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ALUNA: telling time in moving light.

Posted on Oct 21, 2004 - 06:32 AM



Munizha Ahmad talks to artist **Laura Williams** about her project **Aluna**, a tidal powered moon clock which tells time in moving light.

A friend just texted me with the message: "lovely moon tonight". I was on my way home from work at the usual time, wondering whether I

should pop into Tesco to grab something to eat for dinner, thinking about the day I had just spent at my desk in the office, and compiling a list in my head of what I needed to get done this week. I glanced up at the small patch of distant sky above Kennington Road in South East London. Couldn't see it; didn't think to stop and seek it out. But I have to say, I was a little disappointed. It's a sight that never fails to move me.

"Our lives have become all about serving and saving time. Time's become so linear and segmented. We have been made to believe that it hurries past and never comes back. Clock time. But that moment will come by again. It is not lost forever. Time is cyclical." The words are Laura Williams', the artist behind ALUNA, a tidal powered moon clock waiting for a place to be built. All it needs is some free land, an open sky and water. Elementary.

But we're talking about the city here. For most of us urbanites, a garden is a luxury. Laura agrees that ALUNA could be built away from the city, but that would be missing the point. It is in essence an urban piece - the city needs it. The idea was born from a feeling of loss engendered by the rush, pace and disconnection experienced by the individual in the city. Her inspiration has been those occasional moments when people have come together to reassociate with their natural environment and have been humbled by it: the magnetism of the Solar Eclipse that drew more than a million people to Cornwall and Devon in August 1999 and "put everything into perspective"; Robert Elms' Clean up the Thames Day in 2001, when she got a lift on a boat to the Isle of Dogs and saw hundreds of people in their wellies all along the shore who had come together to clear away the rubbish. She was studying at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design at the time and this was her first research day. She recalls it as "magical".

By now, Laura had started to explore a much larger concept of time to our superficial, short "now"-driven norm: Lunar time. She realised she wasn't barking up the wrong tree when she learnt about the Long Now Foundation and its 10,000 year clock, the prototype for which can be seen in London's Science Museum. (Brian Eno, one of the founding members and originator of the term "long now", later became an endorser of ALUNA.) The Foundation hopes to provide a counterpoint to today's "faster/cheaper" mind-set and promote "slower/better" thinking. This confirmed her belief that "we need more than ever to be thinking about the long term". As the literature for ALUNA states,

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"Technology has helped us pin-point clock time to an instant, the richness of temporality has been lost. Addicted to the rush, we try to cram in as much as possible. Our attention spans and temporal horizons are shortening: our responsibility to our future, that of our descendants and our environment is diminishing: our collective sense of meaning and belonging is disappearing".

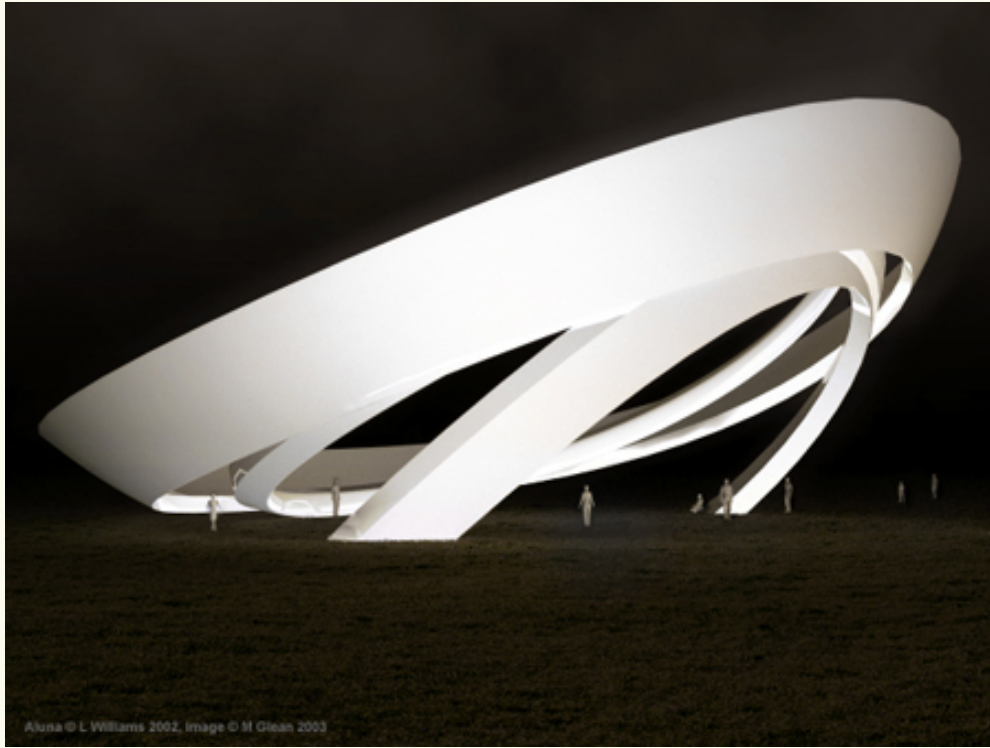


Laura wanted to know if, like a solar year, there was a notion of a lunar year. She went to the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, to see the astronomer Dr Robert Massey, another endorser of the project, who confirmed this and helped her understand the moon. "There are so many different things about it and so many cycles within it. Getting your head around why it's there, where it is at any particular time and the whole notion of direction in space is difficult." She started to draw months' worth of sinewaves, illustrating the rise and set of the tide and the rise and set of the moon, to see if there were any patterns. That's when she understood about there being two tides in one lunar day, and realised that this synchronised rhythm is the "heartbeat" of our planet. "The moon is the reason we are here, why life exists as it does. The sun is our energy stream, and the moon is like a regulator, making the right conditions on this water planet for life to begin and evolve. The moon brings balance to our planet."

As one of its many endorsers, the Anthropologist Lionel Sims, puts it, ALUNA is a "creative rescue": "At every turning point in history a way of life is undermined. The most valued part of that crumbling world becomes the symbol of a deep sense of loss. In struggling to preserve this symbol under conditions that threaten to undermine it, we create something new". ALUNA, which he describes as our "our modern Stonehenge" (it is around 40 metres wide and rises up to five storeys high) can, he says, "turn the wheel of history".

Add to this the reaction of the waiter Laura met in a Turkish restaurant in Hackney. He looked at ALUNA through one of the stereoscopes she and her local friends regularly come together at her house to make, took it into the kitchen to show his colleagues and came back saying: "this isn't just a sculpture is it? It is not just about the light, it's about the whole of humanity". Incidentally, the name, meaning "pure thought, memory, spirit, soul, mind imagination", comes from the creation myth of the Kogi people in Colombia who have survived to this day, keeping their traditions and relying upon, and looking after their mountain environment. They believe it is their duty to look after the mountain which they call "The Heart of the World". They call themselves the

Elder Brother and refer to the newer civilisations as the Younger Brother, who they believe is destroying the balance of the world.



That is why ALUNA is so appealing. It can be understood on so many levels and is as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. It speaks to various scientific and cultural worldviews, but its effect is immediate in giving the individual a sense of their place in relation to the universe.

This is reflected in its structure, which draws on complex technology yet greets the eye with simplicity and grace. The sculpture is divided into three rings, representing the lunar phase, the lunar day and the tide cycles, all from the same dish of translucent glass with a steel skeleton. The markers of light that travel clockwise around outer and inner rings allow us to observe the waxing and waning of the moon and the ebb and flow of the tide. The centre ring, the lunar day, situated half above the ground and half below, tracks the moon, so that even when it is not in our sky, we can tell where it is. When the outer ring is fully lit, it's full moon and the sun, earth and moon are in perfect alignment. The light then starts waning off until there is a new moon and the ring is unlit. The angle at which it leans is specific to its geographical latitude.

ALUNA's light is regulated by a daylight sensor. As the sun rises, the white light on its surfaces fades and whatever the language shows will be visible along the leading edges in colour. At sunset, the surfaces illuminate again. The language is visible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Underneath the translucent glass, the matrix of LEDs which should last for 80 years before needing to be replaced, is powered by turbines driven by the tidal river. As Laura explains to me the model on the table in front of us, a harmonic animation of these cycles of light displays on her computer screen.



When she designed ALUNA, Laura had London in mind, placing it in the little park by the Greater London Authority building. However, the team were then invited to view a site in Merseyside, which they loved. With Liverpool's great maritime and astronomy traditions, not to mention its forthcoming status as European City of Culture in 2008, ALUNA symphonises perfectly with the setting. But this is where the bureaucracy comes in. While the project continues to gather support locally and nationally (there is even talk of building a Southern Hemisphere counterpart in Australia), it still needs the backing, not least financial, of the powers that be. The Mersey Waterfront Board has just carried out a viability study in relation to a site opposite Pier Head that was offered to the project by Wirral Council. Apparently, the report, which the ALUNA team are still waiting to see, is very positive about the project, although the site is unviable. Unfortunately Mersey Waterfront have decided they are not the right body to take the project forward. Discussions with other stakeholders are still continuing.

Laura sees this as just the beginning: "Obstacles are just something to learn from and step over. Just because one organisation can't back it, it doesn't mean another won't." While she would like ALUNA to be realised in this country, she is ready to "open it out to the world".

In truth, ALUNA can re-open out the world to us. It cuts across the boundaries between art, education, spirituality, science, technology and cultural traditions. In fact, it represents exactly what we at En Theos aim to celebrate. Talking to Laura, I knew that the magazine exists for and, more importantly, because of people like this.

The way forward is now to build up support for the project at all levels, from decision makers to the public. The idea has yet to meet an unenthusiastic response and it is probably time that the discussion extends beyond the board room and confidential reports. Think about it. The Dome used up over £600 million of Lottery money. Aluna would cost around £4 million. Then, it is sustainable, inclusive, open and free. It can also help restore a much needed sense of balance to our lives.

To find out more about ALUNA, register your support or make a donation, visit www.alunatime.org.

For The Long Now Foundation, visit www.thelongnow.org.

For the Kogi's, visit Gonawindu Tayrona Organization: www.tairona.org.

To read an interview with astronomer Dr Robert Massey, return to the Conversations menu.

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