

Robert Barry, *Network Time: Yuri Pattison Measures The Modern World*, The Quietus, June 2022

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Network Time: Yuri Pattison Measures The Modern World

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For his new exhibition at Mother's Tankstation, London, Dublin-born artist Yuri Pattison looks at the invisible substrate of the information economy



Yuri Pattison, cuttings, 2022, detail. Courtesy and copyright the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin | London

Three images of books from the last few years, all widely disseminated and commented on at the time:

1. In a remarkably short space of time we have rapidly grown use to seeing politicians, advisors, captains of industry, experts of all stripes interviewed on TV not in a traditional studio or location setting, at their place of work, outside the scene of some event, etc. but rather beamed in via video call from their own homes. Invariably, the chosen backdrop to these newly domesticated talking heads will be a shelf full of books. During the pandemic and the various lockdowns that ensued this obviously accelerated to a massive degree. Each new shelfie would inspire endless commentary on social media and even in the news itself. Choices were pored over and analysed as a series of bibliographical volleys in a game of semiotic war. Amy Klobucher's political biographies of George Washington, Eleanor Roosevelt and Margaret Thatcher felt like positioning. Beto O'Rourke showing off his impeccable boomer credentials with a book on the work of Bob Dylan. Rishi Sunak with his Penguin Popular Classics. Nicola Sturgeon with her sense stack of Ian Rankins. Michael Gove showing off the work of notorious holocaust denier David Irving. *GQ*, *Vox*, and the *FT* all ran mid-lockdown stories judging politicians by the books on their shelf. In April 2020, *The Guardian* called it "Our new lockdown game: judging famous people by their bookshelves".
2. Just a few years prior to this, interior decoration magazines like *Ideal Home*, *Apartment Therapy* and *Elle Decor* began to report on a "new décor trend" for people turning their books round the wrong way on the shelf in order to present a more uniform beige surface to match the washed-out minimalism of the rest of your home. Only one drawback: you can't see the spine of the books in question so you will never be able to find the book you're looking for ever again. In a rare convergence of opinion between the hacks at Mail Online and that donnish corner of social media known as Book Twitter, this trend was roundly lambasted. A random but more-or-less representative selection of responses: "what is with that ignorant shit where people put their books facing backward on the shelf, so the spine is hidden and the paper is showing for uniform colour / aesthetic? how the fuck do you find your books?"; "I just want to talk about the aesthetic of having books on the shelf backward.

Like the pages are facing out. It's a sin and anyone who does it is going to a specific place in Hell.”; “facing books backward on the shelf is a goddam abomination”. The Mail, meanwhile, asked if this is “the DUMBEST home décor idea ever?” Somewhere along the way, this trend seems to have also got mixed up with the sudden discovery on the part of the internet that there exists such a job as “book curator” for celebrities too busy to actually buy (or indeed read) books but keen to fill their shelves nonetheless. It didn't help that one of the celebrities known to employ such a bibliographic gopher is Gwyneth Paltrow and her book curator is (apparently unironically) called Thatcher Wine.

3. More recently, amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine, an image of the apartment of Kyiv-based academic and urban researcher Lev Shevchenko hit the news. The window was full, completely covered from top to bottom, side to side, with stacks and stacks of books, intended to protect the interior of the home from shattering glass in the event of the street coming under bombardment from artillery fire or shrapnel from an explosive device. It soon became apparent that Shevchenko was not alone. The *New Yorker* spoke to a journalist in Kyiv's eastern suburbs who had done a similar thing, saying “The children's room has a good sturdy inner wall and their bed is right next to it. We think they will sleep there. So in that room, we put books in the windows, to fill the entire opening. Fortunately, we have many books, including those that we have published. This is in case there is artillery fire. The books prevent the fragments from entering and also muffle the noise. People recommend using sandbags to block windows, but we don't have sandbags.” Ten years after *The Guardian* hosted a debate at Edinburgh international book festival entitled, ‘The End of Books’, it appears people continue to find uses for the things. As one comment on Twitter beneath an image of Lev Shevchenko's book-stuffed window put it, “You can't do that with a Kindle.”

These three images come together in a new work by artist Yuri Pattison currently occupying both windows of the Mother Tankstation gallery in Bethnal Green. *Barricade (books by the metre)* is a Shevchenko-esque stack of books, completely blocking out any natural light from the gallery interior. The books have been carefully anonymised. We see not their spines, but the off-white textblock. The jackets have also been replaced by plain white dust jackets. Pattison acquired the books en masse from a website called Decor Books which promises to fill “instant libraries from a private home book shelf, to multiple chain store refurbishment.” Their prices start from £29 “per metre”. Judging by the size of the gallery windows, I’d guess this particular library-cum-rampart set him back about £500.



Yuri Pattison, barricade (books by the metre), 2022, installation view, gallery exterior. Courtesy and copyright the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin | London

Pattison's theme is information. But not information as information, information doing information-y things like informing people about stuff. It is more a question of information's excesses, its remainders. What is left of information once you suck out all the information stuff. The substrate. Two works on opposing walls of the gallery called *world clock, reflector timeline (west)* and *world clock, reflector timeline (east)* give the show its soundtrack. These big silvery panels have been made into loudspeakers by the addition of transducers attached at the back. They are playing a constant feed coming from, respectively, the USA's GPS service and Russia's satellite navigation system, GLONASS. Using a custom breakout audio board to convert the signals into the range of normal human hearing, the panels provide a permanent low hum on one side and a repeated staccato thud at around 110 bpm on the other. A drone and a pulse. Two sonic fronts in a cold war fought for control over data.

Another work in the show presents a disturbing image of the present, as seen from the perspective of the network itself. *clock speed (the dead)* proffers a dizzying kaleidoscope of perpetually morphing images: an oil platform, a container port, a cityscape, weird mutant jet aircraft, then missiles, tanks, battleships, and, again and again, clocks and clock faces of all sorts: wall clocks, wrist watches, carriage clocks, grandfather clocks, each one melting into the next in queasy succession. The twenty-nine minute film is built out of images from DeepMind's BigGAN following the prompt: *the modern world*. If you want a glimpse of the future, imagine a kitchen clock digitally morphing into a cruise missile. Forever.

Yuri Pattison, clock speed (the world on time), is at Mother's Tankstation, London, until 2 July 2022