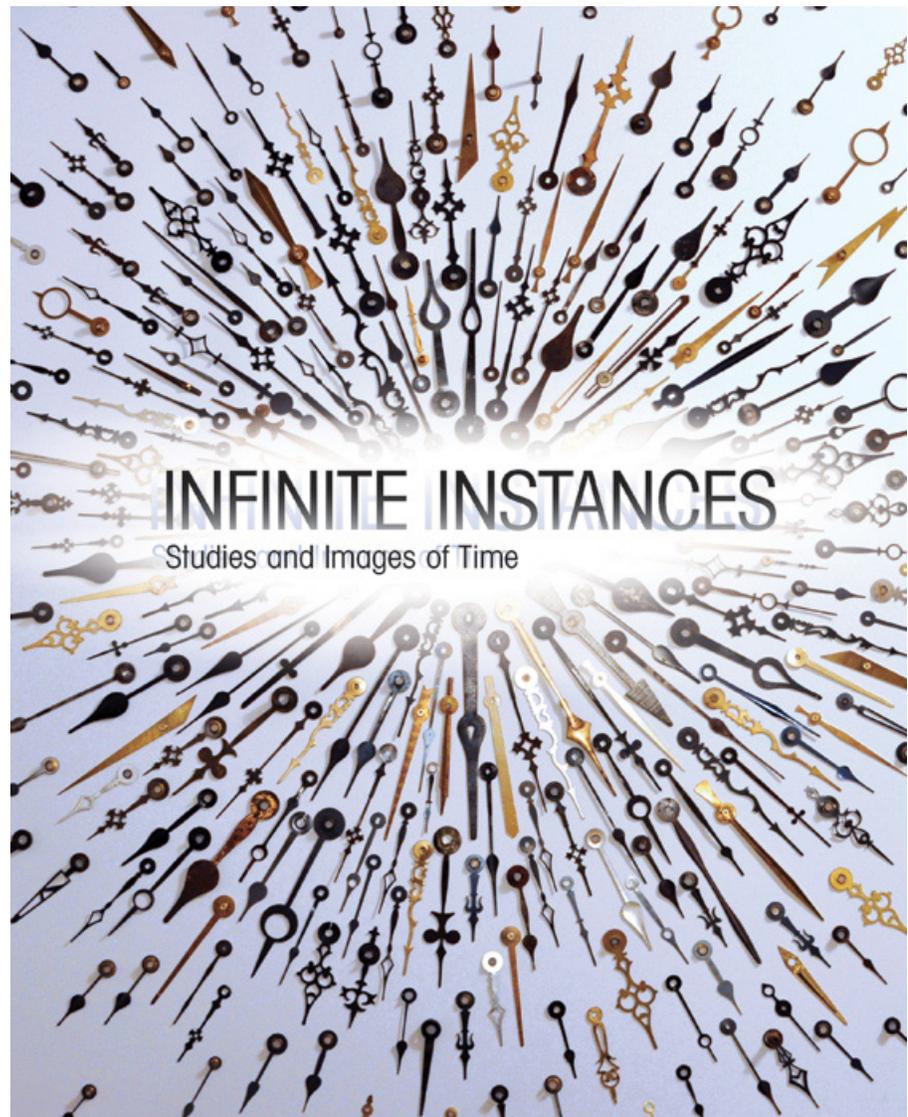


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# INFINITE INSTANCES

*Infinite interpretations on the concept of time*



By Stefan Blokker  
*Guest Contributor*

What is time? How does it work? Where does time go to, and why does it never stop? Where is the future, and where is the past? Conceptual artist Olga Ast has been wondering about these questions ever since she was a small child. This is the reason why she organized the ArcheTime conference in 2009, and it's why all the attempts by scientists, artists, designers, philosophers, writers, and filmmakers from all over the world were put together in *Infinite Instances: Studies and Images of Time*, a collection of essays and visual interpretations that seek to provide some answers to these questions.

Most people might not really wonder that much about these sorts of questions. Time is something we generally take for granted. When asked to tell what time is, one will look at his watch or phone and tell you exactly what time it is. But the answer to what time itself is remains unanswered. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines time as “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.” Whilst this gives us some clarity, it doesn’t really say that much. Throughout history science, philosophy, religion, and art have debated the concept, trying to give the concept some form of clear definition. Yet after all these centuries they still have not been able to give us an answer without resorting to the usage of a circular definition, namely that we’d need prior understanding of the definition of time in order to define it.

One might wonder why Ast chose such an approach when trying to answer her questions. Couldn’t she, as an artist, have simply given her own interpretation of the concept as her contribution to the centuries-old debate on what time is? Luckily this question is quickly answered by George Musser’s contribution to the book: “If any subject deserves an interdisciplinary treatment, it is time. Our experience of time is so fundamental and mysterious that it takes all areas of human endeavor to come to grips with it.” In his essay “The Matter of Time,” Musser delves into the conflicting attitudes physicists have toward the concept of time. He beautifully concludes his piece by arguing that physicists can learn from artists by not trying to explain this tension away, but to embrace it.

These conflicting attitudes towards time do not only exist amongst physicists. The way time is experienced differs from person to person. Through her project *MyTime*, conceptual designer Catinca Tilea, demonstrates that the perception of time is subjective. The watch, named *MyWatch*, doesn’t work in a conventional way, showing the user the exact time. The device contains living algae that grow throughout the watch. The speed with which they grow is determined by the amount of light and heat

they receive from the wearer. Like a bio-mechanical Tamagotchi, Tilea’s design lifespan is determined by how much care the user gives it. The algae receive warmth through the wearer’s body temperature and light through exposure to daylight. These factors then determine how fast the organisms grow, thereby making the user responsible for how fast his watch “ticks.”

Continuing on this subjective perception of time, Italian graphic designer Camilla Torna has been trying to find an answer as to how to define time. Like Ast, Torna sought out the help of others to find a meaning to this question. Unlike Ast, who sought out the answers from figures who have a certain level of authority, Torna approached the common people to figure out how they perceive time. For many years the Italian graphic designer had made her students, friends, and acquaintances draw their perceptions upon time. The result of this almost social scientific research is a databank called “Visualizing Time.” Torna approached people from many different backgrounds, ages, and locations to get as accurate an image of time as possible. The results were rather fascinating. The first assumption was that most subjects would simply draw lines or circles to define time. However, many started drawing all sorts of other shapes, be they three-dimensional rain showers, ice cream cones, cancer cells, and even a drawing very similar to Italian futurist painter Giacomo Balla’s 1914 piece *Mercurio Transita Davanti al Sole*.

Whilst it’s most likely impossible to give a definitive answer to the question of what time is, *Infinite Instances* does offer a fascinating multidisciplinary contribution to the debate surrounding this question. The book shows us that the various disciplines still have a lot to learn from one another by offering almost 80 different perspectives on time. Its multidisciplinary approach offers inspiration not only for scientists, philosophers, and creatives who are preoccupied with the concept of time, but also for those who desire a closer dialogue between science and art.

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*This review has been modified by the author from its original version, which can be found here.*