

DEEP TIME FUNK

How to think in millennia.

The builders of Stonehenge five millennia ago revered the long cycles of time. Their monument measured the annual rhythms of the sun from equinox to equinox and the subtle 18.6-year oscillations of the rising moon. Through a hundred generations, they revised and recalibrated their circles of earth and stone to bind their lives with celestial time.

A world away, under the tropical sun, Mayans identified their place in time within expansive overlapping patterns of days. Their Long Count calendar encompassed cycles that stretched 5,000 years, from the primordial origins of life to the imponderable beginnings of a new era.

Our own highly regulated time never seems so expansive. We live in tight temporal patterns. These begin with a momentary, global celebration that rolls from New Zealand to Alaska on New Year's Eve and provokes a crucial modern ritual: tossing out one calendar and replacing it with another. This new calendar, minutely subdivided into months, weeks, days, and ever-smaller increments, controls our frenetic lives. To function properly, we must attune ourselves to these fine-grained cadences. Failure to fall in step can lead to deep malaise, even mental disorder—one form of schizophrenia results from what psychologists Kai Vogeley and Christian Kupke term “a structural disturbance of time consciousness.” It is hard not to feel a touch of this disturbance in our day-to-day lives.

To counter the short-term thinking that accompanies this dominant perception of time, a group of cultural pioneers—Danny Hillis, Stewart Brand and Brian Eno—founded the Long Now Foundation in 1996. One

of its most intriguing projects is the 10,000 Year Clock, currently undergoing a slow process of construction in the desert of western Texas.¹ Its designer, Hillis, first proposed “a clock that ticks once a year. The century hand advances every 100 years, and the cuckoo comes out on the millennium.” Running off a trickle of energy captured from daily temperature changes and occasional boosts of human energy supplied by visitors, the clock will span the life of our civilization. Its creators hope that by stepping into the clock's long flow of time, visitors will remember to participate in slower rhythms.

The Scottish artist Katie Paterson, interviewed on page 46, creates work that “collapses the distance between the viewer and the most distant edges of time.” Her recordings of melting glaciers, photographs of darkness in interstellar space and assembly of clocks attuned to other planets, all reach out from the mundane to open new frames of reference.

These projects remind us that we do not need to bind ourselves exclusively to the agitated rhythms of modern life, and challenge us to reactivate the primordial, expansive, life-affirming cycles of time.

(1) Another of the foundation's projects is Long Bets, an organization through which people can bet money on future eventualities, with the winnings going to charity. Bets currently open include that by 2030 people will routinely fly in pilotless planes, that by 2050 slaughterhouses will be banned in the UK, and that by 2060 there will be fewer humans on the planet than there are today.

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