In Real Time. Notes on New Expressions of Slowness

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“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.’”

Slow people in our society, as noted by Pierre Sansot, do not have a good reputation. Condemned to rush frantically to nowhere, we are infected, ailing with hyperspeed, the dominant disorder of the 21st century, according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 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. 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 Virilio warned us and, well before him, Eugène Minkowski with his reflections on the loss of vital contact with reality, 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”—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, contradicting two major dogmas of postmodern philosophical tradition. 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 Naim by mounir fatmi, who has had his share of being censored. This work directly references the iconography of Sleep (1963) 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 Naim 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.

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. 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, 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
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 play of slow television of 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.).

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1 Béra 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.”


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.


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 experiments 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 depecting 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.”