

Living in World Time

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Installed in the circular ambulatory of the Hirshhorn Museum, Bettina Pousttchi's *World Time Clock* forms an endless loop. Each photograph in the series shows the face of a clock; each clock represents a different city and time zone. The circuit may be entered at Asuncion or Moscow or Sydney—it makes no difference as there is no set beginning or end, no narrative or temporal sequence. Instead, there is a sense of time suspended. Locations tick past as the viewer walks by, but the clocks remain at the same time: five before two. Five before two in Dubai, five before two in Cape Town, five before two in Calgary, and so on, through twenty-four different time zones.

Another artist might have sourced such images online—but, crucially, this project unfolded in real time and space, with Pousttchi traveling to each location and photographing every clock. The conditions of mobility that underlie its making are partly the subject of the work. Just as the development of the interstate highway system and the jumbo jet at mid-twentieth century sparked a flourishing of conceptual art made “on the road” in the 1960s,ⁱ the conditions of contemporary globalism—low-cost air carriers, the internet, open borders—undergird the creation of *World Time Clock*. Pousttchi conceived of the piece on February 29, 2008, prompted by “that special day” that occurs once only every four years. “[Leap year] made me think about the structuring of time and the calendar system,” she recalls, “Initially there was just the concept to photograph a public clock, in different time zones of the world, at always the same time.”ⁱⁱ Over the next eight years, Pousttchi traveled the globe with her camera, stalking clocks and counting off time zones. Her progress was at first shaped simply by her circumstances as a working artist in today's international art economy. Opportunities such as residencies and exhibitions brought the Berlin-based Pousttchi to places like London, Shanghai, New York and Mexico City. But she quickly realized that dedicated travel would be necessary to bring the project to completion. In addition to pursuing multiple single-destination trips, she twice purchased “round-the-world” air tickets that enabled hectic point-to-point itineraries such as Berlin > Cape Town > Sao Paulo > Asuncion > Noumea > Adelaide > Mumbai > Berlin. For reasons both budgetary and symbolic, Pousttchi allowed herself only 27.3 days for these round-the-world tours—equal to the time the moon takes to orbit the earth. She typically spent two days in each location, giving herself at most two chances to capture a public clock with its hands at five minutes before two in daylight hours.

None of the physical displacement that went into capturing each clock is evident in the final images. Belying the hard travel and months of planning invested by the artist, the experience of moving from Asia to Africa to North America via *World Time Clock* is, for the viewer, frictionless. Travel photography usually emphasizes what is uniquely spectacular or culturally distinct about a place. But Pousttchi frames her subjects tightly, frustrating the search for local context or even physical scale. The digital manipulation of the images into high-contrast black and white, and the addition of

horizontal striations, further consolidates their unified appearance and suggests the mediation of a screen. Some clocks can be recognized, but for the most part viewers must look to the titles to identify each location. Only two clock-faces—in *Bangkok Time* and *Dubai Time*—hint at their specific whereabouts by way of numbers written in a script other than Roman or Western Arabic.

The resolute similarity of the 24 photographs underscores the clock's impact as an instrument of standardization. Before the mid-nineteenth century, all time was local, with communities setting their public time by the position of the sun in the sky. As a consequence, town clocks might differ between locations only several miles east or west of one another. The adoption of standard time—first demanded by the British railroad industry and crucial to the development of global commerce and communications—eradicating countless local time zones, just as the close views of clock-faces in *World Time Clock* ignore native context and shrink the physical distance between locales. As the artist has noted, the spread of public clocks can be read as an index of colonial power. The first clock she photographed for the project was Big Ben, an icon of the British capital—which, not incidentally, is the city through which the prime meridian for modern Universal Time runs.ⁱⁱⁱ In her travels, Pousttchi discovered numerous “miniature copies” of Big Ben scattered across the former Empire, in Cape Town, Mumbai, Sydney. She observes that “the stronger the former ties to Great Britain, the more obvious the link”—and, the greater the number of clocks. Vancouver and Sydney are “absolute clock cities,” while New Delhi's clocks are in disrepair and slowly being dismantled.^{iv} The presentation of *World Time Clock* at the Hirshhorn is historically apt as Washington, DC, is the birthplace of the international time zone system which Pousttchi navigated to create the piece. It was in here, in 1884, that an international conference agreed on a single prime meridian for time and longitude throughout the world.

Pousttchi has considered the relationship between public clocks and state power before. The first image of a clock-face to appear in her work was in *Take Off*, 2005. This series of photographs was created at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport just a few years before the facility, famous for its Nazi and Cold War past, was decommissioned. In *Take Off*, Pousttchi explores the airport as a site of restricted mobility and border-crossing: “I was interested in the airport as a place where the nation-state's claim to authority over territory is manifest and the individual is restricted.”^v These themes are especially resonant given Tempelhof's history as the main port of air entry to West Berlin during the years of the Cold War. It was there that the British and Americans conducted an airlift that provided West Berlin with food and fuel during the winter of 1948-49, when a Soviet blockade barred other access to the city. Though now closed for air travel, Tempelhof is still a practical and symbolic point of entry to the country: since 2015, it has served as Germany's largest emergency refugee shelter, housing at times thousands of displaced people as they await permanent homes and integration.

The scenes in *Take Off* are recorded from a distance, as if by a camera fixed in place. Like in *World Time Clock*, the photographs have a striated, high-contrast appearance

that here calls to mind the look of closed-circuit television, airports being one of the most surveyed spaces in modern life. A signature image in the series shows two people—one uniformed and the other in street clothes—as they pass through sliding glass doors across a threshold. It is unclear if this is an arrival or a departure, or even if the figures are moving in the same or opposite directions. Other pictures likewise capture small moments of transition: passengers disembarking a plane, a traveler approaching a security checkpoint. Finally, there is an image of the large clock that presides over Tempelhof’s main hall. At the time Pousttchi took this picture, she was flying regularly between London and Berlin and, upon arrival at Tempelhof, would orient herself to local time by this clock, noting the one-hour shift. (Despite its geographic proximity, the United Kingdom does not follow Central European Time; hence the peculiarity that London and Berlin exist one hour apart while Madrid, Berlin and Stockholm occupy the same time.) The sharp upward angle of the camera towards the clock-face in *Take Off* is repeated, again and again, in *World Time Clock*. Public clocks are always situated *above*, where many eyes can reach them. Their literally elevated position demands our bodily engagement—eyes and head tilt *up*—and reinforce the reality that public time is communally and institutionally determined.

The imaginary global synchronism of *World Time Clock* suggests that we all look up *together*, to a shared symbolic time. Its circular, non-sequential, and equivalent presentation implies global unity without a governing starting point. The work not only dissolves the multiple time zones between London and its former colonies; it makes the “copies” of Big Ben as large and imposing as the original. The artist recalls that when she visited the Meridian Line in Greenwich, London, in 2008, the words “Welcome to the center of time and space” greeted her: “At a time when no place can any longer claim to be the center of the world, that was somehow a striking sentence.”^{vi} *World Time Clock* visualizes a new world order, one that lacks a center but runs in a circuit through 24 equal hubs.

World Time Clock reflects its historical moment with precision. Born in 1971, Pousttchi came of age during a period of rising global openness, with the movement of goods, information and people all on the uptick. Her German mother and Iranian father met in Shiraz and raised a family near Frankfurt. The revolutions of 1989 brought down the wall that previously separated her relatives in East and West Germany. The artist studied internationally, in Paris and New York, and for the eight years of *World Time Clock*, traveled with remarkable ease through 24 time zones. Today, the open world order seems to be in retreat. Pousttchi began *World Time Clock* in 2008, the first year of the Great Recession, which, in retrospect, may be understood as the beginning-of-the-end of a decades-long period of increasing trade and migration. She completed it in 2016, the year of Brexit and the election of Donald J. Trump. With populist movements on the ascent and governments demanding tighter borders, countries are turning inward. The artist has said there is no special significance to “five before two” as the time in *World Time Clock*; nevertheless, it carries an anticipatory frisson. We are living in World Time now—but the hour may be about to change.

From: Bettina Pousttchi: *World Time Clock*; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Hatje Cantz publishers; Berlin; 2017; p. 33-39

Notes

ⁱ Consider such iconic works as Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1962, and Robert Smithson's *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, 1969. Mark Godfrey draws a connection between the increased mobility of artists in the 1960s and their interest in the relationship between travel and photography. Mark Godfrey, "Across the Universe," in Matthew S. Witkovsky, ed., *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964-1977* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2011), 58-64.

ⁱⁱ Barry Schwabsky, "In Conversation: Bettina Pousttchi with Barry Schwabsky," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3, 2016, <http://brooklynrail.org/2016/06/art/bettina-pousttchi-with-barry-schwabsky>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Greenwich Mean Time is no longer the world's official time standard; however, the solar mean time of Greenwich, London, is still used as the prime meridian for today's Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) system.

^{iv} Bettina Pousttchi, "Off the Clock," Frieze d/e, March 7, 2013, <https://frieze.com/article/clock>.

^v Bettina Pousttchi to author, February 1, 2017.

^{vi} Schwabsky.