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cover image: Larissa Sansour and Soren Lind, *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, 2015, Video, 29 min (still)

How to Travel in Time

organized by S. I. Rosenbaum
November 8 - December 22, 2018



Morehshin Allahyari

Lee Brogan

Héctor Ferreiro

Nicholas Galanin

Gideon Rubín

Larissa Sansour and Soren Lind

apexart - nyc

“The prime purpose of time travel is to change the past; and the prime danger is that the Traveler might change the past.”
— Larry Niven, “The Theory and Practice of Time Travel”¹

Give me back my name
Give me back my name
Something has been changed in my life
Something has been changed in my life
Something must be returned to us
Something must be returned to us
— Talking Heads, *Give Me Back My Name*²

1.

In 2015, when the Wampanoag people of Massachusetts needed a word for telephone, they had to perform an act of time displacement to get it.

No one had spoken Wôpanâak in hundreds of years, but one member of the tribe, Jessie Baird, had a dream in which ancestors told her to bring the language home. Studying at MIT, she was able to reconstruct a grammar and vocabulary from a cache of manuscripts penned by Wampanoag ancestors in the 1600s. The goal was to recreate a community that spoke Wôpanâak: to share a language is to be a people, and to be a people is to have a future. Reviving the language was a bulwark against a continuing genocide.

So they needed a word for telephone. The women working on the project did not simply borrow the English word. Neither did they coin a word for the glassy smartphones they all carried with them.

Instead, they imagined what Wôpanâak-speakers might have called the first telephones, if the language had not ceased to be spoken before telephones were introduced in the 1870s. In doing so, they had to envision a world that had never existed—an alternate past. In this past, people never stopped speaking Wôpanâak; perhaps it was a past where no fevers had decimated their communities and no one had enslaved their children.

It is a past that exists nowhere, or perhaps it exists in some other universe we can never access—except in that universe and in ours the Wôpanâak word for telephone is the same.

2.

The idea of traveling in time to alter or salvage the past is one of the few narrative motifs that seems to appear in human cultures only after the 1800s. Almost all the major narrative forms had been invented, again and again, in many cultures and many times. And yet the idea of traveling backwards in time to rejoin, re-experience, or

alter the past did not emerge in human fiction anywhere until Europe in the 1800s, after the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

This seems odd, since the urge to change or resurrect the past seems universal. The science fiction author Larry Niven wrote, “When a child prays, ‘Please, God, make it didn’t happen,’ he is inventing time travel in its essence.”³ (Here, Niven is probably quoting an earlier time-travel/alternate history novel, *Bring the Jubilee* by Ward Moore, in which a man travels back in time to stop the South from winning the Civil War, and inadvertently creates the timeline we live in now).

Everyone knows the sensation of regret: the instant an object breaks, the moment of death, the disarticulation of “afterwards” from “before.” *Hwær cwom mearg?*,⁴ a poet wrote in the fifth or sixth century, as his world was passing from pagan to Christian: “Where now is that horse? Where now the rider? ... how time has fled, dark under night’s hood, as though it never was.”

And: “I hear the voice of grief and I know that you have been taken somewhere by death,” lamented Gilgamesh in a poem written two thousand years earlier. “What state of being holds you now? Are you lost forever?”⁵

In pre-modern stories, grief and dislocation would be expressed as a journey through space, or through worlds. A man might travel under the sea or inside a hill, and return to find three hundred years have passed. Someone might visit to the land of the dead — to speak to those gone, as Odysseus did, or to attempt the resurrection of some Eurydice or Baldr. Sometimes the dead come to the living, and speak to us in a dream. This form of visitation may be the oldest human way of conceiving of time travel to the past.



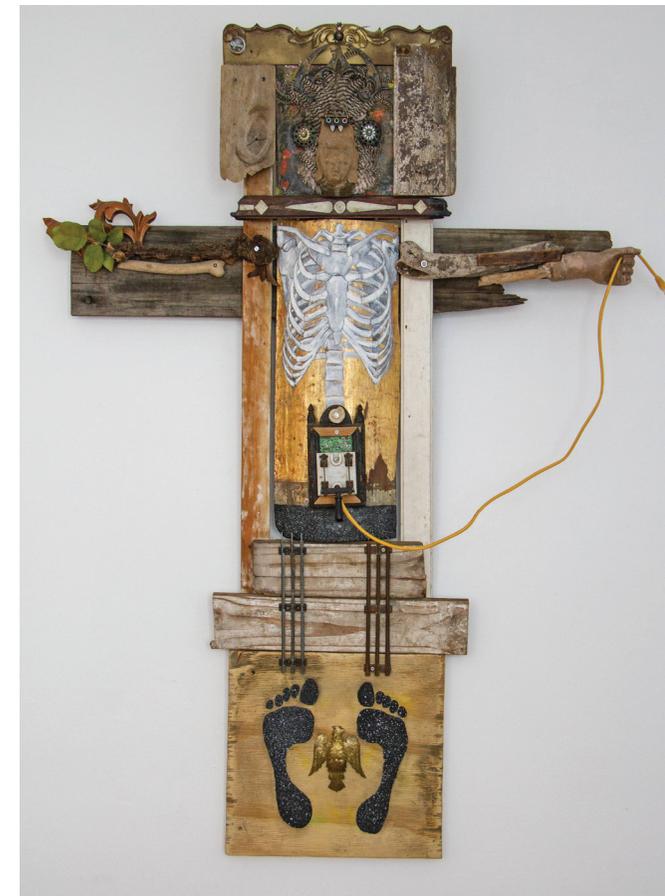
Nicholas Galanin, *I Think It Goes Like This*, 2012, Wood and paint, Dimensions variable (detail)

What changed in the 1800s? James Gleick, in his book *Time Travel: A History*, suggests a confluence of modernities: railroads, Darwin, the rise of archeology, “the perfection of clocks.”⁶ It’s also true that the very first time-travel stories were written soon after the Indian Removal Act was signed into law by President Andrew Jackson, and not long after Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon, a document drawn from a feigned archeological artifact that creates its own alternate past for the North American continent.

Whatever it was, it constituted a profound shift in the human imagination, and the human capacity to articulate loss.

3.

The arrow of time flows in one direction only. The closest we can come to actual time travel is in works of art: objects and



Héctor Ferreiro, *Christic Panel*, Mixed media and found objects on wood, 43.3 x 55 x 3 in



Lee Brogan, *Guadalcanal*, Cast glass, wooden box, padding, 2015, 15.7 x 12.2 x 14.5

images drawn from an imagined past or alternative timeline and made actual, visible, or tangible, in the present—in the same way that the Wampanoag language drew a word from a world that had never existed and never could.

The works in this exhibition represent attempts to alter or recover the past. Some recontextualize historical objects, like **Héctor Ferreiro’s** *Christic Totem*, which repurposes, among other elements, a pre-Columbian mask; or **Gideon Rubin’s** *Black Books*, which redacts original Nazi texts. By changing objects from the past, these artists create a different present.

Others attempt salvage through reproduction. **Morehshin Allahayari’s** *Material Speculation* series uses photographs and other records to digitally print copies of ancient artworks destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The clear, ghostly facsimiles are both here and not-here, like the glass sculptures with which **Lee Brogan** memorializes the Second World War. In Brogan’s work, the metal of weapons gathered in the Solomon Islands have been transubstantiated, like fossilized bone replaced by rock. (These objects are also reminiscent of the “cargo cults” that sprang up in those same islands after the war: indigenous people fashioned replicas of Western objects out of wood, an attempt to regain the “cargo” the soldiers had taken away with them.)

Still, other artists question the legitimacy of such salvage. **Nicholas Galanin’s** *I Think it Goes Like This* looks at first like an attempt to reconstruct the broken pieces of a culture, but it is actually a deconstruction. Galanin has cut apart a generic totem pole made in China, raising questions about how the past can be fetishized and commodified by outsiders.

Similarity, in the short film *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain* by artists **Larissa Sansour** and **Soren Lind**, a

Palestinian activist plants ersatz artifacts to serve as “proof” of her people’s historical heritage and bolster their claim to the land. Like Galanin, Sansour and Lind raise questions about the authenticity of the past. Does it matter if the artifacts are false if the claim is real? Does the past determine the present? Should it?

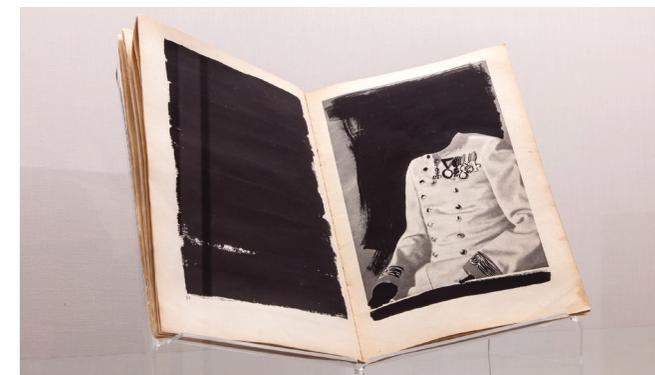
4.

It’s not a coincidence that many of these artists are members of diasporic, displaced and/or Indigenous communities, for whom a cataclysm has created a divide between past and present. In time travel narratives, temporal repair is often undertaken to avert or undo an apocalypse. We live in a world where the end has taken place, many times. (To paraphrase the writer William Gibson, the apocalypse has occurred; it’s just not evenly distributed.)

Time travel may have been invented by Western writers, but the idea is a practical necessity for members of the cultures that the West violently persecuted and displaced. For such artists, temporal salvage of this nature is not an affectation—it is a strategy for survival. A body cannot survive in pieces. Something must be repaired, something reconstituted, in order to go on.

In some cases, in the aftermath of apocalypse, deeply shocked communities have tried to reverse time completely. Anti-colonial millenarian movements like the Ghost Dance, the cargo cults, the Xhosa cattle-killing movement are all last-ditch attempts to reverse catastrophes so complete as to seem supernatural.

There have been instances where a diasporic community will attempt to return to the past through repatriation, displacing or oppressing current inhabitants. In places such as Liberia and in Israel, survivors of apocalypse have visited apocalypse on others.



Gideon Rubin, *Black Book*, 2017, Gouache on book paper, 9.8 x 14.8 in



Morehshin Allahayari, *Material Speculation: Ebu*, 2015, 3D printed plastic and electronic components, 12 x 4.5 x 3.5 inches (detail)

These attempts at a complete reversal of time can only end in disaster, because nothing from the past can be recovered without being changed. The Wampanoag language was authentic as long as it was unspoken. But as it becomes once again a spoken tongue, it will naturally mutate; the grammar will simplify, the vowels will shift. It will become something new.

Time travel cannot truly repair loss; time travel requires transformation, which is another form of loss. It is the survivable form. Time travelers must therefore choose between transformation and obliteration. We are like the boat of Theseus, replacing parts of ourselves until we are something else, some new kind of vessel, that can carry ourselves and our families into the futures.

S.I. Rosenbaum © 2018
apexart Invited Curator Exhibition

1. Larry Niven, “The Theory and Practice of Time Travel,” *Vertex* 1, no. 1, (1973).
2. Talking Heads, *Give Me Back My Name*, lyrics by David Byrne, 1985, Warner Bros./Sire Records, Track 02 on *Little Creatures*, 1985, audio.
3. Niven.
4. Anonymous, “The Wanderer,” *Exeter Book*, c. 960 to 990
5. Gilgamesh, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Danny P. Jackson (California: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997).
6. James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016).