

AN
ABSOLUTE
RIVER



AN ABSOLUTE RIVER

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CURATORS' TEXT



Globally, we have experienced, and are still experiencing an unprecedented event in our lifetimes; the pandemic suddenly ground most things we took for granted to a halt. In this period, we have all had different visions of the passing of time. One person might have experienced the time of the pandemic as a very long period of stillness, and another might have felt it as a very quick flash in their lives. The eight of us, living in different places and coming from different cultural backgrounds, realised that time was a subjective experience as opposed to an objective linear progression.

Together, we considered how capitalist and imperialist systems in the West have manipulated us to live within a world governed by a universalised chronology. As curators, we want to rethink the nature of time and to steal back its subjectivities from standardised “clock time” for our audiences.

Researching LUX’s archive as our starting point, artist Grace Ndiritu’s films offered possible alternatives to linear time through her belief in “deep time” as being part of her creative process. “Deep time” refers to the time scale of geological events, which is extensive, almost unimaginably greater than the time scale of human history. Her three films “A Week in the News” (2010), “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (2015), and “Black Beauty” (2021), centre our exhibition. In her own words, these three films interconnect with each other as both artistic and personal expressions of expanded time.

I like the idea in these films that we are going in and out of time, we are going in and out of different geographies and different histories. — Grace Ndiritu

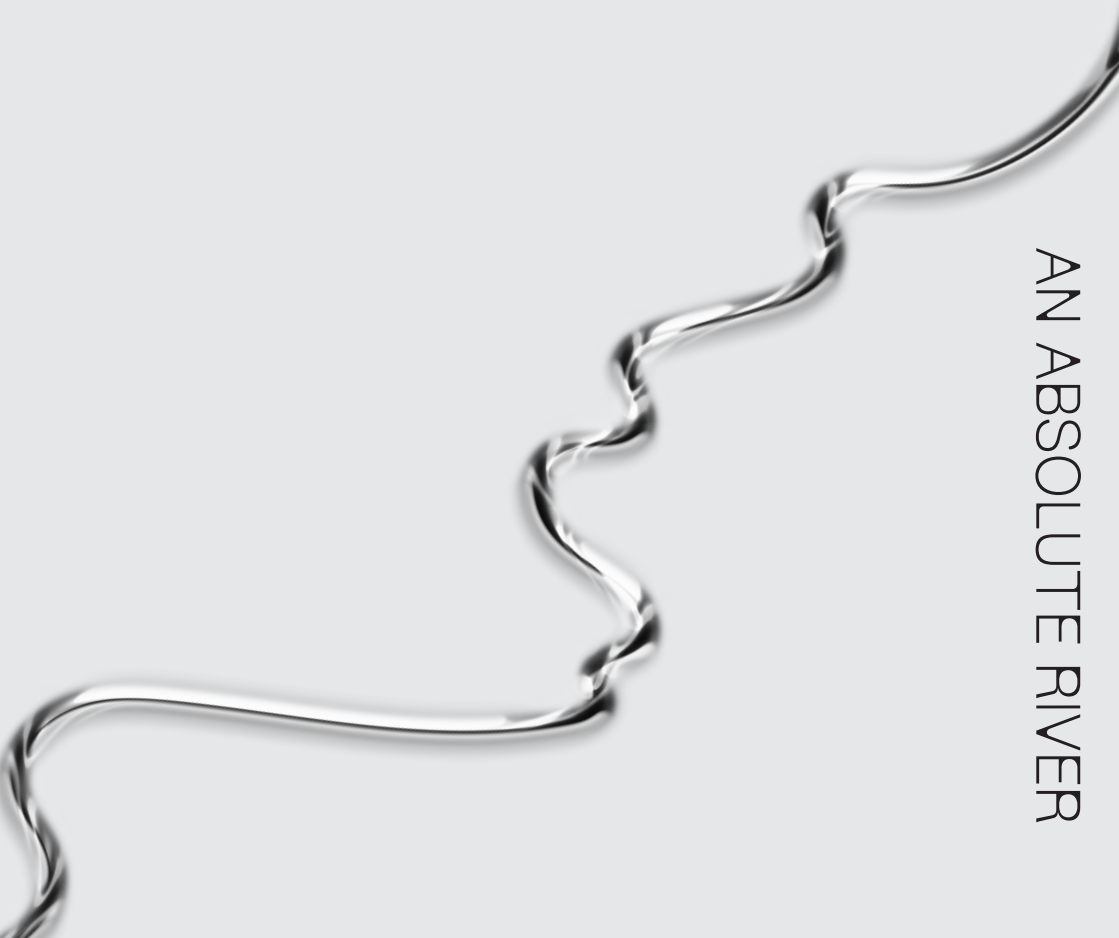
The famous Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), is fictionalised as the protagonist of Ndiritu’s film “Black Beauty” and it is his literary theories on the fluidity of time that inspired us to entitle our project “Grace Ndiritu - An Absolute River”. In Borges’ text “A New Refutation of Time” (1944-46), the Ancient Greek Philosopher, Heraclitus’ metaphor ‘You cannot step into the same river twice’ is central. He used Heraclitus’ river to explain the constant flood of time, on which we as humans are unable to press pause.

In this “absolute river”, we cannot stop to divide time into the imperial categories of past, present, and future, because we are too busy being carried away by its fast current.

We expand this paradox of time in our live programme, where we have invited the audiences to join the flow of cyclical time led by our three different artists, Rieko Whitfield, Serena Huang, and Dr Jason Allen-Paisant, and experience different moments of collective presence. For those who can not experience the live programme, and for those who do take part in it, this publication is a tangible product of expanded time. With a newly commissioned text “Pantemporal intimacies: For Life Outside of Racialised Time” by Allen-Paisant, and four conversation pieces with our artists, we provide alternative models for understanding the subjectivities of time.

Just as Borges did in his “A New Refutation of Time”, the project does not aim to fight against the capitalist imperialist system that restricts and divides time, but hopes to shed light on the potential for each individual to find a way to live within the constant flow of continuous time.

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PANTEMPORA INTIMAC

BY

DR JASON ALLEN-PAISANT

1.

I'm from the unleisured masses. I grew up being aware of a system that grants time differentially. Aren't the poor always deeply aware of this? Now, all of a sudden, I've been given time. The means? A change in my class: a nice job, a home in a "nice" neighbourhood, the park and the woods on my doorstep.

Having the luxury of time is not merely about the 'amount' you have. It's also about how you're able to use it, where you're able to go, the spatial conditions surrounding your body, the degree of freedom with which you move in your space. Space and time slide into each other.

The fusion of relative space and relative time made it possible for Ullman (1973) and Parkes and Thrift (1980) to insist that when they are completely integrated, time and space reciprocally replace one another [...] This reciprocal measurement indicates that time and space are one thing, each transforming themselves into the other all of the time. – Milton Santos

Our movements produce our sense of time: time is spatial. And time becomes more material the greater the impact of what Santos calls "technique" on our physical lives. By "technique", he means the objects that direct work processes, the circulation of bodies, the territorial division of work and production. As he explains, 'the space of work contains techniques that authorise the types of things that can be done, how they can be done, according to which rhythms, and in which orders – all of which is time.' It strikes me, upon reading this, that slavery's production of a lasting warping and constriction in time has to do with the fact that slavery is, first and foremost, a technologisation of the body.

L CIES: FOR LIFE OUTSIDE OF RACIALISED TIME

This heightened feeling of the collapsing of space into time and time into space is common to those over-represented in the space of labour, those seen primarily as producers, to only exist for others and not for self, those whose permanent affect is a feeling of being absent from the time of the present, of being there but not fully, so that time is always in deferral. The epitome of such a person is the enslaved African; their labour, as Saidiya Hartman puts it, 'is the property of another, extracted by coercive means [...] it simply personifies the power and dominion of the owner.' Black people in the diaspora live in this after/life of property; it's the past that's not quite past, structuring the conditions – of spatial enclosure or constriction – in which they are over-represented. We know instinctively the feeling when our bodies and the world become misaligned.

2.

Now, I'm walking through a park in London, England, in the middle of a working day. I feel good today, feel like I'm occupying my space. Various things threaten my ability to occupy my space, my sense of being present to myself. These all have to do with being born in African skin.

Far from Coffee Grove, Jamaica, far from Leeds, I'm walking through Waterlow Park in London. In this experience, I feel all sorts of holes and spirals in time. How did I get here? In the middle of a working day. I'm occupying my space. I've been standing on this patch of grass for a while, speaking into my audio recorder, penetrated by the bird chorus. A band of police officers in hi vis jackets comes walking down a path towards the patch where I'm now standing. I begin to move; this is instinct. Are their eyes on me? I keep walking, avoiding their gaze. I'm doing nothing wrong; I'm just in the park, doing my kind of walking. I'm just in the park, like all the other people – supposedly, and yet. I think of how quickly this could transform into a cliché. Are their eyes on me? I'd just been standing on a patch of grass,

under a plane tree, speaking into my voice recorder, cataloguing all I see. As the dog-walking woman sat on a bench along the path and looked at me, I noted all the suspicion in her eyes, observed how she pretended not to notice me; this woman, who before she saw me, was busy going places with her poodle, walking fast, now slowed down and sat on the bench opposite to the patch of grass and trees.

We have large conceptual tools for discussing the racialisation of space, but not much of a vocabulary for talking about the racialisation of time. Yet, to be unbothered, “smelling the roses” – meaning, taking one’s time, breathing normally, being “in control” of the space between your body and the world – is what racism works to prevent. Racism is a temporal phenomenon. In culture, in writing, and in art, it’s so hard to imagine a body like mine in “nature”, in the “outdoors”, in wide open spaces. Time is racialised. Space slips into time.

Are these young apple trees in the orchard aware of the violence of the present? How much of this is in their memory? I feel no resonance or vibration. Are they screaming or silent? How long before the memories of the present subside in them?

3.

And yet I find a different order of time in the moment I address the tree – not as an “it” but as a “you”. In the word pair I-You, Martin Buber suggests, time boundaries are erased. In the moment I address the tree, both it and I become timeless. Like Grace Ndiritu’s Jorge Luis Borges – the Borges she brings back to life in her film *Black Beauty* – I begin to sense that times coexist, none of them simply dropping by the wayside; I begin to dream about what it means to be an eternal self, existing in 1492 and in 2022; existing five million years into the future.

A resource – to form cross-temporal solidarities with ancestors, with rocks, stone, and trees. The self is distributed across time. No longer individual, from the Latin *individuum*, meaning “indivisible”, it is porous, traversed, spread; I am rock, I am water, I am tree, I am land. My liberation from death metaphysics, from sclerotic materialist ways of acting in the world, is linked to this idea of what it is to be “a body”. Here, perhaps, is my resource, my form of marronage.

4.

The human being is always more than itself - in fact, the real issue here is that "itself" is always more-than. To be in time, then, is to be, always, in the quantum entanglements - as Karen Barad puts it - of earth, rock, tree, water.

To recognise my psychomateriality is to acknowledge nothing less than time as non-linear, to acknowledge ancestral intimacies, to consent to the kinship of earth beings that penetrate me. This is my voice of stone, of grass, of water...



ARTISTS IN CONVERSATION

GRACE NDIRITU

By Lorenzo Menegazzo and Mala Yamey

In “Black Beauty”, Jorge Luis Borges is fictionalised as the main protagonist, do his ideas of “An Absolute River” correspond with your own conceptions of time?

Borges writes, ‘Time is the substance I am made of, time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river. It is a fire which consumes me but I am the fire.’

Borges is talking about that nowness, and in my own spiritual practice, I have been able to experience that through meditation. You are within time, everything that is ever going to happen and will ever happen is happening now.

You are in the “now” but you have the ability to travel through shamanism or astral projection to other ideas of time. But indigenous communities are never thinking about the future, for example in Kenya, the Masai tribe have no words connected with the future, they are always thinking of the now.

This idea of “presence” as a tangible energy, is what some people also call “the absolute”. When Borges is speaking about “an absolute river”, he is also talking about the idea of time and space coming together in the now. When he says, ‘I am the river, I am time’, he is embodying it, and that makes sense because we are living in an embodied universe which is what we are inside and outside of the “now”.

Could you explain your use of shamanic practice to excavate non-linear time in your workshop series “Healing The Museum” (2012-)?

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This idea of non-linear time has always been part of my life. When I was a small child in Kenya, I used to experience much longer days as I spent many hours playing in nature, the sense of “deep time” was there. As an adult, I brought that in through different training, spiritual teachers and gurus. In 2012, when I began my body of work entitled “Healing The Museum”, I felt museums were literally dying because they were so disconnected with what was going on outside politically and energetically. The idea that a museum is a spectacle often goes against the mental nature of the first museums, which I think of as the caves of prehistoric times. Cave paintings were made in connection with shamanic rituals, and this idea of deep time is still part of the creative process. When we value objects only materially in terms of the art market, we are actually working against their function, which brings us to this bigger sense of time. In the West, we look at ethnographic objects just from an aesthetic point of view, but these objects are actually tools and totems. When I spend time with objects in museums, I am not just looking, I am corresponding with the connected spirits. Sometimes I might have visions about objects while in the museums.

Art, and especially objects, have a life of their own and by ignoring this, you are devaluing them and yourself, because we are not just minds living in a virtual, artificial world, but we are natural beings too. I believe that everything we make now as artists is deeply connected to those first cave paintings. In my own practice that comes through making films or doing shamanic performances, where I lead groups of people, who normally think of themselves as rational, on the shamanic journey to understand their place in the universe.

*To find out more please read Grace Ndiritu’s essays “Healing The Museum” (2016) and “Ways of Seeing: A New Museum Story for Planet Earth” (2017), recently republished by Gropius Bau Journal.

RIEKO WHITFIELD

By Livia Nervi and Wan Kit Yeung

Within your practice you actively use the body as a means to access different subjectivities. How do you think physicality comes into play with decentering linear time?

The way that our bodies experience time is completely non-linear. We hold everything we have ever experienced personally and ancestrally on a cellular level, regardless of where we try to place ourselves within the illusion of chronological order. Embodied performance for me is a way of subconsciously accessing different parts of myself in the past, present, and future.

On the stage, whether in the literal sense or in the daily performance of our identities, the body can become a portal to alternative ways of existing within this world. We are at once already dead and have never been born, and yet we are always in the magical state of becoming. With this understanding comes a powerful and spiritual sense of freedom.

What do you think about the relationship between temporality and nature? Do you believe that nature can be a portal to explore care, through different temporalities and human and non-human subjectivities?

My storytelling and world-building are always connected to more-than-human perspectives.

Every living being has an energetic imprint. I say this from a rather animistic position, but I think deep down we all understand this. If we can extend empathy to a tree, to a river, to a fish, to a stone, what a humbling way of understanding our place in this sentient Earth.

When you create an act of empathy through performance, it becomes anybody's language. This language is not necessarily a cognitive one, but one that is emotional and embodied. When we live under a hegemonic culture that forces us into rigid, rational, hierarchical taxonomies, embodying empathy becomes a form of resistance.

With our human ability to empathise, we carry a moral obligation to use these abilities to act in ways that are not just self-serving. It takes real courage and vulnerability to care, and that is a beautiful thing.

Everything on this planet is radically interconnected. We must reconsider our place as a species within the ecosystem of a multitude of perspectives and temporalities. The stories I tell are my ways of reimagining our collective existence from the bottom up. We all have the power to reclaim our narrative. In this way, I am always optimistic.

And the stories I tell are inherently political. If we can get people at an intuitive level to feel beyond the illusion of infinite linear progress and hyper-individualistic selfhood that dominates our current reality, we can begin the necessary work of creating deep political change from a place of empathy. This is why I get up in the morning. This is what drives me as an artist.

SERENA HUANG

By Sanya Malik and Jieyi Zhang

How do you connect with our title of “An Absolute River”?

I have been thinking about water a lot during lockdown. I lived by a canal and there was a leak in my house. It was strange that I was in lockdown at home, yet I was surrounded by water. It felt like nature in a contained form. Looking at the leak, I started thinking about how we try to domesticate nature but wildness always slips in. When we think of a river, it always seems to have a beginning and an end. But water is integral to all spaces, it does not have a beginning or an end because it is not linear, it is a cycle; it can be everywhere but together at the same time. The Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean is dragging down four times more water every year than predicted by scientists. No one knows where the water goes. This inspired me to use water as a thread for the fragmented narrative installation in my recent project.

How do you connect the intangible concept of non-linear time through tangible objects in your practice?

The dimension of time in my work is very important, because every dimension links itself to time. I am interested in how these dimensions can get flattened into one, such as the digital dimension, where fact and fiction come together. In my recent show, there was a clock with no printed hours. It only showed the change from day to night and night to day. The whole cycle of the clock was 30 minutes, which was how long the exhibition viewing experience was intended to be. That is the clock I created for the show, while modern humans use the universal clock to keep time. In effect, there are different ways of measuring time in history. For example, ancient China used “the duration of a burning joss stick” before the clock was invented. So I created the clock as an object to essentially create my own measurement of time within the exhibition space, which also sits in a larger dimension of the space and time we live in.

Do you think we can deconstruct social paradigms through exploring non-linear time?

I want to say yes, because that is what I believe in and that is what I am trying to do. Some say it is escapism but I see exploring non-linear time as a way to create critical distance to the world we are living in now. It is also a way to question

what we conceive as the truth. A lot of artists are exploring non-linear time, in some way it feels like it is needed at this particular moment. For me, I refer back to prehistoric materials such as mythology, because I feel that it holds us together as humans. That is what I feel is needed right now, as we are in such a divisive time. A lot of things happening in the world right now and in history seem like coincidences, or are they staged? The fine line between what is a coincidence and what is staged is what I am exploring through my practice at the moment.



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DR. JASON ALLEN-PAISANT

By Kirsty Flockhart and Fei Xu

Can you elaborate on the connection between writing and embodied performance in your practice?

In my practice, writing comes up as a secondary, subsidiary concern. My main concern as a poet is to have a connection whereby I feel the poem in my body. I experience poetry first and foremost as an embodied connection with my surroundings. The poem for me is a powerful manifestation or feeling that speaks beyond words, and I have to translate what that feeling is. I use the word translate, because I really see the act of writing as an act of translation. The kind of rational aspects of writing, the aspects of craft, of verse, of lines and so on, are subsidiary concerns as I approach poetry as a deep kind of transfer of energy. I have begun to think of poetry along similar lines to how Léopold Senghor, the Senegalese poet and philosopher, talked about art as a participation in your surroundings. There is a kind of residual animism in my mind in everything that is called art, and everything that is called poetry. A lot of my work is composed while I am on site, and it is really important for me to put my body out there into space, because all the senses, the sound, and the vibration manifest in the work.

In your essay “Reclaiming Time” (2021), you propose that ‘a Black future in nature must include an altered relationship to time’. How do you envisage this?

First of all, racism is a temporal phenomenon. Racism is about time. One of the key things that racism does is that it turns time into a less generous, less entire and less free thing for racialised people. Throughout history, Black people have become morally unequal people, resulting in overrepresentations in prisons and in demeaning and dehumanising works. In order for us to attain freedom and emancipation in the fullest sense, we have to reclaim time, meaning that we have to reclaim our right to have an unhindered relationship to our space. What would a new relationship to time mean in a society that is still embedded in racism, then? I think that through our relationship with the living world we are able to reconnect ourselves to our essential time or, in other words, human time. Through our relationships with the living world, we can slide away from some of those oppressions – they will always be there, but we can find a way of living through them.

In what ways do you think poetry writing resists the hegemony of time?

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The point of racism is that it purports to make us feel as if we are morally inferior subjects. When I am writing poetry, I am fully human; I belong to myself. When you are connected in that way with the living world, when you can lose yourself in it, you feel your humanness in the most intense way. Poetry is sensuality. It is the connection through sound, through feeling, through energy and through vibration. What is more humanising than experiencing that in connection to the living world through poetry?

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