

Still Moving

Between inner rhythm and outer image: performers working with body time have brought a new aesthetic to museums and theaters.

An empty dance studio is a room of possibilities, a space with a sprung floor, a mirror that can be hidden behind a curtain, white walls, windows, and nothing else. But it is a room full of volcanic pressure: a spatial valve for letting off energy, adrenaline and body fluid. The memory of the space is loaded: with plays of exertion to the point of exhaustion and beyond; with rigorous self-discipline and boundless devotion. On the first day of a new piece, a choreographer enters this space. Her first reflex is to lie down.

The space gives rise to many a varied work. At some point, the horizontal is joined by the vertical. Concepts are rolled out, dance vocabulary emerges. That is one possibility. The other possibility is just to remain. To remain lying. To wait. To give space to exhaustion. Not to resolve one's inner composure outwards, but to move inwards; to feel one's way through the various positions, tones and textures of the body.

In Maria Hassabi's *Intermission*, an outstretched body descends a flight of stairs head first, so slowly that its movement is not perceptible. The work, first performed in 2013 at the 55th Venice Biennale as part of the Cyprus and Lithuania Pavilion, has become representative of a certain contemporary aesthetic intent on arresting, interrupting and resisting the logic of attention spans and/or the conventional linearity and temporality of performances. In recent years, a number of artists and choreographers have undertaken similar experiments with arrested or extremely decelerated physical movement. Could we call this a slow body movement?

In his unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1943), the late Austrian writer Robert Musil diagnosed 'accelerationism' as the central characteristic of modernity. From the outset, said accelerationism has inspired an aesthetic of deceleration. Time arts such as dance and music seem to be predetermined for this: Just stop speed and you can claim to stop the fated run of things. Yet such gestures remain little more than a statement. Accelerationism is inseparably bound to capitalism, and to halt the latter is not only beyond the realm of gesture, but comprehension. As the Swedish dance artist and essayist Mårten Spångberg claims, invoking Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: 'Today [it] is more difficult to imagine a way out of capitalism than it is to imagine the apocalypse.' Thus, when we consider the aesthetic of deceleration, we must be considering something more complex than a naive attempt to plug the flow. Or citing Maria Hassabi, who was part of the Women's March on Washington: 'I doubt if standing still as a political message is still enough.'

In dance, *Butoh*, the 'dance of darkness', which emerged in 1959 in response to the forced turbo-capitalism of post-Hiroshima Japanese society, was the first aesthetic of slowness. This form of performative expressionism spread to Europe in the 1980s, and is currently making a comeback, in part thanks to attempts at a post-exoticist understanding. We could consider *Butoh*, even if still routed in chauvinist structures, as one of the first attempts to 'queer time' through dance, to use gender theorist Jack Halberstam's phrase. The frenetic pace of the Japanese metropolis was spliced with countryside speed, the dynamics of choruslines and whirls with the urge of séances, of spiritual and psychological experiences – lacked out of the often tensed and cramped bodies with overstretched muscles and skeleton-like white paint. Also the more than implicit standards that dancers are only dancers in their most virile reproduction phase of life were annulled by the inaugurators of *Butoh*: Kazuo Ohno even performed until the age of 100.

If *Butoh* drew from European expressionism, today's slowness could be considered as supra-expressionist. Many conceptual turns later, the body is not used anymore in first instance for visualization but as a vehicle of time and consciousness organization. Hassabi says that the 'speed of New York lifestyle' played a key role in the development of her early performance works, and calls the discovery of slowness a 'natural evolution'. 'It's not about slowing down in the way of a broken record player', she says, 'but really being aware and taking care of every detail while you're moving from one place to another.' For *Solo* (2009), her first work to make use of such deceleration, she set herself into a physical dialogue with a heavy Persian rug. In preparation for this, she analysed and memorized hundreds of images of women in domestic settings, which she then moved through in

choreographic sequence. Even when you abstract images, Hassabi says, 'you always use a recognizable representation of the image'. The true abstraction is the process of transitioning itself.

Daina Ashbee first employed slowness as a tool with which to counter the tempo of her training, which she describes as 'a fast, powerful range of movement.' It later became a mechanism through which she could immerse herself in the various traumas of her Métis heritage, especially those experienced by first nation women. In *Pour* (2016), for example, the expression of performer Paige Culley alternates like a hologram between violence and vulnerability. The naked, almost motionless female body seems to be feeling its way towards pockets of pain locked deep inside, chiselling them out and sculpting them into somatic experience.

'Slowness', says Angela Schubot, 'is the speed of the movement towards oneself.' For her trilogy 'Körper ohne Macht' (Body Without Power, 2014-15), first performed across three Berlin theaters, she used real-time meditations to approach the paradox of a physical presence that is permeable to space: 'In a zero-sum economy of power, the space that I occupy cannot be occupied by anyone else.' In the trilogy's third act, she entirely abandons herself to the inner experience of a space appropriating a body. With an open mouth and slack posture, the body's external form seems to become shapeless, bringing forth an ethereally babbling, dribbling, vegetative monster. It looks like a process of pre mortal decomposition, its uncanniness the result what Schubot sees as a shift from experience of form to experience of matter. 'It's about a principle that carries me,' she explains. 'I can hang myself on it, as if I were hanging my own body in the wardrobe like a costume.'

Since the emergence of postmodern dance, the body knowledge of performers has increasingly included somatic, meditation, imagination and healing techniques, from yoga, body-mind centering, Feldenkrais or Tantra to Gaga, body weather, authentic movement or fascia therapy. Yet, for years, the notion of 'somatic experience' was a veritable swear word in the fields of dance and performance, used to describe those who lay on stage imagining the hands of a clock inside their hips. What remained unclear – despite an increased public interest in such self-care techniques – was how such practices might be translated into an aesthetically interesting vocabulary. The breakthrough has made a long way. After conceptual dance in the 1990's cut with the modernist view on dance as a continuous flow of motion and helped to understand the various systems that movement and choreography are interrelated with, the actual developments can be configured in Spångberg's words as post dance. His PS1-installation *La substance but in English* (2014), a slow motion of a post drug dystopia, calls back dance as an experience –, transformed as a result of contemporary capitalism, immaterial labor and social media.'

The museum has never spent too much interest for those developments. And as long as it provides yoga lessons without showers and changing rooms, its message is clear: Give us the spectacle but take the sweat home. Nevertheless for the actual aesthetics of slowness the role of fine art spaces can't be underestimated. They not only increased the possibilities of audiences to quit from a mono perspective performance and moving back and forth in space and time, they also helped to transform the perception of dance as an immersive object rather than a language. Both Hassabi and Ashbee are interested in visual confrontation and the effect that it has upon the consciousness, what Hassabi describes as 'the silence you have when you look at an object.' This confrontation is an important stimulus for the trajectory towards an innerly moved landscape and might even explain the success of Maria Abramović's MoMA show *The Artist Is Present*.

The tension between external stillness and the living body's inability to ever not be moved or moving is also crucial for Kat Válastur, who does not see the consciousness of time as an affecting aesthetic alone, but as a creative mechanism unto itself. In the studio, Válastur tells me, the body responds to the experience of external stillness in observing by producing micro-movements, which she understands as 'non-representational body positions'. Válastur records these flinches, edits them together and plays them out in the bodies of performers who seem lifted out of synchronous time. In her series 'Oh! Deep Sea – Corpus I-III' (2010-2013), part of which is performed under stroboscopic lights, the jittering bodies seem almost intergalactic, not so much themselves as projected through unknown time codes. For *Gland*, first performed in 2014, Válastur seems to adapt the strategies of time encountering to space. Repeatedly she collides with her physical surroundings as if attempting to redefine them with her physicality– she, the gland; the theatre, the host body. Repetition comes here close to a stand or lie still: the many attempts experience needs to be shaped as a move.

'A pluralism of nothingness', Maria Hassabi calls what happens when dance gets an immersive experience between the performer and the viewer. Is this pluralism – which appearance of course depends on the parameters of the artistic setting – a tool for the kind of imagination that Spångberg evokes? I think it is more than a coincidence that a lot of the slow works are using lying figures. Not only because lying is in first instance seen as 'doing nothing' but because it is used in a way that is opening the horizons of plural nothingness. It is exhaustion, paralysis and dreaming. It is transitory and transformative. It is sleeping (Robert Steijn, who has worked with both Hassabi and Schubot, has even introduced stage sleeping as a performative principle) and sub-consciousness. It is human and non-human. Choreographers who work with slow or still bodies often integrate animal positions: Xavier Le Roy in *low pieces* (2011) or *Temporary Title* (2015) with dropped down all-four-positions or Alexandra Pirici in *Aggregate* (2017) with eel colonies, tigers and gorillas. In these contexts, the lying body, retreating as it has done from the flow of life in order to create another flow unto itself, is as ambivalent as it is a proposition and a hypothesis: radically slowed but never still; a vehicle with the capacity to be tread on, to die or to distort, disrupt and, in doing so, transform that which stands around it.

by Astrid Kaminski