

‘The appropriate time scale for the study of history may be the whole of time...a scale of between ten and twenty billion years’.  
David Christian (1991), as quoted in Manfred B. Steger; Paul James, *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times* (2019)

## 1. Micro

To experience Gleave’s *Cloud Field* (2015) is to be both inside a cloud and inside a gallery, at the same time. The misty fog you’re inhaling really *is* the stuff of cloud—there are no smoke and mirrors here, it is a perfectly calibrated weather system (made from pure water) enclosed within four walls. The ambient air of the gallery is lighter than the cloud, which causes the vapour to sink and rest low to the ground. Step outside of the cloud field and the processes of making it are immediately visible. So, we are walking on cloud, but we are also in the realm of human-made geoengineering. We’re up in the sky, and still very much rooted on earth, standing on a constructed concrete floor, surrounded by cut timber and plasterboard walls.

In this way, *Cloud Field*—one of a series of works described as ‘weather rooms’—demonstrates Gleave’s ongoing interest in the relationship between human perception, reality, knowledge systems, and the processes of the universe. While it would be easy to claim that Gleave is solely concerned with exploring the messages and structures of the cosmos, to do so would ignore how central the human experience is to her work. That is, equally as important to Gleave is how our bodies inhabit space, how we navigate the appearance of a cloud in a room or a planetary eclipse on a wall, and how this may shake or unravel our own understanding of *being-in-the-world*.

Gleave is not only a speculative maker of interplanetary performances and strategies on the ending of the universe, but also a sculptor: one who is concerned with the way a material (whether it be time, a plastic balloon, water, light or sound) can be bent, shaped and contorted in physical space. (Another example: just as *Eclipse Machine* may depict the physical properties of a planetary eclipse, so too does it consider how the light bounces off the walls, and how that same light refracts and distorts when a body is standing in the room.) Recurring across Gleave’s practice is the careful preparation of situations or encounters—the setting up of a controlled environment—within which a viewer might pause, rethink, or shift their apprehension of reality, of how ‘fixed’ knowledges are learnt and reproduced.

It is Gleave’s concern with planetary time, distance, and scale that situates her work within a broader contemporary arts practice similarly preoccupied with ideas of perception and ways of seeing. Working across and between forms (sculpture, performance, works on paper, installation), this group of artists—such as Katie Paterson, Josiah McElheny, Pierre Huyghe, or Haroon Mirza—often have a particular interest in linking scientific processes to artistic practice. In the case of Paterson, this might result in a timepiece for the solar system or a light bulb that simulates moonlight, or with Haroon Mirza, in the interplay between sound, light waves and electric currents.<sup>1</sup> These artists, like Gleave, move between making large-scale or site-specific installations and more discrete introspective works, some which may not be on display until the year 2114.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Katie Paterson, ‘Timepieces (Solar System)’ (2014); ‘Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight’ (2008) and Haroon Mirza, ‘A Monument to Celestial Objects’ (2018); ‘Stone Circle’ (2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Katie Paterson’s ‘Future Library’ (2014-4122), accessed: <https://katiepaterson.org/artwork/future-library/>. As the description reads, ‘one writer every year will contribute a text, with the writings held in trust, unread and unpublished, until the year 2114’. (np)

Yet, what remains distinct to Gleave's practice is her ability to move between the personal, local, global and universal (taking into account the entire cosmos), while also playing and toying with the tension created across these scales. We could describe Gleave's work as relational, *not* in a way that it is only concerned with relations between humans and social contexts (as Bourriaud would have us to think), but rather cross or multi-relational: the way humans relate to atomical structures, self-sustaining ecosystems, particle waves, the solar heat arriving from the sun, *and* past histories, past technologies and alternate knowledge systems.<sup>3</sup> Take, for example, 'Cosmic Time', a performance work that premiered at the TarraWarra Museum of Art in 2021. Presented as a four-person percussion group dressed as spirits from the multiverse, the work explores time and space on a cosmological scale: the rhythms of the big bang, the heartbeats of desert mice, and the circular orbits of planetary forms. Knowledge here is produced not through Western conceptions of science and logic, but rather cosmological, cultural, historical, and biological methods of understanding. To experience 'Cosmic Time' as an audience member is to be aware of *multiple possible planes* (and relations) simultaneously: the tones and semitones of individual performers, the shine and glint of their costumes, the alignment of the planets and stars, and the non-human entities skirting the edges of the gallery.

## 2. Mesa

In 2010, at the base of the Vatjökull icecap in Iceland, Gleave loaded a firework bomb (made out of left-over fireworks from the previous winter) into a wheelbarrow. Gleave lit the fuse and the wheelbarrow exploded in the dusk—a one-off event, in the depths of a Scandinavian winter, for a single solitary viewer. The light would continue out into the universe.

This early work of Gleave's serves to highlight the way she has always been interested in the ephemeral: in the transitory or instant performance; in fleeting artworks that cannot be fully documented by a photograph or recorded on a phone. Such a focus on an everyday rupture suggests Gleave's connection to the conceptual and performance art practices of the '60s, '70s and '80s. Think of Ian Burn's 1967 mirror piece 'No object implies the existence of any other', or Mel Ramsden's 'Secret Painting' (1968)—works that unmoor a viewer and call into question their belief as to what text and art can (and should) do. Or think of On Kawara's almost 900 telegrams, which were circulated to multiple recipients with an opaque message.<sup>4</sup>

In 'Irreversible Actions/Inevitable Reactions' (2017/18), Gleave uses a recipe for fire-activated invisible ink to write the titular words on two sheets of paper. Once set alight, the fire slowly etches the phrases across the page. So, there are two works here: the moment the invisible ink reveals its message (a performance) and the subsequent detritus (the message left behind). Indeed, fire as a workable material recurs across many of Gleave's works, whether it ghosts behind them, as is the case for 'Sincerity' (2011), or triggers the performance, as is the case for 'It was never meant to last (BIG TIME LOVE)' (2011).

While she may be influenced by the conceptual art movement's key premise that 'the idea becomes the machine that makes the art', Gleave also builds on, and plays with, its legacy. For her, the nature of the object is just as important as the conceptual framework that spurs the making of that object. The interest here is in the relationship between the two, rather than one overriding or imposing its will on the other. Materiality and tangible experience become key. Yoko Ono might prompt you to 'listen to the earth turning' on a piece of paper, in her 1963

---

<sup>3</sup> See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> On Kawara, 'Telgrams: I Am Still Alive' (1969-70), accessed: <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/on-kawara-i-am-still-alive-suicide-telegrams>

‘Earth Piece’, but Gleave will devise a system so that we might use harmonic resonances to truly listen (as opposed to imagine) what a star may sound like, many light years away.<sup>5</sup>

For ‘7 Stunden Ballonarbeit/7 Hour Balloon Work’ (2010), Gleave livestreamed herself sitting in her studio in Berlin, blowing up balloons, for a period of seven hours. The video was beamed between Berlin and Sydney on the 10<sup>th</sup> August, and viewers (in both time zones) watched as Gleave was gradually buried underneath a sea of latex bubbles. Like the feminist performances of Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann and Joan Jonas, Gleave is playing with endurance, repetition, and the position of the artist’s body in public space. In a way that’s akin to Alison Knowles’ ‘Make a Salad’ (1962), Gleave’s ‘7 Hour Balloon Work’ documents the boredom of the everyday task, while also questioning the labour-value of such a task, amidst the hours of an average working day.<sup>6</sup>

But, again, Gleave updates and re-energises the parameters of past 20<sup>th</sup> century performances in a contemporary context. That is, Gleave is also asking: What kinds of shifts occur when a live performance is mediated via a screen, or, what is the difference between a performance occurring in situ in a studio while it is also being experienced in another hemisphere, in another time zone entirely? In this way, ‘7 Hour Balloon Work’ (and its subsequent iterations) combines Gleave’s interest with repetition and labour and her ongoing preoccupation with time, space, and the physical properties of the world. Indeed, what links these two concerns is a feminist impulse to trouble the coherent boundaries between the public and the private, and to destabilise the imposed patriarchal hierarchies that order logic, science, intuition, mysticism, and astrology.

### 3. Macro

In her book *The Global Transformation of Time* (2015), historian Vanessa Ogle charts how railway networks, steamships and telegraph communication systems drove the need for standardised global time. Focusing on the period between 1870 and 1950, Ogle reiterates the ways in which new technologies can spawn a series of chain reactions, which often means that previously fixed ways of structuring reality must be rethought and revised. As a response to the possibility of changing time, treatises were written and conferences scheduled, so as to encourage fierce debate. Distinct schools of thought were formed, and ideological arguments ensued.<sup>7</sup> ‘Abstract time was actually made and remade’, writes Ogle, ‘invented perhaps in a drawn out, arduous and laborious process that took much longer to achieve than commonly assumed’.<sup>8</sup> In making this claim, Ogle reveals how concepts we presume are universal—time, space, distance and speed—are just as constructed by social, political and cultural realities as they are by the principles of physics. And, as Ogle suggests, this particular (re)construction of time had the flow-on effect of reconfiguring a fundamental understanding of the world—for Ogle, it ‘produced and permitted the emergence of a global consciousness’.<sup>9</sup>

Ogle sees the transformation of time as explicitly connected to late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism and European imperialism. Gleave, especially in her research, works to draw

---

<sup>5</sup> As seen in Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*, (Tokyo: Wunternaum Press, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> See James Fuentes, ‘Make a Salad, 1962: Alison Knowles’, *Art Basel*, accessed: <https://artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/39164/Alison-Knowles-Make-A-Salad>.

As Fuentes describes, ‘Knowles first made a salad in the name of art at London’s ICA Gallery in 1962. In this event, she prepares a massive salad by chopping the ingredients to the beat of live music, mixing flamboyantly by tossing it in the air, then serving the salad to the audience’. (np)

<sup>7</sup> Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*, (Massachusetts, United States: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 7-10

<sup>8</sup> Ogle, p. 10

<sup>9</sup> Ogle, p. 212

attention to a similar set of scales and temporalities, which, in turn, challenge dominant Western and Euro-centric arrangements of the global space. Tracking underneath many of Gleave's works is her desire to draw attention to scientific lineages and histories, and to reorientate the way such knowledge-systems are built into our everyday lives. *The influence of an idea on the physical properties of the world*, the title of this book, suggests Gleave's preoccupation with the types of social shifts or inventions that alter the makeup of our world, for good or ill. Or, to put it another way, she is asking: What are the tipping points, like Ogle's advent of the railway or the telegram, that shift our perception of reality?

'The Radius of Infinity', a work installed at The Lock-Up gallery in 2019, distils all these differing concerns into an immersive and embodied experience. Taking the mathematical equation for the maximum impact any one event can have on the universe as her starting point, Gleave translates this equation into the language of Morse code (a system of communication first used in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>10</sup> This message is then reconfigured again, conveyed as a flickering circle of light, in a darkened room, which hits the rear wall of the gallery just as the message terminates. But, at the same time, the beam of light also passes through a mist of water droplets—a mass of falling stars or the vapour that sits just above an ocean wave. 'The Radius of Infinity' is at once a reflection on coded messages, the outdated technology of sending this message, the boundaries of existence (both internal and external), the comic ocean, and water: a single element that sustains life on Earth and the means for determining whether another planet is habitable for sentient life.

Indeed, it may be better to say Gleave is not working in the realm of standardised time at all, but rather in *deep time*—with how humans are situated within the 'dynamics of planetary history'.<sup>11</sup> How far back and how far forward should we go? What scale should we use to situate ourselves in relation to the speed of light and the arrangement of the stars, first in the Milky Way, then in our galaxy, then in our universe?

If, as Manfred Steger and Paul James argue, we are now in the period of 'The Great Unsettling', whereby 'relations between people, machines, regimes, objects, and nature' have been forever disrupted, then work that considers our embedded position within 'the cosmic time-space continuum' becomes all the more significant.<sup>12</sup> We exist at a time where we are being asked to consider the alteration of planetary boundaries at a scale of hundreds of thousands of years, and to comprehend surface temperatures and dioxide levels that belong to an entirely different geological age. In making work that challenges us to consider the limits of human knowledge and truths, and to rethink how we, as a species, inhabit (and make meaning out of) our dynamic biosphere, Gleave is answering one of our era's most urgent concerns. That is, in bringing all the scales together, Gleave is disburdening us of the fictions we continue to tell ourselves: that we are separate from, rather than subservient to, the rhythms of this planet, and that we, as human beings, will always have answers in times of crisis.

---

<sup>10</sup> Eddie King, 'Simply elegant, Morse code marks 175 years and counting', *The Conversation*, (21 May, 2019), accessed: <https://theconversation.com/simply-elegant-morse-code-marks-175-years-and-counting-117069>

<sup>11</sup> Manfred B. Steger; Paul James, 'Excavating the Long History of Globalization', *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 147

<sup>12</sup> Steger; James, pp. 158, 140