

## ATTEND

**KEYWORDS:** imagine, contemplate, depth, focus, duration, iterate, flow, mutate, form, presence.

**PROMPT:**

*In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all. -*  
John Cage

Choose a single action or gesture that produces a mark on a surface. The surface can be anything as long as the result can be documented.

Once in place, perform your action repeatedly for the full duration of William Basinski's "dlp 1.1."<sup>1</sup>

**SUPPORT:**

Alan Burdick. *Why Time Flies: A Mostly Scientific Investigation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017) 84-86.

William Basinski, *dlp 1.1*, 2002. 64 mins. [Spotify](#), [YouTube](#)

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<sup>1</sup> "In the 1980s, Basinski recorded from found sound sources, shortwave radio, and delay systems, influenced by musicians such as Steve Reich and Brian Eno. Decades later, while transferring the recordings from magnetic tape to a more reliable digital format, Basinski found that the tape had deteriorated sufficiently that as it passed the tape head, the ferrite detached from the plastic backing and fell off. He allowed the loops to play for extended periods as they deteriorated further, with increasing gaps and cracks in the music. He further treated the sounds with a spatializing reverb effect. Basinski finished the project the morning of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, and sat on the roof of his apartment building in Brooklyn with friends as the towers collapsed. He filmed video footage of the attack's fallout during the last hour of daylight from a roof, and the following morning he played "Disintegration Loop 1.1" as a soundtrack to the aftermath." Wikipedia. Source: Stubbs, David (2018). *Future Sounds: The Story of Electronic Music from Stockhausen to Skrillex*. London: Faber & Faber. p. 352.

Sit quietly, he proposed. Close your eyes, turn off the world, and try to “attend exclusively to the passage of time, like one who wakes, as the poet says, ‘to hear time flowing in the middle of the night, and all things moving to a day of doom.’” (James was quoting Tennyson.) What do we find there? Likely very little: an empty mind, a sameness of thought. If we notice anything, he says, it’s a sense of the moments blooming one after another—“the pure series of durations budding, as it were, and growing beneath our indrawn gaze.” Are we experiencing something real or is it an illusion? To James, the question speaks to the true nature of psychological time. If the experience is to be taken at face value—if one can truly grasp a blank moment as it emerges—then we must possess “a special sense for pure time.” By this logic, pure time is empty, and an empty duration suffices to stimulate the senses. But suppose instead that one’s experience of a budding moment is an

illusion; in that case the impression that time is passing is a response to whatever is filling that time and to “our memory of its previous content, which we compare to the content now.” The question is, is time anything without something in it? Is time a container or the things contained?

For James, time is in the contents. We can’t perceive empty time any more than we can intuit a length or distance with nothing in it, he wrote. Look up into a clear blue sky: how far away is one hundred feet? How far is a mile? With no landmarks for reference, one can’t say. It’s the same with time. If we perceive time’s passage, it’s because we perceive change, and for us to perceive change, the time must be somehow filled; an empty duration alone won’t stimulate our awareness. So what fills it?

Simply, us. “The change must be of some concrete sort—an outward or inward sensible series, or a process of attention or volition,” James wrote in *Principles*. A seemingly empty moment is never truly so because, in stopping to consider it, we fill it with a stream of thoughts. Close your eyes, shut out the world, and still you see a film of light inside your eyelids, “a curdling play of obscurest luminosity.” The mind fills in the time.

James is circling an idea raised centuries earlier by Augustine and, before that, Aristotle—that time is very much a property of the mind. James might not go so far as to say that time does not exist beyond one’s perception of it, but he would emphasize that what the brain serves up is a *perception* of time, not time itself, and that that’s as close as we’ll get—there is no experience of time other than our subjective one. That may sound almost tautological but it’s not far from where many contemporary psychologists and neuroscientists have landed. The average person is aware that time seems to speed up or slow down in certain situations, and it’s easy to imagine that these impressions arise because somewhere in there, somehow, the brain is tracking how long a given stretch of time actually takes. But that clock may not exist. The brain may not time the real world, as computers do; it may only time its own processing of that world.

In any case, we can never quite escape ourselves. “We are always inwardly immersed in what Wundt has somewhere called the twilight of our general consciousness,” James reflected. “Our heart-beats, our breathing, the pulses of our attention, the fragments of words or sentences that pass through our imagination, are what people this dim habitat. . . . In short, empty our minds as we may, some form of changing process remains for us to feel, and cannot be expelled.”

Time is never empty, because we restlessly occupy it. Yet even that formulation gives time too much credit. I sit quietly, eyes shut, or lie awake in bed in the predawn hours, watching empty time flow. “We tell it off in pulses,” James wrote. “We say ‘now! now! now!’ or we count ‘more! more! more!’ as we feel it bud.” Time seems to flow in discrete units—it seems somehow independent and self-contained—not because we perceive discrete units of empty time, James wrote, but because our successive acts of perception are discrete. *Now* arises again and again only because we say “now!” again and again. The present moment, he contended, is “a synthetic datum,” not experienced as much as manufactured. The present isn’t something we stumble into and through; it’s something we create for ourselves over and over again, moment by moment.