

# Alicja Kwade Against the Run

A Percent-for-Art Commission  
MIT Kendall Square Initiative



# Alicja Kwade's *Against the Run*

Jeppe Ugelvig

"Time is money." "Lost time is never found again." Of all truisms about time, some of the most succinct were delivered by the distinguished Bostonian Benjamin Franklin. Born in 1785 on Milk Street, just across the Charles River from MIT's present-day campus, the polymath and early US politician became a representative of a rapidly industrializing nation, one in which attention to time and time-keeping grew steadily alongside the erecting of the country's earliest factories.

In Franklin's era, first-generation factory workers were—by way of time-sheets, timekeepers, and allocated overtime—taught by their "masters" the importance of time, not as a general structuring system of human life but one of labor synchronization and disciplining.<sup>1</sup> The clock has, so to speak, kept ticking ever since—although time itself continues to be contested and abstracted in tandem with the evolution of work and value.

In her practice, the Polish, Berlin-based artist Alicja Kwade has, like Franklin, shown a fascination with time and often makes it her mission to tease out its inherent paradoxes and conundrums. Working in sculpture, photography, and installation, Kwade explores predetermined structures of reality, often encapsulated in common objects and materials, which she transforms, manipulates, or subverts in order to trigger suspicion or reevaluation in the viewer. Her public commission for the MIT campus at Kendall Square's Open Space Plaza, *Against the Run* (2019)—a functional post clock that shows the right time, even if its face turns counterclockwise by the second—is the latest in a long series of works that probe the social and scientific concepts of time and propose art as a place to undo these, if only symbolically.

For Kwade, chronometers (more commonly called "timepieces") have been particularly useful in this mission, as they convention-

ally serve to do exactly that: visualize and objectify something so abstract as time. However, in the artist's hands, the precarious premise of time is quickly exposed: in *12x12x∞* (2008), for example, she presented twelve chrome cabinets of ticking antique mantelpiece clocks without faces, their sounding gong surprising viewers every full and half hour. *Dimension +1--9* and *Dimension -1--9* (both 2012) feature two clocks facing each other, one ticking slightly faster and one slightly slower than a standard second—between them stretching time further and further apart in equal measure. While in *in-fluence* (2013), she mounted a 1930s institutional wall clock with a nail next to it on the lower left-hand side. Each minute, the clock's second hand speeds up for fifteen seconds after passing the nail, as if somehow affected or rushed by it; yet, despite this interruption, each minute remains "correct."

In 2014, she arrived at the trick realized in numerous works known as *Gegen den Lauf*, or *Against the Run*, including that at MIT: a clock with an analog dial, wherein the second hand ticks counterclockwise from the twelve to the eleven o'clock position, seemingly prompting the whole clock face to tick counterclockwise before the second hand returns to its starting point. Remarkably, it is still possible to read the time—that is, if you're willing to turn your head and concentrate intensely—because the clock is, in fact, accurate. In effect, the bright red second hand

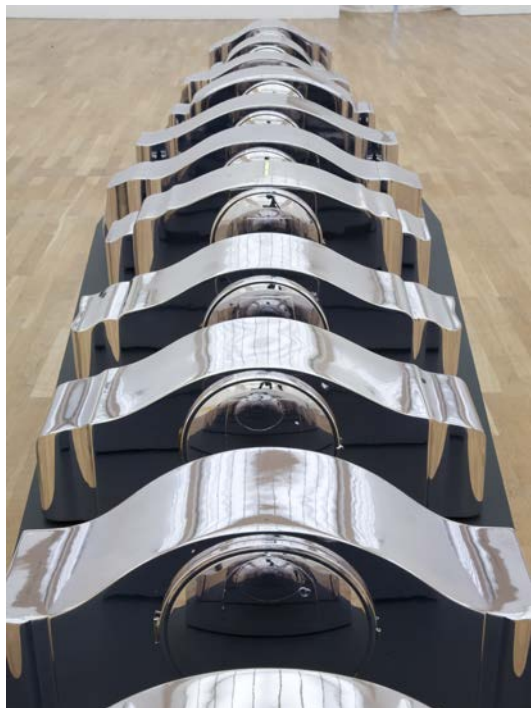


*Against the Run*, 2019. MIT Collection commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art funds. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography

becomes the anchor of movement, perpetually at the top of the clock, while the numeral twelve (with all the others) rotates as the second hand otherwise would. The continuous ticking of the clock adds a punctual soundtrack to this mildly absurdist encounter—a reminder that time is always ticking even while we're trying to read it; time is always running, somewhere or away from us.

By gently destabilizing (but never totally undoing) the time-telling function of chronometers, Kwade confronts her viewers with their overt reliance on human-made objects to structure a phenomenon often taken for granted as given, universal, or natural. In fact, time is nothing of the sort: it is impossibly abstract, historically determined, and contingent on plenty of social, environmental, and economic forces. Time, as often assumed, does not actually exist—that is to say, the past and the future are never given in the concreteness of actuality; what is, is always present.<sup>2</sup>

While theories of time can be immensely perplexing, Kwade delivers them with poignancy and humor in common objects, drawing on the long tradition of using readymades as rhetorical prompts in a logical argument. Just as Duchamp first proved that a urinal in a gallery can single-handedly encapsulate the perplexing value system of art, Kwade shows that time is only ever experienced through designed objects that help us measure it through minutes, hours, and days—and that we are often left feeling helpless without them. When asked about her idea of time in an interview, the artist averred that hers was “an insufficient one.”<sup>3</sup> She continued: “I simply cannot imagine time, however hard I try. Especially the fact that it is decidedly directed strikes me as a frustrating fact. The attempt to imagine hundreds of thousands of years is bound to fail from the outset. So is trying to talk about it.”<sup>4</sup>



*12x12x∞*, 2008. Chrome lacquer, MDF, pedestal, fireplace clock, mechanic clockwork, ticking, 114½ × 31 × 17¼ in. (367 × 79 × 44 cm). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Roman März

Kwade does not attempt to talk about it but instead delivers visual and physical prompts to these scientific issues by way of sculpture. However, as evidenced by Kwade's long string of time-themed works, these point, more than anything, to modern society's own contrived sociopolitical history. Her series *Alle Zeit der Welt* [All the Time in the World] (2015), for example, on so-called Coordinated Universal Time (UTC), elegantly visualizes the inefficiency of the globe's designated time zones. Stacking time zones one after another to facilitate international travel, trade, and communication, UTC quickly imploded due to state borders—evident on continents such as South America, where the distant cities of Santiago, Chile, and Georgetown, Guyana, share times, while Mendoza, Argentina (which falls west of Guyana and east of Chile), is an hour ahead. Kwade's *Alle Zeit der Welt* replicates South America's time zone border lines along one long copper and steel pole to examine their supposed linearity; the jumbled, tangled result is ridiculous at best.

Yet, by erecting a clock in a public space such as a park<sup>5</sup> or university campus, Kwade homes in more specifically on time's political relationship to productivity, labor, and value, not unlike Franklin's age-old truisms. If time indeed *is money*, the clock is what facilitates it, as it has done since its popularization began in the fourteenth century. Public clocks were erected on town squares and in church towers in the market towns of medieval Europe and helped to restructure civic and religious life by centralizing and synchronizing time. This specifically entailed a standardizing of labor time, now measured in hours and minutes, where it had earlier been predominately task-oriented—that is, structured around specific chores in the fields or the home. Historian E. P. Thompson recounts how time-keeping embodies a simple relationship in



*Alle Zeit der Welt* [All the Time in the World], 2015. Copper, stainless steel, three parts: 78¾ × 9½ × 1¼ in.; 78¾ × 7⅞ × 1¼ in.; 78¾ × 12½ × 2½ in. (200 × 24 × 4.5 cm; 200 × 20 × 4.5 cm; 200 × 32 × 6.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and König Galerie, Berlin/London. Photo: Roman März



*Against the Run*, 2019. Previously installed at temporary site: MIT Medical (Building E23). MIT Collection commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art funds. Photo: Peter Vanderwarker

early capitalist production: those who are employed experience a distinction between their employer's time and their "own" time. And when the value of time is reduced to money more than anything else, employees must use the time of their labor and not see it wasted. "Time," Thompson asserts, "is now currency: it is not passed but spent."<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, the clock was sometimes referred to as "the devil's mill" and time as a devourer or "bloody tyrant," pointing to a social regime that disciplines bodies and, in fact, all of society. During

industrialization, this regime was widely embraced as the actual metric of work-life, where workers would have to "clock in" and adhere to given industrial conceptions of time in order to survive in the new urban centers. Even if clocks have changed shape since, time-keeping today is as crucial as ever—as any student speeding past Kwade's irreverent clock to reach class or an assignment deadline "on time" will tell you. Time is always ticking, and we organize ourselves around its strict designation of past, present, and future as if this system was the only governing factor on the planet. Clocks, in whatever shape, are the ultimate disciplinarians, proscribing our behavior even if they have no agency of their own: they brutally dictate life's rhythms, advancing us into the future second by second and often causing an immense amount of stress.

Kwade refers to *Against the Run* as "humorous" and "easy"—in sum, a clock trying to physically escape itself but never succeeding. This Sisyphean task may seem delirious, but in relation to productivity, what would it mean for time to escape itself? "Lost time is never found again," Franklin stubbornly reminds us: in mature capitalist society, all time must be consumed, marketed, or put to use; otherwise, it is lost. But behind Kwade's object of officialism and information, there is a poignant materialist critique of time as it has evolved in our recent age. Kwade allows art to be a space for these kinds of mind exercises, not coincidentally: art has its own strange relationship not only to time but also to the value it generates. If traditional labor time is understood as linear and productive (a clock dictates working hours and the according economic remuneration), art's time is speculative and deeply obsessed with both pasts and futures.

Art is always thrusting itself toward an avant-garde future by defining an art-historical past, which makes for a voracious "contemporary" (not "present") where the value of both can be monetized. In this sense, art has more in common with the much newer economic regime of finance, where you make speculative investments *in the future* today—hoping for a prosperous present to come. In her study of finance, the sociologist Elena Esposito (one of Kwade's favorite thinkers) explains that the "time of money" shows how the future can be produced by the very operations that try to anticipate it, persistently building and binding the real future in more and more complex ways in virtual financial markets.<sup>7</sup> This results in an enormous accumulation of wealth, financial crises, or both. Time, Esposito shows, as defined by the speculative abstractions of finance capitalism, appears at least as delirious as that visualized by Kwade's public clock. The problem, of course, is that we don't yet have truisms like Franklin's compelling enough to comprehend it.

1 See E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, no. 38 (December 1967): 56–97.

2 Elena Esposito reflects on this in *Future of Futures* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011).

3 Katja Schroeder, "The Absurd and the Real, or How Reality Might Also Work," in *Alicja Kwade* (Berlin: DISTANZ Verlag, 2010), np.

4 Schroeder, "The Absurd and the Real."

5 For her first public art commission in the United States, Kwade installed a sixteen-foot-tall timepiece at one of Central Park's southeast entrances in Manhattan.

6 Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 61.

7 Esposito, *Future of Futures*, 4.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alicja Kwade (b. 1979) was born in Katowice, Poland and studied sculpture at the University of the Arts in Berlin, where she lives and works. She has exhibited internationally, including at Marshall House, Reykjavik, Iceland; Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Dallas Contemporary, Texas; and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan. Kwade also participated in the 57th Venice Biennale (2017). Her work is collected by prominent institutions, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Centre Pompidou, Paris; K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark; Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland; and the Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Poland.

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## SPONSORS

Alicja Kwade was selected for the commission by Percent-for-Art committee members, including: Azra Akšamija, Associate Professor, MIT Program for Art, Culture, and Technology; Jon Alvarez, Director, MIT Office of Campus Planning; Richard Amster, Director, MIT Campus Construction; Robert Brown, Director of Perkins & Will Architects, Executive Architects of Kendall Square Initiative; John Durant, Director, MIT Museum; Paul C. Ha, Director, MIT List Visual Arts Center; Michael Owu, Director, Real Estate at MITIMCo; Stuart Schmill, MIT Admissions; and Emily Watlington, MIT Graduate Student in History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeppe Ugelvig is a curator and critic based in New York. His research focuses on aesthetic production under capitalism. Ugelvig completed his MA degree at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, in 2018. His writing frequently appears in *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and *Spike*, among many others. Recent curated exhibitions include *The Endless Garment* at X Museum, Beijing, and *Witch-Hunt* at Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen. His first book, *Fashion Work: 25 Years of Art in Fashion*, was published by Damiani in 2020.

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