

## How Time Can Dispossess: On Duration and Movement in Contemporary Performance

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On 17 November 2007, in one of their Ballettika Internettikka guerrilla actions intervening into various spaces by means of miniature mechanical devices and broadcasting these events online, Igor\_tromajer and Brane Zorman illegally brought a robot to the top of the Lippo Centre in Hong Kong. On the other side of the world, at an equally eminent avant-garde venue, the Hellerau Festival House in Dresden (Germany), the audience was waiting for the broadcast of this illegal guerrilla ballet action, which was scheduled for 10 PM CET. Every minute of the steps leading up to the action was meticulously planned, in accordance with the illegal nature of the event. Temporality came second to the strategic effect of taking over the space and synchronicity served the realization of the planned event. First, through a series of short electronic messages from the two authors, the audience was notified about all the details of the action during the ascent of the Hong Kong skyscraper, on top of which *Ballettika Internettikka: Statikka: Almost static but still transitive Net Ballet* was supposed to take place. At 10 PM, giant projections began in the Hellerau hall. On its walls, ceiling and floor, the image of the robot appeared. With two red lights as the eyes, the robot was situated on a concrete edge made of white ceramic tiles, as though it was just about to make a new step. Behind it, we could see the glittering and rhythmically pulsating lights of the Hong Kong metropolis, a night without proper darkness. There was a sound as though one or several people were continually changing the local radio stations. The length of the transmission was determined in advance: 35 minutes. After the first two minutes, however, the head technician, in charge of the transmission to the Dresden hall, skyped a message to the two authors atop the Hong Kong skyscraper: »Hey, is everything ok? There's nothing happening here yet.«<sup>1</sup> The authors replied that everything was fine. After 35 minutes of transmission, a meticulously scheduled and synchronised descent took place, followed by securing the equipment. The level of risk involved in the action was assessed as the maximum by the two authors.

“When are things going to start?” This question of the technician was not that of a technically skilled but “uninformed” person in the field of contemporary art. It actually mirrored the increasingly uncomfortable atmosphere in the hall; after a few minutes, people began to

<sup>1</sup> From the history of the skype chat of Igor\_tromajer and Brane Zorman when performing the Ballettika Internettikka: Statikka.

fidget, walk around and many actually left the hall. The artistic director of the festival, Johannes Birringer, later described the various reactions of the audience in his blog. While some people were enthusiastically following the authors' project, others almost meditatively yielded themselves to the transmission on the screens, and still others felt a deep frustration, perhaps even anger, and left the hall in protest. After the performance, Birringer's blog also featured a discussion between the authors and some members of the audience. The findings could be summed into two points: a) that not many things happened and b) that, if the audience had been more informed about the context of the performance, they might have reacted differently to this “lack of goings-on”. The reaction of the audience testifies to the fact that duration can be problematic, especially in a technological context: if duration becomes independent, it needs a context. It needs to be filled with something before its slowness begins to get to us – we simply need to know *why* things have stopped.

Ballettika Statikka could be classified as a networked performance, i.e. a performance that broadcasts a real time and space event over the internet, which in the Ballettika's case featured a robot as a main performer. For these reasons, the performance opens quite a few issues related to the relationship between duration and barely perceptible movement. Ballettika was part of Tele-Plateaus, a programme that, by means of broadcasts from various parts of the world, attempted to open up the experimentation platform with synchronous temporalities and reflect on new concepts for events established by the relations between technology and performance.<sup>2</sup> One might expect that duration, the expansion of the event, cannot intrigue an audience so much who is used to performances where the time dimension is heavily experimented with (the perception of time by the audience etc.). In Ballettika Statikka, however, something paradoxical takes place. The connection works and the broadcast is successful, but it seems as though something went wrong; there is duration, but it comes across like failure; there is slowness, but it seems to result from some sort of technical malfunction.

Placed on the white tiled edge with the city view behind it, the robot/toy is not moving, but it is transmitting. In this way, it embodies the very title of the performance – static ballet. Although the event is broadcast, it seems as though things were not working, and we can quickly begin to feel that this is wasting and appropriating our time. When something does

<sup>2</sup> Tele-Plateaus – Performative Instalation was an event curated by Johannes Birringer, Klaus Nicolai and Thomas Dumke and was presented as a part of the CYNET Festival in Hellerau, Dresden (2007).

not function (the body, a machine, a car, a computer, a vending machine), the duration literally intervenes into the subject that witnesses this halt. It appropriates the subject's inner feeling of time; the subject feels that he has been dispossessed, that he needs to slow down and wait. This slowing down and waiting is frequently felt in our culture when the apparatus (*dispositif*) that regulates and organizes our flexible subjectivities no longer works: for example, the means of transport through the city, social networks, airports, motorways, mobile phones. Most of us feel agitated within several seconds when the desired computer programme does not open; we feel like giving the computer a bang, just like we used to with the old televisions when the image was flickering and unstable. These kinds of halts in motion or slowing down have a direct influence on the body as they appropriate the temporality of the subject, organized as endless flexibility, simultaneity and adaptability. In moments like this, we say that we are stuck, with little else to do but hang in there and become powerless observers of our own chronological time, who only can 'feeling the time flying by without being left with any of it, and always miss themselves'.<sup>3</sup> All the apparatuses we use to establish ourselves as subjects today, promise speed and effectiveness. The greater the speed promised by the apparatuses, the less our tolerance (and the more affective our responses) when something remains stationary instead of working. When something stopped, it seems as our subjectivity would be disabled, as it would be dispossessed.<sup>4</sup> Duration becomes apparent when something does not work, stops or hardly moves. Perhaps the affective response is the consequence of the fact that it is the duration that shows that we ourselves are actually not moving but are being moved, that our inner perception of time (the time of someone who freely and flexibly projects their own subjectivity) is in fact heavily socially and economically conditioned.

Igor \_tromajer and Brane Zorman in many of their projects purposefully contrast mutually exclusive temporalities. On the one hand, the preparation of the event (which is not documented in footage but can only be followed through short online messages), is almost dramaturgically structured through the constant acceleration and division of time. On the other hand, the broadcast of the event is purposefully far from the anticipated effect. They

<sup>3</sup> Agamben is describing the observers of chronological time as the one's who are always missing themselves in: Agamben, Giorgio: *The Time that Remains, A Commentary on the letter to the Romans*, Stanford University Press, California: 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben is analysing apparatuses (*dispositifs*) in his short text *What is apparatus*, and defining the extreme phase of capitalist development as a »massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses«. The main characteristic of contemporary apparatuses is that »they no longer act as much through production of the subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectivisation«. In: Agamben, Giorgio: *What is apparatus*, California, Stanford University Press: 2009.

contrast two exclusive temporalities which can also be understood as inner temporal qualities of the contemporary flexible subject. On the one hand, the subject today is subjugated to the accelerated time, organized through the precise time management of the actions and movement; everything (also our potentiality and emotions) is organized into a sequence which leads to a certain effect. On the other hand, however, there is a lot of redundancy, slowness, motionlessness, ineffectiveness, statics and non-functioning in the way how we experience subjectivity. In this way, *Ballettikka Statikka* is mirroring the specific dynamic at work in the contemporary experience of temporality, where the action constantly interchanges with fatigue. At the very moment when the clock begins to tick and the hall is illuminated on the other side of the planet, the investment of the two authors into the event (on the concrete and phantasmatic level, which makes the audience eager in its expectations) is flattened into something static, the image of the movement which stopped, a still image. The investment, the entire preparation for the event, becomes consumption without an effect; the energy and actions produce an effect that is too slow, a lesser effect, so to say. There is a specific incapability at work in the relation to the expectation of what could happen in *Ballettikka*, a specific exhaustion of the event itself. This dynamic of action and fatigue could also be compared to the economic relationship between the time of the investment and the time of the consumption. The time of the investment, although flexible and multilayered, is simultaneously homogenous. The subject continuously structures his time in a project-like manner: to achieve an effect and to realize future goals. This directly contributes to the acceleration of his time. However on the other side, consumption of investment is becoming increasingly redundant. Not only does it have harmful effects on the habitat (natural or social one), destroying it with its insatiable desire, but it is also assisting the experience of subjectivity as redundancy, where consumption goes hand in hand with dissatisfaction, always insufficient gains, phantasmatic spending of energy and resources that brings exhaustion instead of affirmation of subjectivity. The subject's crisis also appears to come from the excessive dynamic of investment and consumption, where the body is very often taken over by fatigue, stillness which comes directly from speed: in our culture speed and slowness seems to be in a direct and traumatic opposition. In all of its formations, especially those dealing with breaking in and illegality, *Ballettikka* plays with these feelings of time organization through expectation and consummate use of time – with the expectation of the event and its actual realisation.

## II.

Similar feelings are triggered by NVSBL (2007) dance performance by Eszter Salamon. This is just one of a number of dance performances in the last years where movement has been reduced to a minimum; it is barely perceptible and has analogous qualities to the unsuccessful movement of the robot in the Ballettikka video. It is true that in this performance we are dealing with the barely perceptible movements of the bodies and not artificial bodies as in Ballettikka, however there is something comparable in the way how bodies are slowed down inside a decelerated image, as they would be recorded in a slow-motion. The title of the performance is deliberately without consonants; the word itself resembles the missing links in the movement of the four dancers - as imperceptible as it may be. Very slowly, four dancers appear from the background, motionless and yet moving. Their bodies seem to slide from one flickering image to another, but cannot be actually retained in the memory. A comparison can be drawn with a broadcast where the image is being continuously delayed and the transmission is not functioning properly. The performance, which is difficult to describe with language without reducing that language to the logic of the events, has been captured by the philosopher Cristina Demaria in the following way:

“On stage we watch the imperceptible and therefore invisible movements of four dancers who emerge very slowly from a dark background: with their bodies, and with a miraculous play of lights, they are not so much composing figures as being figures, apparently motionless but actually changing. Figures that become channels of a ‘logic of sensation’ (Deleuze), at times also laboriously alienating for a public accustomed to seeing and therefore judging what it manages to interpret (‘But nothing’s happening here,’ said a woman in front of me, fidgeting nervously in her seat). It is however a logic capable of restoring our thought of the body as a force at once precise and devastating and also, quite simply, beautiful, like the beauty associated with certain paintings that continually come to mind as we try to watch NVSBL. The power of this thought is demonstrated by such a reduction of movement in space as to render the very reality of the bodies inaccessible, because it deprives us of control over our own perception and consequently of presumed control over bodies which our vision believed it could frame and interpret with its own memory models.”<sup>5</sup>

This description is quite close to what I would define as the potentiality of duration: the reduction and absence of movement are so radical that they shatter the reality of the bodies

<sup>5</sup> Cristina Demaria, <http://www.eszter-salamon.com/WWW/nvsbl.htm>

and, at the same time, dispossess our perception. Time becomes independent when it does not allow us to fill the emptiness with meaning. In this performance, the images are structured in such a way that they do not allow us to focus on something, to rely on our memory, time is so redundant that it takes control over our perception. The consequence of such redundancy of time is dispossession of our subjective inner feeling of time, where our attention is not empowering our subjective experience, but exactly the opposite: we are stuck, duration disables us, it takes over. When we are overwhelmed with redundancy of time duration does not stimulate our attention, making our awareness more intense. Attention becomes rather impersonal, as described with Blanchot: “It is not the self that is attentive in attention; rather, with an extreme delicacy and through insensible, constant contacts, attention has always already detached me from myself, freeing me for the attention that I for an instant become.”<sup>6</sup> This is why duration does not activate us and make us more sensitive and open – more self-aware. Duration has nothing to do with tension and intensity, quite the opposite: during the redundant time that is passing, we are somehow emptied out, jammed, trapped in waiting.

## III.

Only when we approach to the duration as something which is related to the dispossession of subjectivity, duration can be discussed as a potentially critical concept in the contemporary culture. The two aforementioned works help us gain an insight into the current cultural and political dimensions of duration, which has different properties from the experiments with duration and temporality in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In contemporary performance, the stretching of time is for a long time being at the forefront. For example, Lehmann writes that, in contemporary theatre, we often no longer speak of the representation of the timeline, but about the presentation in its own temporality. Duration in theatre does not portray duration; in other words, when the performance slows down, the slowness on stage does not refer to the slowness of the fictitious universe, which is supposed to fuse with our own experiential world. Temporality becomes an immanent, ‘conscious’ element of the performance, by means of which theatre refers to its own process. The experience of time expansion and, consequently, the various strategies for organizing the spectator’s diffused perception are common characteristics of contemporary performance. Performance very often takes place in the gap between its fictitious time and the time of the audience<sup>7</sup>. Instead of

<sup>6</sup> Blanchot, Maurice: *The Infinite Conversation*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lehmann, Hans-Ties: *Postdramatic Theatre*, London: Routledge, 2006.

representing homogenous time (dramatic time, the time of the subject, the time of the event, etc.), contemporary performance takes place as a heterogeneity of temporalities, where a coherent temporality no longer exists. The performances begin to experiment with time and the attention of the spectator; they break the sequence and coherence of the events, experiment with memories that are yet to come, with repetition, with phenomenological experience, etc. In this way, performance has frequently been understood as an artistic field that defies the strict rationalization and effectiveness of homogenous time in contemporary capitalist society (where time is an economic value). It was often believed that performance enables the parallel and heterogeneous experience of attention and reveals the incoherence of the subject (cf. Lehmann). It seems, that when the temporal experience of the subject cannot be embraced as a coherent unit, but as a flexible, heterogeneous and contradictory one, the subject cannot be subdued to the social organizational structures and the subject's experience of time is not subdued to effectiveness. In this way, contemporary performance seems to offer resistance to the social division of time and the understanding of time as a means of economic effectiveness. As Adrian Heathfield writes, in one of the crucial texts on duration, the theatre experiments of the early 1970s that introduce duration by means of various procedures (repetition, the expansion of the performance beyond the cultural convention, improvisation, coincidence and the non-materiality of the event), establish a critical understanding of time as a commodity and create inassimilable values that cannot be subdued to the existing social and cultural construction of time, where time is closely connected to the effectiveness and rationalization of the social systems.<sup>8</sup>

However, it was also at the beginning of the 1970s when, in the wider social and cultural sphere, changes began to take place in the manner of subjectivisation that can be connected with the emerging post-industrial society. The changes were connected with what was discussed by the Italian operaists (Virno, Negri), who detected deep changes in social organization. The difference between work and free time is disappearing, the communicative and linguistic dimension is at the forefront; human potentiality is at the core of production. The power of production becomes what establishes us as human beings, as potent beings. This shift causes important changes in the social organization and cultural concepts of time.

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the chapter on time. Lehmann's analysis is strongly influenced by Deleuze's theory on the difference between movement image and time image.

<sup>8</sup> Heathfield, Adrian: *Out of Now, The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009.

Experimenting with time (simultaneousness, heterogeneity, synchronicity) becomes important part of contemporary production, accompanied by continuous exchange of time compression, crisis and release (both on the personal and social levels). Experimenting with time serves to enhance the effectiveness and production value of the subject, as well as the value of virtual predictions and projections (not only on the financial market, but also in social structures). As contradictory as it may sound, experimenting with time is what contributes to the subduing and discipline of the contemporary flexible subject of today. Time experimentation is an essential condition for the value of work.

Let's try to find evidence for that argument in the contemporary artistic and cultural production. Most of the producers on that field are involved with projecting and realizing projects. The time dimension is therefore already contained in the very term 'project': actions in the future, the realization of possibilities, etc. Despite the fact that experimenting and constant movement is at their core, projects are simultaneously part of homogenous temporality, which we increasingly feel as an intense acceleration on the personal, intimate and social time. The heterogeneous character of projects, which involves exceptional human abilities, paradoxically belongs to all-embracing homogenous temporality, which does not enable a different social model of organization even though, paradoxically, it needs to constantly reflect upon it in order for the project to succeed.

My question would therefore be as follows: what is the critical value of duration in the post-industrial situation, where the inner feeling of the subject increasingly fuses with the value of his productivity and where the heterogeneity of temporality is at the core of shaping contemporary subjectivity? What is the critical value of duration if the heterogeneity of time is part of subduing the subject, the appropriation of the subject's worth by production economy?

A few decades ago, duration could be understood as a sort of critical autonomy of the process (immediacy, failure, coincidence, redundancy, reversibility), and a toll to manage the attention of the spectator and her / his sensibility. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, duration is also closely connected to the entry of work procedures into performance (e.g. that of improvisation in dance, where decisions are taken in the present and the work is not hidden behind the dancing body). Interestingly, this visibility of the work processes in performing runs parallel to the new methods of post-industrial production, where work is no longer Fordist as a rule, but also more and more takes over the characteristics of virtuosity (Virno). It

takes place before the audience and acquires more and more communicative features. Today, however, due to changes in the inner perception of time, which is so closely connected with the apparatuses enabling the flexibility and simultaneity of subjectivity, I feel that we need to think in the direction of duration as dispossession, duration which overwhelms us with non-functioning and non-operativity. In order for the subject to last, he needs to literally be dispossessed, desubjectivised, almost forget himself as subject.<sup>9</sup> This is why even short time non-operative units can have a very long duration today. Due to the accelerated and project-like character of our inner time, the subject finds himself in no man's land (very often that is a non-place, as defined by Marc Auge) if something does not function or if nothing goes on; he feels as though the duration intrudes into him and, paradoxically, steals his most intimate time (which is actually heavily managed with the contemporary apparatuses). The duration, however, gives nothing in return; we do not sharpen our senses or acquire a different sensibility by yielding to it. The duration does not activate us; it only dispossesses us and fails to catch our attention. In many contemporary performances, including those I have discussed today, duration does not cause sublime effects; if the performances do not irritate us so much that we leave straight away, we are stuck, lodged in the event. We sit there and do not surrender to the flow of the performance, but try to get through it as though it were an obstacle, actually we have to move through step by step. Our attention waits »without precipitation, leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, our horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it up. Attention is the emptiness of thought oriented by a gentle force and maintained in an accord with the empty intimacy of time.«<sup>10</sup>

Culturally, duration can be deeply subversive; but not because it contrasts the experience of slowness with the experience of speed (after all, slow movement is a privilege of the rich and inevitable for the hungry). Duration irritates us because it reveals how deeply our most intimate perception of time (i.e. the feeling that we are active beings constantly on the move) is socially constructed and economically conditioned. The time we suddenly have on our hands needs to dispossess us in order for us to be able to last. In the contemporary life subject need to be constantly actualized, however duration does not enable actualization. It throws us into pure potentiality, into what could happen.

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<sup>9</sup> Just like the body needs to forget of its home bed in order to be able to fall peacefully asleep at home every night.

<sup>10</sup> Blanchot, Maurice: *The Infinite Conversation*, University of Minnesota Press 1992, p. 121.

#### IV.

By experimenting with duration and movement, the aforementioned performances open up the problematics of dispossession, not because nothing would be happening but because the redundant time generated interferes heavily with the inner processes of subjectivisation: we are suddenly left with time, which means that being is potentially possible without self-actualization. This description also has concrete political and cultural implications. Slow observation that does not concentrate upon the actual effect, the dispossession in which we create something before it actually happens, frequently characterise the manner of working on contemporary performance. This is especially true if performance is understood as the field of experimenting with and critically addressing the social and economic contexts in which we live and work. Duration also directly sabotages the organization of the social protocols of flexibility and mobility, especially when we are speaking of duration as a specific relation to movement. Contrastingly, continuous and accelerated movement (described by Sloterdijk as kinetic modernity), expels any kind of potency from the actualisation of the subject: professions need to be changed quickly, everything needs to be made usable, the future needs to be organized into a projection. Movement, however, does not only belong to the activity of the subject; we only begin to last when moved by others – when we have been placed into the world.

Finally, let me illustrate the concept of duration with one more image, a private one from my home city. It is an image of the view from my home window. I live near an old people's home, whose residents take walks in a small circular park, where one can do little else but repeat the path over and over. Whenever I look at the park through my window (ironically, during cigarette breaks, which shorten my own chronological duration), I feel that something has changed in my perception of time. In the loudness of the city, a movement is revealed that cannot be looked at without a kinaesthetic feeling being triggered in my body (even if only for a moment – it is always possible to leave the space, to look away or to not see). The duration of the people's walks shows as the slowness of the body no longer capable of the continuous and invisible transition of the city inhabitant, harmonised with the omnipresent rhythm. The walks the old people take always confirm to me that movement is not only getting from point A to point B. Movement is not a unity of quantitative differences that can be endlessly

multiplied, as Deleuze warned. Movement is not only a transient movement in space, but it should also be understood as change, as quantitative differentiation. For example, Deleuze refers to the eminent philosophical image of the fearless runner Achilles; despite his youth and strength, his movement resembles that of the old people in the park, who would represent the turtle in this parable. It is not about equal speed, but about an equal mode of duration. Achilles' movement can be quantitatively divided into steps; with every step, however, the movement changes in a qualitative manner. Deleuze says: "What seems from the outside to be a numerical part, a component of the run, turns out to be, experienced from the inside, an obstacle avoided."<sup>11</sup> The inner perception of movement is therefore quantitative and enables change, precisely because movement concerns us from the outside. Movement is a relation. It constantly dispossesses us by means of obstacles that we cannot react to if we wish to move. This might be the interesting thing about these old bodies taking walks: that the inner experience of movement as qualitative change shows on the surface of the body. One of the basic illusions of the contemporary subject is namely that we only move because of our inner feeling of time. This illusion namely serves as a basis for constantly subduing contemporary subjectivity to numerous apparatuses which promise even greater mobility to defeat our ontological slowness.

The time of the subject is therefore not a homogenous projecting time, a possibility that constantly needs to be realised. Rather, it is constantly avoiding obstacles, involuntary movement, a slowness in which the time is running out. The German anthropologist and philosopher Odo Marquard writes that the obsession with speed in contemporary culture can also be understood as an incessant acceleration of the speed of life, a response to the ontological fact of the shortness of human life. However, Marquard claims that, in comparison to death, all human life is fundamentally slow. Only in this way can we bear the shortness of human life in comparison to the world around it, the fact that we are but a "niche in time".<sup>12</sup> Human beings need to have a sense of slowness because this is the only way to differentiate those changes that are desired and possible. Suddenly, it is possible to see and feel that what could happen. And maybe that's why the relation between duration and movement is so important: since it enables waiting in which we look at something which is not there.

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<sup>11</sup> Deleuze, Gilles: *Bergsonism*, New York: Zone Books 1991, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Marquard, Odo: *Temporales Doppelleben: Philosophische Bemerkungen zu unserer Zeit*, Jahrbuch 1990 der Deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. Wiesbaden: Luchterland, 1990.