


A Neon Sign Provocatively Installed On A Primeval Mountainside Shows The Urgency Of Long-Term Thinking

Jonathon Keats Contributor 
critic-at-large

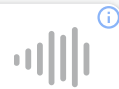
Follow

Sep 30, 2022, 11:07am EDT

0 



Listen to article 5 minutes



Last weekend, a big rig hauled nine words up the side of a mountain. The words were laden with meaning, but that was not the reason why a diesel truck was needed. The vehicle was necessary because the words were rendered in neon on a sign large enough to be read across a valley, and the destination, an eleven-thousand-foot plateau in Nevada's Great Basin, had no running electricity. Gaffing was required, as was an industrial-strength generator.

Moments before sundown, after nearly six hours of toil by a crew of twenty people, the sign was illuminated. "This present moment used to be the unimaginable future," read the neon, quoting *The Clock of the Long Now* by *Whole Earth Catalog* founder Stewart Brand. As the valley darkened, two words turned off, shortening the sentence to subtly alter the message. "This moment used to be the future," the sign proclaimed. Three seconds later, the missing words reappeared, and the sign began to oscillate between the two alternative readings.





This Present Moment Used To Be The Unimaginable Future, by Alicia Eggert. Installation on Mount ...
[+] ALEXANDER ROSE / COURTESY OF LONG NOW

Installed outside for just one night, the neon sign is an artwork by Alicia Eggert. A second sign, essentially identical, is currently on view at the Renwick Gallery in Washington DC, where it is the centerpiece of an exhibition of recent acquisitions titled *This Present Moment: Crafting a Better World*. Its centrality speaks both to its merit and to the expansiveness with which curators are currently looking at craft.

Although considerable skill was required to fabricate many works in the show – including Eggert’s hand-made neon lettering – few of the works put craftsmanship front and center. As the exhibition title suggests, the emphasis is on what craft can achieve in the present. This approach emphasizes the vitality of craft traditions in spite of the hype about 3D printing and the metaverse. Without dexterity and materiality, the ideas instantiated in these works might even be inexpressible.

One of the most remarkable works in the exhibition is a swathe of hand-woven cloth as large as the original Star-Spangled Banner. Unlike the Stars and Stripes, this flag is pure white, replicating the Confederate Flag of Truce, a dish rag raised by General Robert E. Lee signaling the surrender of the Confederate Army, marking the defeat of the Confederacy, and signifying the end of slavery.

Which Vaccines Will Work When Entering The U.S. From Europe?

Best Undersea Photography: 20 Winners Of Ocean Photographer Of The Year 2021

Live Concert Tonight On CBS, Paramount+ Will Celebrate ‘Broadway’s Back’

The artist Sonya Clark created this artwork, aptly titled *Monumental*, while in residence at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, where she collaborated with master weavers and the public to fabricate the flag on a traditional loom. Clark has envisioned *Monumental* as a sort of prototype for replacement of the Confederate Battle Flag with a truer memorial to the old South. The political resonance of her act comes not only from the profound change in perspective – the essential transition from a false emblem of honor to an honest acknowledgment of failure – but also from the collective work of making her banner. Icons are abstract and insubstantial. By physicalizing this icon of Southern submission, and giving many people the motor memory of doing so, Clark grounded her concept and preserved the position it represents in materials that will stand the test of time.

Alicia Eggert’s materialization of Stewart Brand’s words reveals other ways in which the physical presence of an idea can enhance its impact, and the power of combining conceptual art with craft. The plateau Eggert chose is on the Mount Washington property that the Long Now Foundation acquired more than a decade ago with the intention of building a clock that would keep time for the next ten thousand years. The clock has been built in Texas instead, on a mountain more suitable for heavy construction, but the Mount Washington site remains central to the identity of Long Now, its commitment to long-term thinking embodied in the bristlecone pine trees that grow there.





Artist Alicia Eggert installing *This Present Moment* at 11,000 feet on Mt Washington at the Long Now ...
[+] ALEXANDER ROSE / COURTESY OF LONG NOW

By extracting Brand's words from a book and momentarily placing them in an environment marked by deep time, Eggert establishes a literal relationship between the present moment and the long term, and physically models the essential simultaneity of multiple time scales. In that respect her sign relates to the clock, a connection reinforced by the flickering light oscillating between subjective and objective points of view.

The exertion matters as well. Eggert has compared her effort to set a neon sign on Mount Washington to the plotline of *Fitzcarraldo*, evoking the absurdity of trucking Brand's words up a mountain. The purposeful purposelessness speaks to the necessity and futility of imagining eventualities – necessary because it can inform present actions and futile because, as Brand observed, this present moment used to be the unimaginable future.

Follow me on [Twitter](#). Check out some of my other work [here](#).

Full disclosure: I am collaborating with the Long Now Foundation on the creation of a calendar calibrated by the long-term growth of the bristlecones. I witnessed Eggert's work while visiting Mount Washington to survey the trees. My trip was supported by Long Now.



Jonathon Keats

Follow

I am a critic and artist, most recently the author of "You Belong to the Universe: Buckminster Fuller and the... **Read More**