

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



## COMMENTARIES

# 'In the open' – series II

**Ayo Akingbade, Rosa Barba,  
Mikhail Karikis, Tarik Kiswanson,  
Lawrence Lek, Cally Spooner**

**January – August 2021**



*Today is duodi 12 Prairial in the year of the Republic CCXXIX, celebrating woundwort.*

Today is the final day of May, a Bank Holiday Monday, and nothing sets my timeline aflame like the alternate time of the French Republican Calendar Twitter account. Today celebrates woundwort, yesterday celebrated strawberry, tomorrow will celebrate the pea.

When the French Revolutionaries overthrew their country's monarchy they also overthrew a calendar they saw as poisoned by religious and royalist significance. An alternative calendar – a liberated time – was devised during the Revolution and used by the French government for twelve years between 1793 and 1805. Similar to the calendrical model used by the Ancient Egyptians, the revolutionary calendar began at the Autumn equinox, and cycled through twelve months of equal length (30 days), with extra days at the end to make up the 365 days of the earth's orbit around the sun.

With its daily celebrations of particular grains, pastures, trees, roots, flowers and fruits (in lieu of Catholic Saints) it would be easy to dismiss the online popularity of the French Republican Calendar account as cottagecore fad – each tweet as an aesthetically-pleasing portion of once revolutionary politics. Maybe it is, but maybe it also speaks to a longing for alternatives; the more we lose to capitalist time (and its timelines), the more we are allured by the possibility of time measured otherwise.

The distended time of lockdowns seemed to accommodate these fantasies, in which the temporal structures we took as absolute were revealed as arbitrary and brittle. For some, the micro-time of the seasons – like noticing when a new weed flowers in the pavement crack – began to feel more tangible than the concept of 'Wednesday'. Others paid more attention to cycles of the moon, to the rhythms of their own bodies, to the needs and thoughts of those around them, and to forming structures of solidarity with oppressed lives across borders and time zones.

To listen to the works collected in *In the open* is to listen in on dreams of marking or being in time differently. Against the equation of time is money, these works carve out temporal refugia in which time is permitted to remember, digress, suspend, disrupt, loop back, fail to clock in and give a coherent account of itself. Listening, I allow myself to do likewise.

*DEAD TIME: Narrator's Script*, a work by artist Cally Spooner, is described as resisting 'chrononormativity', a word defined as – 'the imperial, masculinist standardisation of time that orders labour, performance, and digital technologies into a progressive future-oriented linearity'. I wonder about the relation between 'dead' and 'time' as I listen, faintly panicked by the regimented bleeps that remind me of the dreaded bleep test at school (the less time between the bleeps, the faster you have to run, until you can't go on – ideal training for a future precarious workforce). After school we'd log onto the library computers, early internet, daring each other to visit the 'death clock', a site that promised to generate the exact date, hour, minute and second of our expiry.

While listening I remember reading about the *chronocrator*, a Greek word that translates literally as 'time ruler'. In astrology, the chronocrator might be a planet, star or constellation that governs a particular interval of duration. Unlike the open-endedness of the English word 'time', *chronos* is more boundary – a slice of time with a beginning, middle and end (although 'cycle' might be a better word than 'slice'). The chronocrator sounds like a tyrant, but is perhaps a more benevolent governance than the no-alternative grip of chrononormativity.

Listening to the conversation in Ayo Akingbade's *Love Letters to E9*, I fall easily into its reminiscing of child time and logic, where the unknown quantities of the universe take on familiar but enigmatic forms: a secret staircase in the artist's primary school; a school pond that may no longer exist. What was it about lockdown that tipped so many of us into reliving sensory memories of childhood – how afternoon light moves across a popcorn wall, the way a corner of

a room becomes a nest? Tarik Kiswanson's *Surging* pulls me further under. A chorus of unanswerable questions, glass breaking, the sense of something irreparable. "Did it happen fast or slow?" A child's voice asks slowly, pointing to the disjunction between the non-linear time of lived experience and memory, and the catalogued minutes and seconds of chrononormativity.

Lawrence Lek's *Rift EP* exists, to my ear, in an alluringly frenetic suspension between future and nostalgia, nostalgic for a future that never arrived (or maybe I just listened to too much synth in lockdown). I visualise the elaborate CGI vistas and cityscapes of the artist's films I saw in a gallery years ago, as well as *Ecco the Dolphin* (1992), which after a quick google I note is currently – along with the internet – going through its Saturn Return. Saturn is notoriously the most gruelling of chronocrators, tripping us up with ourselves, time-heavy, tough love.

From Rosa Barba's *Faring with Faraway* – an archival collage featuring the voices of 20<sup>th</sup> century campaigners for the rights of women, children and refugees – emerges the pervasive horizon of British Imperialism. Clipped RP voices mingle with loops of music and sounds of trains, animals, environments. I think of walking past a car stopped at traffic lights, Radio 4 suddenly pouring, uninvited, out of the open window. In the polyphony of Barba's work there seems to be a reluctance to elevate human voices over others, a refusal to respect the aural hierarchy implied by the term 'background noise'.

This refusal is also tangible in Mikhail Karikis' 'Acoustics of Resistance'. When we listen, Karikis reminds us, we are not being passive, but actively choosing to direct our attention to an other. We decide, in other words, who or what has a voice, and who or what becomes background noise. In this focus on active participation I am reminded of Alfred Gell, writing in *The Anthropology of Time* (1992):

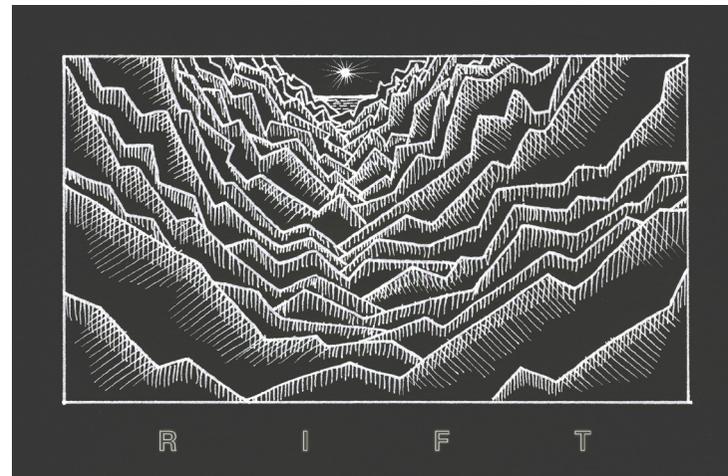
".. the possibility is raised that collective representations of time do not passively reflect time, but actually create time as a phenomenon apprehended by sentient human beings." <sup>1</sup>

Like Karikis' description of listening, and as the instigators of the Republican Calendar knew, our observations and representations of time are anything but passive. The works of *In the open* point towards other ways – resistant and vital – of making, announcing and biding time within the chrononormative status quo.

*Today is quintidi 15 Prairial in the year of the Republic CCXXIX, celebrating the quail.*

**Daisy Lafarge** is the author of *Life Without Air* (Granta, 2020). A novel, Paul, will be published in August 2021.

1. Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*, Berg Publishers, 1992.



Front  
Ayo Akingbade  
*Love Letters to E9*, 2021

Top  
Mikhail Karikis  
*No Ordinary Protest*, 2018

Bottom  
Lawrence Lek  
*Rift EP*, 2021

Courtesy of the artists.