AWE Art Windsor Essex

In Time/Out of Time: Elizabeth Zvonar's *Cracks in the Clockwork*

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I am writing this essay from my home office, listening to the whistle of an Essex Terminal Railway train as it crosses the street half a block away. Before the introduction of standardized time, communities marked the passage of the hours by the movement of the sun without much consideration for the timekeeping habits of their near or far neighbours. Travelling eighteen kilometers west or east meant travelling backwards or forwards one minute. Of course, when it takes roughly three and a half hours to walk that distance, or ninety minutes by horse, one doesn't often travel that far in a day. Standardized time was introduced when trains running on highly local time zones started crashing into each other with startling regularity, almost like clockwork. Railway time was enacted in the United States and Canada in 1883 and passed federally in the United States in 1918. This house was built around five years later, during an automotive boom that doubled the city's population, within shouting distance of the trains that set our clocks.

There is an old nugget that says under capitalism, time is not passed but spent. Walter Benjamin noted this transition between calendar time–time marked by the changing seasons, and how that shifts our labour through the year–and clock time, time that industry governs, the time that regulates the undifferentiated hours of contemporary work. He noted that French textile workers during the 1830 July Revolution were shooting clocktowers throughout the city "simultaneously and independently," recognizing the tyranny of the clock. Just this past January, an anonymous poster proposed that in 2024 we abolish time: "Let us be free from the boring drudgery of work and capitalism that Time makes possible… we call for a free life unstructured by the inhuman rigidity of Time and the police, prisons, and other methods of control it necessitates."

Is time our enemy, and the clock our jailkeeper? In so many instances, it seems to be. For women, whose perceived value diminishes with age. For the wage-earner, whose reward for good work is more work, the day draining itself of time while the to-do list keeps growing. Or for the accelerating race towards climate catastrophe, the opportunity for change closing minute-by-minute. Nothing passes or spends its way through time unscathed, including clocks that keep time, and those of us who live under it. The clockwork starts to crack under the weight of the time it's tracking.

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We've all got baggage

Cracks in the Clockwork presents Vancouver-based artist Elizabeth Zvonar's sculptural and collage works alongside artworks and furniture from Art Windsor-Essex's collection. The exhibition is anchored by three works, all cast bronze cast bags–*History, Influence, New Bag* (2022), *History, Onus, Old Bag* (2022), and *Daytripper* (2023). *Daytripper* and *New*

Bag hang at the end of Everbilt chains in the gallery, while *Old Bag* sits casually on top of a bronze stump scorched to mimic a red cedar stump, scavenged by Zvonar's friends after a controlled burn on Storm Bay, in British Columbia. Zvonar is considering what a monument is in our current moment, and the presentation of her works oscillate between fine art and luxury object, or, in the case of the hanging works, carcasses swinging from meat hooks. As monuments they can be sinister; they can also be screamingly funny. As is so often the case with Zvonar, surrealist wordplay and material appropriation evoke a constellation of meanings and associations. Chief among these is the idea of the *old bag*–bag being a sexist, dismissive term with implications of promiscuity first documented in the 1924 novel, *The Plastic Age*,[i] and old being just *old*, a dismissive term for ageing women that's perhaps as old as time itself.[1] The bags are a metaphor for the baggage we collectively live through and carry–patriarchy, sexism, colonialism, and white supremacism, for example–and the ways in which the production, presentation and interpretation of art is implicated in their construction and maintenance.

Also hanging on an Everbilt chain is a multi-armed glass chandelier from the Georgian era. When I first approached Zvonar about showing at AWE, it was with less than a year's lead time for an exhibition with a footprint of roughly 5000 square feet to consider–so many square feet, so little time. We quickly adapted, using furniture and artworks from AWE's collection to augment Zvonar's work, choosing Zvonar's pieces dating back as early as 2009, and collections work dating back to the 1760s. Serendipitously, the planning for this exhibition coincided with a major collections review, and a broader deaccessioning project targeting (in part) the historic furniture in our collection. This chandelier was the first item of furniture that crept its way into the show, and we hung it low to evoke a bodily relationship in the space, finding ourselves surprised to see how it resembled an octopus in beautiful, leaded crystal once installed. Its presentation in *Cracks in the Clockwork* removes it from its former context high in the great hall at the historic Willistead Manor (1904-1906), Art Windsor-Essex's home between its incorporation in 1943 until its move to a repurposed Carling Brewery in 1975, since torn down to make way for our current building on Riverside Drive.

While always out-of-scope of AWE's collections mandate, AWE's first director and longest-serving curator, Kenneth Saltmarche (1920-2003), acquired historic furniture as part of a broader exhibition strategy. Not only did he acquire these objects as scenography–Saltmarche believed firmly that historic artworks should be shown amongst historic objects, as is the case in many encyclopedic art museums–but he also drew distinct linkages between what we might call the "good life," and the edifying role of art education. In 1949, Saltmarche penned one of his ongoing columns (under the pseudonym David Mawr) in the *Windsor Star* on the gallery's new Junior Art Association. "Although many of these youngsters may be interested in becoming artists," Saltmarche wrote, "the group has been formed more particularly for those who

[1] I add this detail to fight against the nostalgia I feel for the home I write this essay from, whose earliest entrance in the public register is 1924, the same year *The Plastic Age* appeared in print. My house—like most other houses of this period—required only the waged labour of one adult to support it and a family of five; even in affordable Windsor, my house requires the hourly wages of two adults, working without many of the traditional entitlements afforded to John (Jack) Thompson, the Chrysler mechanic who lived here between 1929 and his death in 1974. It's hard not to want to return to a time when such a comfortable life was possible, even knowing that I (like Jack's wife, Evelyn) would not have had free access to waged labour (or even a bank account) at that time. The march of progress is never so linear as might want to believe: we may have improved on so many measures of racial, gender and sexual equality, but our culture of scarcity cuts the pie so thin when it comes to the equitable distribution of wealth under late capitalism. The clock runs backwards and forwards.

will some day be patrons of art and this includes everyone. For sooner or later all of these people will be interested in building or decorating a house, furnishing it, buying pictures for it, selecting clothing, dishes and any number of things in which art plays some part."[ii] Drawing the line between art education and bourgeois culture even more clearly as the year advanced, in July Saltmarche (again, as Mawr) described a new school program delivered to roughly 150 Windsor-based children between 1948 and 1949: "Other models concern clothing problems. In one the student can find his own physiognomic type–bonde, brunet, thin, plump, etc.–and see the effects of a variety of colours, shades and patterns."[iii] If we're using principles of line and form to teach children how to make homes, or to dress, to escape notice and to advance the colonial, capitalist project rather than to buck it, then we begin to see how art institutions are disciplinary as much as didactic.

Much of the work in *Cracks in the Clockwork* references aspiration culture, not least the three bronze bags. Take, for example, *Wants and Needs* (2023): it first appears at a distance to be a milky, swirling crystal ball, but viewed closely the work is a years' worth of receipts and chocolate bar wrappers. The work sits neatly on a small shelf, its bantam heft incongruous with the actual weight of wanting, as anyone living on a tight budget can attest. There's the source material for the collages, too: fashion magazines, dreamy images of sun-kissed suburbia, and the perfected female form. Lauren Berlant has coined the term "cruel optimism" to describe those times when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[iv] Many of the "fraying fantasies" that catalyze this cruel optimism are vestiges of that same good life that Saltmarche desired for his junior art associates, including "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy."[v] In a world where we are instructed to go into debt to dress for the jobs we want, it's well understood that middle-class attainment is as much an ongoing performance as it is a wished-for destination. Art museums are just one of several cultural industries that define and discipline us as middle-class subjects, teaching us how to behave, how to dress, and what self-destructive things we should spend our days wanting.

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Cracks in the Clockwork is designed in such a way that at least one of Zvonar's bags is visible at any time in the gallery space, their reliable presence a reminder of the dual weights of inheritance and aspiration. Not visible when you enter the exhibition is a scalloped-edge mahogany table, with a clay head resting on top of a white vinyl circle at its centre. If a gallery could be said to have a naval, this is where the naval would be: in the very middle of the space, hidden by a narrow slice of wall bearing the exhibition's title.

Kafka, writing about Picasso, described art as "a mirror which goes 'fast' like a watch - sometimes." By this he meant that Picasso captured what Kafka called the "deformities" of the modern era before they entered the public consciousness, mirroring the world not as it was but as what-it-would-become. Arguably, a good artist isn't limited to intuiting what's in the near future, but is in possession of a periscopic vision that can cast its lens backwards and forwards, sensing the signals that connect past to present, bringing hitherto unseen currents to the surface of our consciousness. In this exhibition, the clock and Zvonar work at cross-purposes, with the artist curating AWE collection artworks against chronological time, creating new meanings through unexpected juxtaposition, upsetting neat, teleological narratives between then and now.

The clay head that I've just mentioned is attributed to Philip Hakuluk (Kangiqliniq, 1916-1989), likely completed between 1968 and 1970. Hakuluk was born and raised in

Coral Harbour (formerly Southhampton Island in the Kivalliq Region) and worked for a time in the nickel mine at Kangiqliniq (Rankin Inlet) before it closed in 1962. One year later, Hakuluk began training with the Rankin Inlet Ceramics Program, a government-run scheme intended to replace the wage economy of the mine with the wage economy of craft, supporting those workers who were unable to return to a traditional, land-based lifestyle. So, at 47 years of age, Hakuluk became an accomplished ceramicist whose works are now collected widely by Canadian institutions. Hakuluk's untitled portrait came to AWE in 2003 with a simple, descriptive title that does little to indicate what the work portrays: *Untitled (Inuit Head)* doesn't convey the fact that this portrait is European, nor that the subject's pock-marked skin carries traces of the diseases that Europeans brought to the Inuit population throughout the latter half of the 19th century and beyond. As Zvonar notes, "[the head] has such a distinct style, the teeth and lips so delicately depicted; the attention to the hair and hairline, so descriptive. And yet the memorial so unpleasant and important. This is a rare depiction of a major defining event of colonialism in Canada."

The mahogany table beneath it appears at first glance to be a starched collar for this European head, recalling the outsized ruffs worn by Elizabeth I in her official portraits. Elizabeth was, of course, Queen of England when the British first established colonies in what is now called North America; she was also the Queen of England when the first British ship traded enslaved African people between what is now Sierra Leone to colonial ports in the Caribbean and the Americas. Mahogany is indigenous to the Caribbean and was one of several imports exchanged for enslaved Africans during the Triangular Trade, flooding the North American and British market with this now ubiquitous hardwood from the 18th century onwards. AWE's mahogany table mimics the pie crust tables of this period, but likely dates to the early 20th century, when it would have appeared in the front foyer of a grand Windsor mansion, topped with a towering vase of flowers. Here, the diminutive head doesn't have quite the same height or presence as a sweeping floral arrangement; the head and the low table resemble something that might scuttle across a sea floor rather than something that might adorn a great hall, but the pairing first startles then later settles into satisfying place. Why shouldn't a pockmarked head, carrying the visual marks of measles or smallpox adorn this table? Both head and table reflect the complicated and ugly exchanges that mark our colonial presence on this land, despite their first emergence at different times and in different contexts. "Let's put it on the table and deal with it," urges Zvonar. That they appear here, together, is just one crack in the clockwork, one more instance of time folding in on itself in Zvonar's artful pastiching.

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There is something beautifully enigmatic about Zvonar's relationship to her work, and her ability to remain open to it, and surprised by it, with and through time. Her hesitation to strictly define a work's meaning or interpretation reflects her endless, roving curiosity, her appetite for the perspectives of others, and a deep, unshakeable comfort in ambiguity and mystery. For a brief period in February, the gallery became a studio for Zvonar as she worked to incorporate collection artworks into the exhibition, under the pressure of many eyes and much interest. American sculptor Anne Truitt, in considering her own practice, wrote "the terms of the experience and the terms of the work itself are totally different. But if the work is successful–I cannot ever know whether it is or not–the experience becomes the work, and through the work, is accessible to others with its original force. For me, the process is mysterious. It's like not knowing where you're going but knowing how to get there."[vi] So much of *Cracks in the Clockwork* reveals itself over time, with new surprises emerging around each corner, and new observations emerging with repeated visits. The show is a testament

to how instinct and practice, or faith and preparation, can coalesce into something that surprises even those responsible for creating it.

When a visitor to the exhibition has reached the Hakuluk's head on that mahogany table, *Legs* (2009) reveals itself for the first time. Upon entry to the gallery, the viewer is confronted with a short, four-foot-high wall slanted at a roughly eighty-degree angle, the sculpture obscured; the wall, instead, provides a strangeness to the space, challenging our ordinary expectations and setting the tone for what's to come. Viewed from the other side, it appears as though twelve mannequin arms are casually holding up the wall itself, with just the tips of the mannequins' middle fingers resting easily on the floor. There are twelve arms in total, referencing the twelve-hour clock. This seems to instantiate much of how contemporary authors and critics current writings on time under capitalism. "As opposed to the duration of life or even the processes of the human body, one hour is meant to be indistinguishable from another–decontextualized, depersonalized, and infinitely divisible," author and artist Jenny Odell writes in *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond Productivity Culture*. "This view sees individual people as interchangeable, separate repositories of this usable time stuff: as Marx puts it, 'nothing more than personified labour time'"[vii] In the tradition of the surrealists–many of whom, like René Magritte and Salvador Dali, used mannequins in their works–Zvonar's unstable invocation of both the body and the clock oscillates between humour and horror. The six identical pairs of arms seem to refer to a clock in which every hour is like the one before, with each person living by that clock reduced to an indistinguishable unit of "time stuff"–truly, a new form of time-based body horror. And yet, there's humour here, too: I'm reminded of the work of the choreographer Busby Berkeley of Hollywood's Golden Age of musicals. Berkeley was known for his intricate dance scenes that abstracted his young and attractive female dancers' bodies into elaborate geometric patterns. Berkeley's last known work, a cold medicine commercial entitled the "Cold Diggers of 1969," fittingly included a scene of dancers forming the moving arms of a ticking clock.

Legs was the first work that we planned to include in this exhibition, an anchor work that provided much of the centripetal force for the exhibition as we slowly built it out over a matter of months. Each work in the exhibition seemed to call to the next one: Zvonar's *It's the gaps that change the sequence* (2015) prompted the inclusion of K.M. (Kathleen) Graham's *Northumberland Hills* (1987), with the plaster cast of Zvonar's inner leg, bent at the knee, recalling the rolling hills of Graham's composition. Margaret Lawrence's *Memorial #11* (1987) called out with a gummy smile to Zvonar's unruly *Tongue* (2023), with the unruly, hand-made incense sticking out. The amorphous, spectral form in Zvonar's *Ghosts* (2018) responded to the paper lantern in Henry Morland's *The Ballad Singer* (ca. 1760s), albeit upside down. And if *Legs* was the first work that took root in this space, Luke Anguhadluq's *Drum Dance* (1970) and *Untitled (Faces watching drum dance)* (ca. 1978), and K.M. (Kathleen) Graham's *Cape Dorset Spring Light 77-99 (Arctic) with Whiplash as Seen Over Warm Arctic Currents in the Ocean* (1977) provide a palette that seems to beckon spring: apple green, creamsicle orange, and lilac purple reveal themselves as the viewer travels through the show. The decisions we made intuitively before the installation began to fall in place as we hung each work, with hindsight affirming our instincts and revealing unanticipated nuances.

When Zvonar left the gallery after the opening, it was with my understanding that we would soon develop language for what we had just done in that space, words to describe the decisions we had just made. I write this knowing that the smartest thing I can say about Zvonar's exhibition today will be eclipsed in two years by the smarter things I can say about it then, because time might be cruel to many things, but it can be kind to understanding. Ultimately, this is testament to Zvonar's vision and to her

innate generosity as an artist–nothing that Zvonar does in making, presenting, or discussing her work forecloses the potential for surprise, for new meanings to arise. The always-unfolding aspects of Zvonar's process begin to show us a time-sense that allows for potential, for growth and for change, rather than inevitability and decay. Zvonar's is a time that is generative, that accretes meaning; it is a time signature that welcomes any cracks in the clockwork that might allow the light to find its way within.

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[i] Maureen O'Connor, "How Rude Are Female -Bag and -Piece Insults? A Taxonomy and Exploration," *The Cut*, 7 August 2013. https://www.thecut.com/2013/08/how-rude-are-female-bag-and-piece-insults.html. Accessed February 20, 2024.
[ii] David Mawr, "Art Group Launched," *The Windsor Star,* January 15, 1949.
[iii] David Mawr, "Art Program at Willistead Proves Boon to Students," *The Windsor Star*, July 9, 1949.
[iv] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011): xx.
[v] Ibid, 3.
[vi] Quoted in the Marginalian, "Anne Truitt on Resisting the Label "Artist" and the Difference Between Doing Art and Being an Artist," August 27, 2014. Retrieved from https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/08/27/anne-truitt-daybook-artist/ April 27, 2024.
[vii] Jenny Odell, *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond Productivity* Culture (New York: Random House, 2023): 11.