

Opinion /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
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# A Theory of Relativity

What is slow?

'There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.'

Milan Kundera, *Slowness* (1995)<sup>1</sup>

Agnes Martin's paintings do not appear to be in a hurry; this is, perhaps, one of their most appealing aspects. Whether or not the velocity at which she painted had to do with a kind of recollection is, of course, impossible to know. Nonetheless, her rich use of solitude, and its relationship to her practice, is well documented. In 1967, after abruptly leaving New York and moving to New Mexico, she stopped making art for seven years and built a house in the desert, a location that echoed the sparse, earth-and-sky-coloured surfaces of her pictures. Like pale perennials in a Modernist greenhouse, the grid supports the delicacy of her palette, its implication of infinity reinforcing the profound sense of renewal that lay at the heart of her use of repetition: a kind of thoughtfulness that cannot be rushed. Her suggestion to artists was 'that you take every opportunity of being alone, that you give up having pets and unnecessary companions'.<sup>2</sup> When Martin died, I realized I hadn't thought about her paintings or her writing for a long time. What now seems most startling about her work is the slowness of her approach – to making pictures, to making her mind up, to her career. 'It is so hard to slow down to the pace where it is possible to explore one's mind', she wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Once you begin to think about slowness itself, and what it might mean in relation to art, contradictions pile up at an alarming rate: how is it possible to gauge the speed at which a thought is mapped, and what, ultimately, are the benefits of such an endeavour? Is something that appears slow necessarily richer than something made more spontaneously? Is slowness the same as thoughtfulness? Is each person's experience of slowness unique? Does the time it takes to make something have any real bearing on our perception of it as slow? An idea may take ten minutes to execute yet decades to think about beforehand, while a quick sketch could take years of observation to decipher: is it, then, the looking or the making that determines a slow sensibility? Is a painting made in a day faster or slower than a film that lingers over every frame?

Obviously, speed is relative. Sit through a dull movie, and time and duration will not agree. The presumption of slowness often has no bearing on the conditions that created it; with regard to art, it has more to do with intention and reception. Ironically it is often also used as a kind of shorthand, a simple word to communicate complex, and often contradictory, sensibilities. This becomes clear when I ask some friends what slowness means to them.

The first reply: 'Often an art work that is perceived as being elitist or incomprehensible is simply an idea that takes a long time to understand. Most people are in a rush, when it comes to meaning.'

The second reply: 'Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote* and the fat boy in *The Pickwick Papers* – both are about a very material type of slowness, which contrasts the speedy Romanticism of the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance and Pickwick. There's some great imagery of slowness in Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress", although the poem is about speed and desire ("Had we but world enough, and time/This coyness, Lady, were no crime /My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires, and more slow"). Chardin, obviously, is very good for slowness. Lothar Baumgarten? De Rijke and De Rooij? Tarkovsky, especially *Sleeper*.'

The third reply: 'Maybe I would start with my favourite scene in *The Life Aquatic*, when Bill Murray leaves the party on his boat and walks by himself to the end of the ship and lights a cigarette, and the whole film slows down and goes into a drifting blur. And I would propose that all art in some way or other is about the ritual slowing of life's chaos ... (this relates to science, as Deleuze once said).'

A confused consensus emerges: slowness seems to be more about allowing an image, object or idea to develop at a pace appropriate to its content; about a kind of delicacy that can't be hurried – however slight. If art cannot help but involve itself with residue and accumulation (no idea springs from a void), then time and its effects – physically on the work of art and intellectually in terms of its reception within shifting contexts – are the only media that every artist employs. Some, however, use it as a primary tool – On Kawara, for example, whose work, in relation to time, recalls Samuel Beckett writing of James Joyce: 'His writing is not about something, it is that something itself.'<sup>4</sup>

Kawara's 'Today' series was begun in the mid-1960s and comprises the artist's 'Date Paintings'. Each one is a monochrome field inscribed in freshly mixed paint with the date on which it is made, in the language of the country it is made in, and according to that country's calendar. Each painting is stored in a cardboard box, with a clipping from a newspaper published in the same city and on the same day that the painting is made. Many of the early examples are subtitled with diaristic notes. Some days Kawara makes more than one, but this is rare. Often he makes nothing, but this does not mean he is not working – the subtitle to *Date Painting for July 26, 1972* is a quote from the Russian astrophysicist Nikolai Kozyrev: 'Time is thin around the cause and dense around the effect.'

1 Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, 1996, Faber and Faber, London, p.34

2 Agnes Martin, *Writings*, 1992, Cantz, p.117

3 *Ibid.*, p.71



4 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn, John Calder, 2001, p.172

5 Stuart Morgan, 'On Kawara, "The Recording Angel"', *frieze*, 33, p.56

6 Robert Walser, *Jakob von Gunten*, trans. Christopher Middleton, New York Review Books Classics, New York, 1999, p.5

7 Robert Walser, *The Walk*, trans. Christopher Middleton, Serpent's Tail, London, 1993, p.1

8 [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

9 Hans van Vliet, 'Spoerri: Eat Art', *Slow*, March 2004, p.100

10 John Irving, 'Food on Film', *Slow*, March 2004, p.108

11 J.G.Ballard, 'Up with the Celestial Helmsmen', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2005

12 Amelia Earhart, [www.ameliaearhart.com](http://www.ameliaearhart.com)

13 George Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, Ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwood Publishers, Oxford, 1992, p.131

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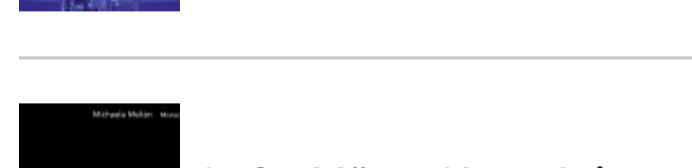
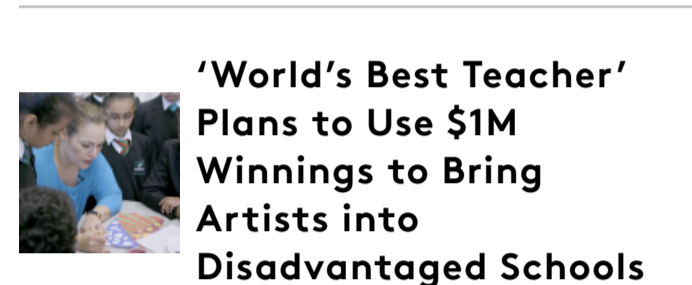
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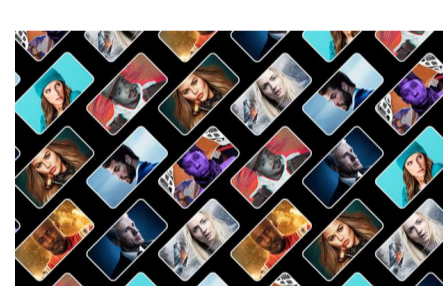
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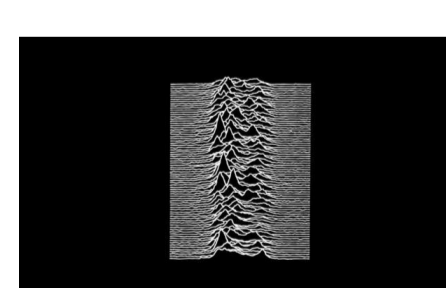
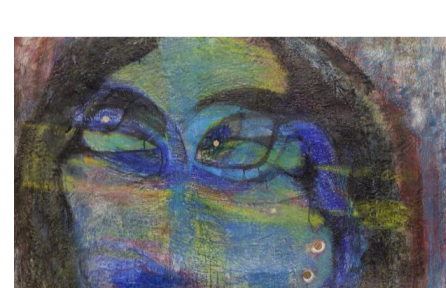
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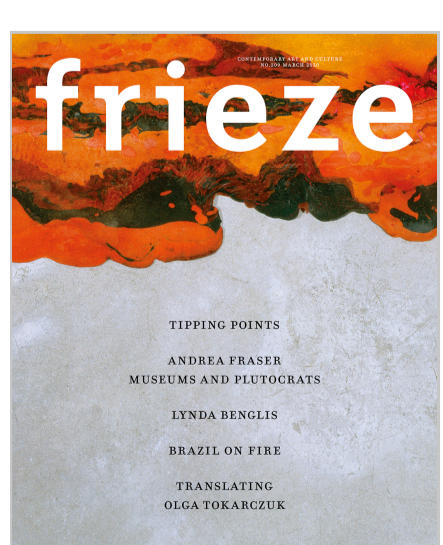


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