

Body at Rest

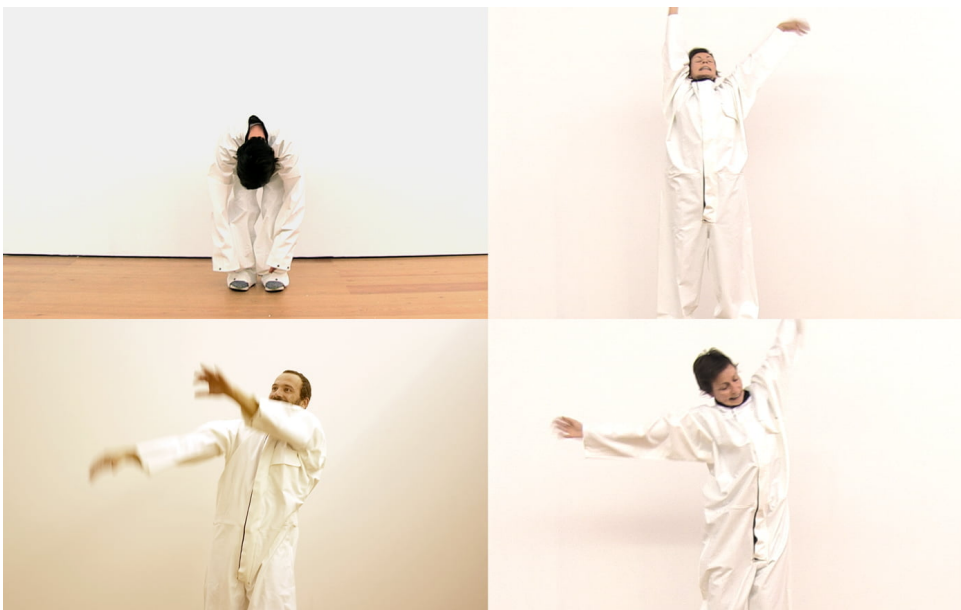
André Alves

Abstract

Body at rest discusses the value of hyper-productivity and uninterrupted production in late capitalism. Departing from an appraisal of the air-dancer as metaphor for the idealised subject in late capitalism, with a special focus on the artistic contribution of Mladen Stilinović to this problematic, this text explores sleep and rest as artistic gestures that make visible the unsustainable expectation of continuous productivity.

The inflatable tube-human wiggles its arms frantically. Meeting this inflated creature offers an unexpected pleasure. Perhaps we sense the Caribbean beats in the wit of the hip.¹ Or, instead, this is nothing but a nervous reflex brought on by the realisation that the relentless movement in the figure of the *air-dancer* is the unrealistic version of ourselves; that this constant smiler is the visual prototype of the ideal capitalistic subject—a self-sufficient, tireless, graceful, confident never-ending dancer idealised by the competitive society we live in.

The *air-dancer* mirrors the malleability and endurance of the human spirit and body, but not our limits, our vulnerability to the interests of capital power based on performance. The air-dancer never stops. Work demands that we never stop. As living entities, humans cannot but stop, alternating between cycles of energetic depletion and restoration within the arch of a lifespan. Unlike the resilient, flapping figure, our bodies and psyches are fragile, irreplaceable resources. Rest is vital.



Never-Ending Dance, video stills, 2016, photo ©André Alves

It is this complex relationship between the identification of subjects with work that I've explored in *Never-ending*

dance, an art installation presented at Centro Cultural Vila Flor (Portugal) in 2016. In *Never-ending dance*, three videos document the failed attempt of different people to mimic the air-dancer. Each body unfurls from a ground position, stretching arms, cracking a smile. In order to impersonate the air-dancer, they try to move tirelessly, effortlessly, joyfully, for as long as they can. Their attempt is bound to fail, and it is unclear what loses vigour first: the arms or the smile.



Installation view *Never-Ending Dance*, 2016, photo © André Alves

The walls around the videos are covered with drawings of the inflatable figure: they are blow-ups of the technical designs featured in the patent registered by Doron Gazit. The panorama suggests a dance scene, and swirling amid the silhouettes are short texts placed in such a way as to heighten the sense of dynamic movements, describing the complexity (and paradox) that understanding work as liberation involves.

Production in late capitalism is no longer restricted to the working hours and the geography of the factory. There isn't a collective scenario in which the climax of working days can be registered (like in the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, 1886). To follow Franco Berardi, the factory is now situated *within* ourselves.² This is a situation of intrinsic exploration, converting social relations and communication, mental states, feelings, imagination and creativity into data—source of capital value. The body becomes the centre of disruptive affects, shaped by the incapacity to realise when productivity—work—is not taking place. It is, as Suely Rolnik argues, as if we'd become "*homeless* ... without the 'at home' of a feeling of oneself, a subjective, palpable consistency."³ The climax no longer is to leave the site of work, but finding how to leave the site of work within us.

Human production, feeding profitability, never cools down. As Félix Guattari puts it, while "in early industrial society ... subjectivity of the working class ... was eroded and serialized. In this era of information revolution, biotechnological expansion, the accelerated invention of new materials and ever more precise 'mechanization' of time, new modalities of subjectification are continuously emerging."⁴ While industrial societies organised profit around the submission of the working body—leaving the mind unguarded to imagine the overturn of the subservient body—the contemporary cultural condition sets a new stage for the circulation and production of the individual as a new form, a new type of commodity.

This new type of existence is worked as a matter of relentless production and management of data through digital technology and social networks. Forms of publicity and adaptation of the self—rather than sweat—become the new material of capitalist investment.⁵ The success of this new economic extraction, following Berardi, results largely from the relationship with technological devices as extensions of our bodies, as privileged tools to relate (continually) with the world, a relation in which the presence of the body (of our own and others') is no longer compulsory.⁶ This scenario, “puts neuro-psychic energies to work, submitting them to mechanistic speed, compelling cognitive activity to follow the rhythm of networked productivity. As a result, the emotional sphere linked with cognition is stressed to its limit.”⁷ The always-on productivity and immediacy of this digital late capitalism is very much like Hans Christian Andersen’s “The red shoes”, stepping into the shoes of a never-ending dance.

Jonathan Crary correlates the “end of inactivity” of this new reality with the dehumanising conditions that blur the distinction between leisure and work, and public and private. Sleep is our last resort to meet this “time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability. In relation to labour, it renders plausible, even normal, the idea of working without pause, without limits.”⁸

If one accepts that post-industrial societies develop damaging modes of over-working, could deliberate artistic representations of non-activity offer critical awareness? Could we work through desire rather than the need to feed capitalist value production, finding ways “to strike” with the self-investment in this (cognitive, physical and emotional) expropriation masked as freedom and autonomy?

Artist Mladen Stilinović was particularly interested in these problems. Between 1978 and 2015, he developed a series of performances for museums titled *Artist at Work*. Under the suggestion of being-at-work, visitors would find Stilinović sleeping or resting in the exhibition space—physically, but also in photographic documentation. Stilinović’s apparent inactivity highlights how the ever-in-production mode that characterises post-industrial societies is made manifest in art. Stilinović performances expose how, according to Jon Ueba, the identity of the artist persona is a case of difficult interruption with activity; that to assume the identity of an artist is to agree to a continuous process of construction in which *labouring* and *working* do not differ.⁹

In his 1998 manifesto *The praise of Laziness*, Stilinović opposes the reduction of aesthetic experience to a managerial act—as he saw it happen in the art of the West. Quoting Kazimir Malevich’s 1921 text *Laziness—the real truth of mankind*, Stilinović claims that there is no art without laziness: “in it Malevich criticized capitalism because it enabled only a small number of capitalists to be lazy, but also socialism because the entire movement was based on work instead of laziness ... without realizing it was laziness that gave birth to it.”¹⁰ Stilinović renounced the progressive automation of art—and similarly, of life—which, for Berardi, drains the creative drive and reduces it to a productive device, and dilutes the possibility of different forms of thought, imagination and hope to prescribed experiences; a poetic impoverishment of the soul.¹¹

By refusing to show in a context that profits from presentation, Stilinović points at and teases the reproduction of economies of relentless production and patterns of consumption within art. Stilinović upsets the exhibition as apothecotic moment, refraining from engaging with a type of politics of “passive spectatorship”, which is oriented to avoid “tiring the listener, which prefers to consume than to be a worker/producer.”¹² Or, as Herman Melville put it: “nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.”¹³ This provocation works by activating the sense of waste in multiple forms. Instead of producing a contagious yawn in the audience, Stilinović’s strike reveals the ambivalent condition of contemporary sleep: regarded as a waste of productive time, and expression

of a reality that is increasingly difficult for subjects to slip into. Stilinović asleep in the exhibition space confronts the expectations around what the activity of live and performance art should look like, and, along with it, the narrative of the support to culture as a waste of public investment. That irritation shows in the way NBC News anchor Brian Williams described a performance by Cornelia Parker and Tilda Swinton at MoMA. In this performance, the latter appears sleeping inside a glass box: “it’s called ‘The Maybe’. A lot of folks thought ‘well, maybe it is art; a woman sound asleep for hours at a time inside a box!’”¹⁴

To spend time sleeping or resting moves against what Ivan Illich called a “worldwide class structure of speed capitalists”, a global structure of constant acceleration that makes rhythms of production and consumption barely bearable.¹⁵ This type of society, oriented towards the exchange value of time, in which someone’s greater speed means more valuable, more productive time than others, reflects in “language: time is spent, saved, invested, wanted and employed.”¹⁶

Sleep, according to Crary, “is an uncompromising interruption ... the stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.”¹⁷ Stilinović’s sleep teases the spectator with this realisation, rendering spectators as a fantasy in the artist’s dream, as if they were spectres of a ferocious reality of never-ending performance, which the artist refuses to feed and awake into. Stilinović’s resting figure recalls the resting figure at the centre of Henry Rousseau’s 1897 painting *The Sleeping Gypsy*. The sleep of this figure can be seen as a defiance to the social pressure to perform, and of sleep as an escape from the ferocious guard of activity—represented in the painting by a lion smelling the sleeping body. The figure smiles in her sleep; here, sleep can be read as a type of happiness connected to resistance, rather than to material wealth.

The theme of sleep in contemporary art moves from the exclusiveness of bourgeois mores to a general motif for cultural examination. Deployed as a form of oppositional politics, “awakening from the credo that is best to burn-out than to fade away”, the motif of sleep in contemporary art claims inactivity as a very contemporary mirage.¹⁸ The examples accumulate: Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963), Chris Burden’s *Bed Piece* (1972), Ted Spagna’s *Sleep* (1975), James Luna’s *The Artifact Piece* (1986), Yto Barrada’s *Sleepers* series (2006), Chajana den Harder’s *Sleep* (2012)... It is as if inactivity has become something that is only reachable from the outside, in which one pays others to do the non-activity that one is too busy to do oneself. This is made quite literal in Elin Wikström’s performance *What Would Happen if Everyone Did This* (1993). By tucking herself into a bed installed in a supermarket, Wikström commodifies inactivity as a consumable good. The performance suggests a discussion around value, about the possibility of another type of society, oriented to practices of inactivity instead of activity.

Sleep is a fantasy in a world of never-ending technological availability. Artists Barbora Kleinhamplová and Tereza Stejskalová portray the artist as the ideal worker within such an economy. Producing even while sleeping, artists’ existence could be described as a somnambulist state of consciousness. In the videos *Sleep. A three-act play with six actors* (2014) and *Sleeper’s Manifesto* (2014), sleep is described as a disputed democratic space. The artists argue that by biological default sleep is democratic and egalitarian, since profiled differences between bodies are blurred in the unconsciousness of sleep. In that sense, any attempt to control rest shows the intention to discipline the general unconscious. As with technological devices, this new existential condition can be termed a *sleep-mode*, a state of being that is neither turned off nor turned on. It is a state of suspended energy and suspended desires: the reductionism of the erotic imagination to the satisfaction of completion. As a result of that, the capacity to invent other worlds, other ways, is reduced.¹⁹

The fading of revolutionary imagination as effect of the indoctrination of subjectivities is the theme of Georges Perec’s 1967 novel *A Man Asleep*. The novel is written in the voice of the second person singular— *you*— a

dialogue taking place with the self, not fully awake, not really a dream; a sleep mode as existence. The novel introduces the reader to the confrontation of a young student with a society built upon a project of collective compliance. Work and participation in society become the means through which such collective enterprise is established. He does not want to become a piece of the puzzle in such a society; he wants to break with the chain of social relations that confine subjects in a lifestyle where “everything is arranged, everything is prepared in the minutest detail: the surges of emotion, the frosty irony, the heartbreak, the fullness, the exoticism, the great adventure, the despair ... where everything is ready for your death.”²⁰

The lifestyle that such society promises, “ensures that there are no visible alternatives to privatized patterns of living” and inhibits the imagination of new reorienting values for society.²¹ It is a reality in which one works through—financial, reputational—needs, rather than through desires. In the attempt to break with such a society, the young student initiates a process of withdrawal, to mirror indifference as a method, disappearing from the shared social scene. But unlike Stilinović’s refusal—or even *Bartleby*’s famous non-conformity—Perec’s main character oversees the significance of strike as contagion. It is the occupying of shared social space that adds to practices of strike that generates ripples of irritation and solidarity with forms of abuse and power installed within structures of labour. By choosing indifference as a form of resistance, Perec’s character misses co-presence as a matter of involvement. In fact, this can even be thought as another form of permanently *on*: the *on* of apathy and negativity and the inability to establish connections—the affective effect of functionalism. The novel ends with a change of tone in the narrator’s voice, reproaching the choice for indifference because political resistance “is futile, neutrality is meaningless, indifference is not transformative of the self.”²²

To oppose the trinity of profit, recognition and influence sustaining competitive and accumulative capitalism, is to discover that freedom is not doing what you will, but to will what you can²³; to find real attachment to *things*. That opens up the possibility to unlearn apathy and the lack of sensibility to other bodies—where our inability for involvement becomes manifest—“the possibility of a socialism of mutual support, of a world divested of private property, flourished as visible elements of a contested collective imagination.”²⁴ This is not nostalgia, but a refusal of the values inherent to the ambition of self-sufficiency and over-optimistic personality, which (conveniently) generate a sense of individual responsibility to fix crises. It is a refusal with a modality of reality that, despite having “the semblance of a social world, ... is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness.”²⁵

In order to halt, or even counter the values of today’s high-performance capitalist society, our best chance might be to recognise that the social existence and emotional connectedness of contemporary reality requires a reactivation of the collective body, according to Berardi.²⁶ To revive the pleasure—not the threat—of finding the body of the other in the collective dimension, and to interrupt the extension of the competitive principle to every fragment of social life. It is an opportunity of slowing down, for recognition and involvement of others: not as a figment of the artist’s dream, but as a reality one is eager to awake into.

Footnotes

1. Peter Minshall, a Trinidad and Tobago artist credited as the author of the inflatable human puppet (originally called “Tall Boy”), explains in the podcast *99% Invisible*, “Inflatable Men” (episode 143), how it

- reminds him of Calypso music. The original concept design of this air-dancer was developed for the opening ceremony of the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics. The patent of the air-dancer was registered in 2001 by Doron Gazit, an artist collaborating with Minshall in the design process, with the patent title “Apparatus and Method for Providing Inflated Undulating Figures”. See Greenspan, Sam. *99% Invisible –Inflatable Men*, episode 143. Podcast Cambridge: Radiotopia. 12-04-2014. Available online at <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/inflatable-men/> (accessed 2017-05-03.)
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 17. Crary, *24/7*, pp. 10 -11.
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 21. Crary, *24/7*, p. 115.
 22. Perec, *Things*, pp. 219-222.
 23. Janning, Finn. *The Happiness of Burnout: the case of Jeppe Hein*. London: Colophon Books. 2017. p. 66.
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25. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

26. Berardi. *The Soul at Work*, pp. 133-134.