

## TIME: A SINGLE BASIC FACT

Sarah Long visits Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's *An Experiment with Time* at CCA, Glasgow



Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *An Experiment with Time*, still, 2022

Kim and I stand in the space as we wait for the rest of our party to arrive. When they do, we move together into the gallery showing Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's *An Experiment with Time*.

The exhibition echoes the name of an early twentieth century book written by the eccentric John William Dunne, a meditation on precognitive dreams, hypnagogic states and time. It is opening day and the gallery is filled with bodies moving in the dark space. Curiosity is high. Visitors are not sure whether to rest their gaze on the large wall tapestries, the granite floor slabs or the peculiar circular floor sculptures. I have seen these sculptures before in the artist's studio—I once shared a floor with her—and to meet them now, in future time, is strangely disorienting. I root myself in front of one of the large prints. On close examination, I realise it is a fabric print created by a jacquard loom. Black and white threads move through different shades to weave its story. Images of Greek goddesses working at the Loom of Life conjure in my mind, ruins exist across many plains, figures and animals are distorted. I find a tortoise. What is it doing here? What does it symbolise? Slow time? A cliché—we all know about the tortoise's slow and steady progress. I think there is a message on this tortoise's back. Didn't Hawking use the phrase 'it's tortoises all the way down' when talking about infinite regress in *A Brief History of Time*? I follow my friends through the black curtains into Gallery 3 with puzzles forming in my thoughts.

Images beam across this room via two large projectors. The soundtrack is calming. I feel my body regulate. The artist Susan Stenger uses a chord sequence based on the DNA codes of cress—surprisingly this modest little plant has played a significant role in scientific study including in relation to space expeditions. It is the prayer 'Glory Be', that causes all of us in the room to settle. I'm transfixed, my head keeps the beat. The room is full but everyone avoids disrupting the passage of time and projection between the two screens. Next to me, I can feel Marie responding to the ammonite that appears to the left—an ammonite once appeared to her in a precognitive dream and now possesses a talismanic quality for her. As

we watch, the screen world moves between images of a giant retro supercomputer, a church, aerial views of a rugged landscape, a museum and an area of study. I am absorbed by the beauty of it all. Then more images of the natural world—steam rises from the ground like a magnificent and ancient *fulacht fiadh*, interior spaces are flooded with stagnant water, the statue of Laocoön and his Sons is submerged. In the gallery, a boy breaks free from his father's arms and runs with delight towards the image of Laocoön. As in the thousand year old Greek story, a son escapes.

I return to CCA with Kim on a quieter Thursday morning. I sit, once more in the darkened room of Galley 3 and as the film again fades to black, a church mural emerges. I notice for the first time the pointy chapel-like gallery ceiling.

*They are driven to believe they possess some funny faculty of seeing.*

The invigilator has told me that the two screens are playing nearly identical footage out of sync. I am surprised. I focus on the text that appears intermittently on the screens.

*The task to be accomplished is the isolating of a single basic fact.*

The camera dwells on the computer generated image of a hand and the word 'system' is repeated. I think of the human hand and all its acts, gestures and patterns. It is both powerful and pathetic, fragile and fierce.

Kim and I continue our attempt to decipher the artist's code. Is the hawk a symbol of war? Is the water a symbol of climate crisis? Or of the West drowning? The word witch is reflected in water, a tribute perhaps to women drowned for being themselves. Kim feels David Lynch vibes in the red curtains.

We linger in places we couldn't explore on opening day. Objects in museum display cases on the floor cause us to crouch down for close examination: strange, bronze sculptures are framed in glass alongside other unusual curiosities. It is as if these artefacts have been pulled directly from the earth for immediate worship. I peer into the glass. Is *this* the isolating of a single fact?

I am reminded of a Zadie Smith interview. When asked about the overarching themes in her work, she stressed the importance of good art recognising where you are in time. The way we live now so often disguises the reality of time, but she and Ní Bhriain remind us of it—this thing we're in is real.

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