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The Materiality of Duration

Between ice time and water time

NATALIE S. LOVELESS

My clock tells me nothing about what is happening on the Antarctic shelves. I cannot predict how much methane is being released from the melting permafrost. I do not know which creatures will go extinct today, nor how much plastic will reach the strange artificial islands forming in the ocean's gyres. So, rather than coordinating our lives with and through a stable and predictable atom, augmented by the movements of a planet around a star, what if we tried coordinating our lives with something less predictable, but maybe more accurate for the times we live in?

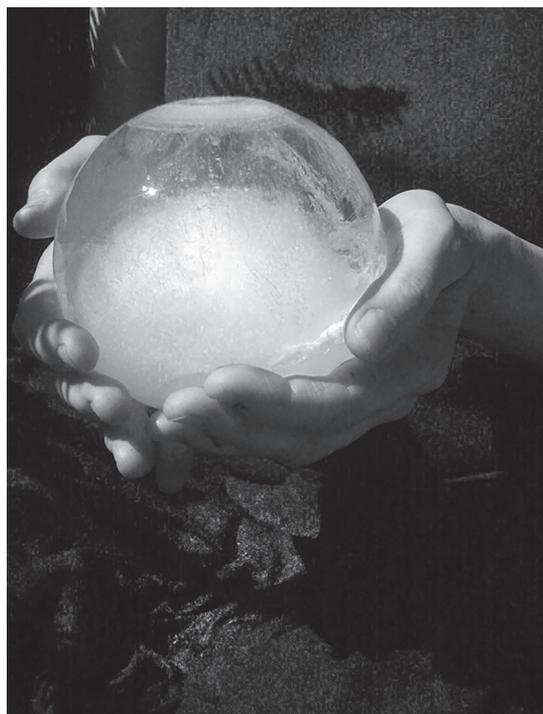
Michelle Bastian (2012:41)

This essay organizes some of my recent thoughts on materiality in durational performance. In what follows I examine two ecologically themed durational performances by

the U.S.-based contemporary performance artist Marilyn Arsem.¹ Each performance, in its own way, invites us into a delicate reconsideration of the materiality of time. Drawing on cultural theorist Michelle Bastian's work on 'clock time' (2012: 23) – a linear, progressive and phantasmatically endless structure – I ask: What kind of intervention into the urgent flow of 'clock time' may be encouraged by durational performances that implicate the viewer as witness? This essay examines two such performances – one organized around ice (*Oceans Rising*, fig. 1) and the other around water (*Evaporation*, fig. 2).

Ice and water have rich histories in contemporary art, from Hans Haacke's 1963–5

¹ Durational performance, here, refers to any performance practice that uses durational time as a constitutive element of its form.



■ (left) Figure 1. *Oceans Rising*. Durational performance. 'Intervene! Interrupt! Rethinking Art as Social Practice', The University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), 15 May 2008. Photo Natalie Loveless, courtesy of the artist
■ (right) Figure 2. Marilyn Arsem. *Evaporation*. Durational performance. Zaz International Performance Art Festival, Mitzpe Ramon, Israel, September 2008. Photo Sinead O'Donnell, courtesy of the artist



■ (left) Figure 3. Alastair MacLennan, *Wontown*, 11 May 2012. Galeria Labirynt (Labyrinth Gallery), in Lublin, Poland. Photo Wojciech Pacewicz, courtesy of the artist

■ (right) Figure 4. Alastair MacLennan, *Rat a Tar*, 13 April 2008 (10am-3pm). Performed at *Undisclosed Territories (2)*, Padepokan Lemah Putih, Solo, Java. Photo JAUHARI, courtesy of the artist.



Condensation Cube, to the Canadian conceptual art duo N.E. Thing Co.'s 1964 *2 Tons of Ice Sculpture*, to Olafur Eliasson's 2006 *Your Waste of Time*.² In viewing this latter piece, gallery-goers were presented with the information that the ice was estimated to have originated in about AD 1200. Viewers of Eliasson's sculptural installation were thus invited to contemplate 'deep' or 'geologic' time (Repcheck). My contention is that with many such ice pieces (sculptural or performance-based), what one is most strongly invited into is either aesthetic abstraction (as with Eliasson's piece, in which we are confronted with the *idea* of geologic time through the sculptural presence of frozen glacier ice that we are told is hundreds of years old) or the drama of human agency (as with N.E. Thing Co.'s performance of difficulty and endurance structured by the task of melting two tons of ice with a flame-thrower). Instead of either the *idea* of a differently inhabited scale of time through which to reposition the human and its history, or a focus on human action and transformation, I am interested in how the simple action of a woman sitting in a redwood forest, with a globe of ice melting in her hands, or staring at a bowl of water evaporating in the desert, may orient us into a different ecological accountability.³ In other words, I am interested in how Arsem's presence, as what feminist philosopher Donna Haraway might call a 'modest witness' in the performances pictured above, operates as an

invitation into a differently oriented attentiveness that has implications for how we *do* our ecological thinking – whether those ecologies be planetary or domestic (Haraway 1997).

DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Duration in performance can be worked with in many ways. For the purposes of this essay I am interested in considering the specificity of action-based, non-narrative, durational performance that is made for witnesses to inhabit *with* the artist rather than relying on either the happenstance viewer (as, for example, in Tehching Hsieh's well-known *Outdoor Piece*, in which the artist performed the instruction of living continuously outdoors for 365 days without marking his action as performance – though, of course, there were those who knew of the piece and sought Hsieh out thereby both witnessing and marking the action) or regulating the viewer's access to the piece (as, for example, in Tehching Hsieh's *Cage Piece*, in which Hsieh performed the action of living in a cage in his studio for a year, with regular viewing times set up during which people could visit him). Both of Hsieh's pieces were concerned with a lengthy duration of time, but neither invited the viewer to *experience* duration with the artist. While I am captivated by these (and many other) ways of working with duration, I consider here the specificity

² Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, a Plexiglass box partially filled with water that evaporates in relation to the climate in which it is installed, lists 'climate in area of display' as one of the materials of the piece; for N.E. Thing Co.'s *2 Tons of Ice Sculpture* the artists proposed to melt two tons of ice with a flame thrower – an action they dedicated themselves to for quite some time before abandoning it (Stankievich); and for Eliasson's *Your Waste of Time*, the artist transported boulders of loose ice from Iceland's largest and most voluminous glacier, Vatnajökull, into a refrigerated gallery space for viewers to experience first-hand.

of durational works that invite not only the experience of duration for the artist, but that also encourage an audience, as witness, to experience extended duration for themselves.

Many of the pieces of Belfast-based, Scottish artist Alastair MacLennan's are built around just such an invitation to sit and witness, modestly and over time. In stark contrast to the responsive durational action-works he regularly performs as part of the collective Black Market International,⁴ pieces such as *Wontown* (fig. 3) and *Rat a Tar* (fig. 4) are virtually motionless. The only way to experience them (as more than sculptural art-images) is to sit, extensively, with the artist, allowing the almost imperceptible movements of matter – human and non-human – to become worthy of attention.

Similarly, Arsem's *Marking Time I* (figs. 5-7) and *Marking Time II* (figs. 8-11) invite viewer-witness-participants to sit with the artist over extended periods of time (eight hours and six hours, respectively) during which little, in fact, seems to happen. *Marking Time I*, performed on 10 November, 2012 at Salt Lake City's Nox Contemporary Gallery, consisted of Arsem working responsively, minimally, and slowly, between 10am and 6pm without break, with four objects: two chairs and two bags of raw flour. The performance consisted of Arsem, over the course of the eight hours, moving both the chairs and her body in a diagonal through approximately 20 feet of gallery floor covered in white flour. Nothing more; nothing less.

Marking Time II, performed on 26 May 2013, at Edmonton's Latitude 53 contemporary art space, consisted of Arsem working in the same manner for six hours (from 2 p.m.–8 p.m.), but this time with a shawl, a pile of earth and one chair⁵. For this second part of the *Marking Time* series, Arsem worked with a clock that chimed every half hour, breaking the performance into twelve discrete segments and grounding the piece in 'clock-time.' Simultaneously, however, the piece challenged clock-time's imperative with the performance of a different materiality of time characterized by a slower pace, minimal action, and lack of structuring narrative. *Marking Time II* challenged viewer-participants to just be with the artist, and, by extension, one another.

Looking around the gallery space during the performance, I noted a number of people, presumably those unfamiliar with durational performance, who seemed to struggle with what to do/how to be. Some looked embarrassed, some moved, some uncomfortable and some bored. Durational performance that asks its audience to be there without giving the members of that audience anything to do or be distracted by (either in the form of expressed affect, implied narrative, or verbal language) is not a familiar literacy for many ('Is this it?' I overheard someone ask). The duration Arsem asks of her audience in *Marking Time I* and *Marking Time II* is not easy. There is no narrative arc, no 'performance', no

⁵ Other key ice/ice-water performances, in chronological order, include: Allan Kaprow's 1967 *Fluids* (an instruction-piece in which a group of people were brought together to build a series of ice walls throughout the streets of Los Angeles in the United States and then leave them to melt); Paul Kos's 1970 *Sound of Ice Melting* (in which Kos placed two chunks of ice on a gallery floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Francisco, surrounded by eight microphones and a sound system that was to amplify any sound that the ice exuded); Francis Aljys's 1997 *Paradox of Praxis I* (in which the artist pushed an ice block through the streets of Mexico City for approximately seven hours until it had fully melted); Tavares Strachan's 2004-2006 *The Distance between What We Have and What We Want [Arctic Ice Project]* (in which Strachan removed one ton of arctic ice and put it on display in a minimalist refrigerated cube in the Bahamas); Roni Horn's 2007 *Library of Water* (a long-term project presenting water melted from twenty-five individual Icelandic glaciers preserved and displayed in clear sculptural tubes installed from floor to ceiling throughout the old city library in Stykkishólmur, Iceland); and Heather Cassils' *Tiresius 2010* (in which, for a performance at the City of Women festival in Slovenia, Cassils stood, naked, with her torso leaning against a muscular male bust made of ice, melting the bust with her body heat).



■ Figures 5, 6, & 7. Marilyn Arsem, *Marking Time I*, eight-hour performance (10 a.m.–6 p.m.) with flour and chairs, Nox Contemporary Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah, United States, 10 November 2012. Photos Kristina Lenzi, courtesy of the artist.

■ Figures 8, 9, 10, 11.

Marilyn Arsem, *Marking Time II*, six-hour performance with earth, chair and shawl, Latitude 53, Edmonton, Alberta, 19 May 2013. Photos Michael J. H. Woolley, courtesy of the artist.

⁴ Black Market

International (BMI) is an internationally renowned experimental durational performance art collective founded in 1985 by Boris Nieslony, Tomas Ruller, Norbert Klassen, Zbigniew Warpechowski and Jürgen Fritz. The collective has since expanded to include Helge Meyer, Alastair MacLennan, Jacques Maria van Poppel, Elvira Santamaria, Marco Teubner, Julie Andree T., Roi Vaara, Lee Wen, and Miriam Laplante. Though here named a collective, important to the methodological ideology of the group is that (1) each artist maintain an active individual practice outside the group, and (2) that BMI performance events emerge as responsive encounters rather than as expressions of collective vision or identity at the level of performance content (there is, of course, a form of collective identification at the level of method).

⁵ <http://totalartjournal.com/archives/3958/marilyn-arsem-marking-time-ii/>

⁶ Shared with permission.



emotional ‘telegraphing’ to tell us why we are here, witnessing. There are bodies in space, unspectacular and present. The performance is about nothing but the subtle transformation of these bodies and materials over time. As the artist contemplates the chair and the dirt, we are asked to as well. After the performance, a colleague of mine from the English and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta, wrote, describing her experience:

I am familiar with durational work nonetheless, every time, I am confronted with my own impatience and judgment. I find myself asking what I am doing here and why, and what the

point is. Then I slowly start to adjust to the different time of the performance and to be more comfortable with it. I liked the part where she was painting on the floor with the dirt. It was amazing to see how far a little dirt could go and the simple but beautiful shapes formed by her hands.⁶

Performances like Arsem’s structurally, as well as emotionally and physically, demand quiet attention and presence for an invested length of time during which there is little happening. One



is invited to commit for sometimes six, twelve, or twenty-four hours, to an anti-narrative event, organized by simple, instruction-based, explorations of material. The mode of attention that this form of durational performance asks of its witnesses is worthy of note – especially, may I add, in the current dominant Western context of what has been called ‘speed culture’ (Gottschalk 1999).

Both *Marking Time I* and *Marking Time II* use time as an artistic material and tool. In so doing, they invoke what performance studies’ scholar Adrian Heathfield, drawing on philosopher Henri Bergson, has called ‘aesthetic duration’ (Heathfield 2008:22). What Heathfield beautifully proposes is that, at its best, aesthetic duration ‘deals in the confusion of temporal distinctions’; in ‘drawing the spectator into the thick braids of paradoxical times ... aesthetic duration is a kind of *entanglement*’ (Heathfield 2008:22, my emphasis). Taking Heathfield’s proposition seriously, I ask: How may we see durational performance as inviting us into pluripotent inhabitings of time that opens up different sets of relations, accountabilities

and attentions than those of the everyday spectatorial – inhabitings that, while not escaping ‘speed culture’, resist its smooth functioning? What may it mean to inhabit confused and/or paradoxical time? How does this entangle us? Why might it matter?

Heathfield’s attention to duration in *Out of Now* is directed towards questioning both the rhetorical commonplace of performance as eruptive event (that is, liveness as the immediacy of the present, the instant, the moment⁷) and the rhetorical commonplace that assigns endlessness to duration (‘a singular and monolithic sense of duration’ (21)). Heathfield proposes both of these conceptions – the eruptive now and the endless now – as artefacts of what he calls the ‘infrastructural terms of Modernity’ (15). This latter perspective on duration, and here I am switching from Heathfield’s idiom to mine, is often aligned with one that sees nature, like duration, as a changeable, but ultimately stable, backdrop for human lives. It is a perspective that can be considered *environmental* rather than *ecological* (Miles 2005); it is one in which sustainability and survival is, ultimately, about *human* survival.

When considering durational performance – when sitting, as I did last month, in a room with Arsem for six hours, witnessing *Marking Time II* – I find myself thinking about the modes of attention we harness in the living of our lives. To what do we attend? When? How? I find myself thinking about this not in the abstract, but in the context of the palpable ravages of climate change and the future of this planet and the people, like my now three-year old son, who will inherit its effects. Durational performances in the mode of Arsem’s depend on altering not only *what* we are paying attention to, but the quality of this attention. As aesthetic form, inhabited duration re-orientates the temporalities and rhythms of our everyday (or habitual) perceptions. In doing so, however, I’d like to suggest that durational performance does not bring us into a different *kind* of time, or even a different *multiplicity of times*, but, rather, that it asks us to *tell time differently*.

Michelle Bastian, in her 2012 article ‘Fatally

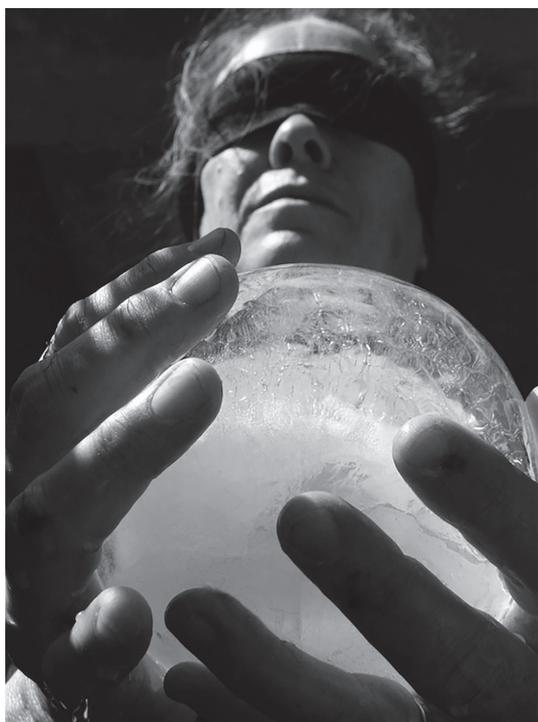
confused: Telling time in the midst of ecological crises’, reminds us that time is always told in relation to something, and whatever that something is, pulls us into a particular materiality. Time isn’t a thing in itself; it is a way of *organizing oneself* in relation to something else. For example, what we know as ‘clock time’ – the performative agreement that we all now have that it is 6.16 a.m. MST (Mountain Time) (the time on my computer as I write this sentence) – is organized by the particular materiality backing that crucial modern technology we know as a ‘second’. What is a ‘second’? Bastian tells us: ‘A second is a unit of time that is calibrated by the ‘before’ and ‘after’ produced by tracking the changes occurring within cesium atoms when electrons shift energy levels’ that is then brought into alignment with the rhythms of the rotations of Earth’ (Bastian 2012: 30). In other words, the rhythm of the movement of a cesium atom [silvery gold alkali metal] grounds what is known as atomic time and the rotations of Earth ground what we call solar time, and *together* they calibrate that all important shift that we call a ‘second’. If we were to follow one (atomic time) *or* the other (solar time), our current system of ordering time would either fall out of sync with the rotation of Earth or lose the precision of the atomic change, thus – and here is my, and Bastian’s, point – clock time is not *one* thing. As Bastian cogently argues, clock-time is ‘the result of an attempt to co-ordinate between two [very] different forms of time’ (30).⁸ For Bastian, however, it is important not simply to show the conventional or performative quality of the time that structures our everyday lives, but to assert the importance of understanding clocks as devices that signal ‘change in order for its users to maintain an awareness of, and thus be able to co-ordinate themselves with, what is significant to them’ (Bastian 2012: 31). She continues:

[T]elling the time can be understood as an act of faith that affirms that the data set provided by tracking the “before” and “after” of a particular material encounter (be it with tides, rocks, a star, or an atom) will provide us with the information

⁶ Peggy Phelan’s now infamous *Unmarked: The politics of performance* (1993: 146–166) offers a particularly persuasive version of this argument.

⁷ What we in the West know as ‘clock time’ works to regulate and homogenize what would otherwise be a heterogeneous set of times attentive to different outcomes and needs and that, in doing so, produces ‘time’ as abstractable and ideologically separable from ‘space’ or ‘matter’. However, quantum physics asserts that the act of observation is a temporal amalgamation; the only way to experience matter is *through* time. One cannot observe anything at any particular point – that is, have space without time – because the act of observation itself *takes time* (Barad 2010). Furthermore, and this is to state the obvious but the nonetheless insidious, the *relation* between time and space is totally conventional: We talk about time and space as if they were two separate things, but they are not. The insight of $E = mc^2$ is that energy and mass are co-extensive. Matter only *matters* in its motion. Such a perspective suggests that matter can be thought of, quite seriously, as performative – a perspective that has been proposed and developed under the auspices of feminist new materialism (Barad 2003; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). For my purposes, this new materialist turn in feminist thinking (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012) lends itself to analyses of ecologically driven durational performance.

■ Figures 12 & 13. Marilyn Arsem. *Oceans Rising*. Durational performance. 'Intervene! Interrupt! Rethinking Art as Social Practice', The University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), 15 May 2008. Photo Markus Saito, courtesy of the artist



required to coordinate and/or synchronize key activities, events, or relations (Bastian 2012: 33)

In other words, particular orientations to time organize us in particular ways, tell particular stories and assign particular values that lead to particular ways of being in the world. The ways that we tell time – the time-telling technologies that we align ourselves with – pull us into *certain* relations, and do not pull us into other ones; they facilitate *certain* modes of being, and permit *certain* modes of attention, and not others (Bastian 2012; Haraway 2007). The way(s) in which we tell time allow(s) us to coordinate with others and – most importantly – tell(s) us which others we have decided it is important to coordinate with.

While the distinction 'clock time' promises absolute commensurability and predictability – despite itself being based on two different kinds of time – Bastian asks us to resist its hegemony in favour of other ways of inhabiting time. She asks us to look for how the different things we attend to, in telling the time, articulate where we place value in our lives, differentially. What I take from Bastian's argument, however, is not

that 'clock time' needs to be jettisoned in the service of some other clock that coordinates us – say the tides for a fisher, or the swell of engorged breasts for a nursing mother or the arctic ice shelf for an ecological scientist – but I, rather, take Bastian to be arguing for a *proliferation* of times and complexity of temporal awareness that articulates multiple values and invites us to simultaneously inhabit multiple ecologies. Rather than jettison 'clock time', the project is to denaturalize it, just long enough to allow us to remember that we are *surrounded by* other times and spaces. Look. Breathe. How many things in your immediate environment alone could you temporally coordinate yourself with? Why live by one time alone? These questions are the first steps towards asking ourselves what modes of time structure our lives and condition our choices, and, through these conditionings, shape our ecologies (Gordon 2004). So, with Bastian and Arsem, I ask: What if my clock were water? Or ice?

For *Oceans Rising*, Arsem sat, blindfolded, in one location for approximately five hours (on a low wall in a corner of an outdoor campus

space situated in a redwood forest) without moving, without a break, holding an eight-inch sphere of solid ice that was slowly melting in her hands. Over the course of the day, the ice melted, dripping into a pool of water that formed on the ground at her feet. When the ice was fully melted, the performance was over. For *Evaporation*, performed four months later, Arsem similarly sat in one location without moving (this time for approximately eight hours, un-blindfolded, but wearing a shawl that, in the desert heat, produced a microclimate surrounding her face), this time staring at a bowl of water until it evaporated – the empty chair before her inviting us, again, to sit and watch with her, one by one this time, for as long as we wanted.

I read *Oceans Rising* and *Evaporation* as invitations to coordinate between water, ice, and the sun, in the context of global climate change. Each piece is attuned to the ability of ice to melt and water to evaporate on a particular day, held by particular hands and/or situated in a particular spot. Furthermore, these performances, as companion pieces, invite us to experience and consider the relation of water to ice. Water is the

sine qua non of life. The life we know requires water. Ice is, of course, frozen water. Unlike nearly every other element, however, when water gets cold and turns into ice, because of the way it crystallizes, it takes up *more* space rather than less. And, as it takes up space, it takes up time. Ice is an archive: Organisms that are living (for example, bacteria) can be frozen; Antarctic ice is an archive of life on Antarctica when Antarctica was not where and how it now is. Ice time tells the story of multiple times simultaneously. When ice unfreezes these organisms come to life and tell the story of a time–space long past and far away. As does water.⁸

Arsem's work inhabits just such a multiplicity of times. It inhabits a complexity of times that, in turn, invites us to question what we attend to in new ways. This is the promise that I read in Heathfield's proposition of Aesthetic Duration and is one of the structural strengths of durational performance as form. Arsem's work takes this structural capacity of Aesthetic Duration and directs it towards ecological ends. Rather than an environmental activism that places the human

⁸ For example, in attuning to water we may attend to the pull of microbial time, industrial time and geologic time, simultaneously (with thanks to Sha LaBare for helping me focus on this point).

■ Figures 14 & 15. Marilyn Arsem. *Evaporation*. Durational performance. Zaz International Performance Art Festival, Mitzpe Ramon, Israel, September 2008. Photo Sinead O'Donnell, courtesy of the artist



as pro-active caretaker, thereby reinforcing an anthropocentric world view, *Oceans Rising* and *Evaporation* subtly highlight a feminist new materialist perspective attentive to what Karen Barad calls co-constitutive and hybrid ‘intra-actions’ with/in time (Barad 2007: 33). We are not entertained, moved or distracted. The performances are structured simply to highlight ice melting and water evaporating. And it is this focus that is constitutive. Through it, these performances suggest the materiality of duration as a central agent in the micro-politics of ecological transformation. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us in her ‘Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things’, not only does it take time to care, but time *needs* care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). These simple performances between human and non-human actors suggest, if we take the time to inhabit them, a dense, non-reductive, conception of ecology as a material matrix (Bennet 2004). Rather than calibrating water, ice – and her and our bodies – to clock time, as Arsem does in her *Marking Time* series even as she denaturalizes it, here Arsem calibrates herself – and us – to *water-time* and *ice-time*. To return to Barad’s feminist new materialist imperative, to orient oneself in an ecological and anti-anthropocentric manner is not to *de-specify* the human, but, rather, to *reposition* the human. This repositioning encourages us to inhabit different questions that produce different ethics – ones not organized around human survival but what Bastian, drawing on Donna Haraway, refers to as “multi-species” flourishing (Haraway 2007: 90). The radical simplicity of these actions asks for no other engagement but to witness matter in motion. To witness Ice-Time and Water-Time. To make ice and water two of our, it is hoped, many, new clocks.

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