Slow Work

Dance's temporal effort in the visual sphere

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In the autumn of 2011 I began working with New York-based choreographer Maria Hassabi on *The Ladies*, a series of 'appearances' that involved pairs of dancers taking to the streets of Manhattan to perform two-hour long intervals of varied choreographic scores that included walking, pausing, posing, looking and being looked at. The six-week span of public performances took place unannounced after a limited rehearsal period in Hassabi's home studio. An education of stillness and slowness, we were briefed in the rigorous labour of composure, using movement to not only locate ourselves in space but in time, producing an extended temporal plane upon which our dancing would occur. The project truly was, in the words of post-studio artist Carl Andre, a movement out onto the streets (cited in Rose 2013), where its temporal consistency dynamically inserted it against the grain of urban hustle. A range of reactions from passers-by ensued: disinterest and inattentiveness, curiosity and enjoyment, interjection and suspicion (especially during two excursions entering the galleries of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York that threatened with the risk of expulsion), mockery and ridicule and even one case of assault.

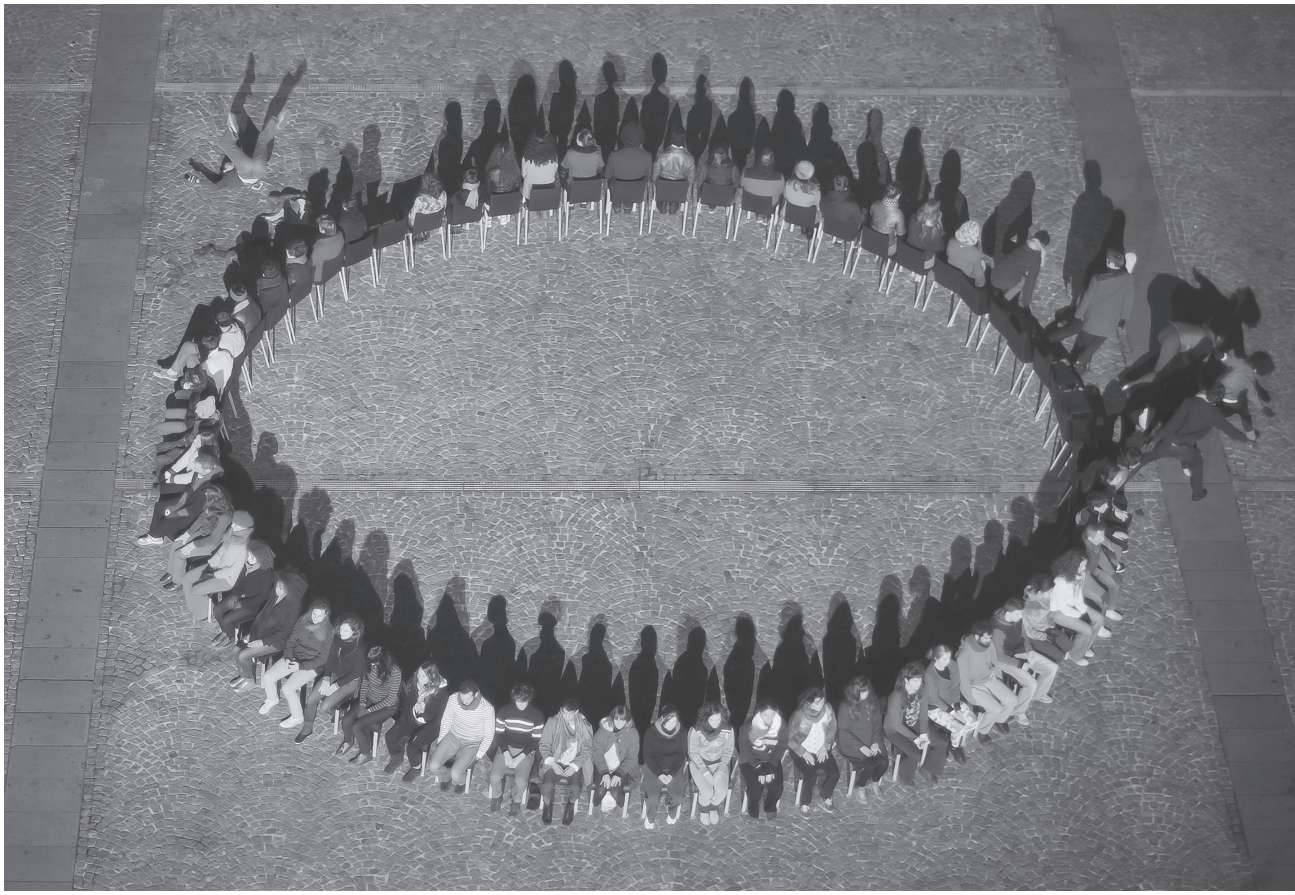
Citing the figure of painting, sculpture, cinema and fashion, Hassabi's work morphs the pose, attenuated to its historiographic spectacle. Engaging duration, proximity and distance, the technical elements of lighting (its objects, illumination and heat), costume and the architectural context of the theatre or gallery, her work asserts the action of posing as a demanding, choreographic pursuit. Referencing famous and affective poses, she has spent years grafting them on to her own and dancer Hristoula Harakas's bodies, developing an intensive performance quality at a signature 'glacially slow' pace that eclipses its confounding effort (Bishop 2013: 319). Bodily endurance, without becoming 'endurance art', initiates a strategy that makes visible the 'effort of formation', intervening against the composure of its image (Lyall 2013). The work can be approached with curiosity or restlessness, intrigue or anxiety, and it is up to the audience to decide. The question of why (pose) collapses into how, anticipating a formal pursuit that is, as Paul Virilio suggests, 'a technical pursuit of time' (2009: 24).

The Ladies was my entre into Hassabi's process as a performer and participant. Through my own labour within its technical demands, I was able to garner a sense of the corporeal capacity of dance to intervene within temporal regimes, accumulate and inflect their flow, and produce its own sense of time. The over-arching task of her choreographic structures for this project could be as simple as travelling

■ The Ladies_MOMA. *Photo Francis Coy © Maria Hassabi (2011)*

PERFORMANCE RESEARCH 19·3 : pp.129-134
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2014.935169

ISSN 1352-8165 print/1469-9990 online



■ The Endless Pace_ Pompidou. *Photo Jean Pacome Dedieu © Davide Balula (2011)*

two avenue blocks when, after one and a half hours, I would realize that only one-quarter of the distance had been covered. Each step, gesture or glance was isolated, metabolized and extended. A quickening of bodily systems emerged – circulatory, respiratory, muscular, the hum of the nervous system – recalling John Cage's observations regarding silence within the sensory deprivation chamber, or Steve Paxton's attention to stillness complicated by a bodily persistence to shift and waver in *The Small Dance, The Stand*. The energy required to maintain intensive deceleration in the midst of New York City's busy, populated streets exaggerated interior calibrations of creaking joints, aching legs, trembling muscles, adjustments in weight and breath and pulse, and the waxing and waning of focus. My body's capacity to filter surrounding stimuli – roaring vehicles, random pedestrians, even the procession of an Occupy Wall Street (OWS) march – afforded incremental complexity to the spare, yet exhausting, choreography.

I exert effort in order to locate my body in the momentary lapse of each pose. Intervals are produced. Hassabi's piece offered a prolonged meditation on what we as dancers do while amplifying the urgency of my own questions within current discussions pertaining to the popularity of dance within visual art spheres: what is the work of dance (as it expands or moves out or alongside its proper institutional contexts)? Does performance practice expand or contract temporality as a primary intervention within object-based economies and institutional structures? How may dance perform this labour? Deceleration, set in relation to performance's economy of ephemerality, draws attention to contemporary dance's relationship to labour, production and (im)materiality. It affords questions about how economies are articulated on and against what I would argue are dance's primary, domestic temporalities, which are most notably expressed through its fleeting acts of disappearance and resistance to the archive. As dance navigates modernism's disciplinary and spatial distributions (between studio and street, labour and leisure, visual and performing arts) this practice of stilling slowness invests the temporal as a site of corporeal labor while also implementing time as a mode of both critique and traversal.

The rhythms of dance's labour can be illuminated by Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of the *domus* and domestication of time. In a 1987 conference paper, Lyotard delivered a critique of Martin Heidegger's 'philosophy of the soil' (1997:270), focusing on the politics of forgetting and exposing 'the potential violence that underwrites the domesticated household' (1997:270).[1] Titled '*Domus* and the megalopolis', Lyotard discusses the *domus* as a site of domestication (see Lyotard 1988).[2] It controls space and time through custom, rhythms of birth and death and communities of work and is maintained as a 'mode of space, time and body under the regime (of) nature' (Lyotard 1988:191–2).

> The common work is the *domus* itself, in other words the community. It is the work of a repeated domestication. Custom domesticates time, including the time of incidents and accidents, and also space, even the border regions. Memory is inscribed not only in narratives, but in gestures, in the body's mannerisms. And the narratives are like gestures, related to gestures, places, proper names. (Lyotard 1988:193)

Representing '[c]ommon time, common sense, common place', the *domus* houses the body's gestures, habits and customs as a keystone of its foundation (191). 'Common work' exposes ways in which temporal qualities of speed, duration and rhythm contribute to the affective architecture of the domestic that binds body and site and maintains it as a space of (re) production. As the sanction and nurturer of bodies, it demarcates the rhythms of these bodies as they rise and fall, wake and sleep and move through the world. This is a bucolic site, where the function of labour and its temporality is naturalized, intersected by the fact that such domesticity is also a sign of inherent violence. The *domus* territorializes through forces of domestication, figuring the self-perpetuated, embodied force of its social choreographies (Hewitt 2005).

The questions that Hassabi's work ignited, pertaining to assumptions of dance's inherent temporality and the embodied labour of slowness, were made all the more urgent after an encounter with Studio Olafur Eliasson's video piece, *Movement Microscope* (2011) It was late November 2011, and I was setting a piece at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris for the opening of 'Danser Sa Vie', a large-scale exhibition tracing relationships between dance and visual art in predominately North American and European contexts during the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. All week I had been rehearsing in the museum's outdoor courtyard with a group of sixty dancers for *The Endless Pace (2009)*, a collaborative project with visual artist Davide Balula. The dance is designed as a clock, each dancer performing the actions of the second and minute hands, keeping, representing and producing time. The conceptual overtones of the dance connect with a spectacle that is reminiscent of Busby Berkeley's abstraction and serialism. My challenge and desire for this choreography was to deliver the dance from the clutches of modernity's embodied legacies of efficiency, Taylorism, or assembly-line mechanics, where each movement might be reduced to a 'mere marking of time' (Kracauer 1963:66). This success settled on facilitating a pleasurable spaciousness within the strict relentlessness of the tick-tock, which I felt was especially critical considering that the cast was comprised solely of volunteer performers. I wanted the dancers to enjoy the physicality of ma(r)king time. A problem to be discussed at length, I anecdotally refer to it only to introduce my thinking upon stepping foot into the exhibition galleries and encountering *Movement Microscope*.

Housed in a converted brewery building in the Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood of northeast Berlin, the multi-levelled Studio Eliasson contains an impressive range of spaces for fabrication, research, communing, cooking, dining, and – on a rooftop – gardening. Incorporating a multitude of activities under one roof, the Studio embraces shifts in programme that blur classical divisions between labour and leisure, art and life. Its fluid spaces encourage flexible interactions and modes of engagement. Akin to trends in technology and

[1] What Neil Leach refers to as 'the dark side of the domus' (1997:270).

[2] Etymologically, *domus* means 'dwelling' or a single-family home from ancient Roman times. Richard Saller (1984) researches the historical currencies of the term as it relates to modern use of 'family', pointing out its meaning as an architectural house or the 'house' of the family, its patriarchal structure and lineages.

information-based economies, Studio Eliasson embraces the cognitive and affective labour of 'head and heart', instigating a process that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss as labour becoming biopolitical (2009: 132–4). Its temporal, spatial and managerial flexibility have been likened to a labyrinth, where the needs of the studio are infused directly into its structure and its productive capacity is not reduced to plastic objects or installations but includes the immaterial: knowledge, collaboration, discourse, pedagogy, community, relationships and the peripheral, conditional elements that support (his) artistic practice (Coles 2012: 61–2). Within this home to anywhere from fifteen to fifty collaborators, Eliasson engages as a client rather than a boss, focusing on process before product and what Philip Ursprung describes as 'the production of questions and the exploration of new issues'. The Studio's atmosphere loosens the tether between labour and commodity, as research 'may or may not serve as a basis for artworks' (Ursprung 2009: 166).

Movement Microscope begins with an outdoor shot of the Studio's entrance. Two people ascend the front steps and enter the building. A moment passes and another couple enters the frame, walking in identical stride, arms swinging gently; their movements are deliberate, slow, graceful and intentional. This initial scene introduces two casts who develop throughout the video: dancers and workers. The rhythm and speed introduced by the dancers remains distinct against a backdrop of everyday studio actions. Their movements are kept at the fore of the video's frame. Decelerated, a dancer's every step, shift or pivot is deconstructed and exaggerated. Limbs lilt and fall, drift and bob. The contralateral, pendulum-like swinging of arms is exaggerated. Slowed down, its gravitational acceleration is imitated and deferred. Shifting between rooms, activities, meetings and materials, speed brings attention to the action of movement itself, its comportment, carriage and restraint. The camera follows the dancers into the kitchen, a communal worktable, the welding room, the painting studio, the library and up to the roof to pick lettuce for lunch. Dancerly traversals are not unlike a butoh exercise, referring to the slow, deliberate, virtuosic walking of Noh. Aestheticized, each dancer's gait is made to look easy and effortless, at home. Nonetheless, we are reminded of Yvonne Rainer's joke that Steve Paxton invented walking (while she invented running) and the constructedness of everyday movement that was productively denaturalized by the postmoderns (cited in Paxton 2012). As the video progresses, the pedestrian dance evokes its vernacular roots in the street. Dancers draw from 'street dance' styles: tutting, popping and locking. These movement vocabularies critique the over-simplification of phrases like 'quotidian movement', inviting alternate dance styles and cultural histories to participate and affect the historical autonomy of the phantasmagoric pedestrian. This street dancer stands out, poised against yet subsumed within the ensemble of the Studio's collaborators. These diverging street vocabularies are woven with pantomime-like gestures that shadow the Studio's various productive actions – cooking, painting, drawing, welding, reading, talking, and so forth.

Throughout *Movement Microscope* it becomes clear that the Studio invests in a crafted image highlighting experimentation, community and an endless well of creativity. Inspecting the scope of its facility, this studio reveals itself as a wealthy and privileged space.[3] Situated within a modernist trajectory of studio practice, whose productive capacity has been argued to redirect focus from the work of art to the subjectivity of the artist, the image produced by Studio Eliasson seems to suggest an intervention that seeks to subvert the primacy of its authorial figure by deferring attention to the semi-public creative process. Studio Eliasson not only fuels the engine for the artwork, it is the liveness of creative action as artwork itself.[4]

Shifts from material to immaterial encourage a discussion of the de- and re-skilling of labour, art's openness to autonomous forms of transformation, and its ability to affect disciplinary configurations through 'relocation'.[5] Claire Bishop cites the transformative potential

[3] *Movement Microscope*'s use of street dance brings up important questions about race and class within the privileged site of the studio, adding another complex layer to parse within my critique of dance's labour within the frame of visual art and its spaces of production.

[4] Studio Eliasson presents a performance of the space of production itself, where, rehearsing Daniel Buren's 1971 essay 'The function of the studio' (first printed in 1979), it resuscitates and perpetuates the place-making function of the modernist studio by (re)claiming that 'the definitive place of the work must be the work itself' (1979: 55). From Buren's argument we can draw an important dimension of the domestic in the production of a work of art, in that it has a home (the studio) that operates as a primary site for the work to exist, haunting its inevitable displacement into gallery, museum, and so forth. This home (as studio) necessarily involves a discourse of site-specificity when considering any and all work.

[5] 'Reskilling is emergent from deskilling precisely because as non-heteronomous labour the deskilling of art is open to autonomous forms of transformation, and these forms of transformation will of necessity find their expression in other skills than craft-based skills: namely, immaterial skills' (Roberts 2007: 87–8).

enabled by dance (referring to choreographer Boris Charmatz's *Musée de la Danse*) as it shifts categorical expectations and conditions of the museum and the collection, 'reimagining' them 'afresh' (Bishop 2011). Dance's popular inclusion in current visual art institutions attends to the re-energizing of critiques around the centrality objects in the art economy, but dance is not merely a symbolic or ideological intervention, it is an embodied and laboured one.[6]

Movement Microscope theatrically engages the dancer's rehearsal studio by drawing attention to the studio's discursive, practical and symbolic currency as meeting place, domestic interior, think tank, stage, laboratory or (according to one press release) a 'reality-producing machine'. The studio is exposed as a narcissistic, phenomenological, metaphysical, ideological space. It operates as a force of representation as much as production, and the video's framing is successful in directing the gaze to the bodies, energies, affects and social exchanges as the fruits that fill this site. We are reminded of artist Tino Sehgal, whose work engages the potential frictions when navigating the gap between object and ephemera, commodity and intangible, dancer and economist, labourer and art-star. He states, 'Art is essentially something that is produced. What I think is overestimated is the power and potential of things. My work is a product, though – not a thing' (Sehgal cited in Higgins 2012).[7]

The figures dancing through the rooms of Studio Eliasson employ concentration and focus but also exhibit an entranced kind of joy and play. Performing a '*certain vision* of dance', they produce an image of the Studio as a quasi-utopian site and offer the sustained sense of temporality (produced through consistent, controlled slowness) as a means to make visible this celebration of creative faculty (Badiou 2004: 59). Each movement is articulated so as to maintain precision yet efficiency, play yet synchronicity. Their slow labour produces temporal pockets in which the Studio's daily tasks warp and transform in dimensionality and intensity. Popping, locking, walking heel-toe, ball-heel, gesturing, or swimming through space, the clarity, rhythm and speed of the dancer's movements intersect the import of a space historically organized by the actions of labour. They call to the critical edge of dance's own history, from which Carrie Lambert-Beatty creates connections between the 'task-oriented time of the 1960s' with 'industrial time sense', writing 'dance's rendering of *playful* activity along industrial lines speaks to the particular anxieties around the rationalization of leisure in this late capitalist moment' (Lambert-Beatty 2008: 95).

And what of the aesthetic significance of slowness? What does this strategy mean in the ma(r)king of time? Eliasson (2013) states, 'I work a lot with our perception of time, of duration, and of how the felt feeling of being present in a situation also determines how that situation unfolds'. The performed slowness of *Movement Microscope*'s dancers provides an ear at which to peel away at the choreographic as a disembodied element that precedes the dancer. The speed of the movement invokes what André Lepecki discusses as a 'slower ontology', a 'kinetic of the slow, the still' that works against the (re)productive speed of modernity's 'kinetic-representational machine' (2006: 57–8). This slowed down temporality forces both viewer and dancer to reconcile creative acts in contrast to the privileging of speed and acceleration within spaces of production. It confuses the transparency of the Studio's machinery whose focus on the immaterial absorbs leisure and labour, and ultimately eclipses the work of this dancing body. Slowness, as a strategy of temporal production, figures against such (re)productive speed, but not without an extreme effort of adjustment. This effort is the key element hiding within the composure of its form. Deceleration requires an aesthetic and embodied labour to produce its sense of time or 'industrial playfulness' (Lambert-Beatty 2008: 94). The stilling of the dancer denaturalizes the Studio domesticated time, producing the visibility of labour itself and enabling another dimension of flexibility: that of dance's own (re)location within the temporal economy.

[6] Controversy around the issue of labour and what Bishop refers to as 'delegated performance' emerged with respect to Marina Abramović's gala performance at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOMA) in 2011 (see Bishop 2008). A primary voice, speaking on behalf of Abramović's 'silent heads', was a widely circulated letter written by Yvonne Rainer, Douglas Crimp and Taisha Paggett.

[7] The performances of the Studio's artists (as they labour) are as much the material output of the studio as its objects installed in museums and this point is further emphasized by its terms for museum installation that necessitate it is shown exclusively in gallery spaces that can mount a life-size projection, allowing the audience to walk around and experience from different angles (Eliasson 2012).

In *Movement Microscope* the studio becomes a filter for a different type of artwork, where dance reflexively performs the actions of labour within the studio, its slow pace making visible the domestication of time within the Studio's aestheticized (s)pace of production. Following the dancers, the viewer's eye ping-pongs between the bodies of objects, materials and tasks and the Studio's enveloping context, and these movements seem to displace the object from material- to an immaterial-driven economy. But the slowness proposed by the dance stalls arrival to such a simple conclusion. The choreographic imperative forces an extended endurance in time. Each movement ignites considerations as to how a body produces time, keeps time and performs or puts pressure on the function of time. It begs us wonder: how can we attend to dance and its temporal investments to better see of what this labour consists? The performance of the Studio as a well of creativity is central to *Movement Microscope*, as is its choice to invest dance with a co-starring role. As I stood in the gallery watching, I wondered if dance could succeed at eclipsing creativity's attendance to economic duty. From behind this question emerged the shadowy figure of time, tenuously spun, weaving attention and spectacle, movement and energy, and a means by which impulse could be wound into an economy of gesture.

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