

A TIME APART

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Selected by Dani Leventhal

The Greeks had two notions of time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos*, which we are more familiar with, is the concept of time as measure, a quantity of duration that changes in a uniform and serial order. *Chronos* is, in a sense, empty; without content or meaning beyond its own linear progressing. It is when nothing happens, and goes on not happening.

Kairos, on the other hand, is a kind of time charged with promise and significance. It is time that saturates time. The dimensions that characterize *kairos* are neither uniform nor predictable. The phrase “the fullness of time” evokes the *kairological*, in the way it expresses the idea that empty time can be fulfilled and made anew through a profound change or rupture of some kind, making what happens thereafter radically unlike what had come before.

Kairos and *chronos* are not opposed to each other. One of the most interesting definitions of *kairos* comes from the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. It reads, “*chronos* is that in which there is *kairos*, and *kairos* is that in which there is little *chronos*.” The two kinds of time are part of one another. *Chronos* transforms into *kairos* by becoming a compressed form of itself, embodying a temporal disruption that dispenses with uniformity. Hegel touched upon this kind of change in his dialectics, through his concept of the “transition from quantity to quality.” This is where something—such as time—acquires a substance that sets it apart, and makes the thing literally unaccountable to the sequence from which it derives. Quality is a force that “aparts.” In *kairos*, time is not kept: it is unleashed.

“Right timing” is another way the Greeks referred to *kairos*. For them, qualitative time can only be achieved through human intervention. The power to act and take advantage of a special event or action that appears over the unfolding course of things is crucial to the nature of *kairos*. But this cannot happen at anytime. Only at opportune moments, when time holds the most potential for change, is *kairos* possible. But again, only if the opportunity is seized and acted upon. *Kairos* is that critical point in time when a crisis or rupture opens up and is catalyzed with human will to create new potentials.

A long tradition exists connecting *kairos* to art. It is fairly boring and mainly attributable to Plato. Platonic aesthetics is based on principles of harmony, symmetry, and measure. The beautiful, for Plato, is that which in words, images, sounds, or movements, attains a unity-in-plurality. The idea of *kairos* as right timing is reimagined by Plato as aesthetic and ethical propriety, or the power of proportion to harmonize elements into a proper balance. The beautiful, once achieved, is really the idea of goodness, wholly embodied. For what the beautiful offers the world is a vision of life in harmonious balance with itself and the divine.

Echoes of Plato’s aesthetics resound in art. They can be heard every time something “comes together.” They are heard in the demand (by artists and critics alike) that all the elements that make up a work play their compositional part to produce a meaningful, that is to say coherent, idea.

But art that works best does so by making a mockery of meaning. Art is art when what is made unmakes itself in the making, and realizes, in barely recognizable form, the discordant truth of living life.

Against Plato, this notion of art actually relates to an even earlier designation of *kairos* in Greek thought. As far as we know, the first appearance of *kairos* was in the *Iliad*. But Homer did not use it to mean the power of proportion or qualitative time. Rather, it denoted a vital or lethal place in the body, a place

that demands special protection. Kairos is the place where mortality resides.

What is the relationship between mortality and time? Maybe it is that time holds import only when something ends. The phrase, “all good things must come to an end” is half the story (and not even the right half). For what makes something good may not be the beautiful—pace Plato—but how a thing happens to apprehend its own end. Being mortal means the end is ever near. Realizing this charges every moment with promise and significance. And it makes what matters less dependent on the power of fate, and more on the inner imperative to find a shape of one’s own, before it is too late.

Being mortal means making good on the task of fully inhabiting one’s own demise. Time becomes meaningful only in this way. The same holds true for art. To make something by subjecting it to the same forces that make life unlivable, and to do it as if its aesthetic life depends on it, charges what is made with an incalculable urgency. Art acquires a quality through this process: it becomes mortal.

Art’s essential discord today may come from artists struggling to achieve a form that is mortal. Everyone is an artist, the story goes, and everything can be art. True enough. But not everything that is art is mortal. There are crates and barrels of work being made that act as if they hold the secret to the good, that is to say the eternal, life. They express in endless formal variations the values that define tradition in art and history. And by tradition, I mean the habits of authority; the patterns and practices associated with a certain way of life that imagines progress as domination.

These works bid for a place in that tradition by molding into new and fresh shapes the motives, references, and experiences that tradition promotes as timeless: the tried and true. By sensualizing tradition into contemporary forms, these works become valued by an economic and social order that treats novelty as evidence of its commitment to innovation and progress, which in

turn becomes a form of self-justification to naturalize the right to advance its rule in perpetuity. As if it was destined. And inevitable. Like time passing.

There are many kinds of art today. Or at the very least, two. If chronological art stands for the endless, and ultimately empty, serialization of a few traditional ideas that serve to enforce the values of the good life (this is especially the case with art that debases those values for the sake of romanticizing them through their sacrifice), then what does a kairological art look and feel like?

At a glance kairological artworks look no different than other works. They use the same materials and show in the same shows. They say and mean nothing in particular. But it is how they say it (and mean it) that sets them apart. They embody a desperate immanence, as if what is given is not good enough but will have to do. They seize time the way a beat holds a song, to evoke the vertiginous feeling of seeing something emerge by being made and unmade at the same instant. They last as experiences by not staying whole as forms. They radiate an inner irreconcilability about what they are and what they want to be with serious and unrestrained abandon, which is as close as it comes to an honest insight about the plight of living today. This radiance is what makes them pleasurable. Lively.

And this. They break time out of joint.

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This is why they rarely console, as art perhaps ought to, in these great times. They remain, in the end, comfortless, as a reminder to anyone willing to engage them just how little time there is left, for anyone, and all that has been lost, how close it all is from disappearing, and what it takes to go on.

1. The appearance of art is itself social.
2. Art participates in the world as a medium of transfiguration.
3. Every artwork is socially defined more by what it anticipates than what it is, none more so than ones that expect revolutions tomorrow.
4. From heap to whole: that is the social promise of art.
5. What gives art quality is the force of its non-judging judgment.
6. Art becomes spiritualized when what is made is more real than reality.
7. Those who misunderstand, denigrate, or ignore what is made are also collaborators in making it.
8. What does not belong in this world is the only thing worth making.
9. A thing is a web of relations at a standstill.
10. An artwork is a form of relating as both instant and process.
11. Art tends toward worldlessness because it is more and less than a thing.
12. Expression is engagement as interference.
13. Politics is art's exchange value.
14. The most useful art is advertising.
15. The most useless political activity is advertising.
16. Practically speaking, the art of politics consists of organizing somebody before somebody organizes you.
17. To be obsessed with politics in art is to forsake society. The revolution without people. A movement without members. A community without community.
18. Art exhibited as a solution to political conflict is an illness offering itself as medicine.

19. The worst sort of artistic egoism masquerades as aesthetic altruism.
20. You must know politics to be able to prevent it.
21. Speed and mystery makes up for the lack of materials and resources.
22. When you are anxious to produce something, let no one perceive it until it is made.
23. There is nothing practical about praxis.
24. Critique is colorless kitsch.
25. The cunning of art is how it manifests the irreconcilability of it all without resorting to myth or nihilism.
26. Art made that is complete is ideological in nature.
27. What passes for engaged art is often just ambition dressed up as redemption.
28. When art is presented as evidence of social truths, it usually gets everything wrong.
29. Only outsiders produce new ideas.
30. Hope in art often masks a secret despair.
31. A political aesthetic divides the adversary in order to gain time.
32. Social engagement is founded on a community of shared risk.
33. A public is never found: it is always built.
34. The more a form mimics social reality, the less hold it has over people's minds, and the farther it is from it being a practical activity.
35. A composition is organizing by aesthetic means.
36. Using people as artistic material enlivens art but strips them of personhood.
37. In matters of art, humankind is always absent. Present is man, this fellow or that.
38. The nature of nature is law as tendency.
39. An artwork is a model for a new nature.