

**Notes for a society of  
performance: on dance,  
sports, museums,  
and their users**

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**Preamble: after spectacle**

What if Guy Debord was to resurrect under a commission to rewrite his Society of Spectacle for the current form of capitalism, characterized as neoliberal and post-Fordist, entertaining the notions of experience and service (economy), as well as knowledge (production)?<sup>1</sup> In my imaginary exercise of a theoretical pamphlet for 2014, Debord would be ready to relinquish the concepts of “image” and “representation” and substitute “performance” for them. To Debord, spectacle designates a degree of accumulation of capital and commodity fetishism that mediates all experience and social relations through images.<sup>2</sup> But as an older Cartesian idea, spectacle privileges perspectival vision from a certain viewing position. It guards distance from the observed object, as well as a specular dialogue whereby the beholder’s gaze is reflected from the viewed object back into the subject’s consciousness. Perhaps the ocular-centric paradigm of spectacle can no longer accurately describe living in neoliberal conditions.<sup>3</sup> The bias of looking supposes a disembodied gaze of the mind in a co-presence with other beholders, witnesses who not only watch the spectacle, but also keep an eye on each other’s appearance. In a word, an overseeable public sphere and space of actors and spectators.

A more adequate notion today to account for a post-Cartesian mode of operation, rooted in the Anglo-American culture of pragmatism, liberal democracy, and the eclipse of the public, would be performance. It is nothing novel to suggest this, as already in 2001 Jon McKenzie’s study titled *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* formulated the injunction of performance and performativity as a new name for the society of con-

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1. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (first edition Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967); Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

2. “The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image,” paragraph 34 in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Available <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm> (accessed November 2014)

3. “The spectacle inherits all the *weaknesses* of the Western philosophical project which undertook to comprehend activity in terms of the categories of *seeing*,” paragraph 19 in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Op. cit. (accessed November 2014)

trol. McKenzie forwarded a managerial conception of three domains of global performativity (cultural, technological, and organizational performance) in a tripartite formula of efficiency, efficacy, and effectiveness. The reason it might be worth our inquiry again, I contend, is that in the last decade or so, performance has grown into a thicker concept than what McKenzie's comprehensive account made of it. Moreover, the word "performance," in its short history, unravels the variability of the notion "performance," malleable according to its usage. The currently prevailing notion maintains that performance bears the brunt of a critique of instrumental reason, a certain teleological order of means and ends in which performing is understood to be motivated by a capitalist drive to show that someone or something can always achieve more and better. Yet it does not leave us cynical, either. It exhibits a thorough sense of ambivalence, forcing us to consider, in every specific situation and in several registers at the same time (ontological, political, economic, and so on) what the matter of performance is, and what, how, for whom, and why it does what it does: constrain, normativize, monitor, enable, or invent.

Hence, in conclusion to this preamble, a society of performance, in difference to the society of spectacle, entails another ideological mechanism, away from the ocular regime of false consciousness or blindness, distorted image or speech, toward a conscious and self-monitored re-embodied doing and showing doing.<sup>4</sup> Performing as doing does not privilege anyone sense beyond another, but signifies a ritualized motion based on the psychosocial power of embodiment, the affective-experiential ground of persuasive expression by which the subject finds a more real sense

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4. Here, I am referring to the key formula in Richard Schechner's performance theory, the distinction between the concept of doing, which refers to all human actions, including ordinary life behavior, and showing doing, which refers to performance, both in art and beyond. (2006:22) "According to him, showing doing does not mean that the performed act is fictional, insincere, or fake, but (only) that the performing subject is aware that she is performing; so she points to it, emphasizes, and stresses it for those observing her," Bojana Cvejic' and Ana Vujanovic', *Public Sphere by Performance* (Berlin: b\_books, 2012), 29.

of the self. If we are to revive the outcast term of ideology and disentangle it from belief, then we would confer upon performance the function of a system of deferral that keeps disbelief in motion. The display of sheer functioning as an embodied ritual generates meaning and value beyond belief. Hence the performative mechanism twists causes into effects in a circular manner: Because we are doing it, we believe it. Or, while we are doing it, we believe there is something making us do it.

### ***Note #1: homo performans***

It has been the familiar legacy of social constructionism to conceive of the subject externally constituted, as a social being in relation to others. Thus several concepts coined in the proximity of theater and performance have served social anthropology and critical theory since the 1950s to account for the performative constitution of the self: habitus and techniques of the body (Pierre Bourdieu, Marcel Mauss), the social role in the presentation of the self in everyday life (Erving Goffman), man as actor (Richard Sennett), or construction of identity by way of the speech act (Judith Butler). What else could be proffered about homo performans today, we might wonder? That the self appears both in the public and private spheres by performance is not contestable, but what is distinctive about it today merits attention. In lieu of a relativist critique of the autonomous self-determined individual that marked modernity, it might therefore be more relevant to investigate how performance sustains and legitimizes the self today, and moreover, what the subject's performativity comprehends and how it is naturalized.

If, for a moment, we allow ourselves a digression into the etymology of the word "performance," we are directed to the middle-French roots (fourteenth century) of what will become a primarily English word. In Anglo-Norman French, *parfourmer* results from a conjunction of "par" (through, to completion), and "fournir" (furnish, provide). Its closest relative in modern French is *parfaire* (complete, finish), a verb mostly used in participial form (*parfait*, meaning perfect), or in a common expression, "*parfaire sa technique*" (to perfect one's technique). Another correlative is "form" as

in “formation” suggesting the formative effect of action. Hence, we can draw three strains of meaning from the etymology of performance: first, that it is an action, second, that its instrumental value consists in forming something through doing, and third, that the formation implies perfection.

In French, before 1876, the word was reserved for racehorses. Bernard Stiegler observes what the performativity of racehorse means: the animal is trained to run to its limits; and, its body is transformed, that is, cultivated and sculpted to achieve this result. In the beginning of the twentieth century, performativity applies to the machine via the car, and in 1924, Stiegler notes, it transfers back to humans in assemblage with the machine—a jockey, a Formula One driver, or a video-gamer; performativity stands for setting a record, or achieving an exceptional result (2004:209-210). Thus it can be inferred that performativity denotes transformation as perfection: the quantitative dimension of this process—call it training—is supposed to engender a qualitative change, a better difference. When Jean-François Lyotard predicated the postmodernist condition upon the performativity of knowledge, he interpreted J. L. Austin’s speech act—a saying that is doing and utterance; an action taking on an effect in a certain speech situation—as the capacity of knowledge to transform the world. Knowledge is performative when it is quantifiable, lending itself to industry and business.

If it implies a capacity that outdoes sheer competence, as established in linguistics (Noam Chomsky), performativity as a model of action in neoliberal capitalism means much more than acting in accordance with conventions. It is the creative enterprise understood as a combination of initiative and resourcefulness. Such capability seems to best explain business management, yet it substantiates the very drive of action.

I am performative to the extent that I can sense this myself and show others how I am performing, thus rendering visible the effect of my performance. Let us leave the second part of this formula, which postulates effect as the object of performance, for later. Now I would like to look into the who, how, and why of this self-constituting sub-

ject of performance. If there is one attribute under which the sense of self-identity is established through performance today, then it would be intensity. A much-lamented issue in the critique of immaterial labor has been the self-exploitation of the freelance worker. Regularly extending her work into unpaid time, the freelancer is the one who invests herself in activity beyond measure. While it may also apply to any profession exercised independently (freelance), it is most readily seen in the image of the dedicated artist who would also do it for no money, who operates in the dire straits of excess and lack. Sometimes this is read as a desperate sign of precarity, or it is praised as effortful generosity: this performative person gives a lot of herself. Such an account best fits the performativity of the artist. But from the perspective of the subject’s own sense of self, the practice of physical activities as in extreme sports, also referred to as action or adventure sports (long distance trekking, climbing, river boarding, paragliding, etc.), is a parable about experiencing the intensity of self-performance.<sup>5</sup>

We might ask ourselves what is so peculiar about the sublime mixture of fear and pleasure that someone like Mike Horn ‘sports’, himself a contemporary celebrity explorer and adventurer. “I hate war but I think it prepared me for what I do today,” he comments with regard to his military service. “I was only an 18-year-old kid when I discovered one will do anything to stay alive.”<sup>6</sup> In Western liberal democracies, where wars have transformed into endlessly protracted low-intensity conflicts, subjects, especially middle-class males, seek out situations that supplant the sense of danger and risk of war in direct confrontation with so-called extreme nature. The discourse in these practitioners’ accounts bears Romantic undertones: the sense of self is intensified in transcendence, through immersion in a difficult

5. For an excellent discussion on performativity in extreme sports, see: David Le Breton, “Performances et passions du risque,” in *La performance, une nouvelle idéologie?*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), 103–18.

6. Statements obtained from the official website of the celebrity sportsman: <http://www.mikehorn.com/> (accessed November 14, 2014).

situation which in a brutal manner deregulates one's senses beyond sensibility, in a fusion with the world, resulting in the alteration of one's own consciousness. The moral reasons stated in such accounts call to memory the Romantic bourgeois recluse who walks away from corrupt society and into nature: there is more sincerity and personal value in combating nature, mythologized here as a pure and sacred place, than to struggle against the hypocrisy of social relations and false individuals. Tough and hard endurance, notwithstanding suffering, equals the road to a conquest of one's given limits in a schizoid capitalist fear of the enemy inside one's body, a danger lurking inside one's person that might stifle her growth and success. What I am depicting here is a contemporary version of the Judeo-Christian "trial by ordeal," the judicial ritual by which the guilt or innocence of the accused was determined by subjecting them to an unpleasant, usually dangerous experience. Its difference from the ancient practice consists in its identity as a truth-game in the Foucauldian sense, a mode of action that an individual voluntarily exercises upon herself and uses to produce her or his subjectivity. Thus the subject performs the ordeal on herself by her own will. As a radical experimentation with personal resources of endurance, force, and courage, it is also intended as an exercise of self-evaluation in the gamble between one's capacity and opportunity, or chance. Mastering one's destiny makes the subject regard herself as both a professional and a person elected by chance.

Another striking difference here, compared to earlier techniques of the self, rooted in Michel Foucault's study of the ancient Greco-Roman and medieval practices of the care of the self<sup>7</sup>, is a reduction to the testing of a strictly physical limit.

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7. Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (London: Penguin, 2000), esp. vol. 1, "Subjectivity and Truth," 87-92; "The Hermeneutic of the Subject," 93-106; "Sexuality and Solitude," 175-84; "Self Writing," 207-22; "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," 253-80; and "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 281-302. Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Huck Gutmann, Patrick H. Hutton, and Luther M. Martin (London: Tavistock, 1988), 16-49.

The physical experience of, say, a free fall in parachuting appears more real than a subject exploring the political or cultural limits of social situations. The ontological priority of the physical truth cannot be relegated to the timeless lure of adventure: the ordeal of undergoing a test of endurance at the risk of losing one's life carries the trophy of survival and a hardened sense of a guarantee of life. In the rationale of its practitioners, it provides one with the evidence of truth, the physical proof of an intensified feeling of presence in the world. Therefore, it is a mechanism for providing personal legitimacy outside of society to the subjects who seek it in a solitary confrontation with nature.

Just living does not suffice. One has to feel one's existence. Or, in a less sentimental tone, we could say, living one's life well requires justification by way of proof. Showing doing does not ultimately depend on the audience or the public for its legitimization; legitimization lies primarily in self-judgment that one establishes in relation to oneself, in the confrontation of oneself with an evidence of truth, that is, a performance that is good by one's own standards. Self-legitimization by performance is therefore a truth-game from which two conclusions of a different order can be drawn. From the perspective of social anthropology, the relation to oneself does not rest upon narcissistic vanity, but stems from the obsessive fear of not being worthy enough and from the hope of, and effort toward, being valued more. From a more general yet no less political perspective, performances of the self nowadays point to an ontological uncertainty of the (human social) subject: certainly, it has always been the case that the subject could not simply be regarded as being him/herself, unconditioned. In times of neoliberal capitalism and the excessive use of apparatuses of self-control such as social media, this condition might be described as a negative ontological assumption of lack of achievement. One relates to oneself as, per definition, unaccomplished. In a reverse of Jean-Luc Godard's famous dictum "we are given the positive in order to make the negative,"<sup>8</sup> the starting point is the negative from

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8. Godard says: "Le positif nous est donné dès la naissance, le

which existence must be earned, its proofs accumulated and assessed; and therefore, one might finally be accomplished. Though the claim I am positing here deserves a more serious genealogical inquiry concerning the extent to which it reformulates individualism in the tradition of Protestant work ethics in the context of Western liberal democracy, for now we will settle for its value as a compelling proposition about the ontological ground of self-performance.

### **Intermezzo #1: museum of the self**

In 2010, The Hypothetical Development Organization (HDO) launched a series of ‘renderings’ on buildings in the city of New Orleans that had fallen into disuse. Unlike a professional developer who seeks out commercial opportunities, the HDO engages in a kind of visual rhetoric imagining urban development: an image which tells an alternative story for the desirable, albeit not necessarily feasible, future of an abandoned site. One such poster applied to a building located in downtown New Orleans, near museums and galleries, depicts the Museum of the Self. The project is outlined as follows:

Hypothetically, it could be the home of a museum dedicated to the most important figure of our time: the self. The entire façade, both windows and exterior walls, would be mirrors. Mounted from the front of the building, and overhanging the sidewalk: a large 3-D sculptural representation of the ‘thumbs up’ icon (the one people click when they ‘like’ your Facebook status). This sculpture would function as a suitable public monument; if such monuments (ordinarily honoring heroes of the Civil Rights movement, or of the Civil War) form a kind of public inventory of what matters to a community, then surely it is time to memorialize abstract strangers approving the Self. You will ‘like’ this museum!<sup>9</sup>

négatif, c'est à nous de le faire!" Robert Maggiori, "Quand j'ai commencé à faire des films, j'avais zéro an," an interview with Jean-Luc Godard, *Libération*, May 15, 2004, [http://next.libération.fr/cinema/2004/05/15/quand-j-ai-commence-a-faire-des-films-j-avais-zero-an\\_479637](http://next.libération.fr/cinema/2004/05/15/quand-j-ai-commence-a-faire-des-films-j-avais-zero-an_479637) (accessed November 14, 2014).

9. The project *The Museum of the Self* is presented at: <http://hypotheticaldevelopment.com/devmots.html> (accessed November 14, 2014).

So goes the brief description of this rendering.

### **Note #2: the exposure of dancing solo: from theater to museum**

When museums of modern and contemporary art accommodate performances, more increasingly dance, we might again ask ourselves the following: Who and what is the matter of performance? What is the public rehearsed by performance? How do— especially choreographic—performances that implicate visitors differently from art objects serve the political purpose of museums to renew themselves as public spaces? My working hypothesis is that the extensive efforts of various kinds—from art projects to curatorial concepts, to publicity campaigns in museums—make people, visitors and performers alike appear as individuals who perform themselves, privatizing their desire in the expressions of the individual's concern with the experience of oneself. In a word, these projects reinforce an individualist ontology on account of their production of subjectivity which is aesthetically intensified and which infuses the public with the self-expression of a private provenance. I suggest observing it through the optic of a well-known performance format, the genre of solo dance. Solo dance will serve here as an analytical instrument and a conceptual blueprint to investigate the performance of the self within the public institution of the museum. And to begin, I will separate out those operations in the history and poetics of solo dance, seen through a global yet primarily Euro-American genealogy, which inform the self-performance in a social, public-private realm today.

Firstly, it is thanks to dance education, which is based on the legacy of early modern dance of the twentieth century, that solo is grafted as the truth-game: Solo is a standard format through which dancers and choreographers are trained to use their own body as an instrument of expression that refers to their individual self, which is predicated upon the dancer's inner compulsion to move. The focus of expression may shift to formal, stylistic, technical, conceptual, or to any other concerns outside of the supposedly inherent emotional nature of movement. But the bottom line of this doxa is that these concerns are all understood

as belonging to the individual self of the dancer, indexing her personal signature. The intimate and private act of communication in a solo consists of the situation in which the dancer seems, in the first place, to reveal her art to herself with herself, where others are allowed to observe this as an emergence of discovery. The performance theorist Rebecca Schneider qualified it as a “precise and human gesture” of “unrepeatable and unapproachable nature” that “rescues origin, originality, and authenticity.” (2004:33)

At the core of this intimism is what Jacques Derrida has analyzed under the terms of auto-affectation and metaphysics of presence, where he often invokes a genre that is close to solo, for solo is often interspersed with its elements—autobiography—as the perfect instance of auto-affectation as self-relation.<sup>10</sup> To unpack what the self-relation entails in solo dance in Derridian terms: solo performance involves auto-affectation as a form of self-referentiality which occurs when one affects oneself, when the affecting coincides with the affected and the body is the source, the material, and the instrument of movement. It has also been described in the late writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the chiasm in the intertwining of subject/object positions in the body: the hand that touches is touched. (1968:130-155) If modern dance has a special affinity with the phenomenological notion of embodied experience in the living present of the performance, solo is the form that best entertains this illusion of self-proximity, of there being no external detour between moving one’s body and sensing one’s body move, seeing oneself in the mirror, hearing oneself speak. Derrida’s deconstruction of auto-affectation in phonocentrism, or in the self-image in the mirror, highlights the hiatus that detaches the subject from the self, a gap which spaces out the difference between the I-eye and the self as another. The reason I am invoking Derrida’s all too familiar critique of a self-identity that is

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10. While it abounds in many of his works, Derrida’s deconstruction of auto-affectation is most instructive in his early work from 1967: *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

constituted in one’s own immediate experience of self-presence is because the production of solo in contemporary dance, but also many other bodily techniques of the self, rests on the phenomenological postulates of consciousness as the embodied experience of one’s living present.

In spite of an array of excellent works that critically undid the essentialist claims on self-identity in the 1990s and early 2000s in European dance<sup>11</sup>, we are now witnessing the return of a New-Age somaticization of dance, an expansion of solo bodywork in the studio, coupled with the proliferation of amateur solo dances in YouTube clips based on the quest for self-identity and indulgent self-expression, not to mention the popular expression of ‘selfie’-performance by recipient-turned-creative smartphone users. Curators endorse the value of the body dancing live in the here-and-now in museums as a public demand they have to respond to, as, for instance, when Donna De Salvo, the Whitney’s chief curator, comments that “people want to be taken to a new place. In the age of the digital and the virtual and the mediated experience, there is something very visceral about watching live performance.”<sup>12</sup> This cannot only be explained by the fact that the dancing body appears more vital in its here-and-now living presence. There is also the psychosocial component of embodiment that endows dance with a more powerful persuasive expression than the spoken word or inanimate object. Vitalism underlying movement as an expression of the spark of life reifies the self as the body, a physical and thus kinesthetically empathetic experience of transcendental subjectivity that suppresses the social and political contingencies that structure experience. In difference to the institutionalization of psychotherapy that

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11. Here I am thinking of the solos of Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Vera Mantero, Eszter Salamon, Juan Dominguez, Antonia Baehr, Mette Ingvartsen, and Saša Ašentić, all made between 1998 and 2007.

12. Cited in *The New York Times* article “Once on Fringe, Performance Art Is Embraced,” by Robin Pogrebin, October 26, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/arts/artsspecial/performance-art-is-increasingly-a-mainstream-museum-staple.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/arts/artsspecial/performance-art-is-increasingly-a-mainstream-museum-staple.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed November 14, 2014).

has sprung from psychoanalysis throughout the twentieth century, contemporary corporeal praxes (such as Body-Mind Centering, Authentic Movement, Feldenkreis, Yoga, and so on) tie knowledge of the self to bodily sensation and affect. This truth-game appears a more real, more efficient, and more aesthetically pleasing technology of the self, a technology which best corresponds to Foucault's "idea of the bios as a material for an aesthetic piece of art." (2000:260)

However, if we return to the museum and how dance stimulates self-performances by its visitors, an observable difference occurs in transferring solo dance from the stage to the exhibition space. Once dance is presented in the museum, especially if the dancer is dancing alone, in casual dress, mingling with visitors, the gap of distance by which the stage is symbolically separated from the auditorium, and the frame of representation and artificiality of mimesis that define the viewpoint of the spectator, are abolished. The space of exhibition gives the illusion of being as open and clean as a dance studio, allowing both the performer and the spectator to navigate their mutual proximity and float with a mobile and embodied gaze, as opposed to the fixed and disembodied Cartesian gaze in theater. Showing dance in a studio offers a privileged close-up view on the dancing body, a horizontal working space of complicity in which the observer is a witness of the making of a dance. A part of the atmosphere of the studio condition is transported into the exhibition space, but then results in an uncanny friction with art objects and visitors. In Boris Charmatz's *20 Dancers for the XX Century* at MoMA (2013), each dancer or performer presents a historical entry for his/her own 'museum' of twentieth-century solo dance and performance. Thus the audience encounters naked bodies dancing or performing action amidst paintings hanging on the walls. The juxtaposition of living bodies in movement, gazing bodies, and art objects, or places that are vacant and expectant of art objects, enhances the fetishism of the living body as being more real, present, and fragile. In a word, more contemporary than an object.

If we think further how solo dancing in museums can be transmuted into a technology of the

self, choreographer Xavier Le Roy's *Retrospective* reemerges as a case in point. The main part of this new work, which fuses choreography and exhibition, consists of performers' retrospectives, personal stories that contextualize their life of becoming-dancer considered from the perspective of Le Roy's oeuvre. Following from Le Roy's anthological lecture-performance *Product of Circumstances*, the performers speak and present short pieces or excerpts of dances that illustrate their narrative. They address visitors who are caught up in a kind of stand-up solo lecture-cum-dance. From the dancers' point of view, their task is emancipatory, enabling, as one of the performers of *Retrospective* comments, the subaltern to speak. (2014:287) Or in the words of performer Ben Evans:

By being asked to objectify aspects of our own lives, we are given the chance to fictionalize ourselves, as subjects. We—the subjects—become almost unimportant as individuals. What is important is that we are there to address the visitor/s and to recount a story. What happens in the meantime is actually what makes up the exhibition: the identification (or not) of a visitor, the distance taken (or not) from a story, the comfort (or discomfort) with another person. The more I perform in the work, the more I realize what a human work it is. Its material is humans and the relationships we create between us: how we speak with each other, how we look at each other, and eventually, how we identify with the other. This is why I say that what is said and done in the exhibition is less important than the fact that we say and do it. The telling of a story, as an action, becomes the material to begin this process of identification, however distanced it may be. This material is so fine, so subtle that, at every moment, it risks being effaced, forgotten. (2014:302-303)

Even if it voids or masks the importance of the place of truth by means of self-reflection or performed fiction, the form of conveying one's own story retains the core poetical principle of identification, self-revelation, and self-realization in solo performance, one that assumes the aesthetic guise of the dancing movement and corporeal history. The rationale of this operation could be something like this: "If I show you how I learned

to dance, or what this movement produced for me (the question Le Roy persistently asked of the performers), I'm unfolding for you the process of becoming myself, however anonymous, trivial, and necessarily open-ended this might be."

### **Intermezzo #2: a museum of your own**

January 22, 2014, was worldwide "Museumsselfie" day with visitors sharing their favorite selfie images on Twitter. An article in the International New York Times recently discussed new educational strategies in museums aimed at enhancing the visitor's experience.<sup>13</sup> A worry has been registered about visitors spending only twenty to thirty seconds on average in an exhibit, so museums are beginning to organize 'slow art' tours. The emphasis is not on mediating art through more historical, critical, or theoretical knowledge, but on providing museumgoers with tips and tools for curating their own experience. To mitigate visitors' anxiety about vast museum collections as battlefields to be conquered in a hunt for masterpieces, museums encourage a personal approach: "choose what resonates with you, not what's most famous; you might emerge feeling refreshed and inspired rather than depleted; you don't need to think you have to behave in a certain way; you can actually be you."

Curiously enough, research into public behavior in museums today is done by psychologists working in economics and political science departments as well as in clinical healthcare programs. "Positive psychology" is the name of the doctrine applied in projects that investigate museums as so-called restorative environments that can have a positive impact on degrees of happiness and self-reported health, as the following anecdote reports.

Dr Julie Haizlip is a clinical professor at the School of Nursing and the Division of Pediatric Critical Care at the University of Virginia, and she was one of the research subjects of Prof. James O. Pawelski, the director of education for the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. She reports on her experience of visiting

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13. Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Creating a museum of your own," *The International New York Times*, October 11-12, 2014, 21. All subsequent quotes about a "museum of your own" are from the same article.

the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia under Prof. Pawelski's experiment, quoted in the International New York Times article:

Initially, nothing in the Barnes grabbed me. Then I spotted a beautiful, melancholy woman with red hair like my own. It was Toulouse-Lautrec's painting of a prostitute, "À Montrouge." I was trying to figure out why she had such a severe look on her face. As the minutes passed, I found myself mentally writing the woman's story, imagining that she felt trapped and unhappy, yet determined. Over her shoulder, Toulouse-Lautrec painted a window. There's an escape, I thought, you just have to turn around and see it. I was actually projecting a lot of me and what was going on in my life at that moment into that painting. It ended up being a moment of self-discovery.

Dr Haizlip's adventurous encounter with Toulouse-Lautrec's painting ended with—the way it should and was meant to be—a museum purchase. She bought a print of Toulouse-Lautrec's Rosa La Rouge, because, Dr. Haizlip explains, "I felt like she had more to tell me."

### **Note #3: synchronizing users**

Are we becoming obsolete political subjects when we expect that museumgoers and theatergoers act as a public, while in fact they have been transformed into users? What does such transformation entail when the value of the symbolic exchange of works of art on exhibition is substituted with the use value of the experience arising from them? As a slightly detoured answer to the trouble I raise here, I will regard the value of performances in museums, which run parallel in physical and virtual spaces, as one of "imaginary property."

In an attempt to account for the material status of digital information, Florian Schneider proposed the concept of imaginary property, which in a concise definition implies the conjunction between "property that becomes increasingly a matter of imagination" and "images that are subject to ongoing propertization."<sup>14</sup> Imaginary property arises in the absence of the object that can be

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14. Florian Schneider, "Theses on the Concept of the Digital Simulacrum," <http://fls.kein.org/view/34> (accessed November 14, 2014).



known, yet imagination does not result from the struggle to define the relationship between the owner and the object owned, but from “social relationships with others who could also use it, enjoy it, play it or play with it.”<sup>15</sup> From an ideal perspective, usually the one that the artist entertains, social imagination amounts to an economy of abundance and excess, a *dépense* of the social, or, more concretely, it is an open, unbounded meshwork of relations, if you will, that are most eloquently played out in Tino Sehgal’s *These Associations*, made for Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall in 2012. The staging of live encounters that involve speech (but not conversation), dance, and music forms an elusive network of personal narratives, anecdotes that count on the affective response of visitors, on the curiosity of visitors to attend to intimate confessions of performers, where Sehgal, however, maintains tight choreographic control of the borders between the performers and the visitors. As Catherine Wood, the curator of *These Associations*, critically remarks, the relationships in the live encounters are objectified. They evidence “a formalized register of mutual alienation” where the visitors are reminded of being “next to and in an artwork,” “solidifying” into an object of the exchange. (2014:115)

In the Turbine Hall, Sehgal was reiterating his firm stance on protecting what I will now call, after Schneider’s definition, the imaginary property of experience, which resists both documentation and interpretation in Sehgal’s attempt to oppose the supply economy. Simultaneously, and next door, at the Tanks at Tate Modern, the future permanent venue for performance and other time-based arts, opened with a series of performances and lectures under the banner “Art in Action.” The program introduced an apparatus of capturing that information which evades the imaginary property of performance. The marketing department and the department of visitors’ experience at Tate Modern refer to it as social media metrics: the capturing apparatus identifies the behaviors of visitors as they extend onto online platforms

15. Florian Schneider. “Imaginary property: Frequently asked questions,” <http://fls.kein.org/view/167> (accessed November 14, 2014).

by implementing the so-called ‘content’ and ‘sentiment analysis’. I propose to regard this as the capture of the relational value of imaginary property. Namely, Tate Modern organized a process of collecting, coding, and analyzing the Twitter data during the three-month long program along two axes: inciting visitors to communicate their experiences and make them appear public on the walls of the Tanks, and researching audience reception through their resonant online activity. Rendering experience ownable nowadays means translating it into image or text, the information whose value is realized in communication. The watching that tries to appropriate an image as a visual property can never be total, yet the partiality of each perspective of each visitor is ignored by the automatic extraction of metadata, which strive to produce algorithmic identities of visitors through indexing technologies. Although the results obtained by applying a set of automatic tools to “detect subjectivity in text”<sup>16</sup> were judged as dubious and ultimately unreliable, what was made public during the program, and therefore should not be neglected, were the questions that Tate Modern posed and the answers it chose to display. To the question “Does live art need to be experienced live?” an audience member tweeted: “live experience of art must help audience to spiritually develop him/herself.” To the question “What is the role of the audience?” one tweet says: “the role of the #audience is give the art a sense of life and realism.” Another says: “Our role is not to be audience but part of the performance.”

#### ***Note #4: spatial confessions***

Whatever the outcome of any audience research would be, the sheer fact that such a procedure is installed is an alarming sign of a consensus-making policy. It does not matter whether the program at Tate Modern will be shaped according to these imaginary voices; what matters is that the surveillance of consumership is now part of

16. Elena Villaespesa, “Diving into the Museum’s Social Media Stream: Analysis of the Visitor Experience in 140 Characters,” <http://mw2013.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/diving-into-the-museums-social-media-stream/> (accessed November 14, 2014).

the museum apparatus. The museum no longer rehearses the social choreography of civilizing citizens by way of emulation, where the working classes were supposed to commingle with the middle classes and adopt their behavior by imitation. As Tony Bennett demonstrated in his seminal study *The Birth of the Museum*, the modern museum's instruction of the public was, among other functions, an instrument for managing social behavior. Instead of disciplining visitors into public order, as the modern museums did, contemporary art museums today regulate visitors' consumer behavior by stimulating it. They manage their attention by inducting them into participatory entertainment. Choreographing visitors starts with framing the artworks, especially performances, with protocols that call for a mirroring performative response, not unlike in the trope of mirror neurons that vibrate in sync with their source of perception. Social media serve as a mechanism of hyper-synchronization of visitors, turning them into users who punctuate their experience by regularized reports online. Presenting choreographic performances in museums together with a call for the self-realization of the visitor, for a process of transforming her own subjectivity, short-circuits this strand of work with a technology of an aestheticized notion of the self. However, as stated before, the thorough ambiguity of what performance could be still allows for dissent at the hands of the consumer type of usership. If part of the neoliberal cultural policy deployed in large-scale venues of modern and contemporary art is to economically and politically monitor the experience of the audience in numbers, then the artists and curators might have to think of ways of evading control or bending the imperative of performativity to more distinctive artistic and political terms of transformation. In that vein, visitors turned into users could be reconsidered as a more political category in a broader than art-specific frame, as Stephen Wright has proposed in his thesis about usership. Wright argues for user-initiated and user-driven challenges to expert culture, once the "art-derived, art-specific and art-engendered competence" is transferred to users, who collab-

orate "with citizen's initiatives, amateur scientists' projects, and so on."<sup>17</sup> We are still waiting.

Apart from the standardization of visitors' experiences towards consensus, what should give us a problem with performances of bodies in museums encouraging performative responses from visitors? The main issue lies in what is being performed here: the centralization of the self, narcissistic, charismatic, intimate, volatile, or insecure. As Ana Vujanović and I wrote in *Public Sphere by Performance*, "on our way to reach the category of citizens, we constantly stumble upon human beings as individuals that plead their status prior or beyond citizenship." (2014:117)

Why again should it be problematic to regard the recipients of art as "human beings" in the first place, bracketing off their citizenship as secondary? It is certainly consistent with the post-Kantian tradition of the disinterested pleasure of aesthetic experience, as well as with the Romantic operation of the sublime that art tries to reach for the affective interiority of its subjects. In an attempt to challenge this tradition of thinking about the value of artistic experiences, together with the choreographer Christine De Smedt and the filmmaker Lennart Laberenz, I experimented with a format of choreographic inquiry in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, in a program titled *Spatial Confessions*.<sup>18</sup> At various intervals during one week in May 2014, the flow of visitors through

17. Stephen Wright, "Users and Usership of Art: Challenging Expert Culture," paper from the conference "Reconsidering Relationality," organized by Alexander Alberro and Nora Alter, in Paris on April 18-19, 2007, <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1180961069#redir> (accessed November 14, 2014).

18. I was invited by Catherine Wood, the contemporary art and performance curator at Tate Modern, to "manifest the book *Public Sphere by Performance*" with respect to the Turbine Hall, the large-scale open space of the post-industrial building of Tate Modern. Wood prompted me to explore the public character of the Turbine Hall, from which a weeklong program of experiments in the Turbine Hall, a conference, and a performance in the Live Performance Room arose, under the title *Spatial Confessions*. The choreographic inquiry in Turbine Hall was performed by Nikolina Pristaš, Neto Machado, and Christopher Hutchings, as well as by Christine Smedt. For more on *Spatial Confessions*, see: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/eventseries/bmw-tate-live-spatial-confessions-on-question-instituting-public/> (accessed November 14, 2014).

the Turbine Hall was filtered through by a choreographic inquiry. A series of questions about topics that identify visitors as citizens and social subjects were addressed to random visitors, asking them to respond in a movement, gesture, or position. The questions included:

Arrange yourselves in a line in the middle of the rectangle according to the color of your skin from the ticket office to the bookshop from the darkest to the brightest.

If you think that London is the creative capital of Europe, raise your right arm to the side.

If you think that art has contributed to that, raise your left arm to the side.

If you think that Tate Modern changed the cultural image of Britain, bend your arms and clench your fists. If you think that London is overcrowded, go and stand behind someone else.

If you consider yourself able to manage the time that you spend working, come together and keep distance from each other at arms' length.

If you are a freelancer or self-employed, come to the middle.

If you have a monthly salary, pension or scholarship, make a ring around the freelancers.

Now point to whom you think is the richest person in this group. If you think it is you, just raise your arm up.

Everybody that received a vote for being the richest one form a line on the right side.

If you think money is overrated, go to the left border, the others go to the right border.

If you think art is overrated, go to the right border, the others go to the left border.

If you think sex is overrated, go to the right border, the others go to the left border.

If you trust your government, go to the left border, the others go to the right border.

If you believe people should better organize themselves instead of government, yes (form a group next to the bookshop), no (form a group next to the ticket office), maybe (form a group in the middle).

If you think polarization between left and right here is a too simple as a way of positioning oneself, lie down in the middle. Take 1 item out of your pocket, place it in front of you and then step back.

Take another item out of your pocket or bag, place it behind the first item and then step back.

Carry on with this action as long as you wish.

We addressed individuals with questions that might concern them as citizens, their positions and opinions about labor, art institutions, community, living conditions, money, elections, the status of public space, the city of London, and Tate Modern, but we asked them nothing about their experience of art, although most of them were there in a hurry to see the blockbuster Matisse exhibition. In that way the visitors were asked to perform their strictly social selves in a public space. The arising choreographic images might reflect the sum result as a tendency in a quasi-statistical way, and the mass ornament apes the automatic analysis of metadata about visitors. The point of the inquiry is not in the accuracy and representativeness of the result, or what the ornament reveals about those visitors that joined us, but in the situation of performing one's position using one's own body in relation to other bodies, facing other citizens caught up in this game, as well as coming to terms with what such an ad hoc group represents as a sample of the public in the public space of a public institution presenting contemporary art.

In the wake of protests and riots against the rampant privatization (and financialization) of public services and public spaces—that is to say, the political processes that museums are not exempt from—we might ask ourselves why choreographing bodies in museums should stop at the border of individuals, isolated in their concern with their own aesthetic experience, their private emotional, sensual, creative selves? If public space is a precondition for a public qua political sphere, then self-absorption of individuals through their personal experience stands as an obstacle to the social imagination of group formations, collectivities that would reclaim the public sphere as a stage for political action. Or, even to the movements of desire unbound, a-personally and a-grammatically floating in. At least we can no longer say: “people are missing” (le peuple qui manque... la comunità che viene...)<sup>19</sup>. People are there, it is just us, artists,

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19. Allusion to Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*.

curators, visitors that might be choreographing ourselves away from the political concerns with public space, or even just with experimentation with the not-all-too human collectivity of being together, when we celebrate each one dancing with one's own aestheticized self.

## Epilogue

If there has been some ground covered in the notes here for my tentative claim about the society of performance, then performance and performativity are here to stay in the same manner in which we have not gotten rid of Debord's spectacle. We are therefore compelled to consider self-performances across disciplines and sectors, private and public, in their modes of functioning: ideological, economic, technological, aesthetic, theatrical, choreographic, etc. We might also need to think performativity away from being the framing device that measures art's coefficient of visibility and identifiability. However, this means not settling with the effect that performance and performativity have gained in the current form of neoliberal capitalism, the meanings of adaptation and perfection and the means of controlling such effects for commercial ends. If we retain the idea of transformation inherent in the etymology of the term, then another sense of change could be invested: conditions in which performing is a matter of invention without evidence and guaranteed success, an institution of a projected future, an experiment out of the bounds of calculable effect.

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ty (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1993) and Gilles Deleuze's notion of the missing people in *L'Image-Temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 282. In the same paragraph, here in English translation, Deleuze writes: "Art, especially cinematographic art, must take part in this task: not that of addressing the people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people. The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims 'There have never been people here', the missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 217.

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