

100 Seconds to Midnight "Human/Nature" at Weinberg/Newton Gallery, Chicago

By Rebecca Memoli

Weinberg/Newton gallery has continued in its tradition of exhibiting work that is socially minded. With Human/Nature, the gallery has teamed up with the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists to recognize the 75th Anniversary of the Doomsday Clock. On Jan 20, 2022, the clock was kept at 100 seconds to Midnight. Midnight being doomsday. The end of it all.

The Doomsday Clock was designed by artist Martyl Langsdorf in 1947 for the cover of the first magazine issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. In the wake of the Manhattan Project, Langsdorf set the clock at 7 minutes to Midnight as a graphic design choice and to indicate that we didn't have much time left to get atomic weapons under control after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The clock is reset when the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists determines a need to call awareness to changes in the world. The farthest the hands have been from midnight was 17 minutes in 1991, recognizing arms control agreements put into place after the cold war. Growing threats to the welfare of the planet has caused the Bulletin to reset the clock every year since 2015. The closest the hands have been to midnight is 100 seconds, where it stands today and has been for the last three years. It is not just climate change contributing to our proximity to doomsday, but also nuclear risks from nuclear armed states like North Korea and Russia, biological threats including but not limited to COVID-19, and disruptive technologies that have contributed to the age of misinformation.



Regan Rosburg, *Monument*, 2021. Recycled and virgin plastic, moss, glue, orchids, petrichor fragrance, diffuser, 180 x 180 x 108 inches. Photograph by Evan Jenkins.

The journey through the exhibition begins with several colorful works that all poetically reflect on nature. The large front space showcases a stunning installation called *Monument* by Regan Rosburg in which amidst a pile of moss stands the monument constructed of black plastic. It is an amalgamation of natural forms such as bird wings, antlers, invasive flowers, entwined with ribbons of smooth plastic. Live orchids grow throughout the installation and an oil diffuser completes the experience emitting the earthy scent similar to the air after rainfall called petrichor. In nature, the scent is produced by a chemical that is emitted by dead bacteria in dirt that is disturbed by the rain. Humans in particular are extremely sensitive to this scent.

Monument is an examination of what can and will last. The moss and orchids are species that have survived on the planet throughout the ice age, a natural symbol for lasting and deep time. The plastic will also remain long after we're gone, a relic that we will leave on the planet. Activating the viewer's sense of smell with the petrichor scent is a pleasant reminder of our biological sensitivity to decay and attachment to memories.

Accompanying *Monument* are three works on paper by Laura Ball. These watercolors morph together animals and plants to create new forms. *Rebirth* takes the shape of a growing phoenix whose shape is comprised of all different species of birds. The colors are bright and powerful, giving a sense of strength and reverence to the natural world. In contrast to *Monument*, *Rebirth* feels more hopeful that nature will endure and evolve.

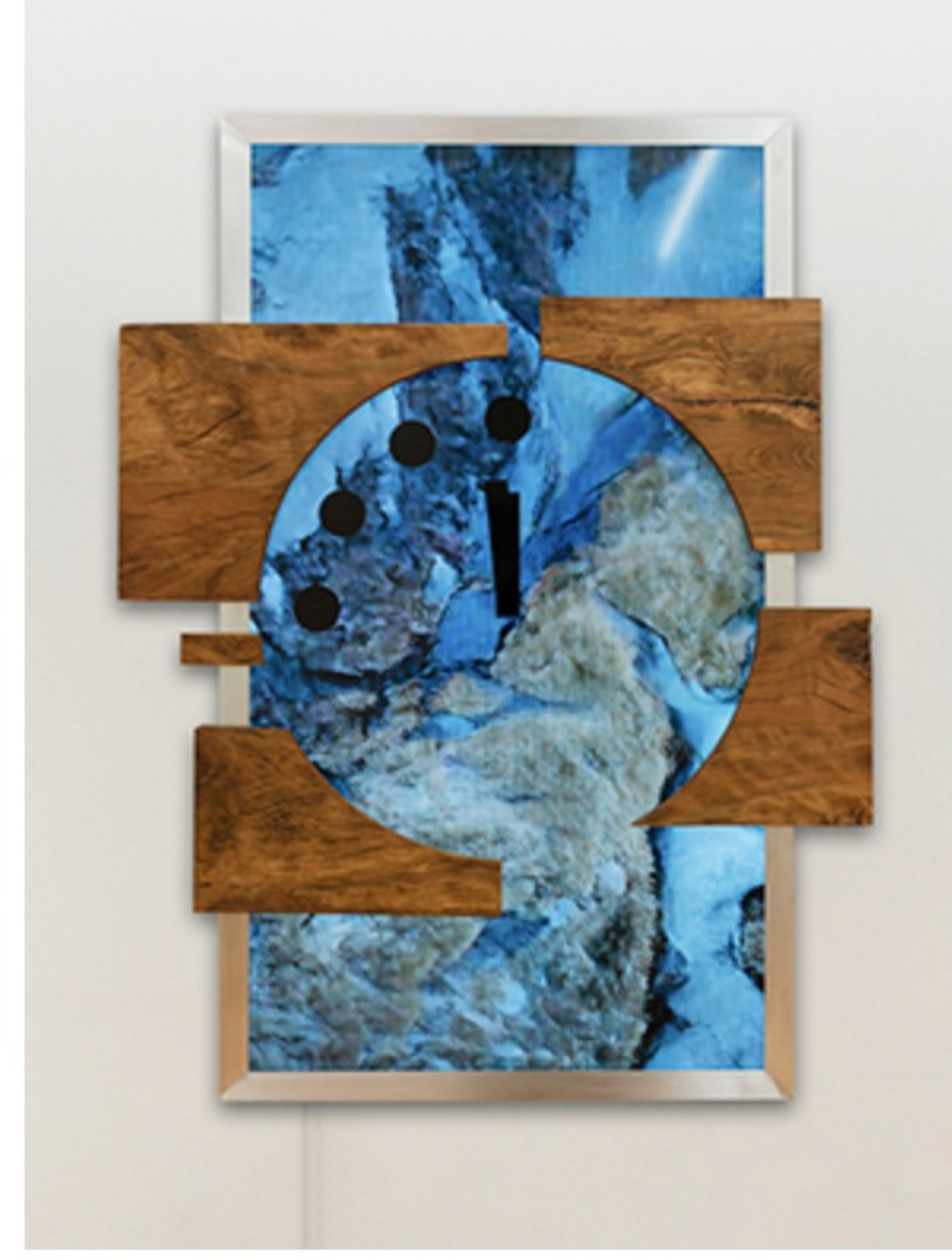


(Left) Laura Ball, *Rebirth*, 2015. Media & dimensions. (Right) Karen Reimer, *Untitled (Change in Average Temperature)*, 2019. Embroidery, 14 x 17 inches. Photographs courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

Moving deeper into the gallery, the exhibition takes a more scientific look at the interaction between humans and nature. Karen Reimer embroiders scientific data on human-caused climate change like melting glaciers and the formation of algae blooms. Just as the human effect on climate has been incremental, so is the act of embroidery—the accumulation of individual threads builds over time to create an image. These charts and graphs are remade in embroidery and fabric to bring a contrasting feeling of comfort to otherwise alarming information about negative changes to the environment. By changing the medium of this scientific information, Reimer changes the way it is received by the viewer.

Next to Reimer's work is *The Doomsday Clock* by Obvious & Stas Bartnikas. Similar to Reimer's use of data visualization, *Obvious* collects data, in this case photographs by Stas Bartnikas, to create the artificial landscapes that loop seamlessly behind a wood and metal doomsday clock. The photographs depict the physical damage caused by climate change. In Alaska, the rises in temperature have melted glaciers revealing patches of black rock and brilliant blue pools of water collecting in the ice. Increases in agriculture have drained large sections of the Colorado River leaving behind an intricate design of dried riverbeds. Aerial photographs of these and other landscapes, equally beautiful and disturbing, were analyzed by an artificial intelligence algorithm to create new images. By breaking down the physical change humans have caused to the landscape into data, the AI has created new landscapes that are derived from the accumulative devastation.

Matthew Ritchie's *Life Clock* takes a practical approach to viewing the Doomsday Clock. A simple graphic in black vinyl on the white wall, several hands point at every position on the clock, instead of the original two that only occupy the last fifteen minutes to midnight. For each position on the clock, he offers a set of researched goals to restore the world, such as "X — Capture waste freshwater and recirculate to restore groundwater loss."



Obvious & Stas Bartnikas, *The Doomsday Clock*, 2022. Generative Adversarial Networks interpolation, screen display, wood and metal, 37.5 x 49.5 inches, 56 seconds. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

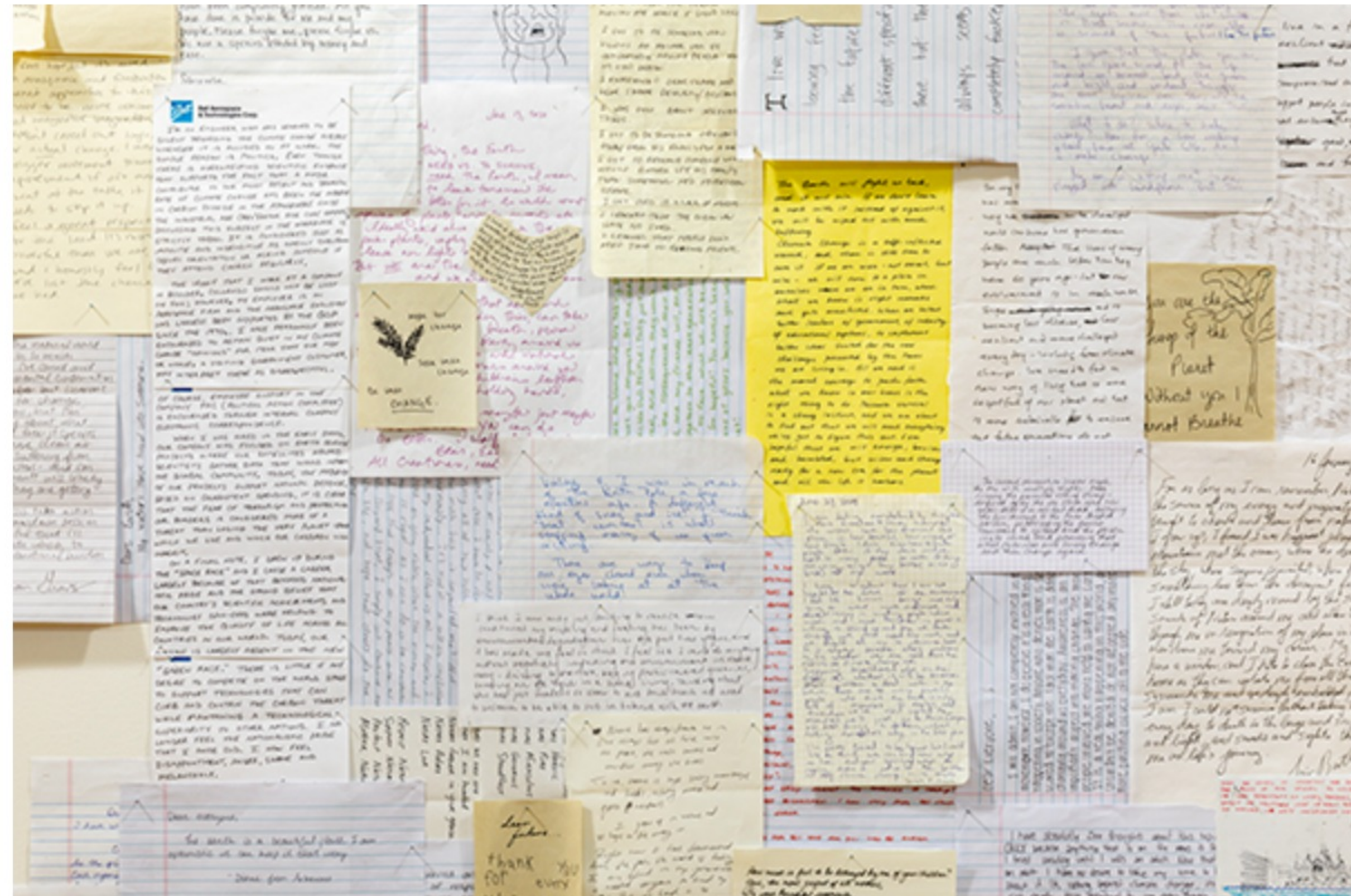


Matthew Ritchie, *Life Clock*, 2022. Interactive single color vinyl installation, 103 x 70 inches. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

Ritchie's call for collective action leads to the three video pieces that can be viewed in the center of the exhibition. The remaining viewing works reflect a more active position for humans to take regarding our planet. Outside the viewing room is a compilation of statements on issues of climate change from scientists, politicians, journalists, artists, and organizational leaders. This video provides context into the thought process for many of the artists and offers insights on the importance of the Doomsday clock as well as observations on how we can work to reverse its hands.

Inside the viewing room is a slideshow of photographs and article excerpts from *The Navajo Times* by journalist, Donovan Quintero. The photographs depict the struggle of the Navajo Nation to maintain and preserve their land. "Water is sacred" only scratches the surface of the importance that water is to the Navajo. This precious resource is being stolen from the already drought ridden land by encroaching corporations and uranium mining operations. The space this work is in doesn't give room to absorb the information. The slideshow itself is very short, around two minutes, and it is followed by Rosburg's video which is twice as long and has a very different tone.

Rosburg's video is called *dear future*. It is a companion to another installation in the exhibition. She has collected letters written to the future. For some that is a future generation, others write to the Earth itself. In this video we hear some of these letters read aloud. The tone that is set by the words is emotional. The addition of music and images of nature feels over sentimental. But if the Doomsday Clock's arrested position shows, this sentimentality doesn't reflect the actions of the population. So, within the context of the rest of the exhibition this video feels manipulative, like watching a commercial.



Regan Rosburg, Collected letters written to the future. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

The exhibition ends with an open dialogue with the viewers that is facilitated by two interactive pieces in the program space. These installations allow viewers to add their own suggestions for turning back the clock and share their perspectives on the future.

Letters collected by Rosburg, including some featured in the video, are on view in an installation called *Everything is Fine*. Viewers are invited to write their own letter to add to the project. These are collected at the front desk and participants are offered a small gift for their contribution.

The letters range from rants about Trump, "—KING OLD PEOPLE!", and single use plastic to an account from an aerospace engineer about how the topic of climate change is taboo in his industry. In contrast to the emotional tone of *dear future*, a broader range of letters is presented that reflect a more complicated relationship people have with the Earth and the future. Like the single line written on a strip of blue paper, some people think "Everything is fine."

Matthew Ritchie's interactive *Life Clock* also provides an opportunity for visitors to add their own ideas for collective action. Neon dots populate a second *Life Clock* with handwritten suggestions ranging from thoughtful, "elect better politicians" to absurd, "root for the virus!" The immediate and anonymous nature of this piece, just like most open forums, has attracted a few trolls.

Human/Nature does a good job bringing context and dimension to the Doomsday Clock. Although there is a somber underlying tone of impending doom, the exhibition provides a space to have a range of emotions towards the matter at hand. An iPad is set up to allow visitors the opportunity to send a letter to their state senator. Anyone visiting the exhibition is already helping to push back the hands of the clock, but there are many approaches available to us, many of which have already been proposed, that would promote positive change for the Earth and the future of the human race.

Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows.

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