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Introduction

The context of this writing is to explore three keywords in relation to at least three visual artists and philosophers. As a practitioner, I am interested in the concept of time, how it works, and how it affects not only us, but the whole world around us. In this essay I will explore how the *past*, *present*, and *future* have been used in art, and will form a question from this research for my dissertation paper.

Time is defined by the Lexico dictionary (2021) as ‘The indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.’ But, most often when we think of time, we think of clocks, however the notion of time is much more complicated than that. The modern clock uses the base-60 system (60 minutes, 60 seconds) that dates from 2000 B.C. in Sumeria. (Bellis, 2019) However, standardised time did not get officially adopted until 1883, a notion pushed through because of the railways. (Bonikowsky, 2013) Before this, each village had its own time, with midday being when the sun was directly above their village, which was getting harder and harder for people to use as travel was getting faster and faster.

When thinking about time we often think of it as an entity which runs uniformly and without outside influences, a theory which Newton proposed, (Rovelli, 2018, pg 43) Einstein (1972) states in a letter before his death “the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” He is talking about the block universe where there are no surprises, it only seems that way to us. (Wolchover, 2020) And Rovelli (2018, pg. 53) states “It is not possible to think of duration as continuous. We must think of it as discontinuous: not as something that flows uniformly but as something that in a certain sense jumps, kangaroo-like, from one value to another.”

This means rather than a continuous flow time jumps from event to event, and because there is always an event happening, we are continuously moving forward, and we are unable to escape time.

The Past

The past is used to refer to the period of time before, but not including, the present. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021) It is also the only time we are able to remember and look back on. We perceive time to move in a straight line, with a cause and effect, and we are unable to change it. To quote Lady MacBeth “What’s done, is done.” (Shakespeare, 1992) It is why we feel regret, remorse, and, most importantly, why we have memories.



Figure 1

Above is Radcliffe Bailey’s work *Windward Coast – West Coast Slave Trade* (2009-2011). The installation is made of piano keys, plaster, and black sequins. His work is about looking back into

the past and questioning the different ideals and systems that make us who we are. He states “I feel like I always have a foot back in time.” (Dafoe, 2018)

The first thing that comes to mind when looking at the piece is, of course, the slave trade, and The Middle Passage, when Africans were brought to America. The piano keys are stacked on top of each other like a stormy sea, but these keys were picked because of a more hopeful meaning, Bailey believing that music is “the one thing that bonds people all around the world”. (Carozza, 2021)

There is a plaster boat on the waves, linking to the name of the piece. The bust – covered in black sequins – sticks out of this waves, bringing forth the impression that the rest of the body is below the ocean, the man drowning, and at the same time making sure that all those thrown aboard is remembered, given a history, and not lost to the past. (Detail to right). However this is not just showing an artistic description of the past, but



Figure 2

how the past is inevitably linked to the present. The installation was also made to show the state of diaspora that those of African descent feel all around the world, and how because of this forced migration there is a painful disconnect between their present and their past – like they are lost at sea. (Adamek, 2018) The keys the man is floating in shows a unity through this, one of the goals of Bailey’s work is to “encourage healing and transcendence through art.” (Carozza, 2021) The work encourages this by showing the link between the past, and the current present.

It is important to remember just because the past is done, it does not mean that it is now irrelevant. Learning from the past is a vitally important part of the future. We can’t just ignore it because it is unpleasant to think about. The ability to look back gives us the ability to grow as not just individual people, but as a society. As a result, work like this is important so the past does not lose meaning.

The Present

“The past leaves traces of itself in the present.” states Rovelli (2018) in his book *The Order of Time*. Our books contain history, our brains hold memories, the soil holds fossils. The present however, is nothing more than the thin line that separates the past and the future, of what has done and what will be done. American philosopher and poet Henry David Thoreau asks the question in his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849, pg. 82) “And do we live but in the present? How broad a line is that?”

Matt Molloy, a Canadian photographer, seems to try and answer that question through the use of time-lapse photography that show time passing- and the broad line of the present.

“I was amazed how the world around me looked with a different concept of time.” He states in an interview (2020). These ‘time stacked’ photographs can have anything from 100 to 1000 photographs in. His images usually show a wide open landscape, the one above a farm yard, grounding the magical looking sky into our reality. With time, the clouds move across the sky, leaving streaks in the image like it was done with a paintbrush, reminding the viewer of an



Figure 3

impressionist painting. As the sun sets, the sky turns different colours, and shown together gives it a feeling of other worldliness that the eye is drawn to.

Looking at Molloy's work questions about the present, or the now, are brought forward. We often speak of the present as something shared between everyone, a common moment, however this is false. Rovelli (2018, pg. 28) states "Our "present" does not extend throughout the universe. It is like a bubble around us." Once the distance is far enough, it is no longer happening in the now. This, in fact, also happens in close contact as well, but the difference is so miniscule we don't acknowledge it. For instance, if your brother is making a cup of tea on the other side of the room, if you look over you would say he is pouring the water from the kettle now, that is what he is presently doing, however the light takes time – however miniscule that amount of time is – to reach your eyes and your brain to process this information. The lag is so small however, that we still class it as happening now. As the distance increases so does this 'lag', and when you start getting to galactic distances the present becomes meaningless. (Rovelli, 2018) Much like with large distances, 'now' is meaningless in Molloy's work. The events are all happening at once, and the 'now' is in fact hours, leaving the viewer to question how they view time.

The work reminds the viewer of a Monet's Haystack series (1890-1891), shown on the right. Monet painted the haystacks at different times showing how the atmosphere, lighting, weather and seasons change. Molloy's work can be seen as a modern take on this, using modern technology that allows a series of work to



Figure 4

be fused into one image, and while his work is not spanning years like Monet's series, it still conveys the same question of time.

While the image reminds the viewer of paintings, as a photograph it can explore time more effectively. As camera technology has improved, and it is more and more easy to take photographs, with everyone carrying around a camera on their phones, the capturing of the 'now' is common

place in our society. We can capture events, go back to edit them, or just keep them for memories. (Barsch, 2008) Molloy's work does not ignore this busy, instant way of life, but rather stretches those moments out, joining the past and the future into present time.

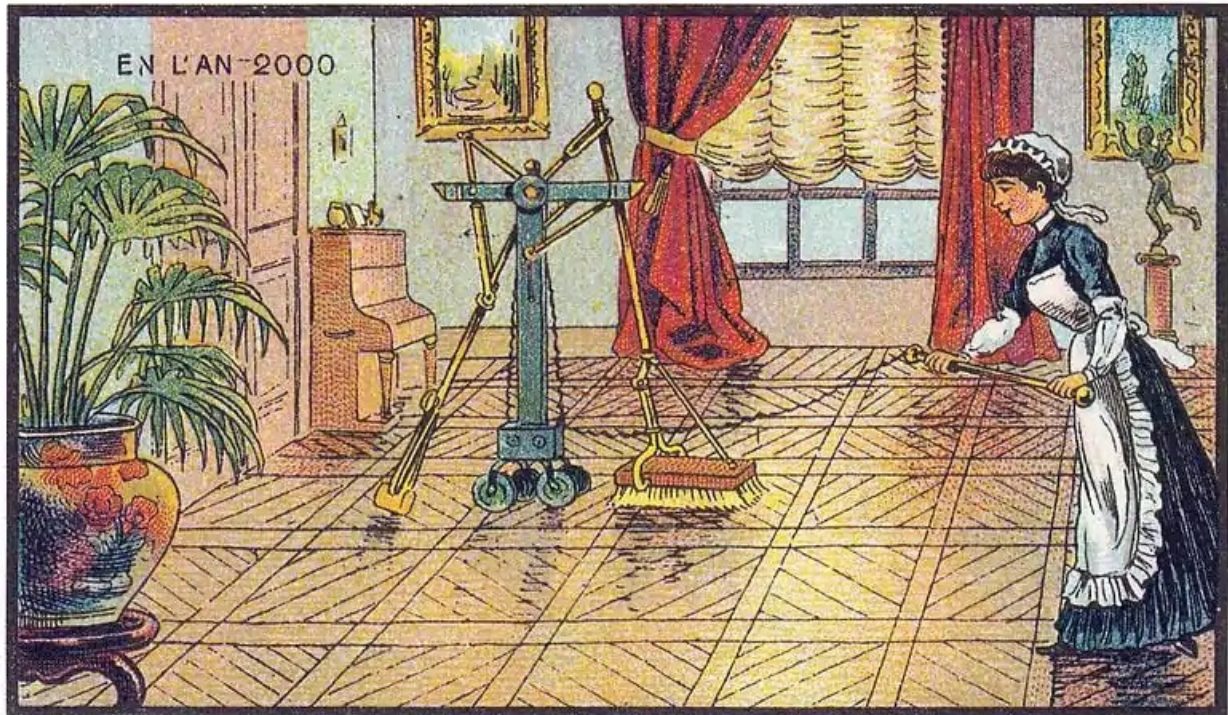
This is not a new take, the view that the present only exists because of the past and the future was talked about as far back as 400AD in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Listening to music, he realised that only a single note is in the present, but it makes a melody because we have memory of the past and anticipation of the future. He writes (2008) "things past and future does not exist... whence from the future? Which way, save through the present? Whither, but in the past?" He is explaining that the present means nothing without the future and past, and yet the past and the future do not exist to us, only the present.

The Future

The future is uncertain. The unknown in front of us. It, of course, is effected by the past and the present, but there is a belief that it is malleable, that we can shape it. However, pre-determinism suggests an alternative. That we do not have control of our destinies, that it is already set into stone, by God, Fate, or whatever. To some people this view can be comforting, while others may feel trapped by the thought that their life is out of their control. (Fischer et al, 2007, pg. 19) While this seems like a more religious view on the world, many physicists make the same claim. Ludwig Boltzmann comes to the conclusion that the only difference between the past and the future is how we see it, and even gives an explanation of why we, as humans, can only access 'the past' and not 'the future'. (Rovelli, 2018, pg. 20)

For an artist, a view on whether the future is set in stone or not isn't actually important, but rather the fact that it is not known. We can't perceive it, and therefore it is full of possibilities. The series *France in the year 2000* is an example of what those living in 19th century thought the turn on the

millennium will look like. These were a series of paintings, made by Jean-Marc Côté and others, where printed on cigarette and cigar boxes around the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris, and then later turned into post cards. (Swanson, 2015)



Electric Scrubbing

Figure 5

While some were completely inaccurate, for instant knowledge being zapped straight into people's mind, others were surprisingly correct, even if they were made in a steam-punk like fashion. Take, for example, the painting above, *Electric Scrubbing*. While at first glance, it seems odd, we have made machines that Hoover the floor on their own. Of course, these machines are a lot more sleek, smaller, and more electric than those who painted the image could have ever imagined.

Many old sci-fi shows and films, while not always an optimistic glance at the future, showed promises of incredible engineering and technology that far rivaled what they had in the current year, and in some cases, the technology ended up being developed in their own lifetime. However, others were not. Take, for example, the famous hovercraft technology seen in *Back to the Future: Part Two*, which we failed to achieve in 2015 when the movie was set. (Kim, 2015) While other sci-fi shows have had a direct impact on the technological advances of the future, such as *Star Trek* cited to have actually inspired technology we have today. (Wright, 2015)

Rose Eveleth is the creator and host of *Flash Forward*, a podcast looking at the possible, and not possible, futures. In 2019 she wrote an article for Vox magazine entitled ‘Tech Issues: The Myth of Inevitable Technological Progress’. It is often felt that ever improving technology, and all the good and bad that comes with it, is often seen as the natural way forward for the world. Many of those looking at the future think it’s inevitable that the devices we are currently making will some day be more intelligent, faster, and simply *better* than humans. It has been a point of sci-fi books for years, a world where AI has taken over. (Gooding-Call, 2019) But Eveleth (2019) argues that ever progressing technology is not apart of a natural evolution of mankind. To stop the over technological future without privacy that we seem to be heading for, it’s in the consumers hands, as long as we stop thinking that it is natural progress we have to make. Her illustrator for the article, Zoe van Dijk (2020) worries ‘that there’s a real possibility we have replaced our old Gods with a new God, one that we made, and that we don’t truly understand’, a feeling shared by many people in our modern world.

Conclusion

“I live in the present. I only remember the past, and anticipate the future.” (Henry David Thoreau to

H.G.O. Blake, 27th March 1848)

Exploring the three key words the *past*, *present*, and *future*, has broken down the concept of time, and how artists have used these concepts in their work. While physicists are an important part of studying time, I do not think time can be understood alone by them, and the need for philosophers and artists to study it is vital. I am especially interested in the concept of ‘now’, and how the present time works. The past and the future is an important part of this, as it gives the ‘now’ meaning.

Therefore I propose to write my dissertation on this subject, asking the question ‘*What is the ‘now’ and how has it been explored in the arts?*’

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