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## Between Participation and Non-Participation: The Generative Potential of Slow Performance and Slow Scholarship

Sometimes there is nothing more infuriating than being well on your way, walking with brisk steps, only to get stuck behind a slow walker. No longer solely characteristic of New Yorkers—although they are most notorious for both their high-speed walking and their hate of everyone who is less fast—this condition of so-called “sidewalk rage” has inspired a variety of articles and think-pieces that either detail why slow-walkers are so infuriating, or try to explain the origin of this fury. This rage against slowness, as Chelsea Wald names it in her article “Why Your Brain Hates Slowpokes,” is of course not confined to the sidewalk: “Slow things drive us crazy because the fast pace of society has warped our sense of timing” (Wald 2015). In our continuously accelerating Western societies, as Wald describes, our brains simply do not seem to have any time or patience left for slowness. Slowness, in contemporary Western societies, is often associated with failure. And yet.

And yet, slowness might just be crucially important to stop for, to meditate on. Such thinking through slowness, though, should not so much occur in a “stop and smell the roses” kind of way, nor as some quick-fix mindfulness and meditational practice in order to live better, faster, and thus more “successful”, as seems all too common today. For, as Marian Donner writes in her column in the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* (2018), these hip mindfulness and yoga practices are often nothing more or less than a return to Victorian projects of self-discipline and self-optimisation used by the upper middle class to demonstrate their superiority to those who do not have the money, time, or moral insight to improve themselves and become “better people”. Slowness, in these cases, is a mere tool to live even faster, to adjust better to the acceleration of society. Instead Donner empathises with the so called “losers”; those people who are slow in a fast world, those who do not seem able to understand the world, to adjust to its speeds. Slowness here, then, emerges as a form of non-participation: “They [the “losers”] do not adjust themselves; either because they cannot or because they will not, they do not optimise themselves. They do not play the game and as such they confront the others with a different reality. Because they form a rejection of the world as it is” (Donner 2018, my translation). And as such,

claims Donner, the “losers” in our society, the slow ones, are actually the best people, the most interesting ones, precisely because they do not understand the world, because they cannot or prefer not to. In being slow, they suspend common rules and patterns and habits of bodies and thinking and thus they take up an ambiguous position in between the cultural blueprints and institutions of today’s fast Western civilisation.



Fig. 1. Kris Verdonck, *END*. Photo © Catherine Antoine

It is this characteristic of slowness—its non-participation in relation to contemporary Western society—that this paper meditates on: slowness not as a tool in the process of becoming better, more disciplined, and successful people, but slowness as suspension, subversion and confrontation. Slowness in this sense is not always pleasant, or successful, or helpful; indeed, it might be infuriating or it might not make any common sense. It is, however, always performative, of failure if nothing else. In this paper, I bring my fascination with “slow performances,” which Peter Eckersall and Eddie Paterson define as minimal and durational performances that engage with an “aesthetic sensibility of slow time” (2011, 179), into conversation with my own experiences of slow scholarship (Mountz et. al. 2015).<sup>1</sup> In three different meditations on slowness—discussing respectively Ivana Müller’s performance *While We Were Holding It Together* (2006), Kris Verdonck’s performance *END* (2008), and my own ongoing and evolving practice and understanding of slow scholarship—I see into the subversive temperament of slowness and consider its corresponding political and ethical significance in today’s Western societies. Drawing on the work of Birgit Kaiser (2011) and Gilles Deleuze (1998), among others, I consider how *insistence* is a crucial element of slowness and how it is generative of paradoxes of success and failure, of movement and stillness, and participation and non-participation. In doing

so, I consider how slowness can not only create the time and space for critical thought and reflection, but also how it is constitutive of embodied and performative thinking itself. Before turning to my case studies, however, I first consider the current discourse on slowness, which not only leads to the first paradox of the simultaneous positive and negative nature of slowness, but also helps in explicating the specific perspective this paper takes on.

## Slowness

In their article “For Slow Scholarship”, Alison Mountz and her co-writers state that “Slowness has many variants” (2015, 1244). This means that slowness does not solely refer to the speed or pace of progression—it does not necessarily have to refer to any kind of progression at all even, as we shall see. Rather, slowness might also refer to the slowness of the experience of time, to a practice of carefulness, or a deliberate, precise, stubborn, insistent, or even obsessive engagement with something (an object, a text, a field, a formula, a movement, a body or part of it). By now, many slow movements have emerged: from the famed slow food movement to the practice of slow scholarship and slow dramaturgy or performance that this paper reflects upon, and many in between. In all these movements, the denominator “slow” is, as Mountz et. al.—drawing on Luke Martell (2014)—argue “not just about time, but about structures of power and inequality”: it is about re-making and re-structuring life and institutions and ways of governing (Mountz et. al. 2015, 1238). Put differently—and as Eckersall and Paterson describe it in their discussion of the “rise of the slow” within their consideration of what they named “slow dramaturgy”—slow movements renegotiate the everyday “in order to provide alternative conceptions of time (pace and duration), space, locality and community, social engagement, and ethical and political participation” (2011, 180).<sup>2</sup> Slowness here gains a positive character of change and subversion; slowness, in a sense, becomes successful. The slowness in various slow movements, states Carl Honoré author of *In Praise of Slow* (2005), refers to “ways of being, or philosophies of life... It is about making real and meaningful connections—with people, culture, work, food, everything. The paradox is that Slow does not always mean slow” (Honoré 2005, 14–15, cited in Mountz et. al. 2015, 1247).

Slowness is thus here cast as a subversion of the treadmill of daily life, a change of institutional as well as personal perspective and experience. Important to note is that this subversion of the everyday in slow movements is specifically positive in nature. Eckersall and Paterson write that “Slow living is therefore a response to, rather than a rejection of, the conditions of global culture and one that offers alternative and ongoing reconfigurations of social relations and contemporary subjectivities through consideration of the ‘creative and ethical potential’ of everyday life” (2011, 180). As such, slow movements are particularly concerned with improving of the quality of living, and have a distinct preference for quality over quantity. As Mountz and her co-writers state:

Such an imagination of the “good life” is important for three reasons. First, this demand for time is a distinct break from histories of class struggle being about material goods, centering socially reproductive activities. Second,

advancing collective liveliness and flourishing advances feminist ideas of what it might mean to radically transform social reproduction. Finally, rather than rooting radical transformation of daily life in grim austerity, slow food offers a more sensuous path. It rejects alienation and embraces gathering to do the serious work of thinking and planning and the seriously human endeavours of dreaming, imagining, and playing. (2015, 1246)

It is here, however, that the structures of power and inequality that these slow movements try to subvert are potentially able to return with a vengeance. For example, healthy, high-quality food is often expensive and taking the time to prepare a nutritious meal is often difficult when one has worked an eight-hour shift (or longer) in a poorly paid, physically and/or psychologically demanding job. Similarly, slow scholarship might be most attainable—as Mountz and colleagues themselves also recognise—for those already in a position of relative (academic) power and/or security (2015, 1240, 1250). These slow movements then appear quite far removed from the slow “losers” Donner talks about (2018). Rather it seems that slow living movements sometimes come dangerously close to the old Victorian projects of self-discipline and self-optimisation:

We are supposed to work on ourselves—do not just sit on the couch; be happy! Rather than corsets, today we have yoga pants to curtail our bodies and to-do lists to restrict our time, but the goal is the same—everything is about self-optimisation. Or *Bildung* as the Victorians used to call it. And now, as then, these practices are above all a means for the upper middle class to strengthen their social position. (Donner 2018, my translation, original emphasis).

Being involved in slow movements seems to have become—at least in certain cases—a sign of and/or tool in displaying one’s social, moral or financial superiority: a way to be more successful, to live better lives in our increasingly competitive economies and societies. Rather than the *rejection* that Donner’s slow “losers” perform, these slow movements are a *response* to the world, as Eckersall and Paterson argue (2011, 180). Slow living movements might subvert the political and ethical reality of daily life, but they do not necessarily suspend or transform it, whereas slowness itself does have that generative potential or so I argue.

Moreover, while I acknowledge the importance of the more sensuous path slow movements offer and I focus precisely upon issues of sensuousness and embodiment in this paper, this sensuous path is, I think, not so much separate from “the grim austerity of radical transformation of everyday life,” but rather deeply integrated within it.<sup>3</sup> Slowness is not inevitably equivalent to happiness, to a better life: Donner’s so called slow “losers” (2018) do not necessarily have enjoyable and happy lives—she does not call them “losers” for no reason. They are not enviable per se: interesting and ambiguous, but not essentially desirable. As the case studies in this paper will show (as well as common daily experiences such as slow walkers, slow internet connections, or slow progress show us), slowness can also be infuriating, senseless, unsuccessful, uncomfortable, disillusioning, painful, and so

on. As Halberstam states, it is important to acknowledge these negative affects because they “allo[w] us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” and they provide us opportunities “to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam 2011, 3). In this paper, therefore, I do not examine slowness as equivalent to success but also highlight its negative qualities; I value this inherent ambiguity, precisely because it helps to understand of slowness’s generative potential. Taking up Halberstam’s (2011) and Mountz and her colleagues’ (2015) focus upon *collectivity*, I then explore how this paradox of success and failure, and those of participation and non-participation and of movement and stillness inherent to slowness, invite us to connect to, reconsider, and rethink others, *the other*, as well as the otherness within ourselves. The paper thus examines the rejection of the fast world performed by so called “slow losers”. It focuses on these ambiguous figures who are not solely responding to common patterns, blueprints, and institutions of acceleration, but who—in being slow—confront and suspend them.



Fig. 2. Karen Roise Kielland, Pere Faura, Stefan Rokebrand, Katja Dreyer and Jefta van Dinther in *While We Were Holding It Together*. Photo © Karijn Kakebeeke

### Imagining

The lights go on and we see five people positioned across the stage, each holding their body in a specific pose.<sup>4</sup> There are no sounds. After a couple of minutes the lights go out again and it becomes pitch black. When the lights come back on for the second time the situation on stage is the same: five people positioned across the stage, each holding their specific pose. After a short while the woman on the left speaks, slowly and deliberately: ‘I

*imagine we're standing in the middle of a forest*'.<sup>5</sup> Another short while later and the man on the right speaks, using the same phrase: *'I imagine we are wearing matching training suits'*. And basically, that is it: an alternation between light and dark and five people holding a specific pose and in turn calmly uttering the same formula, while telling us what it is they imagine.<sup>6</sup> Müller herself, on her company website, describes the performance as 'a tribute to the power of the imagination' in which 'notions of body and mind, and the relationship between the two' are under close inspection (Ivana Müller). At a certain point sounds come into play and there are some shifts in the tempo of imagining, but for the most part, the performance remains exactly this: a minimal, slow paced play of imagining.

*While We Were Holding It Together* is exemplary of Eckersall and Paterson's slow dramaturgy because it foregrounds "time, duration, and the structural process of dramaturgical composition" and the performance's play of imagining is "meta-theatrical, ambient, and situate[s] [itself] in the everyday" (Eckersall and Paterson 2011, 189). Part and parcel of this slowness of Ivana Müller's performance is its double *insistence* of imagining and not moving: for over an hour the performers insist on voicing their imaginings while maintaining their poses, which although different from each other do not change throughout the performance.<sup>7</sup> Insistence, as it appears, is a principal temperamental quality of slowness: as with a slow queue that takes "forever" to move forward, or the snail who tries to reach a leaf, slowness endures, perseveres, and insists.<sup>8</sup> In *While We Were Holding It Together*, as in the work that Eckersall and Paterson describe in their article, "the slow is evident in the minutiae of the body and its performance, the play of intensities interacting with the musculature" (2011, 187).<sup>9</sup> I study this slowness of Müller's work by focusing upon its double insistence to see how it creates a paradox of movement and stillness. And, I argue that this temperamental insistence is not a personal subjective action (of the individual performers or of Ivana Müller herself), but rather an impersonal, collective quality of the slowness itself: *'I imagine we are all holding it together'*.

Insistence, in a sense, is a practice—or a practising—of the limit. Through persistence, limits are not so much pushed forward but rather confronted, questioned, and suspended—as Birgit Kaiser also explains in her book *Figures of Simplicity* (2011, 88–112).<sup>10</sup> Insistence, she argues, exposes the point immediately prior to differentiation into dichotomies of passive and active, intentional and unintentional, reasonable and unreasonable, opening up the potential of reconsideration of their relationality. By lingering in this zone of indistinction, so Kaiser writes, the practice of insistence "undermines and unsettles the logic of either/or" (2011, 94). As such, insistence appears similar to *exhaustion* as theorised by Gilles Deleuze in his essay on the television plays of Beckett (1998). For, when you insist without fail, it is not so much that you realise a possibility, but rather, you exhaust the whole of the possible (1998, 152). That is, in insistence it is not that the limit is pushed further and further, but rather it becomes apparent (through the exhaustion of the whole of the possible, that is, that which in the possible is not realised) that the "limit of the series does not lie at the infinity of the terms but can be anywhere in the flow" (157).

In terms of the insistence upon or exhaustion of imagining in *While We Were Holding It Together* this means that in the infinite series of imaginings neither spectators nor

performers experience the slow progression of imagination to its end. Rather, what is performed is the exhaustion of the possibility of imagining any one particular story. There is not just one solution to the riddle these posed bodies on stage pose and while the possibilities might seem infinite, their limit might just as well have already long been reached: “between two terms, between two voices or the variations of a single voice” (Deleuze 1998, 157). For, as the performance continues one feels—in the uttering or thinking of one specific imagination—the force of the (yet) unformulated or the already dissolved imaginings: the whole of the possible of the imagination, vibrating around and through the bodies of spectators and performers. Through this weight of the exhaustion of imagination, time too becomes exhausted because the focus is not with progression, with linear development, but with each particular moment in itself: the performance suspends all particular moments, making them last, while dissipating them in the same instant. Time becomes slow, just as exhausted as the imagination. As Eckersall and Paterson write: “slow dramaturgy foregrounds this sense of duration and the experience of time: what Edward Scheer calls ‘the infinity machine’—an ambient and cruel accumulation of small moments of being” (2011, 183). In its slowness and insistence *While We Were Holding It Together* demonstrates “a distinctive dramaturgical awareness of time as an aesthetic-corporeal medium of expression” (183).

The performance’s particular slowness through the insistence and/or exhaustion of imagining and time becomes all the more profound through its second structural insistence: that of not intentionally moving. In his book *Exhausting Dance* (2006), André Lepecki discusses how contemporary dance has come to question the bond between dance and movement, a bond which emerged with the unfolding of modernity and its high pace of living. This results, according to Lepecki, in performances without bodies in a constant flow of movement: in the disruption of the bond between dance and movement such performances question dance’s ontology and the subjectivities that can emerge from it (2006, 7-8; 12). In a sense then, *While We Were Holding It Together* seems a primary example of this development due to its insistence on still acts, on not-moving, and its questioning of the forming of subjectivity (through the relentless imagining of subjective possibilities). However, as the performance unfolds, the exhaustion of movement (by means of not moving) takes a different turn with respect to Lepecki’s thinking. What *While We Were Holding It Together* shows is that in non-movement, in the heart of stillness, there is a flow of movement: “involuntary and elicited”—to use Brian Massumi’s words (2002, 189; 206–07). That is, in the unflinching insistence of not intentionally moving, the inherent insistent movement of the body is brought to the fore, as it is impossible for the performers to keep their bodies completely still for a little more than over an hour: they start to shift and shake. The performance suspends all physical movement, making the moment of stillness last, while dissipating it simultaneously as the performers’ bodies start to get tired and move involuntarily. As Deleuze writes “exhaustion (exhaustivity) does not occur without a certain physiological exhaustion” (1998, 154). What occurs then, in Müller’s performance, and what becomes explicitly clear in the insistence upon not intentionally moving, is a paradox of movement and stillness: one that occurs in between the movements of the body/mind in imagining, in the insistence upon the pose of the body, and within the body itself. *While We Were Holding It Together* poignantly shows that there is stillness in

movement and movement in stillness: the performance is still and moving simultaneously, questioning progression and linear development and as such opening up time, imagining, and the body to critical reflection and thought.

The slowness and insistence of *While We Were Holding It Together* is not altogether pleasant or comfortable, despite the work's evident humour.<sup>11</sup> It is not as if the performers and spectators just happily ponder the ways our imagination works through, in, and across our bodies, whether those bodies are our own and those of the people, objects, thoughts we encounter. For as the slowness of the performance persists, when it continues to relentlessly insist upon imagining and not-moving intentionally, and when the paradox between movement and stillness becomes ever more striking, tensions increase. These are not just the tensions of the shaking muscles and limbs of the performers and those of the spectators aching in kinaesthetic sympathy. They also concern—or perhaps especially concern—the tensions in between: in between the terms of the infinite series of imaginings, in between the relations between the posed bodies and the imaginings, in between the performers themselves, and in between the performers and spectators. It is the weight of the exhaustion of imagining, time, and movement—felt in and through one's own body—that makes one want to shift in one's seat, to stop, to accelerate, to move on. It is as Kaiser writes with respect to Herman Melville's figure of Bartleby the Scrivener that the “almost unbearable passivity puts everyone else around them in a flurry” (2011, 88). Except that in *While We Were Holding It Together*, as in the tale of Bartleby, what occurs is no true passivity, but rather a “betrayal of a passivity that is no longer accountable within the common opposition of passive and active, and thus unhinges and questions this opposition” (90). It is rather the slowness of the performance, its inherent insistence and ambiguity, and the suspension and confrontation of imagining, time, and movement that it initiates that becomes unbearable and causes one (performer or spectator) to shift and shake. And this is even more so, perhaps, because in participating in the performance—either as spectator or performer—one cannot “flee” into hurriedness; one has to endure the slowness, as the performance insists, becoming a part of and in it.<sup>12</sup>

A final point I would like to highlight regarding *While We Were Holding It Together* in the context of this paper is that the slowness of the performance, its exhaustion of imagination, time, and movement, invites and initiates the performers and spectators to come into being as a collective: ‘*I imagine we are all holding it together*’. This confronts and even suspends the opposition between viewing and acting.<sup>13</sup> What or who the performers are, even what and who the spectators are, is indefinite, im-personal, ambiguous, and open to the entire series of imaginings: one can simultaneously be a tree, a fox, a hostage, and we are all a “Barbarella and the bandits”. As the performance insists upon its slowness, it, additionally, becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate in origin of imaginings, feelings, tensions, and thoughts: ‘*I imagine being your thoughts and you being mine*’. The slowness of *While We Were Holding It Together* thus becomes slightly uncomfortable as well, because next to suspending and questioning the limits and blueprints of imagining, time, and movement, the performance also initiates the suspension of personal limits in favour of an impersonal collectivity.<sup>14</sup> This collectivity has not got one particular cause, but is rather “involuntarily and elicited”: inherent to and emerging from the slowness of the performance (Massumi



2002, 207). Another paradox then emerges: one of participation and non-participation. In the experience of the performance and with the dissipating of the borders or limits of the personal and individual, the spectators and performers alike are certainly participating in, or engaged within the double insistence upon imagining and not-intentionally moving, but simultaneously it is, in a sense, more happening to them (involuntary and elicited) than actually coming from them (much like the involuntary shaking and shifting of limbs and muscles). We are all in it, holding it together, but we are not necessarily of it.

To recapitulate: the slowness of *While We Were Holding It Together* is constituted by and gives rise to a collective, impersonal insistence upon (non-)movement, imagining, time, and corporeal practices. As such, it is characterised by creative or generative, if slightly uncomfortable, paradoxes of movement and stillness and of participation and non-participation. What is more, the performers, in a sense, fail in their insistence upon not-moving (as their bodies start to move involuntarily), and the slow and relentless exhaustion of imagining never results in one particular imagination: the performance never comes to a definite success or even conclusion; it might even have reached its end already well before. And yet, in these enduring conditions of seeming failure, discomfort, and/or indeterminacy of limits, blueprints, and common cultural habits and institutions—within the tensions that arise herein—new movements come to be. These new movements not only create time and space for critical reflection and thought, but also generate a collective mode of thinking and performing: an ambiguous and material way of being and thinking that challenges ideas of how the world is, could, or should be.

## Ending

All these elements of slowness—its relentless insistence, ambiguity, and collectivity, and its paradoxes of movement and stillness and of participation and non-participation—can too be found in Kris Verdonck's 2008 performance *END*. I study this performance to specifically research the collective mode of thinking and performing that arises from its slowness and I see into its confrontational aspects, its non-participation, with regard to contemporary Western society.

*END* shows human and non-human performers who are—all in their own manner—slowly making their way across what appears as a post-apocalyptic wasteland.<sup>15</sup> Starting from the destructive images the media project to us everyday—or so says the website of Verdonck's production company A Two Dogs Company—the performance explores the possible end of human civilisation in ten scenes. There is a man who pulls the sky (as it becomes apparent with time, his movements on the floor are connected to the movements of the sky-imagery at the back of the stage), a man who sits in a stall while continuously proclaiming a variety of texts (not all of which is audible), a woman walking strangely, a man moving through the sky with difficulty while trying to propel himself forward, a man falling from the sky, a woman carrying a filled body bag, a large engine, a mechanical installation with loudspeakers on wheels (music, sounds, and voices come from the loudspeakers), and a line of smoking fire. These figures, according to Kristof van Baarle in his PhD thesis "From the Cyborg to the Apparatus", "seem to find themselves in the end



Fig. 3. Kris Verdonck, *END*. Photo © Reinout Hiel

time, within the moment of the apocalypse or slightly after it occurred. The performing entities all refer to this apocalyptic environment; they are part of it while creating it—similar to humanity’s actual role in a potential ‘end’ of our world” (2018, 117). *END* thus foregrounds both a “sense of duration and the experience of time” in focusing on the experience of a particular moment and an ethical and political consideration of everyday life and society (Eckersall and Paterson, 2011, 183). For about an hour all the figures of *END* move in a circle, half of which is visible to the spectators, the other half happening backstage. They trace the same circle over and over and over again: entering stage right they move in a straight line—all in their own respective manner—and eventually exit stage left, only to return to the stage again from the right once more. There is one exception, for the man who falls from the sky moves in the opposite direction: thus, falling down at the left side of the stage, he exists at the right, to then reappear falling from the upper left corner of the stage. Each of these figures moves within their own rhythm across the stage, following their own trajectory and (seemingly) unaware of either any of the other figures or the spectators. It is, furthermore, unpredictable when which actor (human or not) will appear: no fixed pattern is discernible in the endless circling across the stage.

As with *While We Were Holding It Together* the focal feature in the slowness of *END* is its insistence. In the relentless cyclical movement across the stage “time passes, but no dramatic bow is generated” (van Baarle 2018, 118). Verdonck’s performance in this sense is thus exemplary of slow dramaturgy with respect to its “distinctive dramaturgical awareness of time as an aesthetic-corporeal medium of expression” (Eckersall and Paterson 2011, 183). Not only is the experience of the passage of time directly connected to a very

concretely material moment (the apocalypse, the ending of the world), the insistence on the specific movements of the figures (both in trajectory and manner of movement) opens up to a critical re-negotiation of the (in)human corporeal in relation to contemporary societies and their reliance on technology.<sup>16</sup> The figures in *END* are ambiguous, demonstrating the very paradox of participation and non-participation: while the performers (human and non-human) are participants, active parts in the endless circling, this insistence is simultaneously also more happening to them than coming from them: the insistence appears as an im-personal enduring material condition. The figures' movements appear, to a degree, to be both 'involuntary and elicited', both conscious and unconscious, both full of purpose and devoid of sense all together (Massumi, 2002, 207). This paradox of participation and non-participation is emphasised further by the performance's entanglement of the (in)human body with technology and mechanics. The human performers in *END* all depend on technology and machinery in their circular trajectory across the stage and vice versa: the mechanical performers are dependent upon human involvement. Not only does this question and subvert the notion of participation, it also already points in the direction of an interdependent corporeal collectivity involving and increasingly intertwining humans and non-humans, objects and subjects, the digital and the analogue.<sup>17</sup>

The figures in *END* seem full of purpose as they try their best under the circumstances to make their way across the stage: even when they pause for a while, they eventually always hoist themselves up again and continue on their path, insisting to see it through. Yet the performance never offers a solution to what it is they are actually seeing through, what the purpose of their relentless insistence to continue on their path actually is. For, as soon as they have reached the other end of the stage, they return to their starting point to take up the same journey once more. In *End* the end of the world continuously begins again. What we see is both active participation and passive resignation to an im-personal condition. In exhausting the whole of the possible by insisting upon their circular trajectories, the performers combine "the set of variables of a situation, on the condition that one renounce[s] any order of preference, any organization in relation to a goal, any signification" (Deleuze 1998, 153). Or as Deleuze later phrases it: "one does not fall into the undifferentiated, or into the famous unity of contradictories, nor is one passive: one remains active, but for nothing. One was tired of something, but one is exhausted by nothing" (153).

It thus becomes clear that the paradox of participation and non-participation in *END* is very closely connected to that of movement and stillness: all (in)human performers continuously make their way forward, but are nevertheless never actually getting somewhere. They remain in the same moment, exhausting it: obviously moving, but simultaneously standing still. This paradox of movement and stillness in the performance is further emphasised by the contradictory direction of the man falling from the sky: his counter clockwise circling superimposes the clockwise circling of the other performers.<sup>18</sup> In his book *Philosophers and Thespians*, Freddie Rokem notes, with reference to the contradictory circling in Brecht's play *Mother Courage*, that:

the spectators are watching one movement contradicting another—each revolving in opposite directions—perceived as stasis. [...] These two opposite circular movements are the basis for complex dialectics that can be perceived and formulated simultaneously in terms of motion and stasis, or as Benjamin writes in his notes for the *Passagen-Werk*: “Image is dialectics at a standstill.” The standstill as an image in movement becomes literal. (Rokem 2010, 128–29)

Crucially, the standstill of the image of the performance thus comes about in and through the perception of the spectator: it is only from the standpoint of the onlooker that the contradictory circles come to a standstill, as the performers on stage insist upon their continuous trajectories and keep moving. As such, the spectators become an integral part of the performance, co-constitutive of its slowness and the paradoxes of participation and non-participation and of movement and stillness it initiates. Again, then, the slowness of the performance leads to a (sense of) collectivity: the focus in *END* is not per se with the individual performers and their specific trajectories, but with the suspension of limits and habits of the personal as the paradox of participation and non-participation within the exhaustive circling creates or performs an impersonal set of insistent dialectical movements (of both movement and stillness). Moreover, as the paradox of stillness and movement emerges, specifically integrating the spectator into the performance, the joint, collective, impersonal effort in “holding it together” becomes all the more apparent.

The slowness of *END* opens up time, (non)movement, and participation with regard to questions of collectivity and the personal, and technological and human development and involvement in today’s Western culture to critical reflection and thought. It invites one to re-consider and re-negotiate the political and ethical affects of these issues upon and within the materiality of everyday life. As with *While We Were Holding It Together*, though, this invitation *END* extends is not altogether positive, or pleasant. Verdonck’s performance is relentless and humorous, sad and beautiful, exquisitely intriguing and also at times quite boring simultaneously.<sup>19</sup> Being slow, it requires quite some work from the spectators, locating the sensuous right within the grim austerity of change and daily life (Mountz et.al 2015, 1246).

### **Beginning<sup>20</sup>**

Readers may have already noticed but if not, it is worth pointing out that the objects of my analysis in this article are both at least a decade old. I first saw *While We Were Holding It Together* twelve years ago, in November 2006, though I have insistently watched and re-watched a recording of the performance since then. Similarly, I first saw *END* in October 2010. In this belatedness, I am a slow scholar. My analyses of both these performances are slow not just in the sense that it has taken me ten years to form my thoughts on them, but in that I insist in returning to them again and again: I have written on both performances before and still I feel I am not done with them yet.

Writing about how slowness is both relentless and uncomfortable as well as generative and creative while my own practice as a performance scholar is quite radically and literally slow, is in itself a relentless and uncomfortable as well as generative and creative performance. I turn to a discussion of my own practice as a specific kind of slow scholar here, because it further explicates the matters of insistence, collectivity, and the paradoxes of participation and non-participation, success and failure, and movement and stillness touched upon above, as well as even more clearly demonstrating the potential performative and embodied mode of thinking that I believe slowness can generate. Moreover, it offers a chance to further highlight some ethical and political affects and (material/corporeal) consequences of slowness in today's high-speed Western (neoliberal and capitalist) university and culture at large.

As Mountz and colleagues write in "For Slow Scholarship", "The business enterprise of academic life in the neoliberal university produces a work rhythm that is rushed, riddled with anxiety and pressure to be ever-present. Sometimes life gets in the way" (2015, 1244). And life certainly did get in the way in my case: two separate accidents left me with brain injury, with life-long physical and cognitive consequences, and with the inability to subscribe to the unrelenting rushed rhythm of contemporary (academic) life. As I am adjusting—again and again—to the new, unmistakably slower pace of both my life in general and in my practice as a scholar, I am not only encountering experiences of loss, pain, and failure, but I am also discovering a new generative potential. With the changes in my embodiment caused by my injuries, my thinking is changing as well: as my linear academic progression dwindles, becoming literally—and quite excruciatingly—slow, dramatic or performative impulses start to arise "from the shifting of bodies and intensities, the unfolding of their tenuous interrelationship, from the snatches of conversation and impulses not to speak" or not to work, or not to participate (Eckersall and Paterson 2011, 184). Writing about Ranters Theatre's production of *Holiday* (2007-2008), Eckersall and Paterson elaborate: "The evident slow dramaturgy of this work lies precisely in this very superficial and yet tense play of relations between the characters and from the realisation that at any point the dramaturgy might collapse" (184). Though undeniably and obviously very different from the performance they are describing, the slowness of my scholarship simultaneously appears very similar: not only can both my body and mind at any point quite literally collapse, the play of relations<sup>21</sup> constitutive of and caused by my scholarship are embodied as concurrently superficial and tense. The slowness of my scholarship is thus not only slow in literal terms of the progression over time, but also in terms of an awareness of the ambient political aesthetic. This awareness of the space and tonality of my ambiguous practice as performance scholar opens my thinking to the 'ecological paradigm resting on an awareness of social and material relations and diverse networks of meaning' (Eckersall and Paterson 2011, 186). In insisting upon practising my scholarship (despite and through the new cognitive, corporeal, political, social, and ethical circumstances) its slowness starts to substantively present the materials of my embodied thinking, showing the seams, the process of composition as a medium of expression—just as Eckersall and Paterson describe of slow dramaturgical theatre.

My practice as a performance scholar is slow, insistent (with me relentlessly beginning the same project, or even the same sentence again and again), and it is characterised by

paradoxes of success and failure, of participation and non-participation, and of movement and stillness. It is not yet as collective as it could and I would want it to be. And yet, already a generative potential is slowly arising (and simultaneously failing in relentless insistent circles), a creative opening for radical re-negotiations of critical thought and reflection, of challenging the material patterns, habits and blueprints of the everyday of academic life as well as of life in general. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2015), Halberstam writes that “These alternative cultural and academic realms, the areas beside academia rather than within it, the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts and refusniks, often serve as the launching pad for alternatives precisely when the university cannot” (7). Moreover, while local, and smaller practices of knowledge “may be less efficient, may yield less marketable results”, they may simultaneously “in the long term, be more sustaining” (9). The key word here being “may”: because even when such local (non-university bound and non-traditional) forms of knowledge practices “may lead to unbounded forms of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability,” they may also not (10). And while I now, more and more, see the potential in Halberstam’s call—itsself a reiteration of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s call (2004, 101)—to “steal from the university, to, as they say, ‘abuse its hospitality’ and to be ‘in it but not of it,’” this practice often also feels quite unsustainable (Halberstam 2015, 11).<sup>22</sup> An important way to remedy this and make this alternative knowledge practices more sustainable, is to form and perform the collectives and collectivity that both Halberstam and Mountz and co-writes promote throughout their respective texts. However, the forging of such collectives are themselves not without political and ethical affects as they cost time, effort, and financial sustainability and support, but also because building a sustainable collectivity (both human and non-human) engaging in critical and slow thought, comes with, or even requires, critical slowness itself. In resisting, subverting, and/or suspending the acceleration of the university and Western society through such a form of ambiguous participation (whether voluntarily or less so)—to be in it, but not of it—together, as a collective, the personal, individualised paths of so called “slow losers” have the potential to turn into impersonal quests of the exhaustion of the possible: not necessarily enviable, but undoubtedly intriguing.

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## Notes

1. Eckersall and Paterson state that slow dramaturgy concerns ‘a distinctive dramaturgical awareness of time as an aesthetic-corporeal medium of expression. Meaning and sensibility are expressive in the overt passing of time’ (2011, 183). Both *While We Were Holding It Together* and *End* expressly foreground the (experience of) the passing of time, exploring the matter of duration. Moreover, both *End* and *While We Were Holding It Together* engage in ‘substantively presenting the materials of theatre, and in some ways the process of composition, as a medium for drama’ (Eckersall and Paterson 2011, 186).

2. Here Eckersall and Paterson reference Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig’s book *Slow Living* (2006).

3. Interestingly, Eckersall and Paterson in their description of the “rise of the slow” too only highlight positive haptic qualities associated with slowness (‘pleasure, authenticity, connectedness,

tranquillity and deliberation' (2011, 180), whereas their theatrical case studies very specifically highlight more arguably negative haptic qualities (for example, dissoluteness, relentlessness, pain, boredom (182), the uncanny, discomfort, wryness (183), emptiness, stammering (186), etc.) . Eckersall and Paterson, however, never specifically comment on this discrepancy in attention to and/or this paradox of positive and negative qualities of slowness, whereas I think that it is precisely in this inherent ambiguity of slowness that its generative potential is able to come about.

4. I first saw *While We Were Holding It Together* live at Theater Kikker in Utrecht on 28 November 2006. In addition, a recording of the performance can be viewed online at <https://vimeo.com/23973875>.

5. This quote and all following quotes are taken directly from Ivana Müller's performance.

6. For almost throughout the performance the performers utter the same formula of "I imagine..." (exceptions appear only at the very end of the performance where interestingly enough "I imagine..." changes to "I feel...", and then to "I wonder..."). After this formula follows either a description of a specific more or less detailed situation in a more or less specific time and place ('*I imagine I'm standing on the number 38 bus*') or a reference to the actual theatrical situation as it is happening and structured ('*I imagine a different position of my hand would have been a better choice*'). Performers interact with each other's imaginings by going along with them and/or changing them to more or lesser degree ('*I imagine I've been run over by the number 38 bus*') or they introduce entirely new imaginings. Certain imaginings, moreover, make repeat appearances throughout the performance, be it at times in altered forms.

7. Within this radical take upon the *tableau vivant*, emphasis, moreover, is constantly placed upon the bodies of both performers and spectators: both through linguistic reference ('*I imagine you can see this hand shaking*') the man in the green shirt says, thus placing a direct emphasis upon the corporeal involvement of both himself and the spectators) and through the (material, sonic, visual, spatial, temporal, and cultural) positioning of these bodies.

8. This insistent quality is regardless of the outcome of the slowness: whether or not the snail in the end finally reaches the intended leaf or instead fails in doing so, does not take away from the insistence of its slowness. Slowness in this sense appears as a "setting" of the mind/body, be it – as we shall see – not necessarily a personal or conscious one.

9. Eckersall and Paterson here are talking about *apoliticaldance* by Not Yet It's Difficult, produced in 2006.

10. Kaiser in her book explores the strange figures that populate the writings of Herman Melville and Heinrich von Kleist. These figures of simplicity—as Kaiser names them—might, at first glance, appear dim-witted and might thus be called "slow" in the pejorative dimension of the term (2011, xviii). However, as Kaiser demonstrates, these "simpletons" (such as Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener) are 'capable of surprisingly apt responses to the situations they are confronted with' (xviii), and as such 'defy our common registers of calculation, deliberation, or reasoning' (xiii). Their simplicity, so argues Kaiser, is a way of affective and embodied thinking: not necessarily enviable, but with the potential to confront and suspend the everyday. In this sense, Kaiser's figures of simplicity and Donner's slow losers thus seem strikingly similar: perhaps rather incomprehensible, ignorant, or even plain stupid when viewed from any common or mainstream societal perspective, but thinking on their own affective and embodied terms. The slowness this paper researches is thus also ambiguous (and potentially generative and creative) in terms of matters of intelligence: the slow figures discussed below are not necessarily dim-witted, but may be slow thinkers in the sense that their thinking suspends and confronts the politics and ethics of the everyday of our contemporary Western society.

11. This resonates quite clearly with the remark of critic Marie-Anne Mancio regarding Forced Entertainment's *Spectacular* (2008) that Eckersall and Paterson quote: 'Despite the humour, it's relentless. Not even painful. Just boring' (Eckersall and Paterson 2011, 182. Personally, I did not find *While We Were Holding It Together* boring, but the performance does quite clearly foreground the experience of the passing of time, forcing the spectator to acknowledge the materiality of duration.

12. As with all performances, the spectators could of course decide to not participate: one could leave the auditorium or one could resist inclusion in the performance's play and deny its invitations. In the last case, however, when a spectator chooses to ignore the performance and just wait for it to end, one could claim that its slowness would still affect the spectator as waiting often increases one's awareness for a moment's duration and the experience of the passing of time.

13. Eckersall and Paterson in the beginning of their paper highlight Jacques Rancière's perspective in *The Emancipated Spectator*: 'In proposing an idea of the audience as a 'community of narrators and translators', Rancière asks for a more contemplative dimension to theatre that is liberating' (2011, 179).

14. This again resonates with Eckersall and Paterson's essay when they state that slow dramaturgy 'sees a reappraisal of the political-aesthetic dialogue in company with the material world of the everyday' (2011, 181). Against the development of earlier trends (such as the experimental performance scene of the 1970s), so they claim, slow dramaturgy turns the perspective back to the collective and notions of solidarity as they focus 'on renegotiating alternative political, cultural, ecological readings through performance' (181). As a rejection of, or subversive response to, today's individual, global neoliberal and capitalist Western society, slow dramaturgy 'foregrounds ecologic-material dramaturgical intensities, which trend toward slowness, ambience and connectivity' (179–80).

15. Apart from the performers a constant indefinable sound can be heard, black snow is continuously falling, and a dark sky with moving grey clouds fills the background. A video-trailer to the performance can be found at: <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/nl/projecten/item/188-end?bckp=1>. I myself saw this performance at Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam in Amsterdam (The Netherlands) on 10 October 2010.

16. For more on the relationality between (in)human corporeality and technology (and specifically in Verdonk's art practice), see Van Baarle's PhD dissertation (2018). Interestingly, many slow movements— despite their overall positivity— seem (to more or lesser degree) characterised by a form of suspicion, or reluctance, or even downright rejection of (contemporary) technological developments. It seems that the experience of alienation that these movements try to subvert is often linked to technological enhancement (as was already the case with Karl Marx's critique of modern life of course): in the case of slow scholarship for example (Mountz et.al. 2015) the take on such reflective computerised systems as Digital Measures (1240–1243) or on e-mail (1251) appears largely negative. Verdonk's work, on the contrary, takes up a more nuanced and (thus) ambiguous perspective upon the human-technology relation and clearly shows that slowness and technology are not incompatible per se.

17. The creators of *End* describe their cognitive corporeal interrelation and interdependency with technology and machinery throughout Marianne van Kerkhoven and Anouk Nuyens' book on the creation process of this performance (*Listen to the Bloody Machine* 2012). The differentiation between human and non-human or technological performers seemed to dissipate during the creation process as both "types" of performers required much attention to the material and corporeal circumstances (as they suffered injuries, for example, or were physically incapable of performing certain feats), but also both at times performed in unexpected ways, appeared to be unwilling or precisely too eager instead, or they suddenly steered of course, leaving their assigned



trajectory, blueprints, or position (both quite literally concerning the specific situation on stage, as well as regarding larger cultural habits and patterns).

18. The counter-clockwise circling of the falling man is counter clockwise from the perspective of the spectators in the auditorium and envisioning the backstage part of the circle as the top.

19. Again, this resonates quite strongly with Eckersall and Paterson's essay (2011, 182).

20. This section of the paper demonstrates some clear concordances with issues that have also been raised within disability studies, yet comparison is not the focus of my enquiries here.

21. The play of relations between my body and mind, between my ambitions and cognitive corporeal abilities, but also between me and other (academic) contextual characters, institutions, blueprints, habits, and common beliefs.

22. For example, with respect to the literal financial costs of such knowledge practices.

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