

# Deformability of Time

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**Date**

February, 2023

**Word Count**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a big advancement in technological development which has affected our perception of time. The speeding up of technology and pace of life has led more and more people to experience the inability to keep up with this race against the clock. The lockdowns during the COVID pandemic, which forced us to slow down our pace of life, brought about a sentiment that was felt on a global scale: time can be spent differently.

Over the past few years, I have shifted towards seeking awareness in what it means to prioritise our own bodies and well-being instead of organising our lives based on productivity and efficiency. Through my own reality and experiences, I want to touch upon the importance of not only what it means to fend for one's own well-being, but also how this can be achieved as a collective body.

My thesis circulates between productivity, time, and relational autonomy. A part is dedicated to an experiment of a 'silent retreat' of 24 hours. Within this empirical research, I set up my own 'rules' during the experience. This goes in hand with other artistic research questioning the traditional concept of time and the social standards within our western cultural system. With the platform Uchronia, Dr Helga Schmid is researching our contemporary time crisis. At the intersection of designer, sociologist and chronobiologist, she criticizes the current perceptions of being in time. Therefore, it is needed to act upon the necessity of embracing slower approaches during our existence. How can certain artistic practices emphasize the needed shift towards bodily processes regarding a more autonomous sense of time?

## Introduction

*In my own practice, I aspire to spend more time on my methods and means of functioning regarding work. Over the years, I gained the necessity to prioritize self-care in which recentering the body and mind in relation to external happenings is needed.*

*The phrase of saying how busy you are, and the lack of time is becoming a frequent way of indicating how well you are doing. It reflects upon how our modernized world, where the dominant structure of office workers outbalances one's individual autonomy. Scheduling work and private life into a grid is almost impossible to imagine. Many tools and products that became the norm and measurement compressed into a limited framework. Agenda's, watches, time registration forms, time management tools and mobile devices are the servants of the current time, in order not to let time slip unnoticed. Productivity has become the dominant measurement to construct time. We try to squeeze productivity within a limited time frame. The relationship between clock time and productivity is integrated into many facets of our daily life.*

*By questioning the sense of being detached from the pressure of clock time, I set up experiment silent retreat of 24 hours without any guidance. There weren't too many restrictions planned beforehand, although I did decide consciously on abandoning the use of electronics which also included my watch. This will enhance the ability to be navigated intuitively by one's circadian rhythms.*

### Conditions

*/ Location: an apartment of 40m<sup>2</sup> in Leiden;  
 / Sounds: coming from the fridge, heating, boiler, voices of neighbours;  
 / Activities: reading, sitting, writing, yoga, meditating, sleeping, eating;  
 / Food: premade meal  
 / Chores: washing dishes, watering plants, folding laundry  
 / Movement: yoga practice of  $\approx$  1hour, outside walk of  $\approx$  1 hour*

## Chapter 1 – Desynchronizing of Time

The introduction of mechanical clocks on public buildings such as the church were the beginning of defining the rhythms of everyday life. One of the very first turret clocks started to exist as a timekeeper from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century spread over central Europe.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, this has changed the perception of time in people's minds. Another development starting from the fifteenth century that has led to the process of desynchronization was the increase of artificial light. Candles, fire, and oil lamps were exchanged for electric lighting which disconnected people from the day and night rhythm. The natural rhythm and social construct of time got more separated that caused physical effects on the human body. During the industrialization, more tools were introduced such as railway, automobile, and the telegraph that acceleration of transporting one to another became enhanced. In order to structure days and to regulate punctuality, the standardization of world time has derived in 1884. The demand for timekeeping devices progressed the concept of time as a commodity. The relevancy of the phrase 'Time is Money' is originated from the book: *Advice to A Young Tradesman* (1748) by Benjamin Franklin<sup>2</sup> still applies today. Franklin justifies how success and failure is depending on your management of time. If not, then the opportunities to become prosperous is lost since time cannot be rewind. And so on, there are many expressions in which time could be saved, spent, wasted, or lost that indicates the concept of time that equals money. This gets introduced to us from the very first days of education system to work environments which has grown into us until now.

Time being perceived as something external, could be linked to seasons, or cycles of the sun. It is something that stands on its own, aside from other occurrences that are happening at the same moment. Our internal time is defined by memories, demands and the things we do; the interaction between you and your personal surroundings, the knowledge, and experiences that you have acquired throughout the years are defining the subjective time. Jumping from the past to recent memories to remembering on what we did, thought or what we felt, is the non measurable way of defining time. It can hold on to all directions, variations of speed and shapes. Chronesthesia – A hypothetical mind ability that allows humans to be constantly aware of the past and the future.<sup>3</sup> The Estonian Canadian psychologist Endel Tulving who introduced this theory that appeared with the term episodic memory. He states that the ability for 'mental time travel' is to create awareness for the present, past and future. Therefore, to adjust our attitude to the occurrences that haven't happened yet. Time doesn't decide on the duration of each task or activity or when to move forward to the next moment. Instead, it is decided on whether you get the sense that you have done enough. You move forward to the next task if it appears naturally to continue. As a reminder, we not only live through time, but time also lives in us.

<sup>1</sup> Betts, Jonathan, "Pre-Victorian Turret Clocks and Their Preservation", 2002. <https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/bigben/bigben.html#:~:text=According%20to%20all%20the%20best,in%20the%20late%2013th%20century>. Accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Founders Online, "Advice to a Young Tradesman, 21 July 1748", Founders Online – National Archives, March 2002. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-03-02-0130>. Accessed on 15 December 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, Bridget, "What makes mental time travel possible?", October 2003, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/oct03/mental>. Accessed on 15 December 2022.

### Acceleration of Modernity

In the interview with German Sociologist Hartmut Rosa for the book 'The Future of The New', Rosa criticizes if the acceleration is the fundamental characteristics of modernity<sup>4</sup>. He breaks it into three aspects: technical acceleration, social change, and the accelerated pace of life.

During the 1800s - early modernity, social change was 'intergenerational': social structures would differ over several generations, something that couldn't possibly be imagined during the lifespan of a single generation. When a son was born in the family, it would inherit the profession of the father. If a daughter was born in the family, it would inherit the mother's livelihood. That means she couldn't even imagine having a career besides becoming a housewife. The son, following the lead of its father, would then again pass it on to the next generation. In classical modernity - between 1800 - 1970, the social change was generational in terms of deciding for each their own profession, which would then be maintained for the rest of their life. Nowadays in late modernity we're experiencing the 'intragenerational'; instead of pursuing to one career, it happens frequently that people are switching jobs and even re-educating themselves into different professions. For a profession to last a lifespan has become an exception rather than the norm, and "flexible jobs" - thus flexible and undefined time are dominating the market.

According to Rosa, we have ended up in a paradoxical state in where everything is constantly moving and yet nothing 'really' ever changes. The pace of the technological, economic, and social change is nowadays so fast, that we are unable to control and manage these aspects through the slower processes by the autonomous values. This makes it unable to manage or plan our own lives in any meaningful way. While referring to the modest pace of change during classical modernity, that allowed us to anticipate towards a meaningful life by working hard and investing in education. Despite, we are entangled into waves of change that puts us into directionless and uncertain situations. We reach out into all the chances that cross our path for the sake of experiencing something new while it doesn't lead us towards a goal. Therefore, alienation has gained importance on how we endure the dissatisfaction with the problems of late-modern, post-capitalist society. The understanding of alienation becomes apparent in conditions and situations of where we feel we are not living according to our ideals. Although we are 'free' to choose how to live for ourselves and not forced by choice through external forces. However, we feel strongly forced to keep up with the intoxicating pace of modern life, even though we choose to live this way.

*'The powers of acceleration no longer are experienced as liberating force, but as an actually enslaving pressure instead.'* Hartmut Rosa

Resonance is being conceived as the opposite of alienation<sup>5</sup>. One becomes alienated from the world and from oneself. Yesterday's knowledge is outdated today, the day is barely experienced in short-short time, and work -and personal relationships become increasingly volatile. Consequently, this can be seen as the flip side of the increased efficiency. It will culminate in more

<sup>4</sup> Krisis, Journal for Contemporary Philosophy, "Beyond the Echo-chamber: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa on Resonance and Alienation", 2019, <https://archive.krisis.eu/beyond-the-echo-chamber-an-interview-with-hartmut-rosa-on-resonance-and-alienation/>. Accessed on 4th January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Rosa, Hartmut "The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept", July, 2018 <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/the-idea-of-resonance-as-a-sociological-concept>. Accessed on 4th January 2023.

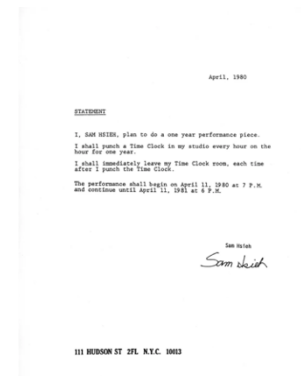
and more of the same mind-numbing and monotonous cycle. The argue from Rosa is to search for something to resonate with. A connection through a conversation in relation to the occurrence which could be a person but also a specific object. It acts as a methodology that would break out any of the form of repetition that comes with the short-short pattern within the acceleration.

*At the time of writing this, it became already quite dark outside. The lamppost which is shining through the back garden inside through the window has been on for a few hours. Usually, streetlamps turn on during 'our' wintertime – around 17:00?. Unknowingly, I followed the same idea by switching on the lights at home as well. One would brighten up the kitchen where the other lamp sets the couch in the centre of attention. The third lamp was hanging right above the dining- and worktable in which the brightness could carefully be adjusted by a rotary dimmer switch. What meant for me was to dim the dining lamp for creating a nice cosy atmosphere. I didn't notice what time it was after I got out of the shower and walked into the kitchen. Apparently, there was a clock time mentioned on the display of the oven. It says 20:07. I should have known and checked this beforehand. For the rest of the evening, I unconsciously checked the oven display for another few times out of a tick.*

*In the late evening, I decided to take a walk around the neighborhood. This was a 'delayed' decision since I couldn't figure out how to lock the door. It wasn't locked at all during the whole day, so I texted my friend about this, but I didn't receive a response before I turned off my phone. At the same time, I wasn't fully comfortable with going out without my phone and with the idea that I couldn't lock the house. Therefore, I couldn't refuse the idea to turn on my phone to see if she replied to me. At the same time, it gave me a bit courage to go out and to have my phone with me just in case.*

## 'Chapter 2' – Examining the sense of time

During the 90's, the Taiwanese Artist Tehching Hsieh dedicated himself to the discipline of punching a time clock every hour for 12 months, 24 hours a day in his project 'Time Clock Piece, (One Year Performance 1980-1981)'.<sup>6</sup> The evidence of 365 punch cards and 365 filmstrips shows a compressed 16mm movie of 6 minutes, representing each day a second. You witness Hsieh in his plain grey uniform with a worn-out appearance. It was a testimony to indicate the statements of being challenged physically and mentally to his strict routine and punching the time clock. In total, he slept through his alarm for 94 times, 29 times of being late and 10 times too early. The 8627 daily mugshots that he took was a straightforward way to visualize the paradox of passing time in which things are changing, but also remained the same. It was his intention to examine the nature of time and systematically observe time's passing.



Continuing with a response from Amelia Groom to Hsieh's performance, she highlights the context of dissolving and yielding to each temporal moment.<sup>7</sup> Amelia Groom is the editor of the anthology *TIME "Documents of Contemporary Art"*, which proposes alternatives to the models of linear time that have underpinned both capitalism and progressive modernity.<sup>8</sup> The marks in which Hsieh failed 133 times out of the 8760 to punch the clock is the fundamental part that emphasizes the contradiction between clock time and corporeal time. The exposure of the circadian rhythm is also signified in his 6 min movie, where you see his shaved hair to grown hair and indications of exhaustion throughout the year. It addresses to the direct correspondence to the cultural measure of time. The durational aesthetic reveals the relationship between the culturally constructed 'clock' time and the 'duration' of a lived experience. Specifically, Hsieh implies towards the endlessly productive work time of capitalism, with the controlling structure of clock time. Through the documentation of his performance, they provide the imagination of materializing the passage time by Hsieh's lived experience. Within the commitment of Hsieh's act of punching a clock, he refers to the omnipresence of working time in the twenty-first century that exceeds into non-working time due to a demand on flexible working hours and the convenience of mobile communications. It examines the deeply rooted human condition of

<sup>6</sup> Cummings, Andrew. "ART TIME, LIFE TIME: TEHCHING HsIEH" Tate, 2 December 2017, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/event-report-tehching-hsieh>. Accessed 15 December 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Groom, Amelia. "TIME" Amelia Groom, date unknown, <https://ameliagroom.com/documents-of-contemporary-art-time/>. Accessed on 15 December 2022.



spatial imprisonment and regulatory constraints.

*This wasn't an unfamiliar neighborhood, yet it was since I haven't walked through it before when it was almost midnight. There was immediate the tendency to open my navigation to see how and where I should go to, but obviously I didn't let this happen. Besides the few unfamiliar neighbors that I encountered, I felt the unease and tension of being restless coming back. The unease I experienced before when I practiced the Vipassana meditation retreat for 10 days in September in 2021. I allowed myself to overflow with all the negative and excessive thoughts. Gradually, they will make their way, if I didn't pay enough attention to them. Instead, the bitter cold wind provoked as a great distraction and led me through the rest of the walk.*

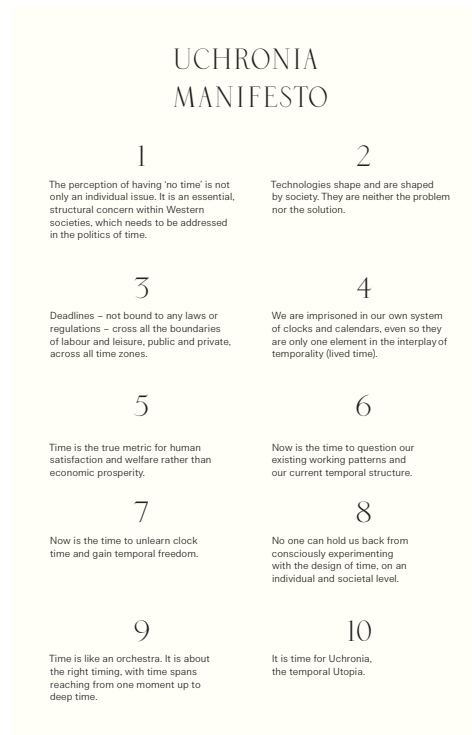
*Getting back home, I felt the invitation to meditate before heading to bed. The amount of discomfort has been built up until the moment I sat down. Thoughts on running away became more and more overpowering. Making an attempt to objectify myself from the distracting thoughts by maintaining a neutral attitude, was something I had to remind myself of. Detaching from the outside world that will give space for the senses to turn inwards. Having no expectations on what will result from this practice. I focused mainly on breathing before starting on sequences of body scans. One of my main takeaways from the Vipassana meditation was that I could observe objectively, distancing myself from the redundant thoughts that I always attach myself to. The meditation retreat explanation? (...) By paying attention to the smallest significant sensations and observing instead of reacting to them, I was more capable of centering my mind and my senses. It allowed me to be in the present moment instead of obsessing about past events or things that still need to happen. I was able to recognize the subtlety of several sensations on and through my body. From the tickling sensation on the sole of my right foot to the touch of the shirt which is comfortably fitted to my skin.*

### **The temporal utopia or Interplay of temporality or Temporal existence**

(...) Moving forward to the design research practice that devotes itself to the contemporary time crisis that offers alternative ways of being in time. The platform Uchronia is founded by the sociologist, designer, and lecturer Dr. Helga Schmid. She opens up a critical understanding of how imposed external time structure of a societal environment can result into a disassociation with the natural rhythm of the biological clock. The term Uchronia originates from Utopia, the Greek word *ou-topos* and *ou-chronos* with the meaning 'non-time' or 'no time'.<sup>9</sup> Within the politics of time, Schmid mainly focuses on different approaches on time and timing in our contemporary work patterns and time norms. In the experiment 'The Atemporal Event (2021)' together with Kevin Walker, she demands for more freedom in the structured time and a breakthrough in societal norms that should encourage the bodily time.<sup>10</sup> A set of summed up principles are defined by the Uchronia Manifesto.

<sup>9</sup> Schmid, Helga. "Embodiment of Digital Time" Re:publica 18, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2018, <https://18.re-publica.com/de/session/embodiment-digital-time>. Accessed on 4th January 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Schmid, Helga, Research Catalogue, "The Atemporal Event", 2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/827680/827681>. Accessed on 15 December 2022.



Before reaching to the earlier mentioned experiment, Schmid have worked already on several projects such as *Designing Time*, *Circadian Space*, *Circadian Dreams* that are giving a different understanding on how time can be experienced. It was part of her PhD research where she eventually compiled all her research that is collected in the book *Uchronia: Designing Time* (2020). Referring to the project 'Circadian Dreams' in which the space acts as a clock.<sup>11</sup> Twelve minutes represent one circadian day of 24 hours, where each minute is equal to two hours. Different color tones such as red orange that makes you sleepy and blue that keeps you active and darkness which consequently brings you to a dream state. These phases are based on daily times for logical reasoning, concentration, producing melatonin, muscle strength and body temperature. *Circadian Dreams* researches the nature of temporality in relation to the future of dwelling. In relation to the project 'Designing Time'(...)

<sup>11</sup> Haentjens, Elien. A Conversation with Helga Schmid, 13th July, 2020. <https://www.z33.be/en/2020/07/13/a-conversation-with-helga-schmid/>. Accessed on 4th January 2023.



Figure 3 Helga Schmid, *Circadian Dreams*, 2018

*Following the next day, I realized that there was a need for almost 8,5 hours of sleep. I woke up around 09:45 without an alarm. The moment when I walked into the kitchen, I got reminded again by the time display from the oven. That was the first thing in the morning that disturbed me enough that I immediately grabbed some tape to close off the display. For me to ignore the thoughts of being behind again, I practiced an extensive morning routine which I really needed and haven't done in a while; the routine in which I meditate, a practice of yoga exercises and then enjoying a well-deserved breakfast.*

*I needed a reason to go out, but I didn't know when exactly. Until the first few sun rays appeared behind the moody grey clouds that vividly filled the living room. It felt very serene to acknowledge the moment on when I 'should' go outside was defined by the daylight breaking through the clouds. Suddenly, I was reminded by clock-time again when the silence was broken up by the ringing doorbell. I flinched. Right after I stood up to open the door for my friend that came back home.*

### **'Chapter 3' - Disciplines of time consciousness**

- Missing paragraph about how Yoga/meditation is connected to art practice and time
- Missing paragraph about slowing down; mentioning Slow Research Lab
- Last part of this chapter is the reflection of the silent retreat.

Thoughts on the silent Retreat of 24 hours -  
03.01.23 14:00h - 14.00h 04.01.23

*During the past 24 hours, the amount of intuitive productivity was very present. Even though there was a minimum amount of planned activities and besides, I tried to keep the expectations realistic. There wasn't a moment of feeling bored. One of the unexpected highlights is that not knowing what time it was allowed me to feel at ease. I could surrender myself to my biological clock and to my circadian rhythm which will let me know 'what time it is'. I realised in that moment that the isolation from social and physical interaction was very much needed. By the end of the silent retreat, I recognised the necessity of minimising the distraction of clock time and digital devices.*

*Someday, there will be a following point of where I am conducting a different experiment about retreating and self-isolation. It could be a silent retreat under professional guidance and conditions, or at least with a clear set of instructions prior to the practice. I missed the freedom and necessity to be surrounded by the forest. Although it was a calm neighborhood, I missed the connection and accessibility to a place where you could only hear the rustling leaves and the subtle howling of the wind. The retreat permitted me to 'exist' without being restricted by the mental boundaries of time. But as I attuned to the needs and sounds of my body, I began to feel the physical boundaries even more. Yet without the option to search on digital maps, I wouldn't really be able to get access to the nearest park. Besides, there was a lack of exercise and movement throughout the whole day. Being outside which was only in the evening, wouldn't come close to the degree of what I aspire to. The romanticized idea of being or living in the forest is maybe something I could work towards to.*

*Contemplating about the next steps, all of this is in relation to the progress of individual autonomy. It is the ability to reflect on the terms of accepting or rejecting personal values and the self-defining features that are always changing due to unexpected circumstances. Therefore, it cannot neglect the internalized social relations and cultural patterns that have grown into me. It is beyond my control to reflect upon the certain structures that define my values, thoughts, and motivations. With my own capacity, I'm trying to discover the means of relational autonomy and the applicable aspect of it. By considering the involvement of social relations between the individual, it forms an unavoidable influence that defines the autonomy. It is the ability to correspond to my personal values, whether as an individual or as a collective.(...)*

*Besides, by even contemplating about my own physical and mental well-being, is something I experience as a certain privilege. The privilege that is reflected upon today's society but clashes with cultural and moral aspects of the previous generation. Concerning to how the attention on preventing being alienated from your environment is an increased risk is something that more people can resonate with. (...)*

*In harmony, in alignment,  
Commitment*

## Epilogue

The relevancy of this topic as a graphic designer lies deeply in the attitude of striving for efficiency. The responsibility for over-consumption and over-producing which is one of the main causes that is being maintained on an unrealistic standard. My intentions of writing this thesis were not for proposing any solutions, but rather questioning and contributing to a shift in liberating from the boundaries of time that social constructs are held upon us. Referring to the main question on how we should act upon our bodily processes cultivates a better understanding on the oneself. Taking a step back to embody the circadian rhythms is an approach for recentering back our energy. It reveals the blind spots that we're too ignorant to pursue under the circumstances of the accelerated aspects in society. This also carries the thought on embracing (relational) autonomy as a radical act on individual activism. This also carries the thought on embracing

However, it is an ongoing process that reflects upon the necessity of what works depending on the changing circumstances. Creating an mutual understanding of (...)

*Research question: How can certain artistic practices emphasize the needed shift towards bodily processes regarding a more autonomous sense of time?*

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