

Would You Look at the Time Artist Panel

September 30, 2022

Panel Members: Artists Julia Barbosa Landois, Julie DeVries, and Monica Villarreal, plus moderator Tiffany Jin (curator/co-founder of the Houston Climate Justice Museum)

This transcript documents an artist panel discussion held on September 30, 2022 at Garza Studios in Houston, Texas. The panel was convened in conjunction with a screening for Julia Barbosa Landois' video art and research project, Would You Look at the Time, which explores the relationship between cultural ideas about time and human interactions with the non-human world. The transcript begins after each panelist briefly introduced their work with a slide presentation.

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Tiffany: So it's common for us to talk about diversity of cultures, diversity in nature, but we less often talk about diversity in time. Is it possible to get a sense of many different and diverse kinds of time, and does that show up in any of y'all's work?

Julie DV: I've noticed since I started working primarily from nature, from looking at the natural world, that my sense of time has totally changed. I notice, oh, around this time of year, these are blooming or the leaves fall off around this time of year. And, I start, I am able to know sometimes what month it is by what berries are showing up or what. And it's something that's been so interesting through about the 13 years I've been doing this. And it makes me think about time in a more cyclical way. And it also helps me understand the past better in the future. I know what's coming. I know when something's off, you know, just by looking at it, noticing the things I notice every day. So, yeah, I think that's, and painting them and photographing them and just really understanding them.

Monica: I was actually thinking about this for a bit because I was looking at the Project Rowhouses images [a 2014-2015 installation project about migration, migrant labor, state violence, and the US/Mexico border wall] and you know, that was like 10 years ago that that happened, that I put that together. And I mean, we're still in the same space, you know, like all of that is very relevant right now. I was having a conversation with someone yesterday actually about this because we're thinking, I mean, I'm thinking about just in that time span, 10 years, I've also had a child, he's five years old now, and like my whole life has changed and there's all these things that have changed, you know? And there's some things that obviously stayed constant. And with that in mind, in the retrospect idea of humans and as someone mentioned right now, I mean, we haven't been here that long, but it also feels like we've been here forever, <laugh>, you know, so it gets a little confusing.

When it comes to my work, I really feel that a lot of the work that I focus on or that I've been allowed to create, has dealt with issues that don't change very much within, you know, at least my lifespan. I feel like they probably won't. And this the main reason why I do it, you know, because I want people to talk about it and look at it and hopefully look at it in a different way and change people's minds about stuff. So when I think about time in that aspect, at least with my work, I don't necessarily want the issues to stay relevant forever, obviously, but it feels like it's something that may not change in my lifespan, but I want it to, Right?

Julia BL: I've been thinking about it in a lot of ways 'cause that was my project, right? And there's a table back there with a bunch of books on these subjects and there's a QR code that you can scan. There's also, if you're old school, you can take a paper version of the list of books. So many ways. But one that comes to mind immediately is when I think about materials that I use when I'm making physical artwork. And I had a very traditional arts education. I started off as a painter and I remember my professors talking about everything has to be archival. Everything has to last, you know, 500 years and you have to use this kind of painting medium because that's what they used in the Renaissance or something. And you want your paintings to last that long.

And now it just seems absurd <laugh> to think that my painting would last 500 years. But also is that something I want? And thinking about when I build something, can I take things that are, can I take things out of the waste stream? Can I put them back after I've used them? Thinking about my art making as part of a cycle rather than the end all be all - as this object that happens.

Julie DV: Yeah. Yeah. I have one more thought, too. Another thing about it is like, you know, when you're walking and you see something or you're driving and you see something and the light's hitting it just right, it looks different depending on the time of day, the time of year, the weather and that moment in time is gonna be gone forever. So it's like, I'm constantly thinking about death too, you know what I mean?

Like where you have to treasure the people you love 'cause they could be gone. It's like that moment that you see that thing is gone. And so it's like constantly trying to hold things, make it for me. I'm like, yes, I want it to last 500 years. <laugh> I want people to look at it. But yes, it is because it's that moment that will never come back, literally. You know what I mean? What you were talking about - how do we want it to last that long? Even the idea of taking up space really aligns a lot with time as well. Taking up time, taking up space and the way that they intersect, you know, it can always be... it can feel heavy, you know, in space and time.

Monica: I was actually gonna mention with my Danza Azteca practice time is very relevant as well. There's times of the seasons where I'm extremely busy, you know, there's Día de Los Muertos, we have Hispanic Heritage Month, Indigenous People's Day. We have the Virgen de Guadalupe's birthday, which is December 12 and Mexica New Year. I mean, there's just, it won't stop. We recognize the seasons you know, I can be active every weekend if I want to. There's

usually a ceremony or some sort of activities going on with danza. And just depending on how busy I am, I know the season or where we are in time when it comes to the year and the rush that I feel, or the stress that I feel or trying to, within time, trying to figure out how to balance everything out, juggle everything, and making sure that it stays sort of constant. Like my work stays sort of constant in that realm. Not only for myself, but for my son, you know, so that he can see and be a part of that sort of lifestyle. So that, yeah, that takes up a lot of time as well.

Tiffany: I wanted to go back to Julie's idea of death and sort of what we're trying to preserve. Either like in individual private moments or through our cultural institutions, right? *[speaking to Julia Barbosa Landois]* In your newest short film - I can't remember the name - you had the Google searches, like the resurrection fern and the some kind of jellyfish. I think you could probably explain more the life cycles. Can you talk about those search terms? Yeah.

Julia BL: There's this jellyfish called the immortal jellyfish, which, I can't explain it very well. You should also Google it <laugh>. But, basically it has a way of sort of like asexually reproducing while also dying, but there's never a clear cutoff point from it dying and the other part growing. And so it's like this continuum of all these little pieces coming off and it's like it's immortal. And then the resurrection fern, actually, we have those on a lot of live oaks around here. They stick to the bark and it's called the resurrection fern because they can mostly die back. They turn brown and curl up and then stay kind of dormant. And then, when there's a big rain, they open back up and come to life again. And I learned that that was one of the organisms that has been tested in space growing environments. And I thought that was really interesting and ironic, <laugh>.

Tiffany: So I like this idea that cultures never die out. And I think through some of your practice, Monica, you're making sure that they're still alive and being practiced. And so in my mind, those two different species, it's like they're just tucked away until the environment is ready to be in connection.

Monica: I was gonna mention something really quick because you were talking about culture and I think one of the differences between the art that I do in my interdisciplinary practice and the art that I do in Danza Azteca is that, I mean, obviously I'm evolving as an artist, right? And my subject matters and the things that I do, or even the topic that I'm focusing on changes, right? But when we were talking earlier about how the issues are very much the same 10 years back to now when I talk about dance or, even culture, that's very evolving. Like, although it's something that we want to keep alive forever, right?

It's also in that practice I feel I have been liberated because for such a long time, you know, after colonization obviously we have lost a lot and to sort of reconnect with that and feel like I'm doing it with respect and I'm also honoring my ancestors and the people who have gave it to me, right? 'Cause it's oral tradition that is also evolving because we're also like a new species

now. I mean, we're constantly evolving. And so we're not only just talking about the past and recognizing that and recognizing our ancestors, but we're also creating our own stories. And that's very important. I feel like it is my practice as I grow in my practice with Danza Azteca that I not only honor what has been, but also create something different for the future. So within time that's so important, at least with culture for me.

Julia BL: You wanna go to the audience? Do y'all have any questions?

Tiffany: Well I don't have a well formulated question right now, but there's like these ideas of resistance that I think that are coming up in all of y'all's work in very different ways. Um, like the, the personally specific for you Julia. And then I don't know if that's, Yeah, I'm hoping this is all going to get edited <laugh>. Resistance and time feel like a theme. Hmm. The purslane, the verdolagas are like that.

Julia BL: Yeah. So if you saw it in the video, it grows all around. It's considered a weed, but that term is a subjective term, right? A weed is just something that you don't want around. It's not a certain kind of plant. And it used to be a food source and it is a food source for many people in the United States and in Mexico. They're delicious.

They're kind of like juicy and sour. So part of that resistance is like trying to be open to what's around me without that kind of judgment. And I think also trying to be more place based. I'm not an expert, but one of the books over there is by Robin Wall Kimmerer, who's an Indigenous scholar. And she talks about Indigenous culture being place based. And this is something that Monica and I have talked about, which is the way that I learned about the seasons.

I grew up in San Antonio, Texas. It's very hot and dry there. It has snowed maybe twice in my life. But I made and decorated fall leaves that I never saw in the fall. Leaves fall off the trees in February, <laugh>. We made paper snowmen, you know, it wasn't connected at all to the place where I was.

And so I'm also trying to, you know, resist that. It's like this homogenization of culture in the United States. Not even just European colonization-wise, but just, you know, like the Midwest is different from the Southeast is different from the Northwest. And why can't we just kind of be in the place where we are?

Julie DV: Yeah, we actually had close friends who left Houston 'cause they're like, there's no seasons. I'm like, are you crazy? Of course there's seasons! There's when the oak trees lose their leaves in the spring and then they lose their leaves in the fall. Like, you just have to be more attentive to the changes. But there are changes, you know, all throughout the year that are happening and it's just as dramatic. But like you said, there's no sense of like, pride in place and observing those changes.

And I do think that, like, I forgot what you asked about. Oh, resistance. Yes. So one of the reasons why I do what I do is it pisses me off how quickly our landscape changes. Like, you know, I might see a field that I really like and next thing you know it's a Walmart or next thing

you know it's another gas station. I have this park we walk at and there was this really nice swampy area where you could see the grass coming up and the reflection of the leaves and it was really nice. And then today they covered it with asphalt and dirt and I'm just, I just wanna hold on to those really beautiful natural moments in my environment. And this is a way of keeping them, you know, like forever, but it feels so out of your control.

That's what's so frustrating, is that we have no say in how our environment looks and how our world looks. Sometimes it feels that way. So when I see something beautiful that I know isn't permanent, it's like ugh. You know, like I must. Does that make sense? Yeah. Memorialize it kinda. 'Cause I do think it's like experiencing grief every day because you know it's probably gonna be gone. It's in a Buddhist way, kind of learning how to let go all the time because in Houston we don't keep anything the same ever. It's always changing. It's always gone. And so yeah, it's a way of you know, really treasuring it in the moment, you know.

Julia BL: Can somebody give us a time check? Eight. Okay, it's eight. It's eight. Y'all don't wanna ask us anything at all? <laugh>. I mean, just like thinking about our work, if we were outside I would hear crickets, but we're not. I just hear an air conditioner. No pressure.

Audience Member 1: I have a question. I was reading the other day that the average American can name something like a hundred or 200 plants or animals and that was comparing it to some Indigenous folks in Indonesia who know thousands of local plants and animals. And I was wondering from your walks, from the films that you've been making, and thinking about the acorns and the the gall wasp, if you guys have been starting to notice, as you were saying things more. Starting to be able to recognize and read, the landscape a little bit more.

Julie DV: Yeah, absolutely. I was always kind of like, a little bit weird because my mom knew the names of trees and stuff and so when I was a kid I'd be like, "Oh, you know, that's a cypress." And the kids were like, "The hell?" <laugh> So I always had that, someone pointing it out. But now that I'm doing this, I know what types of grasses, I look up what's the name and I look up the names of the trees and stuff that I'm painting 'cause I feel that's important, you know, to be able to talk to people about that. Talk to your kid about that, too, and so they know that name. 'Cause once you name it, and this is a very western paradigm, but once you name it, it has value. It's a thing now, you know?

Julia BL: So I think also, there's a large discussion about, the false dichotomy of nature and culture, right? But the loss of the ability to know the other life forms around you, that's a cultural loss. You know? It's like losing the language of your family. It sounds cheesy, but they're part of our family because we are breathing the same air and we are eating out of the same soil and we are drinking the same water and we're all like, in it. And land loss is also cultural loss.

Audience Member 2: I think the reason why I can't ask a question <laugh> is because the things that you're talking about are so complicated and I'm trying to put into words like, 'cause the word survival came up to me several times while you were talking and also preservation. But then the things that are happening in y'all's work are neither of those things. They're in the middle, right? They're in the middle. It's like a kind of preservation, but not really. And it's a kind of survival, but it's less of a strife survival. It's more of like that moment, you know, like you were talking about not the octopus, the jellyfish. It's in between. It's always when you find those moments where the thing is in between.

Julia BL: And everything's always in between really. Right?

Audience Member 2: Right. Cause you lose that shadow on the grass.

Julie DV: Oh, instantly.

Audience Member 2: But how many amazing times has that happened in so many different ways?

Julie DV: Yeah, that's the thing. Yeah. Yeah. It's almost like a joyful thing. Well, joy and sadness go together, you know, joy and grief. So you... it is like celebrating how every day you're gonna look out the window, it's gonna look different. Every single day is also a celebration. You would never want it to stay the same. You know what I mean? Like, it would be awful. So yeah.

Monica: When I think about the subject you were saying about how time and preservation or preservation and what? Survival. Survival and preservation. It's interesting because everybody has different feelings around whether your work stays forever or you know, not. And I was just thinking of how, for me, every project's different obviously, but when I think about creating something for the moment, I get such a rush for that. Like that it's only gonna last that small period of time and then it's just gonna go away. And it's like people either saw it or were exposed to it or not, and I was okay, I'm okay with that. For some reason, I get a little bit of a rush from that. And I know graffiti artists are the same way. You know, they write on walls and they're not expecting for it to last forever.

And there's also the rush of someone else tagging on their work and it's like, Oh, they interacted with my work. You know? And that's always the gift for artists at least. And my point of view.

Julia BL: We'll have to wrap up in a second, but the person that just exited the room, Henry Sanchez, has this project along the bayou called the Bayoutorium that does art activities next to the Bayou. And he left cards. But he's done this project before and I was introduced on a trail walk to this app called iNaturalist. If you don't have it, you should get it because that will help you learn what all of the organisms around you are. And I love it and I try to share it with

everyone. But it uses AI from pictures that people submit. And so you just point it at the leaves of a tree or you point it at a crane fly or, you know, whatever. And then, I don't know, it changes your relationship to that thing, that *being* not a *thing*. Yeah.

All right. Thank you so much. Did you have a question?

Audience Member 3: I did. I had one for the museum actually. So I'm part of a lot of climate justice organizations and I run climate change awareness club at my school. And I was wondering if the museum would ever host a small group of high schoolers coming or if you would come talk to us.

Tiffany: Yeah, for sure. I mean, we do tours as much as we can. Over the summer we had a summer program with high school students especially. I'm always blown away and impressed by high schoolers specifically and a little bit younger, sometimes younger, because y'all are the most articulate and sort of, let's say pure about what it is we need to do to address climate change. So, yeah, we can exchange info afterwards

Julia BL: <singing> You are the future. <laugh>.

Thank you so much. Please, please take cupcakes, take other things with you. Please. Thank you so much for coming and sitting with us.

