

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

An Experiment with Time

Sat 5 February — Sat 19 March 2022

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain works with film and computer-generated imagery, exploring issues of imperial legacy, human displacement and the Anthropocene. She also works through collage, photography, tapestry and installation.

In *An Experiment with Time*, Ní Bhriain draws on a book of the same title by J. W. Dunne published in 1927. John William Dunne (1875-1949) was born in Curragh Camp, a military base in County Kildare, Ireland as the son of a general. He became a soldier himself and fought in the Second Boer War before turning to aeronautics as an invalid. After a spell writing a book that aimed to revolutionise fly fishing (*Sunshine and the Dry Fly*, 1924), he then decided to publish his long-standing research into precognitive dreams and hypnagogic states. *An Experiment with Time* (1927) outlines a theory of time and consciousness: arguing that past, present and future exist simultaneously, but are perceived by humans in a linear fashion. Dunne elaborated on this, stating that our wakeful attention to the present prevents us from seeing other aspects of time and it is only when we are asleep that the mind, freed of consciousness, can perceive these insights.

Ní Bhriain's film reflects her consideration of Dunne's ideas. Film is a linear format, but here, Ní Bhriain presents two almost identical films that play out of sync. The shots of three architectural spaces are transformed by computer-generated imagery (CGI), each modified from their original state to now appear flooded with water. These long panning shots are interspersed with rapid cuts of archival media footage, often so brief to be almost subliminal. The three spaces — a famous Munich anatomy theatre, an Italian church and the National Museum of Computing at Bletchley Park — can also be seen as representative of the larger institutional structures of Western civilisation. The flooding and the presence of

wild animals within their interiors hint at the potential ruination brought by climate change, just as the glimpsed archival footage foresees both future and past disasters.

The soundtrack accompanying the films was composed by Susan Stenger, the American composer and co-founder of Band of Susans. Stenger uses a chord sequence based on the DNA code of the Arabidopsis plant (a tiny edible cress), overlaid with an English horn (cor anglaise) composition from the 'Gloria Patri' prayer, which is then transposed into morse code and into musical score. The Arabidopsis is the most widely used 'model organism' in plant biology, and the first plant to have its entire genome sequenced. In 1982, samples of the plant were taken to the Soviet Salyut 7 space station by crew members and it became the first plant to flower and produce seeds in space. Before he died, the author Tim Robinson asked Stenger to compose a piece based on the entire genome of the plant, a composition that potentially could have lasted years. Whilst Robinson died before this could be composed, elements of the idea are resurrected in Ní Bhriain's film.

The Gloria Patri prayer is a widely used brief hymn of praise in Christian liturgy:

Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto,
Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula
saeculorum. Amen.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world
without end. Amen.

Both sources that contribute to the soundtrack focus on the recursive nature of time (the repetition built into the blueprint of DNA and the endless time of the universe in the prayer) and both to some extent point to the potentially deterministic nature of

Dunne's vision: if all time exists simultaneously then is every occurrence already mapped out?

In the accompanying galleries, Ní Bhriain continues to explore themes of time. Three large tapestries occupy Gallery Two: woven on a jacquard loom and comprised of collaged found-images of ruined buildings from the media. The relationship between textile and computer technology is undeniably intertwined - the Jacquard loom has enabled the weaving of complex patterns through its programmable punchcards of binary codes and is considered the foundation of computer programming. These works also make reference to J. W. Dunne's idea of 'intrusions'. Published posthumously, his book *Intrusions?* (1955) describes personal visions that have the quality of divine spiritual interventions. The book remained unfinished at the time of his death, and his unwillingness to publish it during his lifetime is likely due to its less scientific content. In the context of precognitive visions, the tapestries also recall the Fates in Greek mythology: weavers who create our futures and presage our deaths.

Three limestone slabs from a quarry in Ireland cover the gallery floor, offering a much longer temporal perspective than the wars and natural disasters depicted in the tapestries. The deep time of geology and the formation of the earth itself is again present in Gallery One, where stone is prominent in several of the objects on display. They form an odd echo with the tapestries: photo collage was pioneered by the German artist Hannah Hoch in the early 20th century, who made her living in textiles and embroidery, often experimenting with the combination of both mediums.

Gallery One as a whole, however, takes the principle of collage further. The near doubling of objects in the almost sunken vitrines recall the flooding and reflections in the films while the hand-shaped globes on the floor (shaped clay and recast bronze versions) are strewn randomly in both galleries. The overall ambience of Gallery One suggests a museum presentation, although a closer

examination of the objects reveals a sense of collage in their temporal life: some are made by the artist and some have a longer lineage. These displays and the accompanying collages undermine the formal authority of the wall and the vitrines, reinforcing history as a source to be interpreted, revised and made anew.