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MIT Museum Announces **SPLIT | SECOND**, an Exhibition Exploring How Humans Measure, Regulate, and Rethink **TIME**

February 13, 2026

Bringing together scientific instruments and artworks spanning 340 years, *Split | Second* invites visitors to consider not only how we can measure time inspired and driven by natural cycles, with human interventions which shape our notions of the concept itself.

Today, the MIT Museum announces *Split | Second*, the final exhibition presented during the TIME thematic season. On view from February 19, 2026 until January 4, 2027, *Split | Second* explores how humans measure, regulate, and rethink time, connecting scientific instruments and contemporary artworks displayed in four exhibition sections — Earth Time, Mechanical Time, Electric Time, and Atomic Time. From sundials and pendulum clocks to atomic oscillations and flowing rivers, *Split | Second* traces humanity’s evolving relationship with time, revealing that while the passage of time may be a natural process, the precision of time measurement is a deeply negotiated human construct.

“Time is something we all take for granted as an intrinsic part of modern life, but *Split | Second* reveals that timekeeping is not a fixed universal truth, but a system that both shapes and is shaped by external pressures. The juxtaposition of scientific instruments and art in this exhibition show how the ways we choose to measure time always reflect the demands of those who measure it.”

Florencia Pierri, Associate Curator of Science and Technology, MIT Museum

Exploring timekeeping related to natural processes, *Split | Second* exhibits sundials and other astronomical instruments, once used to track time that varied by season and location. These devices are complemented by American conceptual artist Jonathon Keats's work, *New England River Time* — exhibited for the first time — offering an unconventional river-centered definition of time. A living timekeeping system based on the variable flows of rivers in the New England watershed, *New England River Time* offers a poetic, earth-centered alternative to timekeeping that reflects climate variability and ecological change. By comparing current flow to historical average, Keats's work makes climate change starkly visible as “river time” drifts permanently away from standard time. As technology evolved, mechanical clock models brought an unprecedented accuracy through complex systems made up of hundreds of interconnecting parts. *Split | Second* considers these mechanical models, displaying pendulum clocks and the spiral balance spring which made it possible to measure first minutes, then seconds, with unprecedented accuracy.

With its rise in accuracy, time became increasingly regimented, standardized and regulated. To emphasize how timekeeping helped to standardize the output from early power stations and made the modern electric grid possible, the exhibition displays objects from the museum's collection. Argentine artist Agustina Woodgate's *WORKOUT (National Times)* brings to focus the electric move in technology with a series of networked analog clocks with sandpaper affixed to their minute hands which scrapes the clocks faces. This artwork, in addition to Keats's, perfectly reflects the MIT Museum's endemic mission, ultimately working to shape the relationship between nature, culture and technology. The exhibition's final section reflects on the nature of the second itself with a showcase of objects related to atomic clocks. It features material related to the development of cesium atomic clocks in the 1950s, as well as current work on ytterbium optical lattice clocks from MIT's Experimental Atomic Physics Group. Today, atomic clocks underpin modern telecommunications, GPS, and global data networks, and the newer optical lattice versions may soon redefine the very length of a second.

“Over the past decade, I've become increasingly concerned about the impact of time reckoning on our perception of environmental conditions and the decisions we make as individuals and a community. The world economy keeps the steady beat of an atomic clock. Merchandise is manufactured and moved without regard for damage done by industry. I believe that we can counter this state of oblivion by activating alternative timekeeping systems that are sensitive to the climate and ecology.”

Jonathon Keats

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

New England River Time 2025,

Jonathon Keats

Today, we measure standard time by atomic clocks operating independently of the experience of a day that arises from our own senses. Rivers offer an alternative: a return to an earth-centered definition of time. *New England River Time* is a different kind of clock—one which speeds up or slows down with the flows of the Charles River, Neponset River, Sudbury River, Concord River, and Alewife Brook. This time is never uniform. In the winter, water freezes, rain turns into snow, and rivers slow down. In the summer, snow melts, rain falls, and rivers speed up. The piece calculates river time. River time is calculated by comparing the present-day flow of these five local waterways to their historical averages. Much like the varying length of a solar day throughout the year, river time should average out: falling behind during winter months and catching up again in summer. However, changes in climate patterns will cause river time to drift away permanently from standard time.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

National Times (Workout) 2019, Agustina Woodgate

National Times (Workout) is a closed-circuit network of clocks synchronized directly from the power grid. In it, one primary digital clock sends unidirectional electrical signals to the series of eight secondary clocks below it. Those clocks keep perfectly synchronized time. To do so, the system relies on a kind of network architecture referred to as a “master/slave” configuration—a loaded term still used in certain technological contexts today. In the work, the hands of the slave clocks have been outfitted with sandpaper. As *National Times* progresses, the minute hands of the slave clocks scrape away the numerals on their faces until they are completely erased. This act reveals the material cost of labor, but also reclaims autonomy through this process of disintegration.

In the Fall of 2025, the MIT Museum introduced a year-long focus on TIME, inviting audiences to experience programs, educational workshops and exhibitions that explore our complex relationship with the topic. In the spirit of MIT's unique culture of problem solving and playful creativity, we have examined how TIME links diverse disciplines, research, and storytelling, fueled by the Institute and global community of faculty, students, researchers and artists. Each responding to the inquiry, what is time? How do we measure, understand and perceive it? Learn more about the inaugural thematic season of **TIME here.**

MIT Museum credits:

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