

# Curatorial Text

## Enacting Stillness: An Exhibition in Nine Parts

Curator: Sara Reisman

Opening: June 11, 7 p.m.

Exhibition duration: June 11 – August 28

Artists: Rehan Ansari, Nicolas Dumit Estevez, Brendan Fernandes, Yoko Inoue, Claudia Joskowicz, Kirsten Justesen, Clifford Owens, Jan Pfeiffer, Emily Roysdon a Roman Štětina

When I think of stillness, I think of staying in one place, being of one mind, without distraction. In its most common definition, *stillness* is the absence of movement. To *enact stillness* is to generate a contradictory state in which one actively stops, slows down, or rests. To do this actively, with intention, is not a simple task. Anyone who practices yoga or meditation knows that maintaining a still position takes a certain kind of work. Even inanimate objects, even permanent architecture, are continually shifting and vibrating according to their surroundings, which means that stillness is an illusion.

Inspired by André Lepecki's writings on stillness, *Enacting Stillness* draws on Lepecki's assertion that "what stillness does is to initiate the subject in a different relationship with temporality. Stillness operates at the level of the subject's desire to invert a certain relationship with time, and with certain (prescribed) corporeal rhythms. Which means that to engage in stillness is to engage into different experiences of perceiving one's own presence."<sup>1</sup> In this way, the idea of being still can only be understood relative to a larger context of movement, in other words, resistance to the larger frame of reference. Relative stillness can manifest in intentional gestures of resistance like meditation, slowing down, reversals, and a range of emotional states and political positions that are against the broader cultural, political, and social landscape.

In the context of choreography, or the artistic practice of movement, Brendan Fernandes' *The Working Move* (2012) reveals moments of physical tension and strain implicit in ballet and contemporary dance by positioning performers with plinths that typically support sculptural objects in a gallery setting. Fernandes' poignant and, at times, absurd staging calls into question the value of human physical labor in the production of art. In their isolation, these 'working moves' exaggerate the most basic gestures of art - its bodily expressions and modes of display. Repurposing the visual language of ballet and meditation, Fernandes and artists Kirsten Justesen and Roman Stetina slow their own movements and that of other performers, down to a halt to locate sites of activation in performative poses and gestures. Justesen's *Pedestal Piece* (2000-2002) is a test of will between a woman and the environment. Justesen demonstrates the passage of time in relation to global warming, setting her own body against icy 'pedestals' within a frozen backdrop. A double metaphor for resistance implied by feminism and our contradictory relationship to the planet (mother earth herself), Justesen's *Pedestal Piece* series simultaneously pushes against being silenced and stilled, as a quiet critique of our global condition.

Stetina's *Test Room* (2015) captures, on video, a lone performance by a camera operator whose tense choreography alludes to the steady camera rig's original purpose as a military tool for carrying weaponry. In his prolonged direction of the cameraman's dance with his camera, Stetina reinforces the painful choreography that goes into the production of both aesthetics and war.

---

<sup>1</sup>André Lepecki, "Still: on the vibratile microscopy of dance" published in the book *Re/membering the Body*, Hortensia Völckers and Gabriele Brandstetter, eds., (Cantz Verlag, 2000)

In thinking about different forms of stillness, how do we engage with what it means to be 'still here,' after surviving adverse conditions and trauma? In 1994, choreographer Bill T. Jones with Arnie Zane choreographed and performed *Still/Here*, a performance about surviving illness that was criticized for holding up death and dying as subjects of art. Though not directly about AIDS, the work may be interpreted as Jones' refusal to accept that "being HIV-positive equals death." *New Yorker* writer Arlene Croce deemed this as the type of work that was beyond critique because of the morbid nature of its subject matter. (At the time, Croce also refused to see the piece performed at Brooklyn Academy of Music.)<sup>2</sup> Anna Kisselgoff wrote in *The New York Times* how the dance performance functioned as a binary: "The 'Still' section frequently features stillness. 'Here' becomes more dynamic, a stylized revving up into a sense of reality, with its need to hope." She went on to write: "'Still,' the first part, relates to reactions to a diagnosis of serious illness. 'Here' is about living with the prospect of death. The operative word is living and in the second part, the dancing, is colored by a striking aliveness."<sup>3</sup>

Featured in *Enacting Stillness* are two experimental narrative projects that transform stillness into the here and now. Not about medical conditions but about political aggression, Rehan Ansari's play *Unburdened* (2010) and Claudia Joskowicz's video installation *Sympathy for the Devil* examine the aftermath of political traumas experienced during the Partition of India and World War 2, respectively. Ansari's play *Unburdened* tells the story of a Canadian journalist who is on assignment in Pakistan and staying in the apartment of his elderly aunt and uncle. The aunt and uncle live with an unspoken secret - an ordeal experienced by the aunt - that dates back to the Partition of India. In three performances of *Unburdened*, the old couple reverts back to a time of trauma that brought them together, drawing connections with Europe's history of genocide and the current refugee crisis. The set for the play, created by Prague-based artist Jan Pfeiffer, incorporates visual research collected by Ansari while in a residency in Karachi in 2010: political graffiti, a backdrop of a graveyard in PECHS, Karachi, and the kitchen table of the elder couple's apartment where most of the action of the play takes place. Interestingly, Pfeiffer's broader artistic practice engages with systems of design that shape performance, borrowing approaches from improvisational theater and dance, as a way of understanding social and political transformations throughout history.

Set in an apartment building in La Paz, Bolivia, Joskowicz's *Sympathy for the Devil* almost imperceptibly unfolds in two slow tracking frames that capture the uneasy but daily encounter between two neighbors who live parallel lives. One is a Polish Jewish refugee who arrived to La Paz during World War II, and the other is Klaus Barbie, living in Bolivia under an assumed name as Klaus Altman, known in the Nazi Party as the Butcher of Lyon. The unintentional relationship between these two neighbors is representative of Jews and Nazis who both sought asylum in Latin America, and were able to live in a relative lull. Coexistence can be understood as another form of stillness, between Nazi and Jew, and the Pakistani husband and wife.

Passivity and subjugation are performed by Clifford Owens in his video *Anthology (Maren Hassinger)*, 2011. This video is part of a larger project *Anthology* in which Owens engaged 26 artists of color by asking each of them - Kara Walker, Terry Adkins, and Benjamin Patterson, among others - to provide him with a performance score, written or drawn, to be performed during his exhibition at PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City. *Anthology* was conceived, in part, to create a historic and personal compendium of African American performance art. Featured in *Enacting Stillness* is a video of Owens following the instructions of artist Maren Massinger's performance score. Audience members move and

---

<sup>2</sup> Arlene Croce, "A Critic at Bay: Discussing the Undiscussable," *The New Yorker*, December 26, 1994, pages 54-61

<sup>3</sup> Anna Kisselgoff, "DANCE REVIEW; Bill T. Jones's Lyrical Look At Survivors", *The New York Times*, December 2, 1994

position Owens who remains in what Hassinger has called ‘a reprieve of action,’ calling out the tensions and power relations that are negotiated between choreographer, performer, participant, and audience. Owens’ interpretation of Hassinger’s instructions can be read as a performative power play, or, in more racialized terms, a comment on how race and identity politics in the United States remain painfully and violently unresolved.

The unsettling experience of watching Owens’ performance play out on the floor of the gallery raises questions about his intentions. Is this artwork to be read as a passive gesture or one of critique? By now it should be understood as critique, hailing us as viewers to take a position in relation to these politics. Yoko Inoue’s *Transmigration of the SOLD* embodies similar contradictions to do with immigrant identity in the context of an ever-globalizing economy. Initiated on the heels of 9/11, *Transmigration of the SOLD* first engaged communities in two locations: Canal Street in New York City (where much of the video takes place), and Isla Amantani, an island in Lake Titicaca in the Puno Region of Peru, where Inoue travelled to commission sweaters as materials for her performances on Canal Street. Over the course of fifteen years, Inoue has used Canal Street as a stage for this time-based performance that interrogates the labor and economic conditions surrounding global marketplaces where common commodities are sold, many of which are knock-offs of some distant original. Inoue envisions a more ethical production process – albeit outsourced – in contrast to the impoverished conditions that produced the goods and services to be found along Canal Street. Having commissioned Andean craftspeople to hand knit sweaters emblazoned with American flags, she unraveled the sweaters into balls of yarn, ultimately breaking down these hybrid souvenirs of the Americas into fodder to be returned to the production line in rural Peru. Inoue’s interest in engaging these means of production can be understood as a direct response to the influx of Latin American immigrants in New York City, many of them working in unofficial economies like those found in and around the vendors’ stalls of Canal Street and similar marketplaces around the world. Her impassive expression as she unravels the sweaters belies a growing concern about the status of communities both immigrant and local in New York City and elsewhere.

Staged between 2005 and 2007, Nicolás Dumit Estévez’s *For Art’s Sake* was developed and performed as a series of public interventions - seven pilgrimages that concluded with a last supper - to highlight the obstacles faced by contemporary artists in realizing their artwork, especially in the process of pioneering new forms of art. Modeled after El Camino de Compostela in Spain, Estévez embarked on these pilgrimages, from Lower Manhattan to seven different museums on foot. Armed with the weight of donated art publications strapped to his back, he wanted to reverse the relationship between art and religion, positioning religion as a tool in the service of art. Like Inoue’s reversal of the production of Andean textiles in an attempt to destabilize economic conditions in symbolic terms, Estévez considers how his faith in art can be attributed the same level of intensity and devotion that moves religious interests. *For Art’s Sake* inscribed an awareness of the importance of performance art in the collective conscience of New York City’s art community at a moment when certain performance-based practices were shifting towards socially engaged art-making. Estévez’s public engagement with performance art ‘for art’s sake,’ forecast the formulation of social practice as an antidote to the art market and the increased monetization of cultural practice.

More precisely mapping out the dynamics of performative thought and action, Emily Roysdon’s *Ecstatic Resistance* (2009-2010) diagrams and analyzes the interplay between intentionality and improvisation and the boundary between what can be spoken and what is unspeakable in the process of staging performance with political intent. *Ecstatic Resistance* expresses a determination to undo the limits of what is possible. As Roysdon states the project “develops a positionality of the impossible as a viable and creative subjectivity that inverts the vernacular of power. By exposing past impossibilities, the actor of history is thus revealed as the outcast of the contemporary. *Ecstatic Resistance* works to change this by celebrating

the impossible as lived experience and the place from which our best will come.”<sup>4</sup> Roysdon’s *Ecstatic Resistance* also proposes a mutability in the way that identity is constructed, resisting what is, in order to find a way to speak the unspeakable, which, in turn, extends the realm of possibility. It’s this expansion of what is possible that can only be articulated in the context of art. Over time, this kind of expression may or may not be absorbed into the political sphere, but is within this space of imagination afforded by art that other possibilities can be realized. And so, enacting resistance as a form of stillness gives way to transformation.

Open daily 1 – 8 pm and according to the evening program. Voluntary admission fee.

---

**Contact and more information:**

**Jaro Varga** → curator

+420 775 655 295

[jaro.varga@meetfactory.cz](mailto:jaro.varga@meetfactory.cz)

**Šárka Maroušková** → PR Manager

+420 723 706 249

[sarka.marouskova@meetfactory.cz](mailto:sarka.marouskova@meetfactory.cz)

**MeetFactory – prostor pro živé umění**

Our mission is to foster a dialogue between individual genres and make the current happenings on the art scene accessible to the widest public.

We aim to create a space where art is alive and artists are present, enhancing a direct exchange between international artists and visitors.

*MeetFactory is supported in 2016 by a grant from the City of Prague amounting to 10.000.000 CZK.*

---

<sup>4</sup> Emily Roysdon, *Ecstatic Resistance*, 2009