Keeping Time at MAAJAAM

Brian House

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It was past the dinner hour already. But I didn't regret my choice to take the long way back as the lingering sunset cast everything with a rare and beautiful light. It felt that I was walking through a sane world, one that luxuriated in the slow and cyclical time that we're all born into but from which we so easily become estranged in an urban and online life. The dirt path wound through hills and fields, passed timeless farmhouses festooned with beehives or barns, and ducked into woods that were not quite wild but filled with mysteries nonetheless.

I couldn't help the thought that this view would have been identical hundreds of years prior. And while I'm well aware that European history is far from idyllic, just having this basic contact with the land reminded me of what's at stake when we engineer time and space to work differently.

Maajaam, which translates from Estonian as "Earth Station," is the home and studio of Timo Toots, as well as where he hosts an annual residency for other artists working with technology. On the one hand, the whole enterprise reflects an improvisatory exuberance that mirrors the man, such as when he began resurfacing the driveway an hour before the culminating *Wild Bits* exhibition opening – and finished with time to undertake several more impossible tasks. Timo's relentless pulse is something like a social media feed that just keeps going. But at the same time, the lived nature of the Estonian countryside is continually erupting into the middle of things, whether that's a sudden downpour, an underfoot child, fresh black bread, storks calling across the valley, a collective vegetarian meal, a swarm of mosquitos, a spontaneous trip to the lake for a swim, or a crew passing out together on mattresses in the living room. And it's certainly the only place where I've gone directly from using a digital laser cutter to chatting with a group of naked people sweating in an ancient smoke sauna.

I don't mean to say that there is a contrast at Maajaam between old and new, digital and physical, fast and slow. Instead, that dichotomy is what is missing. It is always a false premise to suggest that the digital is immaterial, or futuristic, when, in fact, the materiality of our technologies has defined the structure of society for all of human history. What many of us now suffer from is an alienation from this reality, and the premise of Maajaam is therefore

not at all quaint, but rather essential. Where else, for example, would visitors be prompted to have a conversation about artificial intelligence while dangling their feet into the water from a custom built raft in the middle of a pond? What might at first seem absurd is actually a fitting vantage point from which to consider technologies that will have a pervasive impact on the world, as opposed to environments that feel "techy" – otherwise, there's a lot that is missing from the conversation. To get tech advice from an elderly mole or to see a precise hole cut into the facade of a forest, are deceptively critical positions in which the material effects of abstraction are not dismissed.

My own practice is concerned with the rhythm of computers, which has everything to do with their physicality. Take the concept of "random access" in computer science – the logic that says any piece of information should be accessible roughly the same amount of time. This is different than, say, a cassette tape, which must fast-forward or rewind linearly. With hard disks, computer memory, and even the internet itself, nothing is (perceptibly) closer than anything else,

which imparts a sense of arbitrariness to the digital systems we use every day. Behind the scenes, however, engineering both small (the read head of a disk) and huge (fiber optic cables spanning the globe) re-organise physical spaces to make such a flattening of time possible. But this is not how the human body relates to geography – walking is a matter of a contingent sequence. No matter how we try to index space, moving "matters," and because of that, a place like the farm at Maajaam is assembled relationally, as lived. Everyday facilities are clustered close together according to use: kitchen, community table, toilet (the sauna is maybe a little further away).

But what if we lived according to random access? Of course, in many ways we already do, such as every time we check email on our phones, collapsing all kinds of diverse relationships into a homogenous form. For my work at Maajaam, however, I tried to find out what it would be like if our movement through space itself also functioned in this way. So I organised all aspects of my daily life such that moving between any two sites of activity – e.g., from the loft of the barn where I slept to the porch of the main house – would take the same amount of time. To set this up, I used a stopwatch (vintage, natch) and made multiple timed walks between each pair of locations. I discovered that it's not just a matter of distance, as walking uphill is slower than downhill, for example, or there might be a tricky door to open along the way that affects the time. Once I had these timings, I built a reference tool, a circular chart that I made out of wood (using a laser cutter in the workshop). This tool let me calculate alternative routes between locations so that moving from the porch to the communal table—normally a negligible walk—would first take me around the property and therefore equal the full three minutes that it would also take to walk from the driveway down to the creek.

For the final couple days at Maajaam I lived in this way. On the one hand, it elicited the physical and social tensions when human-centered ways of living meet

machinic ones. My social interactions, for instance, became asynchronous. I could no longer stroll together with someone from the workshop to the hammock, or change my mind midway. It felt restricting, or even isolating, just as the digital can be. But on the other hand, my exercise also forced me to take more time, and in so doing, to notice in greater detail what of the earth was present along my path. If there is a thesis to this piece, it is that we should pay more attention to the material contingencies behind the kind of arbitrary access our digital devices make possible.

To run such experiments with time requires a rare kind of residency. I'm thankful for how Timo, along with co-organisers Marie Kliiman, Kadri Lind, and Taavi Suisalu, made room for this kind of possibility in the Wild Bits programme, and how they intuitively cultivated serendipity. On exhibition day, buses arriving from Tallinn and Riga brought visitors to Maajaam. The slow chaos that resulted was far richer than if polished work had been shipped off to white galleries in the urban centres. The latter is ultimately a capitalist enterprise, but Maajaam accomplishes something more timely. Perhaps it's that as much as any artwork, the communal experience of place was on display at the exhibition. This in itself offers a critical and much needed perspective on technology and what it is to make art in our our time.