

# The AV festival: from here to eternity

A car crash that will last a month, a million-year dialogue, astronaut geese – this year's AV festival is devoted to slow art. Adrian Searle clocks on



**Adrian Searle**

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Going nowhere fast ... Slow-Motion Car Crash by Jonathan Schipper. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

In an otherwise empty shop in Newcastle, there is a car crash going on. A VW Golf is being slowly shunted, by hidden hydraulics, into the wallpapered wall. The car is moving 7mm per hour, and it will take all of March for the collision, devised by Jonathan Schipper, to evolve. I stand and watch, waiting for the sound of panels crumpling, a crack to appear in the windscreen, the wall to cave. It could take days. Maybe I should call for help.

## **The AV Festival: As Slow As Possible**

Various venues

Until 31 March

[Venue website](#)

Time appears to be slowing down, just as it does in the violent instant of sudden impact. But I am a man in a hurry, on a 24-hour dash around Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Gateshead and Sunderland, trying to catch as much as I can of As Slow As Possible, the fifth and most ambitious AV Festival of Art,

Technology, Music and Film, which continues all month. There are exhibitions, concerts, films, performances, readings and walks. A whole radio channel, Radio Boredcast, is playing a marvellously motley selection of programmes: as I write, I'm listening to John Cage in conversation with composer Morton Feldman.

The festival needs more time than anyone could possibly have, and takes its title from an organ piece by Cage – a performance of which, begun in 2001 in a church in Germany, isn't scheduled to reach its conclusion until 2640. That's 639 years. See you at the interval.

Cage and Feldman are inspirations for Susan Stenger's sound installation, which

resonates under the concrete domed entrance to the Newcastle Civic Centre. Trained as a classical flautist, Stenger is best known as a rock bassist and leader of the Band of Susans. Her work *The Structure of Everyday Life: Full Circle* builds and decays as it filters out into the surroundings. Using clock time and lunar cycles, the I Ching and the Chinese zodiac, musical development and the harmonic circle of fourths, Stenger's composition is as much sculptural and environmental as it is something to be listened to. Vertiginous, droning, rushing, discrete, insidious and extremely beautiful, such orchestral slowness makes me feel I am standing in a whirling panopticon, surrounded by her circle of speakers, Newcastle in early spring roaring beyond the 1960s concrete pillars. The work starts to inhabit you, just as you inhabit the space. It's a perfect match.

The theme of the festival is more than simply slowness, duration or endurance.

Benedict Drew's *The Persuaders*, installed in the Newcastle building where Robert Stephenson built the Rocket steam locomotive in 1829, had me running for the door. "Breathe in, breathe out," said a spooky hypnotic voice. Another spooky voice, which I think was my own, whispered "Leave now, asshole", so I did.

What's with the slowness? I didn't even have time to grab any slow food. The festival's director, Rebecca Shatwell, seems to be a human whirlwind, too. She's trying to encourage us all to slow down – which is why I'm counting out the millennia, reading a list of odd-numbered years into the far-flung future, while the woman who sits beside me at the big desk in an empty gallery at Baltic, in Gateshead, reads out the even ones. "Four hundred and eighty one thousand seven hundred and sixty three AD ... Four hundred and eighty one thousand seven hundred and sixty, er, eighty, oh blimey, I've missed my place. Start again. Four hundred and ..." I'm fluffing it.

Between us, the female volunteer and I are reading from the 20 volumes of a book filled with nothing but columns of dates, going a million years into the future, and a million into the past. Japanese artist On Karawa's 1993 work, *One Million Years*, will have members of the public at it all month, working in pairs for as long as they can bear. I managed 20 minutes. Keep going and apparently the task gets easier; part of the mind detaches itself like a little pop-up counting machine, and performs the task on automatic pilot.

Some things you can dip in and out of; others need constant vigilance. To a few, I just surrender. Bob Levene's film *Inertial Frame*, at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland, shows the islands and inlets of the Finnish archipelago passing by the camera's fixed and steady eye, filmed in fading and uncertain light. On a sofa in the darkened space, I drifted, too.

In the next room, I am plunged into industrial Milwaukee. Back in 1977, James Benning filmed 60 locations in Milwaukee's industrial valley, for 60 seconds each. In 2004, he returned and filmed the places and people who appeared in the earlier film again. Last summer he shot a third version, *One Way Boogie Woogie*, 2012, premiered here. Big projections line the walls: frontal views of walls and buildings, a plume of smoke from an industrial chimney, railway trucks passing under the silos; this last shot is filled with a melancholic, formal grandeur reminiscent of the paintings and photographs of Charles Scheeler. The US flag flapping in the wind, a hotel sign against the night sky, and somewhere in the aural mix, a Leonard Cohen song plays.. Benning's long shots are elegies to the commonplace and particular. A sun-struck wall, a railyard, an empty street – how haunting and elegiac these visual reports become. A further work by Benning is installed at Middlesbrough station. On one screen we watch molten pig-iron and slag being collected in railway wagons, in the belly of a steel plant in

Duisburg, Germany. It is raining. You can almost taste the smoking metal. On an adjacent screen, Benning has slowed down a 14-second, 1971 black and white scrap of footage, of a worker leaving a Milwaukee factory, so that it lasts 31 minutes, the same length as the footage shot in Duisburg.

Over at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, I missed the caretaker who allegedly appears in John Gerrard's monumental filmed circumnavigation of a ruined 1960s school, set in an almost empty landscape in Cuba. The school turns before us on a deserted pan of crumbling concrete. The day passes from dawn to dusk in real time; the light changes. Perhaps – who knows? – there will be a storm. Gerrard's films are virtual worlds built using customised computer-game software, and based on site photographs and satellite data. Get close to the huge screen and the image never falters. Here's the decaying concrete, the banana palms in the distance, the ruined modernist edifice turning under a digitised sky. The image goes on and on, and I go with it.

Lingering isn't always desirable. I wonder at the months, or possibly years, [artist Agnes Meyer Brandis spent training a flock of geese to become astronauts](#). Moon Goose Analogue is on show at Newcastle's Great North Museum, which is filled with stuffed animals. (Turn left at the dinosaurs, says my itinerary.) The film of her efforts is hilarious, but the installation, decked out as a space centre, where you can watch the geese in live time in a simulated moon environment somewhere in Italy, is an overegged bore.

One of the best things about this festival is that it takes you to places you otherwise might never go – whether to Finland or Milwaukee, or to the wonderful cast-iron architecture of the Great Hall at Newcastle's Discovery Museum, where [Fluxus veteran Yoshi Wada's](#) collection of sirens, foghorns and a ship's ventilator clang and whine and go about their noisy, computer-assisted business.

God, is that the time? I'm watching the clock in a Sunderland shop window, where a team of 72 workers is constantly erecting and demolishing arrangements of planks that tell the time, minute by minute, hour by hour. They rebuilt the structure 1,611 times, to create [a physical 24-hour clock in a patch of Berlin wasteground, filmed by Mark Formanek](#) and called Standard Time (you can watch it on the Guardian's website). This is fun, but not as good as [Christian Marclay's film The Clock](#), which the festival tried to get but couldn't. Marclay's work is the absent ghost at the feast. How long does a festival or an exhibition take? As long as it lasts and then some, is the answer.

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