Kulkarni Venugopal Vasant

NTW2035: Art and the Attention Economy

Dr. Tan Teck Heng

AY2024/2025 Semester 1

Zooming Out with Slow Art

Olafur Eliasson's *Double Spiral* (2001) is a deceptively simple sculpture made of stainless steel, twisted to form two intertwined spirals, one inside the other, and illuminated by a single spotlight. At first glance, it appears motionless—easily overlooked in an exhibition filled with sensory-driven, interactive installations. Like many other visitors, I, too, nearly dismissed it at first, moving past without a second glance. But after exploring every other exhibit, I returned to the quiet *Double Spiral* to finally notice its subtle, elusive movement. Slowly revolving in place, it cast hypnotic, concentric shadows on the floor, with the spirals seemingly twisting in opposite directions. I realised that this slow, deliberate motion was not a malfunction but the very essence of the piece.

The understated presence of *Double Spiral* reveals a paradox: its strength lies in its ability to be overlooked. In an era where, as Odell (2019) describes, the “attention economy” commodifies our focus and sensory overload is the norm, *Double Spiral* resists these demands. The piece requires a concentrated focus to observe its illusory motion and gentle bobbing shadows, echoing Odell’s call to “take hold of [attention],” embrace patience, and value observation over instant gratification (p. 141). She suggests that “there [is] ‘a lot to see’ only if you were willing and able to see it” (p. 134), and *Double Spiral* encapsulates this. In an exhibition where most pieces scream for attention, *Double Spiral* whispers.

Indeed, amidst the exhibition’s bleak pieces about the relentless march of climate change, *Double Spiral* quietly prompts us to consider the larger, slow-moving crises we miss when we fail to slow down. This deliberate embrace of slowness to shed light on a larger phenomenon thus makes me wonder: Can the very quality of slowness in art be a rewarding experience, offering a deeper form of engagement that flashier works cannot? How does this engagement allow us to perceive and understand complex phenomena that extend beyond the boundaries of art?

This paper argues that slowness is an aesthetic experience characterised by mutual vulnerability between viewer and artwork—where the viewer risks their time, and the artwork risks being overlooked. This mutual vulnerability, makes slow art uniquely capable of helping us engage with phenomena that typically exceed human comprehension—what philosopher Timothy Morton terms "hyperobjects." By first examining how slow art creates conditions for mutual vulnerability, and then illustrating how this vulnerability enables engagement with hyperobjects, we can understand slow art's broader significance in addressing contemporary challenges.

In *Slow Art,* Reed (2019) suggests that slowness is potentially a transformative aspect of an artwork. He goes as far as to define a notion of “Slow Art”, characterised not as a fixed object but as an experience, as “an ongoing conversation between artwork and spectator” (p. 36). He argues that slowness transforms the experience of viewing art into a prolonged, contemplative interaction, one

that gradually reveals layers of meaning that would remain hidden in faster, more immediate encounters. According to Reed, slow art "prolong[s] engagement by design, building into [its] structures a temporal unfolding" (p. 36), which requires the viewer to invest time and presence. It is this temporal aspect of slow art that distinguishes it from faster and flashier works; it is not simply meant to be looked at, but inhabited, with the viewer playing a crucial role in shaping the encounter.

As such, in slow art, the viewer's entry into the piece marks the beginning, and their decision to leave signifies the end. This is significant, because it creates an open-ended structure that encourages the viewer to engage on their own terms, lingering and returning as they feel compelled. It allows viewers to explore and shape their experiences according to their own curiosity and appetite, transforming the act of viewing into a deeply personal journey. It shifts the onus of meaning formation onto the viewer, probing them to become attuned to more subtle details. This is precisely what Reed describes as the "modus operandi of slow art: paying attention" (p. 32). By prolonging engagement, slow art encourages paying closer attention, which in turn enables viewers to cultivate a sense of intimacy with an artwork, where meaning is not passively received but actively constructed. Thus, slowness effectively transforms viewing an artwork into a process of discovery.

This quality of slow art has found sanctuary in the Slow Art Day initiative. Museums around the world now curate artworks specifically for Slow Art Day, encouraging viewers to spend between five and ten minutes observing individual works (*About | Slow Art Day*, n.d.). While this initiative may allow viewers to discover the "joy of looking at and loving art" (*About | Slow Art Day*, n.d.), it has also contributed to slow art becoming somewhat fashionable. As Slow Art Day gains traction, the increasing number of museums adopting the concept has led to existing artworks being repurposed as slow art, raising questions about whether the imposition of slowness truly fosters deeper engagement.

In a blog post, Haber (2014) challenges the notion that Slow Art is inherently valuable by arguing that the imposition of slowness risks turning it into a superficial trend rather than fostering meaningful engagement. He points out the irony that Slow Art, which ought to resist the demands of

attention-grabbing art, is itself being used as a trend by museums to attract attention. For instance, Haber points out that “candidates for the worst art galleries in Brooklyn have joined with others outside the city in a ‘slow-art day,’ without a trace of doubt that it would benefit them” (para. 6). In doing so, he criticises the way slowness is appropriated by institutions to create an illusion of deeper engagement, even though the actual experience might not warrant such prolonged contemplation. He questions if slow art can be “[treated] as a matter of will” (para. 9) — that is, whether slowness can be imposed on art simply by designating it as “slow.” For Haber, slowness simply cannot be prescribed in the manner of Slow Art Day.

Indeed, if slowness cannot be prescribed, then it must emerge organically from the artwork itself. This highlights a limitation in Reed’s more optimistic view that if the viewer is open and willing to invest time, slowness has the potential to transform any artwork into a rewarding experience. Haber pushes back against this subjectivity. He notes that “Some art takes very little time, until later” (para. 7), emphasising that the value of some art lies in its ability to quickly create a memorable impression. At the same time, he concedes that “Conceptual art can take a great deal of time” (para. 8). Whether fast or slow, Haber returns some of the onus of creating meaningful engagement back onto the artwork, pointing out that artists still have a responsibility to “make art worth knowing” (para. 15). He cautions that slowness should not be treated as a universal “cure-all” for art appreciation (para. 15). Instead, art should take precisely as long as it needs to. His criticism highlights a reciprocal relationship: while the viewer must be willing to invest their time and attention, the slowness of the artwork must offer something meaningful to the viewer.

Therein lies a crucial insight: slow art embodies a reciprocal trust between the artwork and the viewer. The artwork, as Haber suggests, must offer depth that invites slow contemplation, while the transformative experience that Reed describes places trust in the viewer’s acceptance of this invitation. This mutual vulnerability—where the artwork risks being overlooked, and the viewer risks their time—is what makes slow art a powerful and authentic experience.

Unlike the institutionalised forms of ‘slow art’ that Haber criticises, often promoted as trendy experiences, works like *Double Spiral* genuinely embrace the risk of being ignored. This acceptance of vulnerability separates authentic slow art from its commodified counterparts and is paradoxically the source of its true strength, as it invites a relationship built on genuine trust and meaningful engagement. The vulnerability also extends to the viewer, who must be willing to spend their time without a guaranteed return. In doing so, slow art asks us to go against the way we typically engage with art, to risk boredom, and to sit with uncertainty.

My experience with Double Spiral exemplifies this shift in perception. While I initially approached *Double Spiral* with the same economised attention I bring to most encounters, when I later chose to risk my time with the piece, something remarkable occurred. The slow, perpetual motion of the spirals and their extending shadows began to evoke something larger than the physical sculpture itself: the slow turn of geological time, the creeping advance of climate change.

This revelatory process highlights how slow art’s mutual vulnerability rewards a distinct mode of perception. As Odell (2016) suggests, such artworks act like a “prosthesis” for our attention (p. 134). By engaging me in a process of slow discovery, the artwork taught me to attune my attention to phenomena that operate on scales beyond my normal experience. It suggests that our typical modes of engagement, hungry and optimised for immediate comprehension, may actually blind us to phenomena that extend across vast expanses of space and time.

These phenomena are what philosopher Timothy Morton (2013) terms "hyperobjects"—entities that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (p. 1). Climate change exemplifies the paradoxical nature of hyperobjects: it is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, too vast to see in its entirety yet present in every unexpected storm or melting glacier. Nuclear waste, global capitalism, and mass extinction are similarly hyperobjects in their resistance to conventional perception or representation. Hyperobjects are also nonlocal—any “local manifestation” is merely a part of a larger entity that cannot be fully apprehended in one view (p. 1). For example, we can graph

rising temperatures or map radiation spread, but these representations capture only fragments of phenomena that are, by their nature, impossible to fully grasp or depict.

The challenge of perceiving hyperobjects mirrors the challenge of engaging with slow art—both require us to attend to what initially seems absent or insignificant. Just as Double Spiral rewards those willing to risk their time with previously invisible movements and patterns, hyperobjects become perceptible only through sustained, patient attention to their "local manifestations". The mutual vulnerability that characterises slow art—the willingness to spend time without guaranteed reward, to risk being changed by what might initially seem unremarkable—thus offers a model for engaging with phenomena that typically go unnoticed. By training us to value and sustain attention toward the apparently uneventful, slow art cultivates precisely the perceptual stance needed to glimpse the hyperobjects that increasingly shape our reality.

Building on Double Spiral, Katie Paterson's Fossil Necklace (2013) provides another example of slow art's ability to connect viewers with hyperobjects. The work consists of 170 beads, each carved

from a different fossil from around the world, spanning geological time from pre-human history to the present. Each bead represents a major event in the evolution of life. At first glance, it appears as a simple string of beads, easily overlooked by casual observers.

However, viewers who take the risk to engage with the piece begin to notice the subtle differences between each bead, discovering their origins and ages. They are drawn into a process of discovery. The necklace transforms into a tangible timeline of Earth's history, localising the non-local effects of geological change and evolution, distilling the vast timescales of phenomena that constantly occur around us but typically escape our notice. *Fossil Necklace* zooms the viewer out and for the duration that they engage with it, gives them a glimpse into the enormous forces of biological and geological evolution.

This suggests that slow art's significance extends beyond aesthetic experience or resistance to the attention economy. The mutual vulnerability it cultivates—between artwork and viewer, between the immediate and the vast, between knowing and not-knowing—offers a model for engaging with the hyperobjects that increasingly define our contemporary existence. As we face challenges that exceed conventional human scales of comprehension, from climate change to capitalism, slow art reminds us that understanding sometimes requires us to embrace vulnerability, to risk being unproductive, to spend time without guaranteed returns.

References

About | Slow Art Day. (n.d.). Retrieved October 20, 2024, from https://www.slowartday.com/about/

Eliasson, O. (2001). *Double Spiral* [Stainless steel, motor *Double Spiral*].

Haber, J. (2014). Haber's Art Reviews: Slow Art, "Warholism," and Oscar Murillo. Haberarts.com. https://www.haberarts.com/slowart.htm

Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University Of Minnesota Press.

Odell, J. (2019). Exercises in Attention. In How to do nothing: Resisting the attention economy. Melville House.

Paterson, K. (2013). *Fossil Necklace*. https://fossil.katiepaterson.org/

Reed, A. (2019). Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell. University Of California Press.

Appendix A

Tools

I acknowledge the use of OpenAI ChatGPT (https://chat.openai.com/) to refine the language and grammar of this submission. The prompt used was "Suggest changes that could be made to improve the grammar and flow of this essay." The output was selectively adapted into the final submission.