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ZINE
#8

Times of bodies and breakages

Martí Manen

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To speak of bodies, distance and proximity; to speak through membranes, skin, contact; to speak of viruses, grids; to speak of performativity and the moment of encounter. To speak of times, situations, to speak of physical memory, gesture, touch. To speak and also to understand the weight of language. There are leaps between Blanchot, Bachelard and Deleuze. There is a difference in rhythms between text which is body and text which is dance. Text which is and text which refers to. In each type there is body and space; there is a definition of the physical in each, and in each a specific distance.

The idea of time, the idea of history, constantly requires revision. We look at yesterday from today and predefine our tomorrow, but there are always leaps and spaces to turn. From a particular position, we define a temporal spectrum to revise or project, through bodies in particular situations. History vanishes, time becomes complex, and Elizabeth Freeman observes subjectivity and politics in bodies and moments in contrast to a closed off definition of history. In the wake of Julia Kristeva, Freeman speaks of chronobiopolitics and the implication of bodies – and their position in intimate space – as a system which reformulates an ideal, linear structure of national history, as compared to a broken, cyclical, domestic time weighted with historical subjectivity.[1] The broken, invisible time of domesticity that hides identities to be left out of the narrative of history; cyclical time, which goes nowhere except back to a constant question about us as subjects, our fragility as a possible encounter, our dissidence and impotence. About the minor and the reduced. Intimacy as an ahistorical field outside regulated time. In COVID-19, circular time, the domestic, private space directly occupied the social sphere, which abandoned the physicality of public space and, through the grid and the membrane, allowed for private moments. And thus for bodies, which are also images, and a specific place. Bodies seen from a distance predetermined by the grid display. The performativity of our bodies changed, and so did their rhythms.

In a swift exercise of adapting to the medium, work meetings and family encounters shared the same formats. Zoom, Teams, previously Skype, and other commercially aimed technological systems began to define the codes of our relationships. On Zoom – we will speak of Zoom as an expanded field – we have shared forms of individual and group behaviour; we know who's speaking by the colour of the grid; we know when to silence our own voices, we know when it's acceptable not to share our own image. We also know how to be patient with temporary dislocations; how to build something up out of broken fragments, how to share our domestic spaces and discern what is private, what is acceptable; we know how to adopt a certain form of social behaviour that involves asking other people how they are, how they feel, what things are like where they are; what is the current moment like for them, what do they know of the future; what experiences do we share, which are different? It all happened very fast, but there is always a previous experience, there are always moments of anticipation. Codes and the gazes in them.

I remember a series of videos and installations by Saskia Holmkvist.[2] These works were observations of a grid, which in this case was not so evident. The grid, which because of its invisibility might not be perceived, was a system of relations and interactions defined by positions of power. Yes, power; complex power, but power even so. In one of the videos, we see a politician and his simultaneous interpreter being interviewed. Being able to understand the approach of the interviewer meant that the translator could soften the politician's political position. She could turn political arrogance into something acceptable to their receivers. In another of the videos, we see an interview; this time not with a politician, but an asylum seeker. The translator was now not only a mediator sensitive to how he will be heard and perceived from the outside, but someone with the capacity to limit the asylum seeker's life. It is in the hands of the translator whether or not the candidate "says" what must be said at this crucial meeting at a government immigration agency. Nobody knows whether the translator said what the asylum seeker did; it's a question of faith. In another of Saskia Holmkvist's videos, we see a job interview. Questions in such interviews tend to be the same, and the answers matter little: what matters is how you act, the type of performativity staged. It is your body and gestures that will give you a security that might become a position in the workplace; the pauses, your control of the situation and your body will be your entrance into one or another work situation. A rupture in the moment will give rise to a "no". What is said is less important; the whole body is listened to.

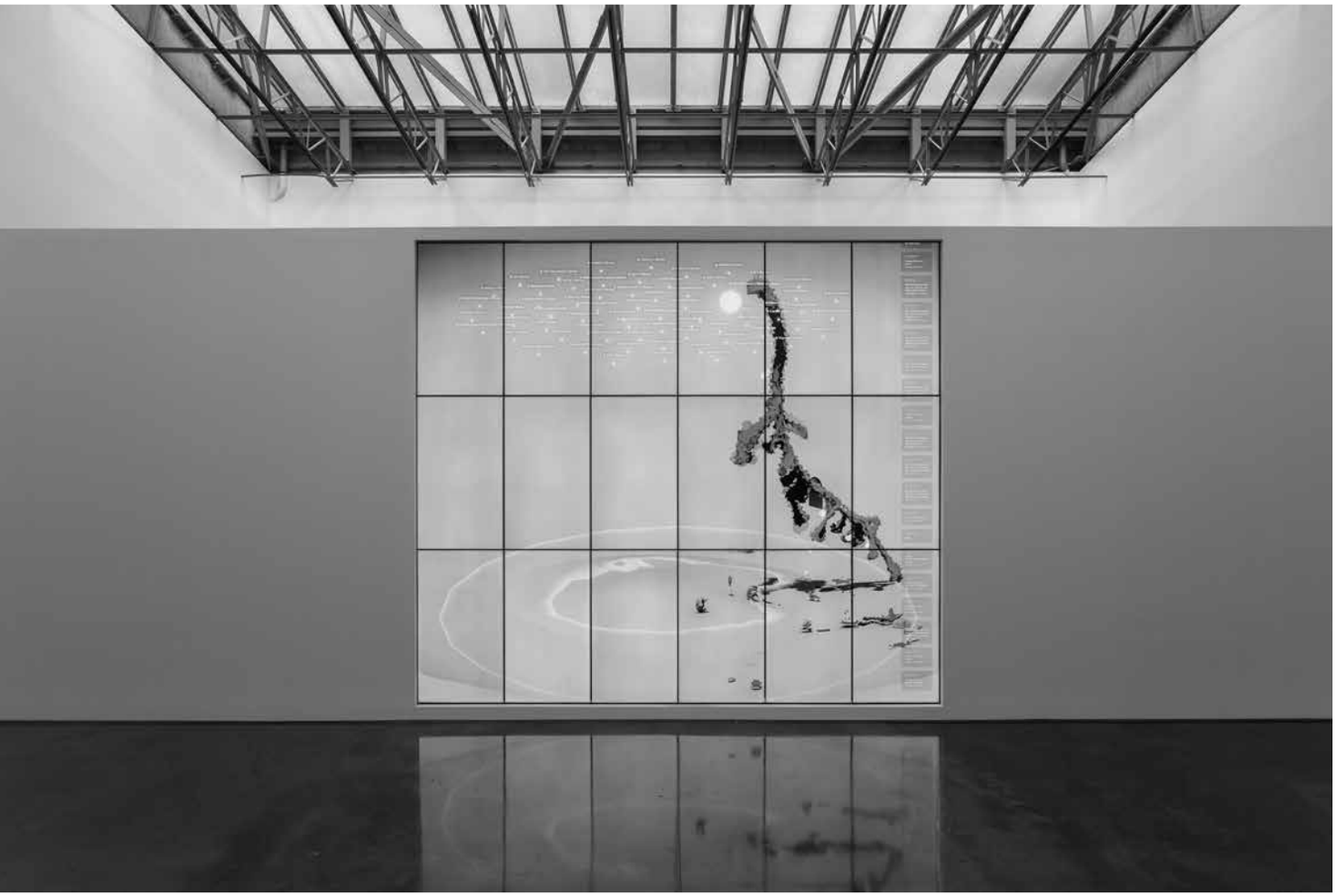
Bodies on Zoom, in this new distanced intimacy, become dismantled, a constant source of information. Bodies can break up or be stuck at the previous second,

1. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

2. See *Saskia Holmkvist: In Translation*. Exhibition catalogue, HOK (Henie Onstad Kunstsenter). Revolver, 2012.

> *The Breathing Lesson,* 2001. 6 min © Dora García <

> Ian Cheng, *BOB* (still), 2018. Artificial lifeform. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photography by David Regen. Installation view, "Ian Cheng: BOB," at Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2019 <



can be glitched. The digital medium is incorporated and bodies play with it to its full extent. There are visible filters, contexts have become part of the body-image, and the background can be chosen or erased with colour or superimposition. The body-image is amplified through what has become a routine practice. There was a moment when a family happened to appear in a newsreader's (home) office. That then became a norm, and scraps of domesticity started appearing in many meetings – uninvited characters, the gaze escaping the camera to focus on something beyond the Zoom grid. Bodies are broken into time, pixels; they break in a context beyond the visible background.

In his beginnings,[3] Deleuze spoke of the break as a word, and the leap from there to the wound as a marker of time. Linguistically, the break is still something in process, like the glitches on Zoom that leave our bodies on standby. There is not a wound but a break. Moments that escape from our bodies. Only afterwards do we understand those moments as something to negotiate, as situations in which we must wait to determine if we are still there or have disappeared.

I remember a video by Dora García, *The Breathing Lesson,* from 2001. I go back to this video from time to time. A young girl is staring at the camera in the foreground, at more or less the same distance from the camera that Zoom works now, in 2021, when this text was written. The breathing instructor is in the background. She is indicating how her student must breathe: rhythms, ways, speed. The student's body is being controlled from a distance. There is control of life – and the possibility of death – from a distance, from a position of power, an idea of knowledge. We are in a closed space.

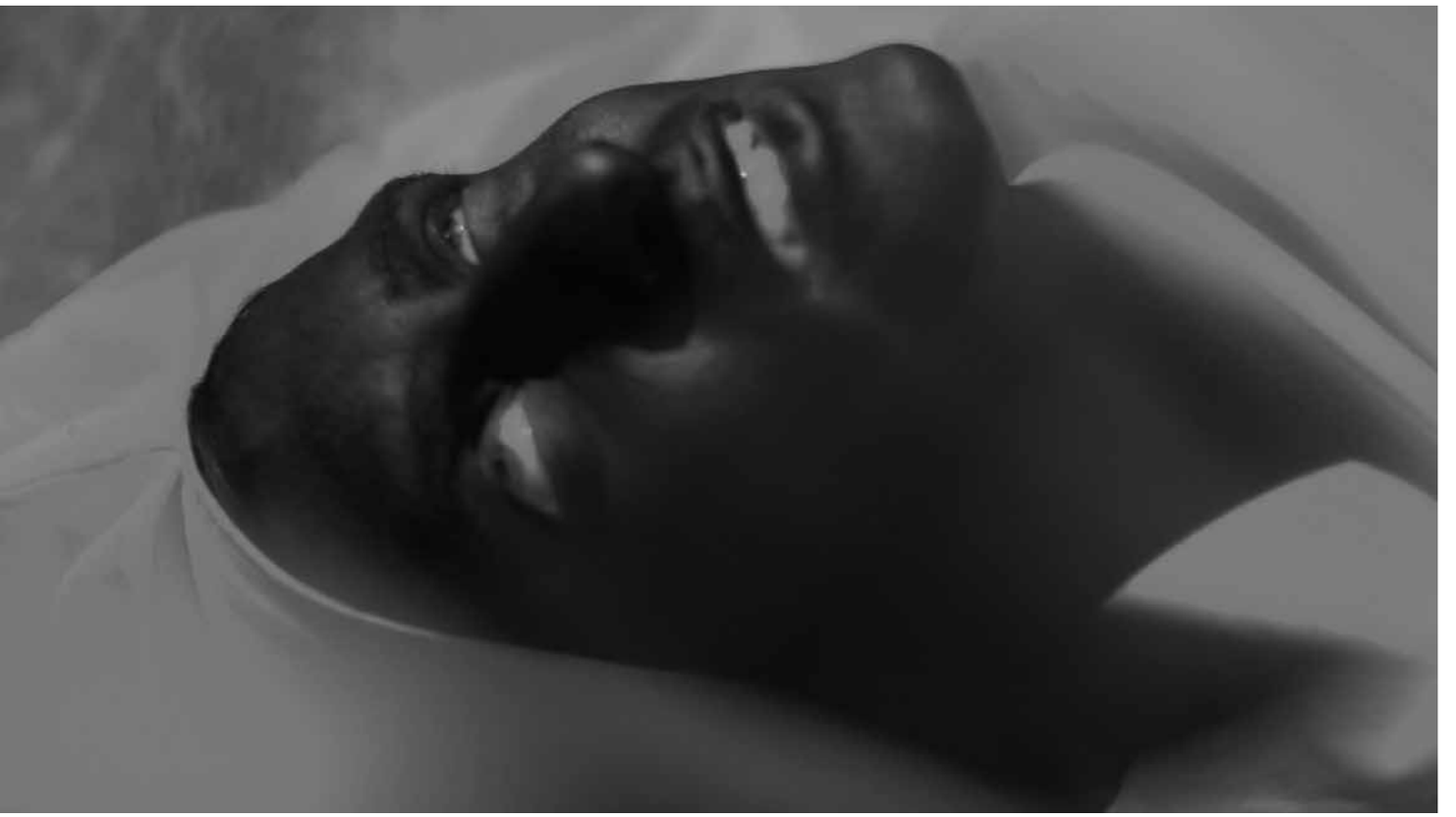
The body-image shows itself exuberantly through the perfectly accepted grid; but our bodies had already entered the digital medium before COVID-19. Digital bodies have been with us for a long time. This is surely the reason why we have not needed a long training for it; we have not been surprised by our pixelated bodies, and have leapt directly into the digital sphere and accepted all its implicit norms. Digital bodies are also possible intimacy, and distance, too. They are cold, and maybe something more. Digital bodies can know they are digital, and can even interact without the need for a "human" physiology. Ian Cheng's algorithmic works manage to endow digital bodies with life and interaction of their own. The work of art then becomes the context (the grid) where life happens. A new life, faster, surely; a life that can also be cut off at any moment. A life we (or Ian Cheng) can decide whether to endow with memory, whether to let it remember what happened before; whether it will grow, evolve, or die. A life on a grid, in a series of codes, encoded. There is also a meta-referential option, of dialogue, with digital bodies. While Ian Cheng uses logarithms to generate a closed, digitally interactive environment, Ed Atkins speaks through the voice of the digital being, who is made to be a part of an artwork, a technically advanced being, no longer the being in those first technological attempts, nor a secondary being from a digitally animated world, who becomes a field for artistic study in the work of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno. Atkins beings know themselves to be advanced, and discover the possibility of digital perfection as a representation of the body in their own bodies; they discover how to be bodies, how to be text. A body that knows it can be modified towards perfection; one that can have digital wounds and represented history. A digital body that can be conscious of every single hair it possesses, each one of its pores, the temperature of its simulated breathing. A digital body that can be conscious of how we are fooled, of how unnecessary breathing is for this body that looks in the mirror in our own body. This being speaks to us and speaks to itself, being text, and understanding dance.

However, the digital being inside the digital body is an artificial one. Its artificiality implies a problem with intimacy. Intimacy involves an advanced, subtle gaze, a certain lack of knowledge as compared to the idea itself. Digital animation has struggled with the complexity of the gaze: eyes have been closed, veiled or dead, whereas digitally created hair exploded with grace and fascination. Intimacy is something to be felt and shared; it approaches the perception of a world largely distanced from the machine and far from programmed numerical security. Eyes and definition. Kate Cooper works with the digital medium to emphasize its artificiality and relate it to the construction of our physical bodies. The gym then becomes the place where our body images are defined. The gym, with all its devices conceived for movement and effort. Gymnastic devices are a reaction to movement and require specific human movements in order to mean what they are intended. At the gym, an (also artificial) aesthetic defines a space, a set of colours and materials for a specific function. Kate Cooper takes her perfect digital characters into the aesthetic of the gym, where effort will lead to a certain look, an aesthetic in itself. Even when we are very close to such bodies, we know the closeness may not imply any kind of intimacy. Distances are no longer faithful indicators, and the gym is a kind of non-place, a time of waiting, yet another flesh mirror.

The fictionalised bodies of the digital world, with their digital perfections and imperfections, have seen other dirty bodies as fictitious as their own. Nathalie Djurberg takes Paul McCarthy's dirtiness into narrative. Whereas McCarthy incorporated dirt into identity in an obscenely performative manner, Djurberg uses the same resource to seek an equally obscene proximity. There are props and fiction in her work; it is visibly fake and its construction is open to view. But

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969.

> *Grotta Profunda, les humeurs du gouffre (Grotta Profunda, the moody chasm)*, 2011. HD video and sound. 28 min © Pauline Curnier Jardin <



the bodies in it are close; they exchange glances with us without the cold digital barrier. There is closeness, however dark or terrible. Closeness here allows much more than perfect digital bodies would. Djurberg's exhibitions may contain explicit violence or attempts at racism or abuse in the representation of identity; there may be highly explicit close-ups; but all of the bodies and fluids in her work have a physicality that approaches that of our own body and removes us from purely image-based empathy. When we look at digital bodies, we see ourselves represented; whereas the brutality of Paul McCarthy or Nathalie Djurberg enters directly into the world of the fable and that of our bodies in zones of digital encounter and the idea of intimacy. And then the great question, what are we made up of, what defines us as beings, what it is that makes us look at something and comprehend it as part of what we are?

From a different angle, Pauline Curnier Jardin turns to the body to trace the gaze historically through the construction of morality. Hers are physical bodies which carry the weight of mythology, ideas and history, politics and superstitions. In Curnier Jardin's installation at the 2017 Venice Biennale,[4] physicality gave way to visuality to maintain the viewer's experience of the body's sensuality. Visitors entered the work through a monstrous, gigantic hand and walked into a world far removed from the white cube. No white walls but red; flesh-like tactile mounds rose from the floor as part of a living organism one could fall into and watch a large video image. In it, several characters and bodies carried out a neo-pagan, feminist exercise with references to Greek mythology, Catholic ecstasy, witchcraft and a Dionysian inclination, in an operatic, theatrical construction. Reality as a metaphor and the present as a constant turning towards other moments and projection towards a future loaded with guilt and desire in equal parts. Bodies that are bodies and seek physicality, bodies that are bodies but know of ideas and representation. Sold bodies, felt bodies, bodies to see and look at. In Curnier Jardin's work, bodies are living a different moment, and are more like a kind of reference. They feel, but are also a leap into the past; the body is felt, but is also a historical or philosophical reference. Layers of information and things passed down will also affect bodies in the present, changing their performativity and desire, dismantling distances with time influencing the definition of space. Pauline Curnier Jardin's bodies do not know how to talk to each other; they are each in their separate moments, each one in a frame of reference and historical thread that cannot come to terms with that of the others'. Distances may be short, but translation or adaptation is impossible.

And in times of physical distancing and digital communication, it might be important to return to the idea of asynchronic dialogue, the epistolary wait. The intimacy of bodies – and between them – has led to continual situations in which the break, the grid and discrepancies in our timing must all be taken into account. How should immediacy now be handled? How do we overcome our constant need for speed and affirmation? How do we accept that distance also requires time? Bodies that are no longer present, but remain, the moments that follow, the defrayed gesture, the abeyance of the tactile: much of this can be found in the work of Félix González-Torres. In bringing emotional proximity and temperature into the political, domestic and intimate spheres, this artist's work was an absolute revolution, which brought about a shift in minimalist and conceptual approaches. Now, in the time of the pandemic, we see how his work continues to grow and generously relate to its immediate context and time. Physical distance and the transference of the body to the idea of the body while still somehow maintaining its warmth. The Norwegian artist Hanni Kamaly does not close the dates of her sculptures according to when they were realised; if a work was "made" in 2015 but exhibited in 2021, it continues to "be made" in 2021. This calls into view the work's relationship to its context and time, and defines the work as something that continues to happen. Félix González-Torres is still happening. He died. He is still happening in the possibility of moments with disparate narratives, associated with desires recorded in and through each moment. Desire also implies pain, sorrow, the recovery of beauty and moments, clouds in the sky in an infinite second, beds unmade to eternity. Glitches, pauses outside narrative, breaks that are not wounds.

The break as time, as an impasse. Bodies in tension, waiting. The break as the second that ought to disappear to allow the wound to emerge; an end or a next step. At a completely broken time, bodies have been waiting for this to lead to something, and have become part of the breakage. They have moved into the impasse that Zoom has professionalised. Our constant digital encounters have led to a dislocation with the physical world, and we do not know how long it will take to be recovered. They require us to stay within something we never foresaw. The breakage continues, and like a waterfall, continues to slide at full speed with its continuous, deafening sound. Joyce Carol Oates, in *The Falls,*[5] manages to capture the constant noise that calls upon a dark desire to jump into the fall and end it all. In *The Silence,*[6] Don DeLillo encounters exactly the same thing in silence: breakage, awareness of the impasse and the impossibility of understanding, but at the same time, being bodies and physicality; beginning to discern distances, proximity and emotions that will start to explode in the future, whatever that brings.

4. *Grotta Profunda.*

5. Joyce Carol Oates, *The Falls*. New York: Ecco Press, 2004.
6. Don DeLillo, *The Silence*. London: Picador, 2020.

> Kate Cooper, *Rigged,* 2014, video stills. Courtesy of the artist <