

Indivisible Parts of a Totality

In its most pared down description, *Time Out* is a piece that involves the movement of bodies, has the qualities of stillness and horizontality, lasts a varying and unfixed duration, and can occur in various spaces. When I wrote about this work a year ago, I interpreted it as an act of resistance against the forward rush of capitalism and its accompanying bodily exhaustion. It seemed to be about the need to take time out of our everyday lives to rest, become horizontal, and remove ourselves from the demands we constantly choose to accept owing to the fear of falling behind. I considered it through its formal elements, including the church architecture; the meeting of horizontality and verticality; the garments worn during the piece; and the historical significance of the graves in the church. While this reading still seems to fit the work, I've come to interpret it in a few other ways since it was performed again in the Oude Kerk as part of Amsterdam's *Museumnacht* 2015. Margret Wibmer's *Time Out* has developed significantly over the past year, and has meanwhile, taken place at RMIT Design Hub in Melbourne, and the Nakamura Memorial Museum in Kanazawa, Japan. It has evolved since its first modest manifestation and become even more visually striking, leaving a lasting impression on the viewer. Wibmer has said that this work seems to belong most in the Oude Kerk since it was conceived of with the church in mind, therefore I see this fourth performance as a way of coming home.

When I entered the almost silent space of the Oude Kerk on the evening of November 7th, I slowly walked around the back of the church, and was struck by what I perceived not as bodies at rest, but as corpses laid out on gravestones in the darkness. I took pause: I was familiar with the work, had observed it before, and knew what I could expect, but nevertheless I saw the figures this way. I looked closely at two bodies draped in black, faces disguised by hoods, laid out, supine on the gravestones. One man was taller than the stone beneath him and his feet extended over the edge, as though they were hanging over a too-small bed. This image intimated the presence of death, and I felt its immensity. Although I knew the details of what should transpire in this performance, I was reluctant to lie on the cold stone floor, afraid of the empty space enveloped in cold, and afraid of the motionless bodies that appeared to me more and more corpse-like. I soon acknowledged this fear as something that stemmed from my difficulty or inability to see life and death equally present in the figures of the bodies at rest. If I could see the faces of life and death at once, and not as mutually exclusive states, I'd be able to see them as indivisible parts of a totality. In this way, *Time Out* calls for reflection on the intellectual constructions of the notion of life and death, and invites us to think about death and time differently.



Body of a Courtesan in Nine Stages of Decomposition. Ink and colour on silk. Kobayashi Eitaku, 1870's.

Consider as one example an artwork dealing with a similar theme, the painting by Japanese artist Kobayashi Eitaku, “Body of a Courtesan in Nine Stages of Decomposition”.¹ This late 19th century hand scroll, rather than being a repulsive illustration of a decomposing body, suspends typical aesthetic reactions to death and decay and prompts us to look at them differently, perhaps as part of the life cycle. In this sense, one gets closer to being able to see the indivisibility of death and life: death in all things, life in all things.

Beneath the Oude Kerk floor, skeletons are stacked up to ten layers deep, and during *Time Out*, living bodies temporarily occupy the spaces above the dead, forming a continuum across generations. Living or dead, they all assume the same position one takes while sleeping, the familiar ‘corpse-pose’ or *shavasana* as it’s known in yoga. The horizontal body laid out on the ground looks like death, and when that body sits to rise, it appears as a kind of resurrection. In this visual simulation of death and resurrection, we are inclined to think of death and wonder: when will a temporary rest become eternal? All of the apprehension I felt, was however, balanced by an equal measure of relief and the lightness that I felt from watching people slowly turn to their sides and rise to stand. Every time it seemed like a small miracle, much like the one that goes unnoticed every day when we wake up and rise out of our beds. We are still alive.

Wibmer’s piece, in addition to drawing attention to the time we should be more careful to take for ourselves, and our own particular rituals, also brings our awareness to the daily movements of our bodies that can be thought through from a spiritual perspective. Many of our daily movements are embodied rituals, yet they are not recognized or acknowledged as such. What a dignified posture the viewer takes in this work, especially in comparison to the posture one takes when, to take a

¹ The hand scroll painting belongs to the collection of the British Museum and can be viewed here: britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=603867001&objectId=3168105&partId=1 (accessed 30 November 2015).

familiar example, one holds a mobile phone (to photograph artwork or oneself). In this piece, which does not follow any particular ceremonial protocol, the church visitor is gently guided into the nave and dressed by attendants in a long black woolen robe. There, he is handed a thick white felt mat to carry to a chosen spot, where he will place it over a gravestone, and lie there, face up. These movements are prescribed, but they are being learned as they are carried out for the first time. *Time Out* does a peculiar thing by inviting the viewer to participate in what looks and feels like a ritual, but is without religious dogma. Every person entering the church is instructed to be as quiet as possible. They are told how to enter, as though it were their first time in a church. The Oude Kerk's interior and history strongly suggest a certain reverence, which may be expressed through silence. Wibmer has chosen to emphasize this characteristic, requesting visitors to be quiet and take notice of the specific qualities of the space, which appeal to all of the senses.

Time Out also plays with the heterogeneity of time: time is not experienced in the same way by everyone and individuals also choose how long they wish to experience the work. Here, the viewer decides the duration, and varying temporalities are permitted and encouraged to exist within the same space. When organist Jacob Lekkerkerker began to play John Cage's piece "As Slow As Possible" without any notice, late in the evening, this broad spectrum of temporality became even more appreciable. Sitting still and listening to the music, I had the sensation that the people around me had begun to move more quickly, and that they had sped-up in contrast to the drawn out and extended tones being played on the organ. Time became beautifully disjointed because people's movement in the space was in such sharp contrast to the time experienced through the score. Sensed in yet one more way, time can also be experienced in relation to temperature. Time's passage is marked by incremental drops in body temperature; even with the thick protective woolen robes and felt mats, a person will soon become cold on the unheated church floor. The body together with the mind, dictate the duration of this work.

An artist who develops a work involving its viewers as actors always has something specific in mind for the person who will experience it even if the invitation seems to be open-ended. Wibmer has asked us to experience the church through the sensual, and this can be connected to the spiritual. Transforming the entire church interior into a kind of *mise-en-scène*, she encourages the visitors to be more aware of their own presence and the presence of those around them in a nonreligious meditation that interrupts daily life. The striking images of bodies at rest on the church floor, the sound of the organ being played as slowly as possible, the willed silence, and a slowly cooling body temperature prompt the mind, through the senses, to contemplate an elastic temporality, long after having left the church.

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