

In Real Time. Notes on New Expressions of Slowness

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Maija Saksman, *Don't Touch*
(*Sisterhood Series*), 2012. Video still.
Courtesy of the artist.

In Real Time Notes on New Expressions of Slowness

"After the Old Testament, we have no new stories. Movie stories are not new and that's the reason why we think, 'Ok, the story's only a part of the movie.'"¹

Slow people in our society, as noted by Pierre Sansot, do not have a good reputation.² Condemned to rush frantically to nowhere, we are infected, ailing with hyperspeed, the dominant disorder of the 21st century, according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen,³ who devoted an influential essay to the frantic whirlwind sweeping away all aspects of our lives. For the Norwegian anthropologist, our age is characterized by fast activities that cannibalize slow ones (family, reading, private life). Yet, by making it possible to accomplish more tasks in less time, speed should, in principle, free up additional time for individuals. Every one knows that this is not the case. The social rhythms of contemporary life tend to establish urgency as a normal temporality, as well as a historical and social reality—in the Durkheimian sense that Christophe Bouton gives this term.⁴ It suffices to make speed the symbol of innovation,

success—the race to productivity—and happiness. Contrary to a world of perpetual haste—as Paul Virilio⁵ warned us and, well before him, Eugène Minkowski with his reflections on the loss of vital contact with reality⁶—, today those trying to escape the secularized fear of death can look closely at the growing tendency towards a quest for *slowness* taking shape against all doom and pessimism. This ambitious recovery of the taste for slowness, the aesthetic reverse side of patience, the driving force freeing us from the mystique of speed—as put forward with customary thoughtfulness by Luis Sepúlveda in his recent story for "little men"⁷—also traverses the recent practices of some artists and authors. More specifically, it informs certain aesthetic experiences and media phenomena that shift and reconfigure cultural signifiers in order to create what might be defined as a field of inaction, in which something, nonetheless, is happening, something which is profoundly real and authentic in form as well as substance. This has been recently exemplified by a renewed interest in the "real" in philosophical thought,⁸ contradicting two major dogmas of

postmodern philosophical tradition.⁹ These transformations, which engender a slightly provocative radicalism in intellectual pleasure, reveal their coherence only slowly; this is why time-based art, such as video and performance, has a privileged relation to slowness. Defining the scope of what can be increasingly described as a phenomenon provides us with a limited selection of propositions in which time is perceived in its immanence, without speed changes, ruptures or loops: reality exposed as it is, or as it could plausibly be.

Slowness aligns well with rest, abandon, sleep. The paradigmatic figure of the sleeper, safe from all, exposed to all, is in fact the subject of the work *Sleep-Al Na'im* by mounir fatmi, who has had his share of being censored. This work directly references the iconography of *Sleep* (1963)¹⁰—in which the poet John Giorno sleeps for almost six hours, giving the illusion of a long sequence shot—by Andy Warhol, who mischievously laughed at his own films, which allowed the audience to leave and return, most often without worrying that they were missing something important.

Begun in 2005, *Sleep-Al Na'im* is a black-and-white fictional work depicting a man peacefully asleep, his naked chest rising and falling to the rhythm of his breathing. After trying in vain to contact Salman Rushdie, fatmi chose to represent him via a virtual image. Considering the death threats hanging over Rushdie for many years, the writer's rest appears as a necessary loss of control: sunken in sleep, a state of relaxation is still possible despite the vulnerability to which he is exposed. The Moroccan artist correlated his own breathing with Rushdie's body—it is in fact fatmi's actual breath which we hear for six hours—by synching a sound montage and the 3D animation of the writer's body.¹¹

Another famous sleeper of our era is Tilda Swinton, though in this case her sleeping was live and inside one of art's temples. Her performance at MoMA, inside a glass case where she slept for more than six hours at a time, challenges the taboo of death.¹² The anticipated duration of *The Maybe* was unknown even to museum employees. Other than providing the context, no program was published for her performances, nor a statement made by the artist or the museum.

Confronted with visual experiences of this kind, viewers don't know if anything will happen; they might hope something will happen,¹³ and likely nothing will, but even so they watch, observe, and are sometimes content with contemplating. Something wonderful might suddenly occur and put an end to their viewing, as compensation for this no longer habitual patience. Such is the case



Ivan Moudov, *Performing Time*, 2012.
Performance, clock. © Takeshi Sugiura.
Courtesy of Galerie Alberta Pane.

with *Don't Touch* (2012), a video less than two minutes long by the young Finnish artist Maija Saksman, in which one of the three inert female figures, sitting with their backs to the still camera, is touched by a slowly approaching hand. At the moment of contact, an alarming cry is heard. The viewer is startled but the female characters remain immobile.

In a different way, for the Dutch artist Maarten Baas, something happens in a place where normally we don't expect it to: inside a clock. Baas joyfully pushes the limits of design to constantly question our relationship with objects. *Real Time* (2009) presents three videos that "mark time," employing technological advances that make it possible to film for twelve or twenty-four hours without interruption. The clock display of *Grandfather Clock* is a twelve-hour video of an actor indicating the time by erasing and redrawing the clock's hands every minute; *Sweepers Clock* depicts two workers sweeping the trash, which forms two giant clock hands, to the rhythm of time passing; *Analog Digital Clock* shows a person covering or wiping the transparent geometric elements that shape the digital digits giving the exact time. In 2013, clock-movies were included in *Grandmother Clock*, offering the documented performance of a real grandmother in action. Meanwhile, the series has been adapted for different media (Comtoise clock, Blu-Ray, iPhone, etc.).

More recently, the Bulgarian artist Ivan Moudov, known for his occasionally illegal artistic actions that defy social conventions and the power of authority and its appropriation, often with great mockery and the authority of artistic work, has taken this concept even further. In 2012, he created *Performing Time*, a video installation in which he stands and pushes the hands of the clock, according to his own sense of time passing, for an uninterrupted twenty-three hours and fifteen minutes.

These artistic propositions correspond with some aesthetic forms that have marked the viewers of certain European public television channels of a more avant-garde nature. The first was the playful world of sheep invented by Hélène Guetary in 1993 for the Franco-German channel ARTE: at the end of the programming, actors played sheep indefinitely jumping over a fence to lull noctambulists to certain sleep. Gone in early 1995, they came back on the air on January 1, 1998 with the goal to count down the days until 2000.

More recently, Norway has tried to give time to time, now through television. The NRK public channel broadcasts ultra long programming of ultra slow, trivial content, all in real time. These are visual performances executed in tempo *adagio*, sometimes elevated to a *maestoso*. The television medium, typically defined by its speed

and clamour, takes its time to find its most radical embodiment: as reality television in the literal sense of the term, since viewers can watch a ferry journey through the fjords (134 hours) or a fire burning in a fireplace (three hours). With a precise beginning and end, but lacking narrative substance, it is a vital letting go, the great return of contemplation, and possibly a sinking into reverie, making us want to reread Milan Kundera.¹⁴ These are modes of authenticity that search for parts of the imagination which, because of their evident banality, often escape us.

At once a producer of time passing and a fragment of eternity, this "slow but noble television," as defined by the channel director Lise May Spissøy, began in 2009. To mark the centenary of the railway line traversing a stunning landscape from Bergen and Oslo, the journey was retransmitted with the help of onboard cameras and archival images, so as to remain on air while passing through tunnels. The success surpassed all hopes: approximately 1.2 million people, almost a quarter of Norway's population, watched at least one part of the journey broadcast for seven hours and sixteen minutes on NRK2. Original, easy and inexpensive to implement, the proposal convinced the CEOs of the public broadcaster who, freed from the constraints restricting commercial channels, decided to allow this kind of experimentation on one of their two national channels. Besides these long journeys at home, NRK produces thematic *slow television* programming that explores salmon fishing, the art of wood fire, or all aspects of knitting. A long sequence of a discussion by experts is followed by an even longer sequence of the practice in real time. Thus in early November, NRK minutely analyzed the making of a sweater in eight hours and thirty-five minutes, from sheep shearing to knitting the last stitch. Beyond developing a taste for artisanal prowess, *slow TV* creates true "islands of deceleration."¹⁵ However, as proof that the urgent need for slowness is not the same everywhere, in the United States, the train's coastal journey was reduced to a program of... one hour.

Yet in a country in which the rediscovery of slowness takes the form of unique experiments that intersect art with the hotel industry—*The Thief hotel*, in Oslo, replaced its offer of *porn-on-demand* with *video-art-on-demand*—, NRK has plans for other projects, such as a program on time minutely analyzing the making of a clock (in 2006, the Turkish artist Ali Kazma showed us how a clock is repaired in *Obstructions*), then filming time passing. Baas and Moudov be advised...

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1 Béla Tarr, quoted on April 19, 2003 in an article by Richard Williams on *The Guardian* website, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/apr/19/artsfeatures>. The journalist writes: "For the director of Werckmeister Harmonies, the biggest part of the movie is time. [...] as the camera watches Valuska and Eszter for minutes on end as they walk silently down a street before heading off in different directions, Tarr is turning cinema's most abused dimension into its most effective tool."

2 Sansot, Pierre. *Du bon usage de la lenteur*. Paris: Payot, 1998.

3 Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. *Tyranny of the Moment. Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, 2001.

4 Bouton, Christophe. *Le Temps de l'urgence*. Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2013.

5 Among others, Virilio, Paul. *Speed and Politics*. Trans. Mark Polizzotti. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

6 Minkowski, Eugène. *Lived Time. Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*. Trans. Nancy Metzel. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970: "Technology, through its discoveries, tries to conquer time and space. All too happy to benefit from its unrelenting progress in this respect, we can't but be grateful to it. However, this feeling of gratitude remains incomplete. Often we are seized with a profound weariness, as though the pace of life, thus created, did us violence. This progress takes place to the detriment of other essential values. Going fast is not enough for us. [...] Inside, we feel the rumblings of revolt [...]."

7 Sepúlveda, Luis. *Storia di una lumaca che scopri l'importanza della lentezza*. Parma: Guanda, 2013. Praising slowness while also putting it into practice can be a form of civil disobedience, as demonstrated in the food industry by the *Slow Food* movement, whose founder Carlo Petrini published with Giunti-Slow Food, in 2013, *Cibo e libertà—Slow Food: storie di gastronomia per la liberazione*.

8 One text in particular: Ferraris, Maurizio. *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012. Realistic reaction, according to the Turin philosopher, has regained ground in this century.

9 Ferraris, Maurizio. *Ibid.*: "[...] that all reality is socially constructed and infinitely manipulable, and that truth is a useless notion since solidarity is more important than objectivity [...]" (My translation.)

10 One of Warhol's first experimentations with cinematography, *Sleep* was conceived as an "anti-film." Warhol would develop this technique in his next eight-hour film, *Empire*.

11 Ironically, once the film was completed in 2012, the two men met in Brussels. After this meeting, fatmi conducted a long interview with the writer to be published in a book called *Sleep*.

12 The performance was conceived as a *memento mori* in 1995, for the Serpentine Galleries in London, following the death of the actress's friend Derek Jarman, and was restaged at MoMA in 2013, following the death of her mother.

13 A scene in Spike Jonze's most recent film *Her* elucidates this idea. In this scene, Amy Adams shows a video depicting her mother sleeping and the husband, disappointed, asks her if anything is about to happen...

14 Kundera, Milan. *Slowness*. Trans. Linda Asher. New York: Harper Perennial, 1997: "There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. [...] In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting."

15 Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.