

The Itch for Eternity

*As Long as Possible (ASLAP). GIF animation, 2015.
Duration 1.000 years. An art project by Juha van Ingen
realised in collaboration with Janne Särkelä.
To be launched in 2017.*

The *half-life* ($t_{1/2}$) of Uranium 238 is approximately 4,5 million years. It is good to know that something is left when we all are gone. But the waste from a nuclear energy plant is considerably less radioactive already after 1.000 years, just 1/100th of its original levels. In Olkiluoto Island in Eurajoki, where the Finnish authorities have decided to store the Finnish nuclear waste, the 1.000-year anniversary will be a day to celebrate.¹ If they have it still, I think that moment will call for champagne and butter cookies. The uranium clock will continue to click, the underground deposit will pursue yet another 1.000-year circuit on its multi-million year journey towards its first half-life.

We deposit material in the ground, and we deposit it simultaneously in time. 100.000 years is a figure mentioned as a guaranteed safe period for a nuclear waste repository. It is a bold assumption that humanity will still be around to check on it.

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We are slowly sinking through time, like a submarine falling through the depth and darkness of a bottomless ocean. If we ever knew how to operate the ship, the skill is long since forgotten. We paint simple figures with our fingertips on the condensation of the round pressure-safe windows. A diminutive message to the outer world. A smiley, maybe. We are here. We were here. Are you?

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It takes me 3,5 minutes to walk from my home to the gallery where a prototype of *As Long As Possible (ASLAP)* is shown, a work developed by artist Juha van Ingen, realised in collaboration with Janne Särkelä. Every frame in the GIF-animation is roughly 10 minutes long. There are 48.140.288 frames totally in the finished loop. Each frame is numbered, and the images consist of its number at the centre of each black frame.

Gasp. There is no way I am going to survive the completion of this work. It will finish its first round in 1.000 years. After that, it continues from frame nr 1, for future generations to enjoy a new beginning. Walking back from the gallery takes close to 5 minutes, as it is more uphill. Have I proved the relativity of time, or my relative shortness of breath?

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ASLAP is not the longest existing artwork, but due to its loop it is endless, intended to be an eternal work. It departs from John Cage's composition *Organ²/ASLSP* (an acronym for *As Slow As Possible*) from 1987, a composition made to last for 639 years and which is played on the organ of St. Buchardi in Halberstadt, Germany, since 2001. It will finish in 2640. Simultaneously, Jem Finer's (of the Pogues) *Longplayer* is sounding from the Trinity Buoy lighthouse near Canary Wharf in London, where it has played since 2000. It will continue working its way through time until 1 December 2999.²

¹http://www.posiva.fi/en/final_disposal/general_time_schedule_for_final_disposal#.Vj9Xl0uRNuZ. Read 7.11 2015.

1.000 years is a deliberate limitation. Any amount of time has to make sense. Canadian artist Rodney Graham uses in *Parsifal* (1882 - 38,969,364,735) from 1990 an additional sequence to Wagner's opera *Parsifal* written by the composer's assistant Engelbert Humperdinck. This short sequence was designed to be added and played in a loop, to extend Wagner's music at a change of stage sets that continuously proved taking too long, the music ending up too short. By using this loop together with a system of prime numbers and applying it to instrument by instrument, the printed score (which consists of only a few pages) will when executed extend over 39 billion years – three times longer than the estimated age of the Universe. "In some ways it is a musical joke", says Graham. "To me it redeems itself only because it is a joke of cosmic proportions".³

Somehow parallel to Juha van Ingen's ASLAP is the Japanese artist Tatsua Miyajima's LED based number sculptures and installation. In these works, the numbers keep changing, while intentionally omitting the number zero. Although Miyajima's works change, and have an intention to last "forever", they don't develop over time. They will appear very similar over time. It is probably easier to link ASLAP to conceptual artist On Kawara's series of paintings *Today* (from 1966 until the artist's death 2014) where he painted the date of the day meticulously on a canvas, and his *One Million Years* (conceived in 1969) where a million years preceding the date of the conception of the work are listed, as well as a million years following the same date. This work exists in printed form and is frequently also performed in readings. In its minimal aesthetics, ASLAP reminds of Kawara's *Today* series, while having less in common with its concept of registering the passing of time and places – the latter indirectly by the choice of different languages, depending on where Kawara made the paintings. Contrary to both these works, ASLAP is not a work relying on a specific physical object (paintings or books), nor on the human interaction with it, and neither is it tying itself to any given place or space.

One distinct difference between ASLAP and other enduring digital artworks, is that it already exists in its totality. It is not waiting to be executed. It is like a nuclear deposit, or a sculpture sunk into the abyss of time. It is a digital Stonehenge, primitive in form, intended for eternity.

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GIF is an image format of almost antediluvian age on the Internet, as it was launched already in 1987. It is versatile and reasonably simple by means of programming, if not necessarily in terms of usage. It might not be the best of applications developed since, but it has the enormous benefit of being free of charge to use. With Flickr, Tumblr, Instagram and other recent social media, it has regained momentum after a period of decline, and also has a great application as used (at least in the period around 2015) in the little squares showing very short animations or just brand or institutional logos on the margins of various web magazines and home pages.

In the digital art world as well as the tech savvy parts of printed and digital media, ASLAP has raised more attention than within the wider art world. This is most likely due to the lack of art institutional support; instead the project has created a buzz outside the art circles. True, *Hyperallergic* art magazine was the first to acknowledge the unusual quality of ASLAP. "The work turns eternity into a composition, unraveling the dimensions of time into chunks we can

² Jem Finer, *Longplayer* is a project originally commissioned by Artangel in London which started playing on 1 January 2000. It is run by the Longplayer Trust. <http://longplayer.org/about/>. Read 1.11 2015.

³ Alice Sanger, "Rodney Graham *Parsifal* (1882 - 38,969,364,735) 1990" on the Tate homepage; <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/graham-parsifal-1882-38969364735-t11933/text-summary>. Read 29.10 2015.

comprehend while also invoking questions of digital decay”, writes the contributor Claire Voon.⁴ The attention so far is astonishing, as it is given to a work which does not yet exist in its final version, and whose prototype so far was seen only by the few taking the extra steps to one of Helsinki’s smallest and most idiosyncratic galleries, Fish, on their rare opening hours.

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Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.

The Book of Revelation, 20: 1-5

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In Robert Musil’s huge novel *The Man Without Qualities*, an important element in the fiction is the preparations for the 70-year anniversary of the Austrian emperor due to occur in 1918 – as this coincides with the 30-year anniversary of the German emperor, the event is secretly labelled “The Parallel Action”. For some in the inefficient and generally useless festival committee, the occasion will be an opportunity to leap into a new Millennium, a Utopia built on the greatness of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. We know from the history books, that this year proved instead to be the end of that same empire. The Millennium realm later discussed in Musil’s novel is a vision of selfless mysticism on a much more individual level.

ASLAP will officially be “unveiled” in 2017, on the 30-year anniversary of the GIF file, and the centenary of Finnish independence. This is certainly a “Parallel Action” of memorable standing. The ironic gesture is obvious, but still intriguing: will there be a humanity in 1.000 years, or a nation called Finland, or GIF files, or technical platforms familiar with any such formats? Will there be an ASLAP there for future generations to enjoy? If so, what a venerable piece of work, having absorbed all that time, all the fateful events passing through the ten centuries, the thousand years, the more than 48 million frames having moved ahead one by one without a sound, only to be restarted for yet another millennium round.

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In Christian Millennialism, it is usually assumed that the Millennium realm is either the preamble to the return of Christ, or its aftermath. Hitler’s Third Reich was yet another variation on this dream of a world perfected. The Marxist’s claim that the revolution will lead to a benign dictatorship of the proletariat and the subsequent state of Communism is certainly a version of these utopian and escapist visions of untroubled futures.

But imagine the future really being untroubled – by humanity? Imagine a world where nothing human exists anymore, apart from peculiar remnants like the mysterious black monolith of Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The dystopian trope of an

⁴ Claire Voon, “The 1000-year GIF” in *Hyperallergic*, September 21, 2015; <http://hyperallergic.com/237627/the-1000-year-gif/>. Read 29.10 2015.

Earth without the presence of humans is one which over time will gain increasing credibility, simply because it is unlikely that our species would be exempt from the fate of most other species of higher order the day the Earth is hit by a comet – if not extinct already by its own means. But before that has even happened: will our current civilisation be remembered by anyone, even by our own species in, say, only a couple of thousand years' time? We know of numerous other civilisations only through what's been preserved in physical form: majestic temples, inscriptions on stone or clay, brittle papyruses, objects from metal or stone, the occasional organic specimen preserved by almost miraculous coincidences. We find entire cities buried under the ground, dating no further than 1.000 years back, and still being forgotten about. They certainly had written documents, maybe archives, but our longstanding preference for paper, vellum and similar materials – rather than more enduring materials like metal, stone, glass or clay – means we miss records for the communities of our own ancestors dating only 25-30 generations back. What will be left of a culture that finally digitized most of its knowledge and its communication? That only rarely inscribed any messages of importance onto materials more solid than paper?

The pyramids were certainly meant to preserve for an afterworld (Earthly or Heavenly) the remains of the Egyptian Pharaohs and their most important property, rulers of the most powerful and developed culture in the Western world for more than 2.000 years. Only a few centuries after its final decline the understanding of the Egyptian hieroglyphs was gone. It took yet another 1.500 years before the hieroglyphs were deciphered again. What will happen to our alphabet, our languages over time? Oblivion is almost certain. We can see how technical platforms and “languages” are invented, flourish and disappear with increasing speed. Walkmans, VHS tapes, Hi8, MiniDV, Laserdiscs, short lived video discs, a variety of cables designed to transport digital information, etc. have found temporary rest in cardboard boxes in basements, attics and garages while waiting to be brought to the nearest waste separation station. Who can handle our digitized information in a couple of thousand years' time – or maybe just a century ahead? Of what use will a GIF file be?

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Inspired by the pyramids and the spectacular findings of archaeologists in the beginning of the 20th century, modern efforts have been made to preserve our civilisation – or at least a selection of its artefacts. At Oglethorpe University in Brookhaven, Georgia (USA), a “Crypt of Civilization” was built in the years 1937 to 1940, filled with a myriad of books, images and objects considered representative of our modern culture and finally sealed with all due precautions to ensure its content won't be destroyed by neither decay nor disaster. It is intended to be reopened in 8113 – based on a calculation assuming that the earliest fixed date in the Egyptian calendar was in 4241 BC, and extending this distance in time symmetrically into the future from 1936.

By 1970 the crypt had already been virtually forgotten, but a new interest came in the years around the most recent new millennium and a trust has been formed to somehow warrant its preservation.⁵

Numerous “time capsules” have been created before and since – most notably the 1939 Westinghouse Time Capsule that also coined the expression *time capsule* (though originally called “Time Bomb”). But a distinction needs to be made: some time capsules are made for the future of our own civilisation, others are meant for the posterity of it, when it is lost and forgotten about. In a way, this expresses almost contrary views of the future. The founder of the Oglethorpe Crypt of Civilization, Thornwell Jacobs, addressed the future explorers of the

⁵ Oglethorpe Crypt of Civilization homepage; <http://crypt.oglethorpe.edu>. Read 29.10 2015.

crypt with the words: "The world is engaged in burying our civilization forever, and here in this crypt we leave it to you".⁶ With a world on the brink of war (but which had not yet witnessed its climax, the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), Jacob's concern is understandable.

A totally different expectation is expressed in a more short-lived time capsule found in 2012 in Vulkanny, Kamchatka (Russia). It was planted under the foot of a Lenin sculpture on 15 July 1979 in what was still the Soviet Union, greeting the "Socialist society in 2024":⁷

"We say to you, who will join us in 45 years, ... let your character be courageous. Let your songs be happier. Let your love be hotter. We do not feel sorry for ourselves because we are certain you will be better than us," the message says. "Improve the world and yourself in the name of communism, as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin taught us, as the Communist Party teaches us! Lenin is always with us!"

Time capsules like Crypt of Civilization are intended to overcome time. The 10.000 Year Clock being realized by the Long Now Foundation inside a mountain in Western Texas is a different story, as it is all about hanging on to time. This huge mechanical clock is designed to be rewinded by the occasional visitor – but if visited by no one, it will source the energy needed by other means. In one sense it is an optimistic work (just as its makers claim) as it will keep measuring time, and play its ever-changing chimes for us and for our descendants. But it will assumedly continue to measure time even without humanity present. It might have a rendezvous with posterity, without humanity attending.

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The certainty that future generations will be better than our own may be in decline today. But nevertheless, the importance of a time capsule increases with the time it travels. For a long time, the importance will mainly be anecdotal or sentimental – like for the whisky bottle and newspaper from 1894 retrieved inside the foundation of a bridge in Kingussie, Scotland, in August 2015.⁸

Also ASLAP will gain increasing importance, while simultaneously the likelihood of its survival decreases. In a way, it exists and is realized already in its programming status, as a file. Like a folded blanket, it remains a blanket also while folded, but it is affirmed in its totality when unfolded. ASLAP, in its current form, is folded time. When playing, it will unfold over the great plains of future, from the tiny platform of a GIF file.

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⁶ Quoted after "Crypt of Civilization" on *Wikipedia*; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crypt_of_Civilization. Read 31.10 2015

⁷ Unsigned, "Time Capsule Found Under Lenin Statue" in *Moscow Times* web edition 20.6 2012; <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/time-capsule-found-under-lenin-statue/462327.html>. Read 31.10 2015.

⁸ Unsigned, "121-year-old time capsule found at bridge near Kingussie" in *BBC News* 26.8 2015; <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-34054847>. Read 1.11 2015.