Alienated Accumulations: Does Time-Based Media Belong in the Museum?

I mean something. Or maybe I don’t mean anything. I am the resurrection of the SPACE and I am the resurrection of TIME.

– Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*

Beginning in April 2016, for about a month, several dancers and choreographers occupied the first floor of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. The exhibition “Frames of Reference: Choreography in the Museum,” curated by Katarzyna Słoboda and Mateusz Szymanówka, transformed the museum’s spaces into open studios, which in turn made visible to the public the working methods of the choreographers. The experience of observing the dance in its nascent form questioned the institutional framework in which the unfinished pieces were presented, redirecting the spectator’s focus towards critically assessing the institution’s structure. Not experiencing a dance as a finished piece left many of the visitors baffled. Yet, it ultimately revealed the significance of including time-based art in an institution – a testimony to how time can be abstracted, documented, and held in reserve.

The first floor of the building (once a nineteenth-century palace) was sectioned into rooms that were distributed to individual artists to use as their studio and rehearsal space. While some of the artists arranged the rooms into small-scale installations, others transformed their entire workspaces into exhibiting institutions. The artists performed new movements connected to current projects they were researching and developing. Since these were unfinished pieces, there was, in fact, nothing “to be seen,” only fragmented movements like exercising, resting, reading, and, as was often the case, distracted browsing of the internet. Artists previously in need of rehearsal spaces turned the museum into a real estate market of new time-based work.

The act of handing over museum rooms to be filled with expanded choreographic forms had a dual effect. It not only allowed the spectator to witness the development process and be offered tools to better understand the pieces; it also rendered each room an area of artistic autonomy, given that the now alienated artists were not obligated to respond to each other. These “living spaces” – unable to share in one, singular narrative – required that each artist stand on their own. The resulting alienation effect brings to mind the duality of “synchronic” and “diachronic” exhibitions discussed by Rosalind Krauss. Krauss reformulates the tension between institutions dedicated to the preservation and presentation of contemporary...
Krauss points out that this “discursive change” Krens imagines is one that shifts from diachrony to synchrony. She explains that through this transformation, the entire model of the museum – which previously exhibited works in a way that connected different eras and forms of art into a whole and coherent story – now becomes a space for the presentation of a disconnected selection of artists. The key difference for the spectator is that instead of time, it is the experience of space and the use of architecture as a tool that enhances the art. This transformation can be seen as an evolution of installation art as it intersects with the increasingly autonomous role of the artist. The logic of capitalism had stripped bare the museum’s pretensions to historical preservation, now revealing a relation that epitomizes the commodification of art.

In its nascence, installation art can be seen as an attempt by artists to gain autonomy over the context of their work as they push against the institutional–curatorial mediation complex. Until then, the historiography imposed by institutions was a one-way street. Individual pieces of art were instrumentalized and robbed of their singularity in order to render a teleology that established a history of art as a common task and shared fate. Artworks, formerly points in a grand narrative woven together by institutions, now asserted their own independent, unshared space – a hidden aspect overlooked by Szemann’s notion of “individual mythologies.” Artists, now directly addressing the varied spaces and frameworks in which their works were being presented, defined art’s singularity as an “accumulation of space.” While such utopian spaces might have been intended by the artist to serve nonconformist ends, they also prepared spectators for a reformulation of the capitalist logic of work. While the spaces exhibited and enabled autonomy, they also simultaneously promoted liberalism and staged market-driven values. In this way installation art, at its beginning, embodied a paradox – subversive works presented in an institutional space reaching a new level of commerce.

While Krauss was concerned with installation art, the tension between art, the institution, and the market she examined can also illuminate the logic of the rise of time-based art, and the logic of late capitalism. This reformulation came after Krauss spoke to Thomas Krens, who at the time was the director of the Guggenheim. As Krauss recounts, Krens described his vision of a new type of relation between artistic production and its spatial presentation:

What was revealed to him was not only the tininess and inadequacy of most museums, but that the encyclopedic nature of the museum was “over.” What museums must now do ... was to select a very few artists from the vast array of modernist aesthetic production and to collect and show these few in depth over the full amount of space it might take to really experience the cumulative impact of a given oeuvre.³

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1. Ramona Nagabczyńska
2. Przemek Kamiński
3. Alex Baczynski-Jenkins (08.06)
4. Kasia Wołńska
5. Magdalena Ptaszynik
6. Agata Siniarska
7. Izzi Szostak
8. Anna Novicka
9. Marta Ziółek

art in the contemporary museum, especially new media such as film and video. When it comes to these forms of artistic expression, the role of the spectator is vexed and baffling – not unlike the spectator of performance-based work in museums. Museum visitors know all too well the fragmented attention that film and video works induce. While it cannot be argued that film and video don’t belong in the art space, their successful presentation depends on very specific conditions.

A screen is a technology that creates the illusion of space, with the effect of localizing the viewer. In a movie theater, the comfortable chairs form part of an apparatus whose function, in preventing movement, is to create a passive subject. Bernard Stiegler describes the full cinematic effect that is desired by the spectator:

The coincidence between the film’s flow and that of the film spectator’s consciousness, linked by phonographic flux, initiates the mechanics of a complete adoption of the film’s time with that of the spectator’s consciousness – which, since it is itself a flux, is captured and “channelled” by the flow of images. This movement, infused with every spectator’s desire for stories, liberates the movements of consciousness typical of cinematic emotion.4

While Stiegler was writing about cinema, film in an art institution can only partly resemble this experience, which completely immerses the viewer and removes them from real time. By contrast, the museum visitor, with distracted attention, roams through the museum from object to object in search of something to focus on – an experience of art that is shaped by rest and movement. Unlike in a cinema theater, the viewer in an exhibition is conscious that there is always something more to discover, constantly delaying a sense of completeness. Attempting to reconcile this conflict between different modes of attention, the institution tries to either transform, as much as possible, a gallery space into a cinema space, or to reformulate a film into art that can be viewed in parts (it’s crucial that the film’s general atmosphere be more important than the narrative plot). This constructed experience oscillates between concentrated attention and distracted spectatorship, with the film on infinite loop – a mechanism of eternal return for the film or video material. Since the film or video is often available in its entirety.
Alessandro Bosetti, fragments of the gesture based score for *Acqua sfocata, utilità del fuoco ed altre risposte concentriche*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.
outside the institution, the spectator rarely watches it until the end. There is much more to uncover elsewhere. The rhythm of movement that is common to viewing, for example, an exhibition of paintings, is replaced by an elongated version in which rests are much longer than movements. But just like the synchronic spaces that Krauss discusses, the temporal dimension of moving-image works in exhibition venues transforms into abstracted time. As the presentation space mimics a cinema-like non-space – which could very well be exchanged for anyplace else – the time of a projection is removed from its original context. It now confronts an attention span that is continuously distracted by thoughts of what else there is to see in the exhibition.

Distraction in the exhibition space is further encouraged by the growing multiplicity of different media. As Peter Osborne writes:

This need for distraction is readily fulfilled by the gallery: by the sounds and movements and sight of other viewers, by the beguiling architecture of gallery-space (which so frequently overwhelms the works), the view out the window, the curatorial information cards, the attendants, by the gallery shop, the café – as well as by other works. Perhaps this is the function of grouping works together in the same visual space: they provide a psychic space of distraction which eases the anxiety involved in giving oneself up to a particular work. Other works “gaze” at the viewer behind his or her back, making their own claims on their time, providing the reassurance of possible distraction.5

This “psychic space of distraction” also sets the conditions in which performance and live art are experienced within the museum. However, dance, and more generally performance art, must not only acknowledge these conditions of distraction as a symptom of capital. They must also challenge them. We can identify two distinct situations or “places” in which time-based work is typically presented in a museum context: one is a replica of the performance art venue, while the other uses the specificity of the exhibition space to expose the constraints of that space.

While exhibition venues are sometimes reconfigured to look like concert halls or theaters, these transformations are merely temporary – for the duration of the performance. Rather than the physical setting adapting to the performance, it is the performance that is required to adapt to the conventions of the exhibition space, including the conditions of attention and distraction. Claire Bishop refers to these transformations as the “retemporalization” of performance – an adjustment of “event time” to “exhibition time.”6 This adjustment could also be compared to the change from the diachronic to the synchronic. And while it may seem that live art reintroduces narrative into the museum, performance also invites fragmented attention and partial spectatorship in a “psychic space of distraction.” As a result, the narratives take the shape not so much of connected sequences of movement, but rather of semi-independent parts that can be fully understood without having to experience the work in its entirety.

Sometimes these works also consciously take into consideration the institutional framework of the performances, turning the work into a form of institutional critique. An example of this is the work of Adam Linder, who has said of his choreography, “If it’s institutional critique, it’s located in the transaction of the bodies.”7 Here the choreographer seems to reference recent discourse on the presence of dance in museums. Most notably, this includes the work of Sven Lütstück, whose article “Dance Factory” applies the ideas of Italian operaist thinkers to dance. Just as Krauss observed the logic of capitalism at the core of museum presentation, Lütstück sees the museum’s growing interest in the works of choreographers as reflecting exploitative relations of labor in the wider economy. Delegated performance is often criticized for instrumentalizing the performer, or worker, while not offering them prestige and wealth equal to that of the choreographer. Linder uses such criticism to reflect on the ways that art might reveal the limitations of choreography. His pieces that offer “choreographic services” are comprised of both the live performance as well as labor contracts – an integral part of the work that sets the service relations in motion and structures the performance itself. Choreographic Service No.1: Some Cleaning, for example, was partly based on a set of movements used in cleaning.

The act of revealing the hidden work of maintenance and care involved in exhibition spaces can be traced back to Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Linder, by contrast, represents the act of service in the performance itself. For Linder, the institutional critique is oriented towards the expectations of the audience, which desires a self-reflective work rather than one that is directed towards the institution. Works like these raise the concern that a bold and possibly risky practice based on realism might be replaced by well-known and safe representations. Linder positions his works on this shaky foundation:

There are two factors that allow me to
Alessandro Bosetti, a composer interested in the muscality of language, establishes a different kind of social relation through the performance of his scores. At the Serralves Foundation in 2017, he realized a version of Acqua sfocata, utilità del fuoco ed altre risposte concentriche, a five-hour durational work with twelve volunteer performers and himself as conductor. He devised a set of gestures and operations that enabled him to control the volume, frequency, and modulation of the voices of the ensemble as they naturally conversed with one another. For a viewer just peeking in, the performance might at first have seemed like a chaotic panel discussion. However, in the work — based on the idea that a set of voices can be treated as a bank of samples or set of plug-ins manipulated in real time — Bosetti conducts the forms of speech. A seemingly casual situation is in fact a highly controlled process where the performer has liberty only with the subject matter of their speech.

The notion of involuntary speech is central to Bosetti’s practice. In his words:

We are “spoken” by a voice that comes from elsewhere but disguises itself as “our voice.” I have to think of why in many of my pieces I am so obsessed by dubbing, speaking in unisono with other voices. I always try to speak along with them. Never to succumb to the illusion that this is me. “Me” is “me” and “them” is “them,” there should be two hearable voices there at the same time to save me from confusion. One is the corpse and the other is me. The ideal situation would be that of having a time machine allowing us to know in advance everything that will be said in the future. If, for example, we are invited to a dinner we will already know every single word that will be spoken at the table. We could then learn it by heart and speak it in unisono with the others. We will speak our part and then all other parts as well.

Unisono, or two or more sounds in the same pitch, is intersubjective and enabled by a score that determines the mechanism of operations rather than the sequence. Nonetheless, the score still represents time and space in reserve, and forms a plateau on which the voices can, for a moment, form a community. Like duration, the space in which the work happens is a secondary consideration. The piece consists of bodies consistently activated and put to rest by the conductor. Labor, then, is alienated from the individual and becomes part of the intersubjective task. While the work isolates itself from other events in the museum, diachrony is reintroduced and becomes integral to the piece. Since the narrative is replaced by a sequence of orchestrated but largely nonverbal utterances, the piece produces a sense of staging a mnemotechnical device that activates accumulated speech. In a manner similar to Linder’s work, Bosetti uses the score to create a discrete community with bodies uttering words in reserve. The muscality of cut-and-pasted parts of speech offers a synchronic reading of the piece. The listener is led from an initial impression of a synchronized community into constant disruptions of any sort of continuity.

Choreographer and performer DD Dorvillier provides a more direct take on questions related to the spatial and temporal localization of live art:

I don’t think there’s any way of making dance anything but dance. Dance is a time machine. I want to touch the French soldier’s calves dancing the gavotte. I want to sniff the hair of the Haitian dancer at the crossroads. I want to be there when they throw tomatoes at Nijinsky. I want to be there when Mr. Wiggles wiggles. I want to hear the clunking toe boxes of all the ballerinas exiting the stage at once. I want to be there when they throw tomatoes at Nijinsky. I want to be there in Tiananmen Square, in Ramallah, in Bulgaria, for all those dances, and all those reasons for dancing. These are images of dance, a mere pinch of salt from an inexhaustible mountain that continues for days, weeks, years, forever.

The multi-layered temporality experienced in Dorvillier’s works is further enhanced by the notion of accumulated spaces within them. That is to say, each work is performed in a real space,
and is also a sum of abstracted and past rooms. She recounts one of her pieces:

I was making No Change for over a year and a half, in lots of different spaces. Every time I rehearsed in a new place, I repeated what I did the day before in the studio. It was about reproducibility: everything had to be same. So, if today there’s a window here but next month I’m working in another country, and I have studio time for a few hours after class, and there’s no window there, I still refer to that place as a window and I still try to look through the window; I still put my arm out the window even though it’s a wall ... I started using a trashcan and then the trashcan finally became a bucket. But every room I went into I had to find a container that was like a trashcan. So, each space that I worked in was an accumulated space.11

In considering these multiple layers of context that simultaneously root and displace the work, she continues: “I have gotten so much energy from discussing my work in places that aren’t typical dance institutions, the kind of discourse that has been extremely limited for years in the dance world.”

An art institution is a repository of spaces where previous time-based media has already occurred. An exhibition can be treated as an extended event that continues past the media it initially presents. Dorvillier’s observation points to a recent institutional drive towards the reconstruction of music, performance, or installation from an intermedia moment during which ephemeral pieces were beginning to be established in museums — namely, the work of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and ’70s. After all, this was the era of the first massive inclusion of time-based media in the art institution. Recently reigned interest in figures like Tony Conrad may represent an attempt to rewrite the history of art from the last century in terms of the interests of the present moment. For example, in writing about Conrad in 2008, Branden W. Joseph proposes developing a new genealogy with the phrase “minor history.”12

While Conrad, Catherine Christer Hennix, and Marianne Amacher are missing links in the formation of art music and its presence within art institutions, Simone Forti might also signify a similar process of reprisal and revival that establishes the foundations of choreography in the museum. The ephemeral character of these works is obviously one of the primary issues in reimagining the past. As a result, these artists’ more complex works were never preserved. The drive to reconstruct these moments of inclusion signifies the need for grounding the new wave in the past. For years, the pioneering works of time-based art were only accessible through documentation, providing only an idea of the event through photographic witness.

How is it possible to reconstruct such a movement? Just as Dorvillier writes of accumulated spaces, we should be thinking of the accumulated time that an institution can activate through performance. David Crowley and I faced a similar set of problems earlier this decade, while seeking to reconstruct the histories of audiovisual experiments in the Eastern Bloc. In 2012, the exhibition “Sounding the Body Electric” addressed the history of authorities on experimental art and new technologies – primarily in the cooperation between visual artists and musicians. The archival materials, not originally intended as works of art, needed to enter the exhibition and become primarily visual objects. Much of this material was prepared by composers from the late 1950s who found themselves doing films and developing new languages for graphic scores. These archival materials helped to decode the works of intermedia art, and subsequently led to a unique realization: the institutional frame is strong enough to turn a musical score from an object used to record and originally transmit music into an object of aesthetic contemplation. Performances of reconstructed time-based audiovisual pieces are arguably similar to the instruction-based works of conceptual art or Fluxus event scores. The common grounding of these materials within the art-institutional framework allows an architectural floor plan that uses the language of space to become a time-based audiovisual score. A 1968 sound installation at Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw entitled Spatial Musical Composition provides another example of music being transformed into an art object. The architect Teresa Kelm, composer Zygmunt Krauze, and the sculptor Henryk Morel created a corridor with six sound booths, each lit by a different color and equipped with a source of sound. Extended soundproof walls allowed for soundtracks to be mixed in the separated spaces. Equipped with tools offered by the artists, the visitors moved freely between the spaces in order to create their own version of the composition. The simple project was powerful in its installation: it enacted a model of working with taped music so that sound, organized in intersecting layers, became a means of handing control of the audiosphere over to the listener. In this way, the installation challenged the passive activity of listening to music in a concert hall. The modular character of the composition made it easy to separate and blend the tracks and
allow the audience to acknowledge the principles of recording and mixing tools. The artists note:

The piece is composed of several audio layers, each being emitted at the same time by a single speaker installed inside a soundproof booth. Moving from booth to booth, the listener integrates the separate tracks into a single whole. Unlike in the concert hall, the piece does not unfold in time in front of a passive listener, but rather the listener can shape the piece depending on the path they take and the time they spend in the designed space.

As the first sound installation in Poland, it was frequently referenced in literature on experimental music, but essentially unavailable to entire generations of researchers. The work was a missing link in the reception of the avant-garde in the 1960s. The connection between this piece and, for example, the early audiovisual works of Krzysztof Wodiczko, would be based solely on written accounts.

Questions surrounding the later accession of an audiovisual work of art posed by our reconstruction of Spatial Musical Composition can also be found in Robert Ashley’s composition Yes, But Is It Edible? (1999). The performance instructions here were simple: the lines should be uttered in one breath, and after each line is a mark with a cluster of sound coming from a piano. Ashley argued that part of the revolution of graphic notation was that it also involved space:

There was a lot of experimenting that ended about thirty years ago based on the “hypothesis” that “space” equaled “time” in musical notation. These were experiments, because in the traditional notation of Western music space had never been equated with time except in transcription. The experiments were designed to determine if musicians could learn to “read” space (on paper) as time.

Ashley’s observation seems to directly address Kelm, Krauze, and Morel’s work – the floor plans of which resemble a mix of spatial arrangement and musical notation, rather than simply a work of architectural design. Kelm and Krauze’s description of their piece points to this possibility: “Music and architecture thus form an integral whole here and can only exist in mutual connection. Architecture, like an instrument, is indispensable for the piece to be performed. The operation of the piece of music can be connected to that of the visual sequence.”

Today, a leaflet from the original exhibition can be treated as an instruction for the work to be repeated, reperformed, reinterpreted. In this sense, it becomes achronological. With this reasoning in mind, Muzeum Sztuki acquired the work not as a physical object, but rather as a set of instructions for realizing a musical piece. Now the piece has a transitory character within the museum setting: it is available as archival material, but can also be performed in the space for a special exhibition. So far, the museum has performed it twice.

Like the works of DD Dorvillier, the two performances of this piece occupy real space while also constituting an afterimage of the 1968 installation. There is a serious obstacle, rooted in modernist aesthetics, to the methodology of treating installation art as a performance of a score: the question of authenticity and originality. But were the Fluxus event scores or Sol LeWitt’s instructions so different than a “Structure That Wants to Be Another Structure”? As shown above, recent developments in the area of performance offer new tools for revisiting founding moments of time-based media. Delegated performance is, after all, also a method of preserving ephemeral art, and its popularization pushes against the requirement of authenticity as a valid criterion of value.

The extended definition of a score that addresses its own spatial design is a mechanism, based on mnemotechnics, which renegotiates the temporal and spatial coordinates of the action. For Linder, the score can be the work contract that questions institutional regulations. For Dorvillier, it is an accumulated space in which movements are set into motion. And for Bosetti, it is the accumulated involuntary speech that forms an alienated speaking sculpture. Using a score as a pretext to the performance never proves neutral towards the sensation of time. The score is time in reserve. But it can also be an accumulated space that allows for the activation of reserved time. Strangely, this takes us back to the moment of Krauss diagnosing the relation between the logic of capitalism and the structure of the museum exhibition. The operation of time as labor addresses performance as an oscillation between synchrony and diachrony, which doubles as a relation of capital. Accumulated time can be exchanged for space, since both share the same logic and both are units of the same currency. We can attribute the expanded logic of notation to the condition that allows the synchronic to gain dominance. A score does not care for the date – every single iteration of a performance is unique and equivalent. Since only the date of the composition matters, the chronological continuity of both grand and
smaller narratives is disrupted and alienated.
Returning to Stiegler, he claims that:

It is this general equivalence in which time gives way to a spatial figure that allows for what Marx calls the "general equivalent": capital, as currency accumulating an abstract value because of its manipulability, is thus also time placed in reserve, preserved, in some sense crystallized or congealed, as Queneau has said. Tertiary retention, whose most abstract form is money, and which produces abstraction through the correspondence principle, at the same time opens up the possibility of abridged manipulation in which positional numeration is a systematic exploitation in the form of a system of spatial equivalences (images and numbers), of temporal operations (enumerations as the fallible streaming of consciousness).\(^\text{16}\)

Stiegler introduces another important element into the equation of performance and spectatorship: the technical devices that enhance memory can be seen as tools of tertiary retention. A museum that is formed as a mnemotechnical instrument accepts live art as it disrupts narrative, spatial, and temporal constants. After all,

Diachrony and synchrony are tendencies that form and re-form ceaselessly, and we will see that they cannot be in opposition over a significant amount of time without tragic consequences. Yet their composition is precisely what from the hyperindustrialization of temporal objects constitutes the possibility of decomposition.\(^\text{17}\)

The brief moments of rest in the oscillation between diachrony and synchrony reveal the exploitation of temporal objects. But within these hidden islands or cracks is also a hope for a renegotiation of potentialities, just as Susan Howe imagines in the evocations of music:

Listening now, it’s as if a gate opens through mirror-uttering to an unknowable imagining self in heartbeat range. When we listen to music we are also listening to pauses called “rests.” “Rests” could be wishes that haven’t yet betrayed themselves and can only be transferred evocatively.\(^\text{18}\)

Audio credits:

Piotr Kurek, Falling, from: Piotr Kurek, A Sacrifice Shall Be Made / All The Wicked Scenes, LP, Mondoj, 2020
https://mondoj.bandcamp.com/album/a-sacrifice-shall-be-made-all-the-wicked-scenes

Robert Piotrowicz, Flares Et Wasser Hole, from: Robert Piotrowicz, Euzebio, LP, Bött Records/Recognition/Musica Genera, 2019
https://robertpiotrowicz.bandcamp.com/album/euzebio
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1 This article was written long before the Covid-19 pandemic, and it touches on experiences that are now unavailable to most of us. The current situation has generated a wave of attempts to move the culture of museum participation online, creating new relations mediated by the internet. I don’t believe this evolution contradicts the arguments in this essay, and it might even represent a logical implication of them — but that discussion must be left for a future essay.

2 Other projects with a similar agenda include, among others, the film exhibition “Inoperative Community,” curated by Dan Kidner; “Notes from the Underground,” an exhibition on music and the counterculture in the Eastern Bloc curated by David Crowley and myself; and, most recently, “Codex Subpartum,” which involved transforming works from the Muzeum Sztuki collection into graphic scores prepared by Barbara Kinga Majewska, Michał Libera, and Konrad Smoleński.


5 Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art (Verso, 2013), 186.


7 “Dance in the Ruins: David Everitt Howe Talks to Adam Linder,” Mousse, no. 50 (October–November 2015), 81.

8 Uri Aran, “I wanted to teach the white cube how to take theatricality,” interview with Adam Linder, Spike, November 1, 2017 http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/i-wanted-teach-white-cube-how-take-theatricality.


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15 Teresa Kelm and Zygmunt Krauze, Spatial-Musical Composition, 149.


18 Susan Howe, This That (New Directions, 2010).