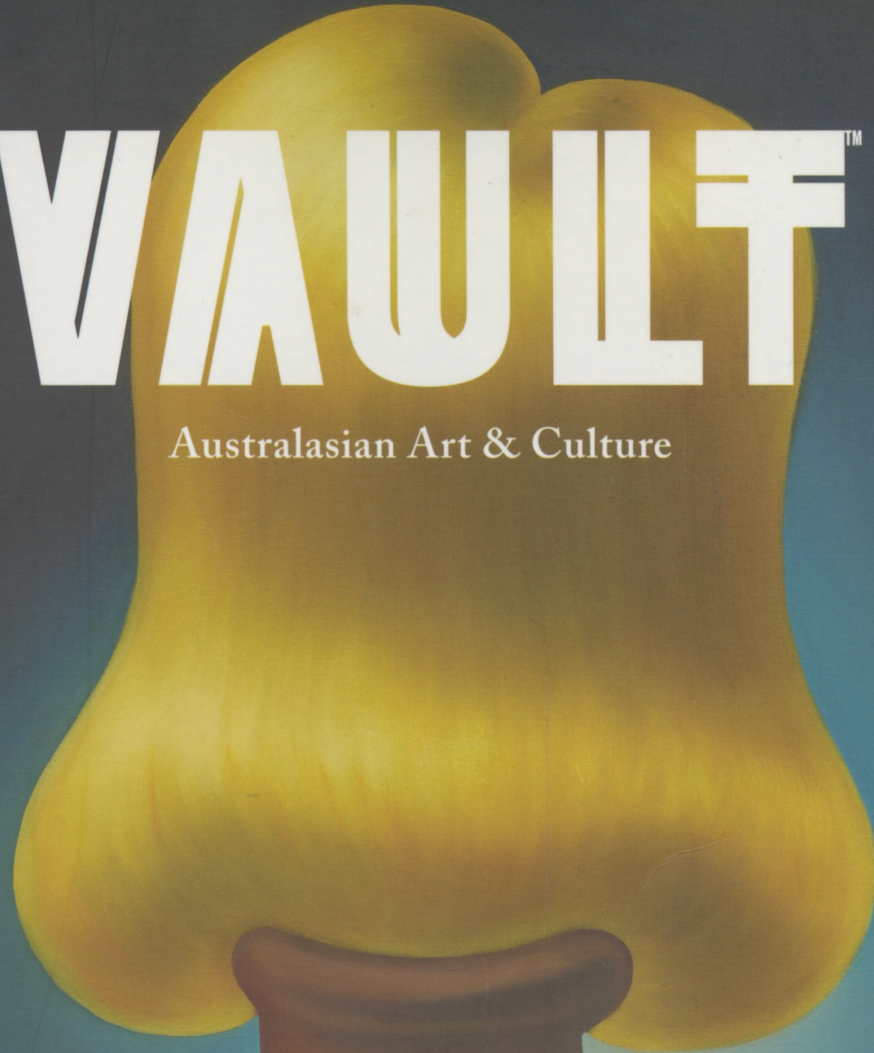


V/AULT™

Australasian Art & Culture



ISSUE 29 • FEBRUARY to APRIL 2020

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STUART RINGHOLT COMMITTING TIME

What has Stuart Ringholt been up to in the last few years? Building another clock. Thinking of his future.

FEATURE *by* ROBERT LEONARD





Opposite
Installation view
STUART RINGHOLT
Nuclear Clock, 2019

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Installation view
STUART RINGHOLT
Untitled Clock, 2014

Courtesy the artist and
Assembly, New York

In the beginning, our sense of time was keyed to nature's obvious rhythms. Day and night, the tides, the waxing and waning of the Moon, seasons, and years regulated our work, play, sleep, and prayers. Our first timepieces were sticks in the ground, whose shadows tracked the movement of the Sun. When we invented mechanical clocks, their faces were based on sundials. As technology evolved, balance-spring and pendulum clocks gave way to quartz-crystal and atomic ones, as analog gave way to digital. With time, time has become increasingly abstract. Once its measure was deduced from the familiar macrocosm (a second was a 60th of a 60th of a 24th of a mean solar day), but it is now calibrated with the invisible microcosm (a second being the duration of 9,192,631,770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the caesium-133 atom at zero kelvin). Clocks once reflected natural rhythms; they have now supplanted them. These days, when time is money, we rock around the clock and slave to the rhythm. From the worker crucified on his clock-machine in *Metropolis* (1927) to workers being paid in seconds, minutes, and hours of life in *In Time* (2011), clocks belittle us, symbolising our alienation from nature and our true selves. No wonder people fear them. They call it chronomentrophobia.

In 2013, Melbourne artist Stuart Ringholt decided to explore his love-hate relationship with time, becoming a clockmaker. It was a big gear change. Before that, Ringholt was largely known as a performance artist. He got our attention with his 2006 self-help memoir, *Hashish Psychosis: What It's Like to Be Mentally Ill and Recover*. His subsequent *Anger Workshops* (ongoing) enabled participants to purge negativity, while his naked gallery tours helped them reconnect. Meanwhile, his absurd collages (of images) and assemblages (of objects) offered a topsy-turvy view of the world – either reflecting psychotic delusions (bad) or bypassing orthodox ways of seeing (good). Being deranged could be disease and cure.

Ringholt's crazy assemblages include a collection of watches he defaced by changing the numbers on their dials, adding

hands, adding straps, taping over their faces, and subverting their mechanisms. Perhaps these inspired him to make a giant clock. Assisted by a horologist, he designed and constructed a three-metre-high version of a humble, old-fashioned mantel clock, taking an indoor-domestic clock and enlarging it to grand outdoor-public-clock scale. Making it was an epic feat of problem solving. Umpteen parts had to be designed, made and calibrated.

Untitled (Clock) (2014) is made to last – the case is solid steel. But it's also unreal. It has an *Alice in Wonderland* quality, looming over viewer and artist alike. Installation shots only make sense when someone stands next to the work, for scale. It takes a while to notice, but Ringholt not only enlarged the clock; he also sped it up. You can see the second hand moves faster than normal; an hour of the clock's time passes in just 45 minutes of ours, and its day in 18 of our hours. A second dial gives the day, in 50-day months. The clock's back is glazed, revealing its novel mechanism: big cogs, an Earth globe that rotates every 18 of our hours, and tubular bells that chime every 15 of its minutes. Ringholt said it doesn't tell the wrong time, but the correct time on a hypothetical planet – one that rotates faster, perhaps on a different orbit. He furnished a new calendar to match, with many more days per year. It's as if clock and calendar had been teleported from another dimension, albeit in a disarmingly familiar form, in an uncanny *Star Trek* moment.

Untitled (Clock) prompts us to consider how we might do things differently under its alternative temporal regime. When would we work, play, sleep? When would we eat, pray, love? How would we perfect a new work-life balance, and what would it be? It also asks us to consider how we have managed our time to date, given the contingency of our place in the universe and the clocks we devised to rule us.

But does *Untitled (Clock)* represent liberation or a new prison? When it debuted in Ringholt's 2014 survey show *Kraft*, it resonated with another new piece. In *Club Purple* (2014), visitors were invited to break old habits, nightclubbing during daytime, in a

Opposite top
Installation view
STUART RINGHOLT
Photographs in Pink Turrell exhibition
(Raemar Pink White), 2015
Photo: Christo Crocker

Opposite below
Installation view
STUART RINGHOLT
Nude Anger Workshop, 2014

Courtesy the artist and
Assembly, New York

gallery, in the nude. It was inspired by the daytime Rajneesh disco Ringholt had frequented in Perth, while getting over his psychosis. Perhaps a change is as good as a rest.

After *Untitled (Clock)* was unveiled, Ringholt started to think about it differently – not as correct for some imaginary planet, but for Earth itself hundreds of millions of years ago, when it was rotating more quickly. This thought promoted him to imagine a similarly distant future, when the planet will rotate more slowly. He envisaged a second clock, a companion piece, for then. Unveiled in Japan's *Aichi Triennale* in August last year, Ringholt's *Nuclear Clock* (2019) upped the ante. It's more complex and ambitious than its predecessor – it took four years to build. Like *Untitled (Clock)*, it's an architecturally scaled public clock, but dramatically cantilevered from its base. Its dial is plain, bold, industrial-looking, featuring no-nonsense Arabic numerals: 03, 06, 09, 12. Its tardy second hand revolves every 80 seconds. Ringholt says it will be accurate for the Earth in 900 million years' time.

The clock's workings – again visible from behind – are organised around the format of the yellow-and-black 'nuclear hazard' symbol, lending an ominous association. Up top, a device queues small coloured balls (Ringholt says they're 'moons') and larger Earth globes (dollar-shop stress balls). A moon is released every quarter hour of the work's time, and an Earth every hour. As they fall, they may collide with a much larger rotating yellow sphere, which Ringholt says represents the Sun – or a neutron (not to scale). Moons and Earths visibly accumulate in the clock's base, occasionally falling out through a hole, forming random constellations on the black carpet below. Another feature is participatory. Visitors can donate small items to be inserted into a grinder that turns every quarter hour. Ringholt wants to stage a divorce ceremony where estranged couples can insert their wedding rings and have them atomised.

Nuclear Clock is ominous but gimmicky. It's part scientific model, part prize-dispensing fairground attraction. It suggests a bomb, but is more about dissipation. By the time reality catches up with it, all our nuclear waste will long be inert.

Ringholt's clocks demonstrate the hubris of trying to get our heads around inhuman expanses of time, asking us to imagine absurdly distant times via the historically specific, anachronistic form of an analog clock with moving hands. In 900 million years' time, it's unlikely we'll be around (*Homo sapiens* has only been here for a few hundred thousand years thus far, and will be lucky to see out the current century). But, if we are still around, we probably won't be telling time using a clock with hands, in hours, minutes, seconds. Despite our desire to look impossibly far forward (and back), *Nuclear Clock* shows that we can only imagine the distant future (and past) in terms of the metaphors to hand, here and now.

Art historian and writer Amelia Barikin described Ringholt's first clock as "the materialisation of a science-fiction thought experiment".¹ Justin Paton said it is as if "a 'what if?' proposition has been dragged, cog by cog and nut by nut, out of the realm of speculation and into the world of things".² It's crucial that Ringholt's clocks are not just concepts, but made for real. While they could be understood as amplifications of his earlier watch pieces, they are equally their antithesis. It's one thing to vandalise cheap watches, another to build giant clocks. Ringholt's clocks represent a major commitment. He voluntarily slaved around the clock to make them. While they read as conceptual statements about how we might be liberated from time's arbitrary grip, this lesson is qualified by the time he invested into them, as others danced away their days and nights. Time off. **V**

Robert Leonard is Chief Curator at City Gallery Wellington.

Stuart Ringholt is exhibiting as part of *Australia. Antipodean Stories* at PAC (Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea), Milan, Italy until February 9, 2020.

Stuart Ringholt is represented by Assembly, New York.
assembly.studio

1. Amelia Barikin, 'Time Outside of Time: Stuart Ringholt's *Club Purple* and *Untitled (Clock)*', in *Stuart Ringholt: Kraft* (Monash University Museum of Art and Institute of Modern Art, Melbourne and Brisbane, 2014), 32.

2. Justin Paton, 'At Odds: Opening Remarks on *Kraft* by Stuart Ringholt', February 15, 2014, monash.edu

