structure and transformed into a tool of resistance. Waiting and rest, could, for instance, be seen as active suspensions of time, willful gestures to remain out of a productive and oppressive framework. If one considers the politics of time, however, one is also bound to encounter the concept of repetition: revolutions, as the very etymology of the word suggests, also imply a measure of reprise. The essays in this collection all address, to some extent, the temporality of the work of art through the prism of reappropriation, imitation, incremental accumulation, or cyclicity, as well as the complexities of resonances, returns, and reversals—taking us firmly away from simple, linear constructions of time.

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Notes

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- ¹ The historian David Landes has identified the development of the mechanical clock and the twenty-four-hour day after the thirteenth century in Europe as a precondition for the development of the free market (with its standardization of units); see David Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Similarly, E. P. Thompson has shown that the creation of the modern state would not have been possible without the imposition of “time discipline”; see E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38, no. 1 (1967): 56–97.
- ² Accordingly, the project is informed by the work of scholars across diverse disciplines: Barbara Adam and Hartmut Rosa in sociology; Kevin K. Birth in anthropology; Stephen Kern in history; Mary Ann Doane in film and media studies; Elizabeth Freeman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Lee Edelman in queer studies; and Christina Sharpe in Black studies.
- ³ Millette Gaifman and Lillian Lan-Ying Tseng, “Art and Time,” *Art Bulletin*, 103, no. 1 (2021): 6; Keith Moxey, *Visual Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Amelia Groom, ed., *Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); and Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present* (London: Continuum, 2012). In the history of American art, a notable example is Pamela Lee’s *Chronophobia*, which examines 1960s US art in the light of the anxieties and obsessions with time generated by the technological, economic, and social transformations of the decade. See Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- ⁴ For example, in his classic 1962 work, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), George Kubler advocates for a new approach to art history, using a model other than physics, such as biology, to describe temporality.
- ⁵ Amy Werbel, “John Haberle’s *A Bachelor’s Drawer*: Censorship, Geologic Time, and Truth,” *Metropolitan Art Journal* 55 (2020): 43–59.
- ⁶ For a detailed analysis of the trompe-l’oeil genre’s cultural values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, see Michael Leja, “Touching Pictures by William Harnett,” in *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004): 125–52.
- ⁷ C. H. Cramer, *Royal Bob: The Life of Robert Green Ingersoll* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1952).
- ⁸ This interest is evident most notably with his works *Reproduction* (1886), *Imitation* (1887), and *A Bachelor’s Drawer* (1890). See Alfred Frankenstein, *After the Hunt: William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870–1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953), and Werbel, “John Haberle’s *A Bachelor’s Drawer*.”
- ⁹ Alexis McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- ¹⁰ See, for instance, Rasheeda Phillips, “Counter Clockwise: Unmapping Black Temporalities from Greenwich Mean Timelines,” *Funambulist*, June 21, 2021, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/they-have-clocks-we-have-time/counter-clockwise-unmapping-black-temporalities-from-greenwich-mean-timelines>.
- ¹¹ Sarah E. Lawrence, Ian Alteveer, and Hannah Beachler, eds., “Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afro-Futurist Period Room,” *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 79, no. 3 (Winter 2022).