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A pamphlet for the exhibition *Sheffield 08: Yes No and Other Options*

EXHAUSTION & EXUBERANCE

Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform
by Jan Verwoert

The Pressure to Perform

How can we address the current changes in our societies and lives? Some say that we have come to inhabit the post-industrial condition—but what does that mean? One thing seems certain: after the disappearance of manual labour from the lives of most people in the Western world, we have entered into a culture where we no longer just work, we *perform*. We need to perform because that is what's asked of us. When we choose to make our living on the basis of doing what we want, we are required to get our act together and get things done, in any place, at any time. Are you ready? I ask you and I'm sure that you're as ready as you'll ever be to perform, prove yourself, do things and go places.

Who is we? The group is ever-expanding. It is we, the creative types—who invent jobs for ourselves by exploring and exploiting our talents to perform small artistic and intellectual miracles on a daily basis. It is we, the socially engaged—who create communal spaces for others and ourselves by performing as instigators or facilitators of social exchange. When we perform, we generate communication and thereby build forms of communality.¹ When we perform, we develop ideas and thereby provide the content for an economy based on the circulation of a new currency: information. In doing so, we produce the social and intellectual capital that service societies thrive on today, in the so-called Information Age. Accordingly, the Deutsche Bank sums up

90

their corporate philosophy with the slogan *A Passion to Perform*. (The motto is symptomatically agrammatical: in English, someone can be said to have a passion *for* something or someone, but not a passion *to*.)² Management consultants confirm that “implementing, promoting and sustaining a high performance culture” is the key to increasing corporate productivity by eliciting individual commitment and competitiveness among employees.³ So which side of the barricades are we on? Where do they stand today anyway? When do we commit to perform of our own free will? And when is our commitment elicited under false pretenses to enforce the ideology of high performance and boost someone else's profits? How can we tell the difference? And who is there to blame, if we choose to exploit ourselves?

In a high performance culture, we are the avant-garde but we are also the *job-slaves*. We serve the customers who consume the communication and sociability that we produce. We work in the call centers and in the kitchens of recently opened restaurants in the burgeoning new urban hubs of the global service society. To provide our services we are willing to travel, so we go west to perform, we go north to perform. We are everywhere, fixing the minds, houses and cars of local customers wherever we end up staying *because* there is work available—and for as long as it's available. Living this life of high performance we are constantly facing two questions: “Are we (still) in charge?” and: “Are we (still) happy?” They are the questions of agency and the good life, and both are implied in the first question of political ethics: “How can we know what would be the right thing to do to make a better life possible for ourselves and others, now and in the future?”

Every time this question arises, it leaves us craving for an overall solution, a resolute stance, a set of unassailable principles or a foundational politics that would provide us with unambiguous criteria for determining the right thing to do in each and every future

91

situation. The trouble is that just as the question only arises in situations when a specific decision is needed, it is precisely the specificity of each new situation that seems to pre-empt the very possibility of ever devising a general morale or politics that would apply to all instances. The requests, invitations or opportunities to perform tend to be connected to a set of highly particular conditions that make some instances acceptable and others impossible. Under certain circumstances a yes and a no may even seem equally justified. Moreover, the conditions under which you will perform may turn out to be completely contingent on the way in which you (re)negotiate those conditions in the process of your performance. So beyond the yes or no, beyond the either/or, there seem to be a million other options. Maybe the secret of autonomous agency and the good life lies precisely in opening up the space of those other options through a categorical refusal to accept the forceful imposition of any terms, leaving us no choice but to choose between *either* yes or no?

Yes No and Other Options⁴

Kirkegaard proposed the view that only he who faced up to the full challenge of the either/or, and based his life on a rigorous and binding choice, truly chose to choose (and thus acted ethically). Anyone who deflected this choice refrained from choosing at all and merely dabbled in the boundless sphere of inconsequential possibilities (the sphere of the aesthetic). Whether this view is still justified seems doubtful.⁵ The experience of the dictatorial regimes of modernity has attuned us to the fact that the imposition of binding choices is precisely how the power of ideology manifests itself in the pressure of social control. When a nation goes to war, for instance, the leader will confront you with a binding either/or choice: “You're either with us or against us.” All other ways to position yourself are overruled by the forceful assertion of a single set of options to choose from: Friend or Foe.

Consumer society conversely proclaims to be founded on the principle of limitless choice, most vividly epitomised by Microsoft's iconic slogan *Where do you want to go today?* (It was used from 1994 to 2002, since replaced by *Your Potential. Our Passion.*) In adopting this motto, the company promised that their product came with unlimited choice options built-in and could thus serve as a universally applicable performance tool for whatever personal purpose. The irony of this promise lies in the fact that the system on which computing machines operate is a binary logic of zeros and ones. In other words, it is a system based on the constant repetition of either/or choices. This irony becomes tangible the moment you realise that the generous offer to go wherever you want effectively entitles you only to select a predefined option from the menu of a computer program. This moment of realisation may very well exemplify the way in which we encounter the ideological regime of our high performance consumer culture and service society. We encounter it in a moment of suspicion (if not paranoia) when we dimly sense that our willingness to perform might be elicited under a false premise of opening up limitless possibilities—which is, in fact, merely pressure to enact predefined options and thereby enforce the system of control that defines them.

Returning to the question of political ethics (“How can we know what is to be done to make a better life possible for ourselves and others, now and in the future?”) we then face a two-fold challenge: 1. to understand the conditions of our agency in order to enable us to define them according to our own terms; and 2. to imagine another logic of agency, an ethos, which could help us defy the social pressure to perform and eschew the promise of the regimented options of consumption. If we perceive the pressure to perform to be innately linked to the regimentation of options, to imagine the ethos of a resistant practice implies an exploration of the conditions, situations and potentialities that lie beyond the option menus and the exclusivity of the yes and no. In artistic practice this

dedication to imagining other ways to perform and other ways to enjoy consumption means claiming the imagination and the aesthetic experience as a field of collective agency where workable forms of resistance can be devised.

I Can't

But what would it mean to put up resistance against a social order in which high performance has become a growing demand, if not a norm? What would it mean to resist the need to perform? Is "resistance" even a useful concept to evoke in this context? Are the forms of agency that we commonly associate with resistance not modes of high performance themselves? Grand gestures of revolt tend to be overpoweringly assertive. They thrive on the rush of the moment when things *really start happening* (the crowd surges forwards, the water cannons start shooting). In this sense they actually *exemplify* the core momentum of high performance itself: they make something happen and deliver an event. Should we then not rather look for other, more subtle ways of performing dissent? What silent but effective forms of non-alignment, non-compliance, uncooperativeness, reluctance, reticence, weariness or unwillingness do we find in everyday life? There are, for instance, those covert survival tactics of the workplace accumulated by generations of employees devising ever-new schemes to avoid performing the task they're asked to perform in the way (or at the time and speed at which) they are required to do so. Can we embrace such forms of anti-performance in art and thinking as forms of art and thinking?

Or do we inevitably find ourselves in the same position as the high performers who are enraged by slow people standing in their way? Uncooperativeness may well be the revenge that uncreative people take on creative society by wilfully stopping it in its tracks. Have you ever found yourself screaming or wanting to scream at an uncooperative clerk behind a counter: "I haven't got time for this!" only to

realise that, yes, *he does* have time for this—an entire lifetime dedicated to the project of stopping people like you from having their way? This slow man may turn out to be a guardian of the social equilibrium, protecting peace and sanity by preventing insanely restless performers like you from changing things for the worse. Or he may merely represent an older system of control and alienation—the bureaucratic apparatus—that is increasingly coming into conflict with its successor, the regime of high performance. In any case the question remains: Can we learn something from the traditional know-how of casual uncooperativeness when we seek to put up defenses against a culture of compulsive high performance?

Why does it take other people to stop us from performing in the first place? Why do we not dismiss the need to perform of our own accord? What can make us utter the magic words *I Can't*? Does it take a breakdown to stop us? Does the utterance of the words *I Can't* already constitute or confirm a breakdown, a failure to perform, justifiable only if our body authenticates our incapacity by refusing to function? How could we restore dignity to the *I Can't*? How could we avoid becoming backed into a corner where the *I Can't* would merely be perceived as a passive-aggressive stance of denial? In other words: How can we embrace the *I Can't* without depriving ourselves of our potential to act? Could we unlock the *I Can't* as a form of agency?

Reportedly, Gerhard Richter used to have a poster next to his phone with one single word printed on it in big letters: *NO*. As compelling as this may seem, the categorical no in this case only functions as (because it is) a response to an existing demand—and therefore a move within a stable economy that supports or even rewards it (rarified supply enhances the demand and raises the price). So the question is rather how performing the *I Can't* could effectively *interrupt* the self-contained economic cycle of supply and demand and truly break the spell of the pressure to produce for the sake of production.

Punk was exactly about this: the unwillingness to submit to industry standards of what music can or can't be and how professional musicians should deal with what they can or can't do. This resulted in the transgression of personal capacities by rigorously embracing personal *incapacities*, rising above demand by frustrating all expectations. In this respect, Stuart Bailey pointed out the iconic status that the closing moment of the Sex Pistols' final performance: In the video recording of the show, the band are visibly drained of energy as their last song "No Fun" drags on into an endless coda, and their wild posturing routine terminally exhausts itself. As the performance disintegrates completely and ends, singer Johnny Rotten, visibly alienated by both the band and the whole situation, sneers at the audience: "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" At the point of exhaustion, the performance of the *I Can't* interrupts the economy of expectations and throws its workings into relief, producing an empty moment of full awareness.

Could we imagine a form of agency that consists in producing an ongoing series of such moments of interruption and awareness? Since the mid-1960s the art practice of Slovakian artist Július Koller has been precisely that: a series of small interruptive acts performed in public and private space, provoking situations in which the potential for difference becomes tangible. In his 1965 Anti-Happening manifesto, Koller stated that, as a means of artistic practice, the Happening was an insufficient gesture because it was merely another "way to put an artistic act into action." His concept of the Anti-Happening suggested an alternative use of "[the] means of textual designation" and "cultural demarcation" to effect a "cultural reshaping of the subject (and) an awareness of the surroundings."⁶ Koller's Anti-Happenings consequently consisted, for instance, in graffitiing a question mark or an endless wave onto a street wall with whipped cream, or in staging a table tennis match in a gallery as a social model of direct intersubjective exchange.

The photo of the Anti-Happening *Casopriestorové vymedzenie psychofyzickej cimmosti matérie* (1968), for instance, shows him in the act of redrawing the tramlines of a tennis court with a chalk-dispensing cart. The title translates as "Time/Space Definition of the Psycho-physical Activity of Matter" and thus designates this act as work—in the most basic sense of its definition in physics as the activity of displacing matter in space. Work, or artistic labour, is then defined by the simple gesture of drawing a line (or marking a difference) that designates the space as a site for a possible encounter between two people as players with equal rights in the game. It is an operation on the margins whilst staking a claim on those same margins.

Koller continued to perform such Anti-Happenings with an attitude of casual insistence, but from a position quite literally on the margins of a society. Due to the political regime in power, the art he was practising was practically barred from public recognition. Yet Koller's insistence on the possibility of making art on his own terms turned his work from a marginal practice into a practice of performing the margins; a performance of demarcating the limits of the existing society by pointing beyond them towards other possibilities. The photo *Monologika—Jojo (U.F.O.)* [Monologic—Yo-Yo] (1982), for instance, depicts him playing with a big white Yo-Yo in front of a group of mind-numbingly dull apartment blocks. The cipher "U.F.O." in the title is a key to Koller's work, as a central part of his practice consisted of finding ever-new permutations of the acronym. In diagram drawings it came to stand for Univerzálna Futurologická Organizácia [Universal Futurological Organisation] (1972–3), Univerzálny Filozofický Ornament [Universal Philosophical Ornament] (1978) or Underground Fantastic Organisation (1975), to name a few. Collectively, the potentially infinite variations on the cipher "U.F.O." form a continuous cheeky incantation of the Utopian principle. By representing the possibility of other possibilities, they point to all other options outside

The Beauty of Latency

of the given regime of options imposed on social life by the dominant system of governance.

The various interpretations of the acronym *perform* the utopian principle: first of all because the infinite play on the name realises the potentials of the imagination as a radical form of free agency; secondly, because the performance of infinite renaming operates on the dialectic of affirmation and deferral that is crucial to utopian thought. Utopian thought portrays a different world as presently not yet existing but realistically within reach. In this sense, Mark E. Smith's ingenious mantra "I can't get it now but I can get it" (from the Von Südenfed track "Fledermaus Can't Get It", 2007) is a shorthand formula for the way in which the utopian drive suspends the opposition between the *I Can't* and the *I Can*, allowing each one to embody the realisation of the other.

Nietzsche argued that to realise a fundamental critique of bad faith means to move beyond cynicism and embrace a radical optimism that exceeds the petty dialectics of expectation and disappointment. (Invoking such an attitude of defiant optimism, I feel indebted to Paulina Ołowska for pointing out the key role this spirit played in the art and pop culture that continued heroic modernism after the Second World War.) Koller's art epitomises this optimism, as it demonstrates the potentiality of what I propose to call an **existential exuberance, i.e., a way to perform without any mandate or legitimization**, in response to the desires and dreams of other people, but without the aim or pretense of merely fulfilling an existing demand. **It is a way of always giving too much of what is not presently requested. It is a way of giving what you do not have to others who may not want it. It is a way of transcending your capacities by embracing your incapacities and therefore a way to interrupt the brute assertiveness of the *I Can* through the performance of an *I Can't* performed in the key of the *I Can*.** It is a way of insisting that, even if we can't get it now, we can get it, in some other way at some other point in time.

Another mode of performing the *I Can't* in the key of the *I Can* that art and poetry have always used to great effect is to create moments in which meaning remains provocatively latent. **To embrace latency goes against the grain of the logic of high performance.** The appraisal of latency restores dignity to the unsaid, the unshown, and everything that can't be dragged out into the open in the rush of high performance when the value of all our potentials appears to depend entirely on our capacity to actualise them right here, right now. The fatal consequence of a continuous pressure to perform is the exhaustion of all our potentials precisely **because the current social order denies the value of latency**, the value of a potentiality that remains presently unactualised and quite possibly can't ever be exhaustively actualised. It seems that we have to learn to re-experience the value and beauty of latency.

Again the *I Can't* implied in the unwillingness to fully spell out the meaning of something that cannot be forced into the open (an idea, a feeling, a motive etc.) must not be understood as a denial of agency. On the contrary, the insistence to speak—or make work in any other way—about that which is neither readily understandable nor immediately useful is in itself a strong claim to agency: *I Can* speak or make work about what *I Can't* speak or make work about. While this in a more general sense applies to any form of art or writing, it may have a special bearing on abstract work.⁶ The provocation of abstraction in thinking as much as in painting or sculpture, for instance, lies precisely in this insistence on addressing and not addressing its subject in the very same instant. The capacity of abstract thought and work to invoke ideas in the most concise way is intrinsically linked to the impossibility of its exhaustive verification through positive facts. **Whereby abstract thought and work insists on the latency of meaning not because it won't disclose its immediate meaning** (i.e. out of a

coquettish flirtation with opacity) but because **it can't. If it could, it would lose its capacity to address the potential reality of all that is presently not given in actuality (i.e. all the possibilities that lie beyond those already actualised within the dominant mode of thinking and acting.)**

It may be that some of the oldest forms of creative manual labour, such as painting or writing, further the cultivation of a particularly intimate relationship to latent meanings. As you write or paint, words you have read or images you have seen elsewhere (including those which you have forgotten you read or saw) are present in your work as latent memories. The same latencies are at play in the moment of reading or looking at a painting as the words of the pages you have read before reverberate in the words you presently read and the images you have been exposed to resonate with what you see when you look at what you presently face. Explicating these latencies by forcing them out onto the page or canvas in their brute actuality would mean to obliterate the deep space of memory that the immanent echoes and delays of the medium generate. How can the potential of these latencies be activated? **How do you open up the space of echo and delay?**

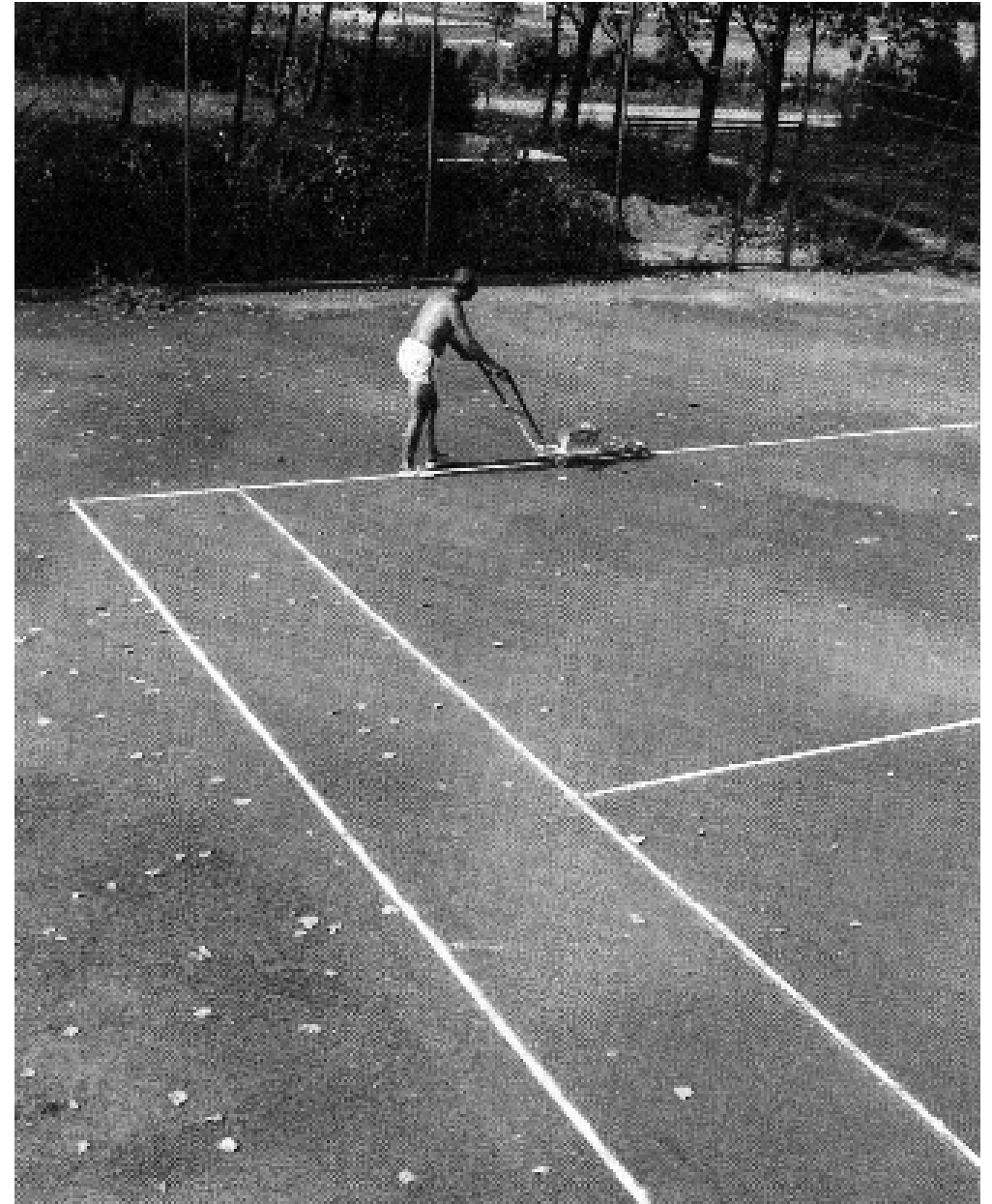
In her abstract paintings, Esther Stocker, for instance, does this by projecting several graphic grid structures on top of one another. The structures then echo and displace each other through the delay that occurs in your visual perception when you try and fail to read them as one coherent pattern and the structures begin to waver. This is the experience of the latency at the heart of any structure, the latent grids that quiver through the visible ones just like latent thoughts make words tremble on the page. In Tomma Abts's abstract paintings this latency resides in the texture of their surface. At first glance, the shapes of the abstract figures and constellations in her work seem so clearly defined that you would assume they had been painted in one shot. Nooks of paint around the edges of each form then, however,

make you aware of the fact that these forms are the outcome of a long painterly process of continuous revision and overpainting in which nothing is fixed or decided at the painting's conception. Still, this painterly process does not assert itself as a dramatic form of agency. It defies the melodrama of process that **abstract expressionism performed**. It is only through paint nooks, uneven edges, strange overlaps of shapes or surprising symmetries between askewed axes that the decisions made in every stage of the work's execution become tangible in their latent presence. Beyond the grand gesture, Abts thereby proposes a very particular model of agency: **a model of how time can be spent making decisions in relation to what you want something to be.**

A crucial question in painting (as in writing) is how to start and where to end. In a high performance culture, the beginning and end of each given task is defined with **brutal clarity**. All parameters are set by an outside demand, and the job must be performed as fast as possible to meet the impending deadline. On the contrary, in painting (as in writing) the beginning and end of the work are defined through an immanent demand, as the decisions about how to start and conclude are choices that shape the very identity of a piece. It is only by concluding in a particular way, that the piece establishes its own standards of completion and demonstrates why it had to be the way it is. Work that incorporates the memory of its own process in this way constitutes its own parameters of time both in- and outside of itself. This is a time that stretches into long days and nights of pushing towards something, only to collapse into split-seconds of sudden discoveries; a time that can retroactively change its face as it re-invents its own beginning at the end. Through its immanent temporality such work is structurally at odds with any regimented notion of time. It interrupts the homogeneous pace of high performance culture through the immanent rhythm of expanded and compressed, delayed and accelerated time of the memory at work in the process of its making.



OT
Acrylic on cotton, 140 × 160 cm (Esther Stocker, 2007)



Time/space Definition of the Psychophysical Activity of Matter 1, 2 (Anti-Happening)
(Július Koller, 1968)

Just in Time

Performance is all about timing. A comedian with a bad sense of timing is not funny, a musician useless. Career opportunities, we are told, are all about being in the right place at the right time, and so, perhaps, is finding a lover. Is there a right time for love? These days, over-worked couples are advised to reserve “quality time” for one another to prevent their relationship from losing its substance. What is quality time? “Is it a good time for you to talk?” people will ask when they reach you on your mobile. When is a good time to talk? We live and work in economies based on the concept of “just-in-time” production—and “just-in-time” usually means things have to be ready in no time at all. Who sets the urgent pace according to which all others are measuring their progress? Or rather: Who sets the pace of planned obsolescence that keeps people buying the same product in slightly upgraded designs over and over again, allowing industry to thrive on the constant over-production of what will essentially be tomorrow’s waste? This is the question Dexter Sinister (publisher of this essay) is asking and attempting to answer by seeking not only alternative modes of production, but also other means—or ecologies—of circulation. For instance, *re-publication* is offered as a form to keep thoughts in the loop, beyond the date of their planned obsolescence.

The timing of just-in-time production, moreover, seems to be the defining force at the heart of the pressure to perform. To be in sync with just-in-time production essentially means that you have to be ready to perform all the time and at all times. Are you ready? is the question you must be prepared to answer positively: *As ready as I’ll ever be*. A whole etiology of high performance culture could be based on studying the current use of this term.

“Are you ready?” asks smooth operator Danny Ocean (George Clooney) in the blockbuster *Ocean’s 13* (2007), to which self-styled gentleman criminal Terry Benedict (Andy

98

Garcia) promptly replies: “I was born ready.” Subsequently Clooney, Garcia and a cast of selected Hollywood high performers rise up to the challenge summed up in the movie’s pitch: “What does it take to steal 500 million in three point five minutes?” Even in its ostentatious self-irony the movie essentially glorifies what Jean-Luc Nancy calls an operative community: a mythic bond of male heroes who come together to complete a task. In the film, the heroes team up to revenge their godfather by driving his enemy, a Las Vegas casino developer, to ruin. They acquire all kinds of equipment and expertise and burn enormous amounts of money. They do all it takes to get the job done and succeed, and yet their success somehow smacks of fatalism. What else would we expect a Hollywood high performer to do, but to satisfy and deliver? Even in the mode of self-irony, he can’t perform the *I Can’t*; as a prototypical man of action, he remains chained to an inviolate *I Can*.

In a much more subversive form the celebration of the *I Can* implied in the continuous unconditional readiness to perform is interpreted by the eponymous hero of the children’s cartoon programme *Spongebob Squarepants*. Spongebob, a tiny yellow sea sponge who lives in the submarine smalltown of Bikini Bottom, loves to unreservedly greet any new morning by exuberantly chanting: “I’m ready! I’m ready! I’m ready-eady-eady-eady-eady!” He then usually spends his day working in a dingy fast food joint, the Krusty Krab, where his remarkable talents at frying patties are shamelessly exploited by the owner, a Scrooge-like crab. This exploitation has no impact on Spongebob, however, since frying patties happens to be one of his most favorite pastimes. He effectively lives a free and happy life because, coincidentally, he does what he loves to do, and as such the idea that he may have reasons to feel alienated never dawns on him. His unassailable naiveté affords him the gift of an exuberance so contagious that the dire reality of his surroundings pales in the light of his optimism. Spongebob’s incredible resilience evokes the

99

potentials of an anti-oedipal interpretation of the *I Can*. Through deflecting the demands of the dominant reality principle, the *I Can*, performed in the key of the anti-oedipal, may effectively create a different (and no less factual) reality in which the unrequested exuberance of desire—rather than demand or discipline—determines what is real.

Unfortunately, even if you manage to shrug it off exuberantly, the dominant reality principle tends to find painful ways of reasserting itself. In this sense, one such painful reminder produced by the timing of high performance culture is the current global experience of divided, alienated time. Today, time is becoming progressively disjointed as the “developed” countries push ahead into a science fiction economy of dematerialised labour and virtual capital—and simultaneously push the “developing” countries centuries back in time by outsourcing manual and industrial labour that imposes working conditions on them from the times of early industrialisation. Sometimes this time gap doesn’t even have to span centuries—it might be only a few years, as some former Eastern European countries are currently experiencing (rapidly catching up to the speed of advanced capitalism, but perhaps still not rapidly enough). Migrant workers bridge this gap, travelling ahead in time to work in the fast cities of the West and the North, yet facing the risk of any time-traveller losing touch with the time that passes while they are away. Can you find your way back into the time zone you left when you learn to inhabit the time zone of a country that purports to be your future? How many time-zones can you inhabit and still live happily?

One of the most painfully difficult aspects to grasp and live with in this respect, is that life goes on at a different pace in the place you have temporarily left behind when you travel to work. With an abundance of experience, a two-week journey may feel like a single long day. On returning, however, you may come to realise that someone who stayed at home experienced

this period in its “actual” length as two long weeks. An apparent gap of thirteen days thus opens up between the two economies of time. What happened to this time? The space of circulation absorbed it. Such time-lags can cause even the most intimate long-term relationships to fall apart. As progressively more people can, want or have to circulate to keep up with the pace of high performance, just as many people cannot or do not want to circulate. One of the most existential questions we thus face concerns the possibility of conviviality and communality under the conditions of a division of time through spatial distance: How do we want to share time together, when work divides time in previously unknown geographical dimensions? How can we try to bridge these differences in time—the time-lags created by circulation—which question the very possibility of intimate relationships?

Roman Ondák has proposed a whole series of ways to potentially share the experience of circulation; that is, to share precisely that experience of the insurmountable difference in time and space that disrupts the horizon of shared experience. One form this takes is through the use of invitations to participate in international exhibitions as an occasion to cultivate his correspondence with the people he lives with. In *Antinomads* (2000) for instance, Ondák asked friends and family members in his hometown of Bratislava whether they considered themselves to be nomads or antinomads. He then photographed those who identified themselves as antinomads in a location of their choice, e.g. in front of their bookshelves, at their own desk, in the garden or on their bed surrounded by cuddly toys. Each picture was made into a set of postcards, and these postcards were then distributed freely in the locations where the work was later exhibited. Through this work Ondák thus performs a symbolic exchange: the antinomads give their picture to the nomadic artist and he, in return, sends them on a journey by allowing their pictures to circulate in other places.

Contradicting the pressure to be mobile, Ondák restores dignity to the position of people who defy this pressure by presenting them as heroes of anti-mobility. At the same time, however, he also draws a fine yet crucial line between this position and the reactionary resentments against a global culture that neo-conservative parties today incite and profit from. By insisting on circulating the pictures of the antinomads internationally, Ondák negotiates the value of their reluctance within the context of a global culture. He thereby cheekily frees the position of the anti-nomad from a negative proximity to a politics of isolationism, in the tradition of the *vade mecum* (taking along a picture of family and friends to a foreign place is an intimate gesture of love and allegiance). Symbolically at least, the rupture in the horizon of shared experience is then bridged by the fact that the traveller imparts the conditions of his existence on those who do not travel, by circulating their image. Ondák demonstrates that if we seek to break the high performance spell that threatens the possibility of intimacy through insurmountable time-lags, we must devise counter-spells and learn to perform a kind of relational voodoo whereby we invoke the ghosts of the absent others wherever we end up being, to share our life with them.

The Exuberant I Can

If we return now to the notion of exuberance implied in a way to perform the *I Can* that transgresses the predefined demands: Could such exuberance be a way to interrupt the order of the division of time and space imposed on social life by the culture of high performance? In his film *Theorema*, Pasolini draws up precisely such a scenario of unleashed performativity. The film starts with a scene in which a factory owner hands over his factory to the workers. (The film involves a temporal reversal: the beginning of the film is actually its conclusion, and the gesture that ends the working life of the factory owner is a latent decision which takes shape

over the course of subsequent events.) Although it lies close to the factory, the villa of the owner is a space in which the regime of labour is suspended. Consequently, it is a space where time is undivided and endless; a time of infinite boredom; in a space that seems without structure, through which members of the staff and family move about aimlessly. This comfortable situation changes when, at short notice, a young man arrives. He is devoid of personality or any other form of distinction apart from the fact that he is a charming lover. Over the course of the film he sleeps with all members of the family and leaves again. Suddenly liberated by love, all family members now start to perform: the son acknowledges his homosexuality and becomes a painter; the daughter decides to never move nor speak again; the mother cruises the streets, having casual sex with random young men; the maid refrains from killing herself and instead becomes a saint; the factory owner undresses himself in the train station and walks off into a nearby volcano. All these acts are portrayed as possessing identical value, all suddenly seem equally possible, and none of the individual “performances” negates the potential of any of the others. Pasolini thereby invokes a situation where the end of work and the arrival of love creates the potential for a radical co-existence of ways to perform the *I Can* and *I Can't* which are not forced under the yoke of a dominant imperative to perform in one way and one way alone.

Could we collectively inhabit such a condition of exuberant performativity? In her recent paintings Silke Otto-Knapp points towards this possibility. The works are based on her ongoing study of the forms in which modern ballet has translated patterns of social life into dance. Otto-Knapp appropriates selected moments from this history and transforms them into pictures that focus attention on the specific formalised body language through which dance reflects the relation of the individual to the collective. Many of the works are painted in monochromatic silver tones, others in luminous water-colours. Abstraction enters the

picture through this painterly form, and it is precisely this moment of abstraction that draws out the intrinsic exuberance of the formalised body language of ballet. This exuberance resides in the gesture freed from any other purpose but to communicate the idea of bodies communicating. Depicted in the mode of abstraction, dance then becomes a cipher for a communality that is not organised towards an ulterior end, a task or function it has to perform on demand. In its abstract form, the exuberant community remains inoperative. Collectivity and disaggregation are performed by those present, coming together and falling apart in ways that are solely determined through bodily articulation. What the paintings represent, then, is a utopian state of exuberance.

In her work Hilary Lloyd also focuses on the sheer exuberance of the gesture, yet she reaches this point less through abstraction and more through the specific observation of a vernacular body language. *Car Wash* (2005), for example, consists of four slide projections, each comprised of 80 slides. As the slides change with the pace of a very slow movie, they intensify your experience of place by unhinging your sense of time. The pictures show a group of young Arab men working at a car wash in Sheffield. Lloyd's camera picks out numerous details of their body language. You see how the biceps of a man in a vest ripple as he lifts a hose to rinse a car, or how a gold necklace glitters between the zip of a tracksuit, opened just wide enough to reveal it. You sense that the men know how to let these things show. It's a defiant form of exuberance, as none of the defining features of their performance is determined by the requirements of the work they do. And it is precisely through this moment of exuberance that the men erase the stigma of a low-paid job, transforming it instead into a platform for a performance in which the cars become mere props for a demonstration of pride. Here Lloyd pays tribute to the body politics of pure attitude. The men at the car wash have exactly what the fashion industry

capitalises on: they have *it*, i.e., attitude. But they didn't buy it and they don't sell it; they just have it. Many a stylist, model or musician would give their right arm to have it, too, but it's not for sale. As in *Theorema*, the acts of exuberance interrupt a labour regime in which only purposeful production counts as agency, and instead opens up a space in which the *I Can* exists in the form of an untradable surplus.

Who Cares?

But in what way do we experience the *I Can* when we release it from the demands of high performance and economic productivity? Giorgio Agamben argues that this experience is “for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality.”⁸ In one sense the horror of the *I Can* could be understood as the infinite challenge to truly face the reality of your desires in a state when no outside demands or prohibitions protect you from asking the terrifying question: *Tell me what you want, what you really really want?* In another sense, however, the challenge of the *I Can* is not simply or solely a reflection of your own desires. As Irit Rogoff points out, Agamben actually relates it to a moment of existential indebtedness to others.⁹ To make this point, he recounts the story in which Russian poet Anna Akhmatova describes how and why she became a writer. Standing outside a Leningrad prison in 1930 where her son was a political prisoner, a woman whose son was also imprisoned, addressed Akhmatova with the question: “Can you speak of this?” She realised that she had to respond *yes*—indeed she *could*—and in this moment found herself both indebted and empowered.¹⁰

Thinking through this link between indebtedness and empowerment may prove crucial, precisely because the thought goes against the very grain of high performance culture. Its demand to be ever-ready relies on the assumption that you *could be*. It is based on the illusion that each individual should be

able to generate an inexhaustable potency solely from his own resources. This illusion is as self-aggrandising as it is fatal, because it is only through assuming you had such inexhaustable potency that you willingly accept the request to prove it, then take it to heart when you are reprimanded for failing to do so. To point out that the potential to perform is a gift and debt received from others involves shattering the illusion on which high performance culture is founded. But what does it mean to assume that we are always already deeply indebted to others when we perform? In what way is it precisely this indebtedness to others that enables us to perform in the first place? How could we develop the ethos of a mode of performance that acknowledges the debt to the other instead of asserting the illusion of the infinite potency of the self?

One way to acknowledge the debt is to pay tribute to those who have enabled you to practice what you do by inspiring you. With regard to inspiration, the *I Can* is realised in a very particular way because another person's thoughts, works or conversation make you experience the liberating sensation of potentiality that, yes, you can *also* think, feel, speak and act this way. To feel inspired essentially means to realise *I Can because You Do*. Any form of work that unfolds through addressing the work of others (including this essay) thrives on this sensation. To put the moment of inspiration into practice and act upon the implications of the realisation that *I Can because You Do* involves transforming the debt to the other into a pro-active gesture of dedicating one's practice to this other. Overcoming the fear of influence, we could then move towards a politics of dedication.

The work of Frances Stark thrives on such a politics of dedication. In both her visual and written work she continuously borrows and quotes and transforms what she borrows and quotes. Yet, the gesture of appropriation in her work, as much as it always echoes an act of stealing, first of all communicates a sense of appreciation that precisely reflects the conversion of a debt into a dedication. The space her

work opens up is an open continuum in which other voices resonate through her voice, but where her voice remains very distinctively hers. The oedipal hierarchies of godfathers and disciples, progenitors and epigones are effectively toppled in this continuum, where the ghosts can only speak when the one who summons them speaks too. In this space such hierarchies are dismantled and displaced by a form of communality and conviviality with the ghosts of those whose presence may be felt through a work. At one point in the conceptual text piece *Structures that fit my opening and other parts considered to the whole* (2006), mischievously offered in the form of a Powerpoint presentation, Stark hints at the social model of communality that such a politics of appreciation implies through its anti-economical motivation. She writes that in composing a poem (dedicated, as it were, to one particular person or maybe many) she was pondering "the possibility of liberating oneself from a cycle of disengaged production motivated by a craving for legitimising praise. Paradoxically, I looked toward a mutual admiration society—to that ecstatic reciprocal attention-paying of lovers—as an alternative model for understanding how and why intellectual equals might freely collaborate." This could form the first paragraph for an unwritten (and maybe unwritable) constitution of a community committed to the politics of dedication.

I Care

To practice a politics of dedication and recognise an indebtedness to the other as the condition of your own ability to perform means to acknowledge the importance of care. You perform because you care for someone or something. This care gives you the strength to act, not least because to *not* act is out of the question when someone or something you really care for or about requires that you should act. In conversation Annika Eriksson summed this point up by describing the experience that, as a mother, (when your child is in need of you) "there is

no no." This unconditional demand forces you to realise that you can even if you thought you couldn't. By definition, then, the *I Care* implies the potential of an unconditional *I Can*. The decisive difference between this mode of unconditional potentiality and the illusion of inexhaustable potency, however, lies in the fact that the experience of unconditional care is one that comes to us both from and through the other. Paradoxically, you are freed from the economic regime of demand by virtue of a debt to the other; in other words, the existential demand will always overrule the economic one. And since it is unconditional and existential rather than economical, the *I Care* is equally the force behind an incommensurable surplus of exuberance. That extra bit of time and attention we invest into our personal relations as well as our work is precisely what makes these relations and this work un-economical. It's a surplus that can never be justified by economic standards, but it's the source of our *modus operandi* when we care.

The *I Care* has radical implications because, while it can provide the sensation of an unconditional *I Can*, it can equally radically *delimit* it. When you recognise the priority of care for someone or something, this commitment may, under certain circumstances, oblige you to turn down an offer or request to perform what you otherwise might have gladly accepted. In this situation to profess the *I Can't* (do this job, participate in this event) is then the only adequate way to show that you care—for the friends, family, children or lovers who require your presence, or for the continuation of a long-term creative practice that takes its time. Likewise, the recognition that you are exhausting yourself and need to take care of your health can under these conditions constitute a reason to decline an offer to perform and utter the *I Can't*. To practice a politics of dedication then means to recognise the *I Care* as the source both of the *I Can* and the *I Can't*.

The *I Care* is also, then, a question of welfare—a pertinent issue in the context of

the widespread dismantling of the welfare state. In a recent talk Jimmy Durham cited two people he had met in Italy as saying: "We are liberated. What we need now is a better life."¹¹ This anecdote might help us rephrase the question of political ethics, from "How can we know what is to be done to make a better life possible for ourselves and others, now and in the future?" to: "How could we collectively realise the freedom and demands of *I Can* and *I Can't* in the key of *I Care* and claim the right to create the conditions for a better life for everybody?"

Politically speaking, this is the question of organised solidarity. Ethically speaking, however, there is a fundamental problem: when we fully realise the implications of the *I Care*, we are forced to acknowledge that the potentiality of care can never be collectively organised, because the debt to the other implied in the *I Care* is always radically particular. To generalise it means to obliterate its very momentum. In conversation Gitte Villesen formulated this criticism in relation to what she marked out as the intrinsic arrogance of a social democratic idea of welfare: because it generalises care, the social reality of institutionalised solidarity and welfare results in a top-down imposition of the standards of a good life on demographically-categorised population groups. Organised care, she continued, can only address its subject indifferently as "Them" (an anonymous collective entity whose needs are to be administered from a distanced position, as in "Them, the immigrants, the single mothers, etc.") and never as the "You" of a direct encounter with the need of the other. In her own practice, Villesen performs a critique of the administration of welfare by using documentary video to provoke such direct encounters in which the force of the demand placed on the artist by the other can be fully experienced. It seems the potential of such a politics of welfare may only be truly realised when it retains the moment of disorganisation that the particularity of care inevitably produces—at the very moment it becomes collective.



The Bride's Chamber Scene
Watercolour and gouache on canvas, 100 × 100 cm (Silke Otto-Knapp, 2005)



Car Wash
4 × 80 slides, 4 × Kodak Ektapro 5020 slide projectors, 4 × Unicol projector stands (Hilary Lloyd, 2005)

Use Me Up

Complete exhaustion is a state we both fear and seek to reach. To one day run out of ideas and things to say is what creative people dread more than anything else. Yet, at the same time one of the strongest driving forces behind creative work continues to be the desire to push an idea to its limits, to go to extremes and only stop when all possibilities have been exhausted and, looking at the result of your efforts, you realise with pleasurable horror: this is it, this is how it must be, **it could have been different, but now that the hour is late, the deadline has passed, the opening of the show or premiere of the performance is about to start, there is no way you could still change anything.** Time is up and you are finally relieved from the **pressure to perform.**¹² This build-up of conflicting emotions around the end of work—the completion of a particular work as well as the depletion of all possibilities to make further work—is at the heart of the drama by which artists and intellectuals in modernity have learned to experience the climax and crisis of their work as a radical form of exhaustion. It is also through this drama that avant-gardes asserted their power to bring art (as it was) to an end by terminating tradition, either to liberate following generations or to leave them with nothing more to do.

This drama is far from over. On the contrary, it has become a general social condition. As the post-industrial societies of the global north are increasingly organised around flexible, immaterial and creative labour, complete personal exhaustion in the form of the much-feared burn-out syndrome has become a collective experience of professionals in all sectors of the service society and new creative industries who feel pressed to perform to the best of their talent and abilities on their job every day. Bizarrely then, the heartfelt belief that “it’s better to burn out than to fade away” that used to set the rebellious devotees of countercultural creativity apart from obedient employees, now seems to have become the first commandment of the

high performance culture endorsed by advanced capitalism.

Parallel to the way in which futurist avant-gardes had demanded the museums to be burned to release art production into a state of pure presence, the economic rationale of just-in-time production lies in the realisation that the storage of goods in warehouses is too costly and has to be replaced by models of distribution where the consumer or client can access the desired service or product right away (ideally through downloading). Museums and warehouses remain as sites that retain temporal latency. But in a high performance culture there is no time for latencies; all potentials of production must be actualised right away, the faster the better. Under the economic imperative of high performance, just-in-time-production is boosted by the buzz and justified by the necessity of the moment because any choice taken under extreme time pressure is without alternatives. **As the range of possibilities is always already exhausted when there is no time to consider other options, acts performed in the nick of time appear to be powered by the full force of necessity. Anyone working under the conditions of just-in-time production by definition labours and lives in a constant state of exhaustion.**

But is an economy based on systematic exhaustion not bound to collapse at any time? If current forms of capitalism purposefully sustain a sense of crisis to increase the urgency of production, it does indeed seem inevitable that the whole system should soon spiral out of control. Such apocalyptic prognoses, however, have been popular ever since the 1960s, when consumer culture came to increasingly thrive on excessive overspending and thus seemed to head right towards economic meltdown. Yet, until now nothing like that has happened. So it seems more probable that overspending and exhaustion are simply moments in the cyclical patterns of capitalism’s reproduction and regeneration. As more and more people burn out the whole machine gets fired up.

What would it mean to escape this vicious cycle and break the spell of the death drive towards exhaustion?

One option, of course, is to start taking care of yourself. It is no coincidence that after having exhaustively analysed how people willingly submit to the systematic exploitation of their life energy, Foucault should aptly title his final book *The Care of the Self*. In it he portrays the practical wisdom ancient Greek and Roman culture gathered in its reflections on how to live a good life. Instead of fixed norms, Foucault writes, ancient ethics and dietetics encouraged free men to find their own style of economising their energies and controlling their powers in order to avoid prematurely exhausting the capacity to act and enjoy in later life.

In a contemporary high performance culture, to draw a line somewhere, stop work and cut off communication at some point—to reserve a part of your life for taking care of yourself—has indeed become a radical thing to do because it effectively means you are taking yourself out of circulation. You deliberately hold back resources, free time and potentials that could be used productively. Still, you can never be sure whether the free time you gain is not just the time you need to restore your energies to be fit to perform again on the next day so that you never escape the cycle of compulsive productivity. As such, the care of the self—wellness and health—is one of the hottest commodities available today. Madonna sarcastically comments on this in “American Life” (2003): “I do yoga and Pilates / And the room is full of hotties / So I’m checking out the bodies / And you know I’m satisfied.” Taking care of your health from this perspective could also be understood as a measure to protect your most valuable asset by conserving your physical power to perform.

The Politics of Exhaustion

Directed against this conservative moment, the politics of exhaustion inherent in counter-

cultural rites of excess have always been about deliberately squandering that capital. This philosophy of self-destruction is born out of the realisation that the accumulation of capital is tied to the moment when profits are skimmed off and stashed away in the bourgeois private sphere to secure property. The rebellious response of bohemian culture has therefore always lain in the commitment to never accumulate profit but always waste it and get wasted, to consume and be consumed, and refuse to save anything or be saved by anyone. Most beautifully maybe, this spirit is expressed in the so-called “devil’s verse,” the anonymous Latin palindrome *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (“we wander around in the night in circles and get consumed by fire,” originally a riddle alluding to moths or mayflies). **Guy Debord** used it as the title for a film he made in 1978 and **Cerith Wyn Evans** turned it into a neon sign in which the letters of the palindrome were arrayed in the form of a ring which is suspended from the ceiling like a candelabra designed to illuminate a celebratory space for a potential congregation of the wasteful.

A nagging doubt of course remains as to whether this politics of exhaustion is not merely adding a little more fizz to the spectacle of cultural consumption—and whether the insouciant consumers and collectors of art are not just all too eager to see another bohemian go up in a blaze of glory, be pleasantly entertained and in time move on to applaud the next eclipse. Still, there is a beauty and dignity in gestures of expenditure that, I believe, will always exceed the petty rationale of the lucratively spectacular. This is because the deliberate exhibition of exhaustion in art or writing deprivatises exhaustion by exposing it as an experience that may be shared. The exhibition of exhaustion produces public bodies. In this sense, **Vito Acconci** told me in conversation that among the Marxist beliefs he had espoused in the 1970s but still felt compelled by was the conviction that the rejection of the value of private property should begin with a changed attitude to your own body,

with the radical readiness to understand this body and self as public and political, 24/7. The refusal to claim your potentials as private property and the will to allow them to be exhausted by others implies a generosity that has little to do with moral altruism. It seems rather more driven by an unrestrained desire to enjoy and be enjoyed by others. Bill Withers probably best expressed this in his R&B classic "Use Me" (1972) "I wanna spread the news that if it feels this good getting used / Oh you just keep on using me until you use me up."

The erotic force of this desire to be exhausted in turn points to the sexual dimension of a high performance culture. Sex work is one of the fastest growing industries today. And, without wanting to turn "sex work" into a loose metaphor, I still feel that the unconditional readiness to perform whenever and wherever that is expected from freelancers as well as from artists and intellectuals operating in a project-based arts economy somewhat resembles the pressure put on the sex worker to always get it on. Yet, even though this pressure can never be disconnected from the potential to perform, it should also not be confounded with it. For there is undeniably a genuine joy in recognising one's own potentials in the act of realising them.

There is a beautiful drawing by Frances Stark which shows the outlines of a peacock in a perky pose, but its tail feathers are not yet unfolded. Among the collage of different small cut-outs of texts that the feather texture is composed of, a Henry Miller quote written backwards in capital letters reads: "GET ON THE FUCKING BLOCK AND FUCK." The words read equally like a firm admonition (Do it!), a declaration of will (Yes, I will do it!) and a supportive cheer (Come on, you can do it!). As you can also tell by its pose, this bird both wants and needs to get up and go. This inextricable ambivalence between what you want and expect of yourself and what others want and expect from you is probably one of the hardest puzzles for anyone who works both

creatively and on demand to solve. One consequence is that an uncanny feeling of outside determination and dependency might never leave you, even if you are positively sure that you only do what you want to do. Here again, to push yourself beyond the point of exhaustion is a common technique to relieve yourself of the burden of outside expectations; you simply incapacitate yourself to a degree that no-one can possibly still expect anything of you. The Dead Kennedys summed it all up in "Too Drunk to Fuck" (1981): "But now I am jaded / You're out of luck / I'm rolling down the stairs / Too drunk to fuck."

Beyond Exhaustion

What potentialities open up when we reach a state beyond exhaustion? In conversation, Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi pointed out that a state beyond exhaustion is precisely the condition that asylum seekers find themselves in when, having made their troublesome passage out of their own country into the foreign one, they are forced to realise that they have effectively exhausted all their options for further action. While the legal proceedings concerning the request for asylum are underway you are not only prohibited from doing any work, but there is also no way that you can do anything about the outcome of your lawsuit. To be condemned to inaction in a situation where you may still be full of energy and hope is a terrible way to face the exhaustion of your options to perform.

Still, a potential for agency exists beyond this point of exhaustion, as Nasrin Tabatabai shows in her documentary video *Passage* (2005). Over the period of a year, Tabatabai visited a middle-aged Iranian woman who spends her days in the foyer of a shopping mall handing out free newspapers and speaking to passers-by as she does so. In the course of the film it gradually transpires that she might not have an official permit to stay in the country, but that she cannot return to Iran either

because of the husband she has left. This complete impasse, however, does not stop her from acting. In fact, it turns out that through speaking to people in the foyer she has created a situation where a lot of these passers-by share stories of their daily chores with her. While you would assume that the precarious situation she is in would destine her to be in need of care, she reverses the situation by caring for others. Her performance continuously alternates between exhaustion and exuberance. In moments when she takes a cigarette break her exhaustion is highly tangible, yet in moments when she is up again and talking to people, her exuberance seems unconditional: she performs without any mandate and upon no request but with an unassailable legitimacy created through the fact that she cares. Like the workers in Lloyd's *Car Wash*, she transforms the non-space of the foyer into a platform for her free agency.

Continuing the conversation, Babak Afrassiabi drew attention to the dialectical relation between exhaustion and revolution that throughout modernity has determined the political climate in countries which experience upheavals of their social structure. While the exhaustion of the credibility of the old social order is the legitimisation that revolutionaries draw from to justify the necessity of radical change, it is conversely also the regimes of the revolutionaries that plunge into crisis at the very moment their discourse exhausts itself and the promises they make begin to ring hollow. Afrassiabi argued that in post-revolutionary countries like Iran you could therefore analyse the development of politics over the decades following the revolution as a cycle in which the inherent promise of revolutionary rhetoric is gradually eroded through routine repetition until, at the point of its exhaustion, the discourse of the revolution is seized again by a new herald of change who promises to rejuvenate its meaning. It seems that this logic may also apply to the foundational moments in the history of modernity and contemporary

politics when operative communities are forged through the forceful renewal of the promise of an exhausted myth.

The interruption of this vicious cycle would then mean to suspend it at the point of exhaustion, before it recharges itself with meaning. It is this gesture of interruption and suspense that Deimantas Narkevicius performs in his films. In *Energy Lithuania* (2000), for instance, he portrays the situation in the Lithuanian city of Elektrėnai, a city that was built in 1962 around a major electric power station. When Lithuania regained its independence in the 1990s, the station more or less lost the function it fulfilled within the larger economy of the Soviet Union, depriving the city of its *raison d'être*. As Narkevicius documents, the station and city exist in peculiar state of latency, neither fully operative nor entirely shut down. Two central sequences in the film capture the latencies inherent in this moment of temporary exhaustion concisely and provocatively. In one shot the camera follows a worker who, as he walks past enormous machinery in the power station, produces a discourse on the history of the station and the heroic events through which it came into being. His speech is passionate, yet the effortlessness of its delivery also betrays the routine way in which it must have been presented many times. Surprisingly, however, the irony implied by the fact that the subject of the heroic discourse of labour has more or less ceased to exist and that the speech is recited over the backdrop of shut-down machinery, does not fully invalidate it. On the contrary, the words continue to resonate with the memory of the promise of a better future as well as with the memory of the work of the people who tried to realise it. These memories cling to the words like a shadow that gives them depth despite their emptiness.

These echoes are further amplified in the following sequence in which Narkevicius films a colourful modernist mural that portrays the heroic deeds of the workers in the manner of

a biblical struggle. The camera travels across the image with a very slow, careful panning shot, while a Mozart piano concert plays on the soundtrack. In itself, the image looks as exhausted as the words sounded before, yet the combination of the patient gaze of the camera and flow of the music again produce echoes of the experience of those who may have invested belief in the promise of this image as they built the city. As the film simultaneously reveals both the exhaustion of the words and icons of socialism, and their residual promise, it effectively redeems their memory. Yet by decidedly refraining from rejuvenating their meaning, it does so without restoring their founding ideology. They are exposed in their exhaustion, yet in this state their hollow forms begin to reverberate with the memories of lived experience. Consequently, the economy of the cyclical re-interpretation of revolutionary rhetoric is interrupted by an empty moment of full awareness.

It is maybe in precisely such empty moments of full awareness that the potential of a state beyond exhaustion manifests itself. In the discourse of modernism this heightened state of awareness in a moment beyond exhaustion has a name. Edgar Allen Poe described it as the state of **convalescence**:

Not long ago, about the closing in of an evening in autumn, I sat at the large bow window of the D—— Coffee House in London. For some months I had been ill in health, but was now convalescent, and, with returning strength, found myself in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of ennui—moods of the keenest appetency, when the film from the mental vision departs, and the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its everyday condition, as does the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz, the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias. Merely to breathe was enjoyment; and I derived positive pleasure even from many of the legitimate sources of pain. I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing. With a cigar in my mouth and a newspaper in my lap, I had been amusing myself for

the greater part of the afternoon, now in poring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street.¹³

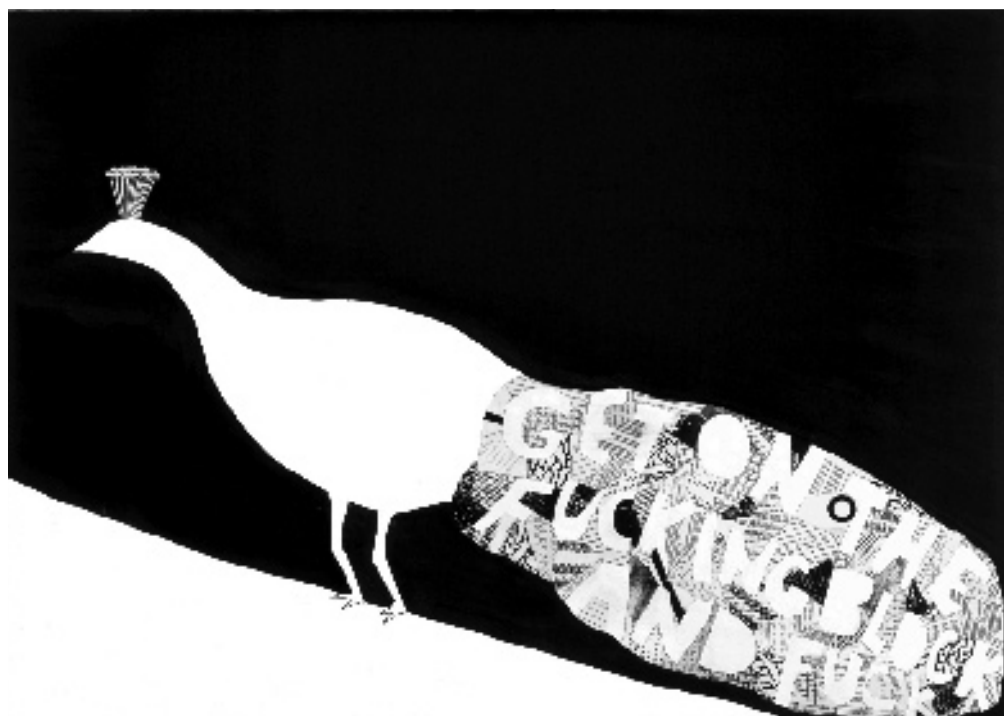
As as state of suspension between exhaustion and activity, between the *I Can't* and the *I Can*, the state of convalescence is the epitome of an empty moment of full awareness. In this moment the illusion of potency, interrupted through illness, is not yet restored (there is no way that you can go back to work in this state) but still the sense of appreciation is redeemed as the ***I Care* returns in its full potential: You begin to care about life again, more than ever.**

Could we imagine this state of convalescence as a shared condition of experience, or rather a condition shared through art and thinking? If, living under the pressure to perform, we begin to see that a state of exhaustion is a horizon of collective experience, could we then understand this experience as the point of departure for the formation of a particular form of solidarity? A solidarity that would not lay the foundations for the assertion of a potent operative community, but which would, on the contrary, lead us to acknowledge that the one thing we share—exhaustion—makes us an inoperative community, an exhausted community, or a community of the exhausted. A community, however, that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional, exuberant politics of dedication. **In short, because, as a community of convalescents, we realise in an empty moment of full awareness, that we care.**

Title lettering on p.89 by Will Holder.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank the community of people who assembled during the production of the issue of *Dot Dot Dot 15* at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève: Stuart Bailey, Will Holder, David Reinfurt, Anthony Huberman, Walead Beshty, Polona Kuzman, Joyce Guley and Jan Dirk de Wilde, all of whose criticism has been invaluable for writing and revising this essay.
2. On the Deutsche Bank webpage, the company's mission statement reads: "We are a European powerhouse dedicated to excellence, constantly challenging the status quo to deliver superior solutions to our demanding clients. That's why to us *A Passion to Perform* is far more than just a claim—it is the way we do business."
3. From: Joanne Reid and Victoria Hubbell, "Creating a Performance Culture" in *Ivey Business Journal Online* (London, Ontario: The University of Western Ontario, March/April 2005) <http://www.iveybusinessjournal.com>
4. This line, which is also the title of the exhibition *Sheffield 08*, was suggested by Tim Etchells.
5. Even Kierkegaard himself cannot be trusted on this point. In his boundless irony he voiced this view (that only the rigorous choice between either/or qualified as a *true* choice) solely through fictional persona he invented in his writing, none of whom can be unambiguously identified as expressing his own convictions.
6. Quoted in: Georg Schöllhammer, "Engagement instead of Arrangement" in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, Cologne Kunstverein exhibition catalogue (Cologne: transit Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2003) p. 126.
7. I am indebted here to Robert Linsley for having hosted a residency in Toronto earlier this year, which afforded me time to think about the politics of abstraction and immanent agency of painting.
8. Giorgio Agamben: "On Potentiality" in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1999) pp.177–184
9. Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality", in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006) pp.13–20.
10. Agamben, op. cit., p.177.
11. From a talk held on 14 September 2006 in a symposium organised by Irit Rogoff for the exhibition *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.* at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp.
12. In writing this section I have drawn heavily on inspiring studio conversations with Ruth Legg, Eveline van den Berg and Ruth Buchanan.
13. From: Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of The Crowd", first published in 1840 in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* and simultaneously in *The Casket*, then variously republished in slightly revised form, in numerous subsequent Poe collections. The passage cited is taken from the second paragraph of the story. I am hugely indebted to Robert Linsley for quoting this passage to me.



Reflection for Reading
Vinyl paint, collage on panel, 91.4 × 157.5 cm (Frances Stark, 2005)