

...pausing barely/barely pausing...

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A collaboration between A Tale of A Tub and Tlön Projects

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“Stillness is always on its way to movement. When you stand still, you don’t feel the “how” of movement stalling unless you’re asked to feel the stillness.”

Erin Manning, *Relationescapes* ¹

In ...*barely pausing/pausing barely*... the volatile state of stasis, on a physical, personal and societal level—produced by opposing modes of hyperactivity and inertia—is taken as a starting point to discern the tireless and profound influence of late capitalism in which we are all inadvertently caught. How do we experience the world as subjects and products dispossessed of time that has been rendered largely homogenized and indistinguishable between the slippery definitions of work and life? When boundaries between labour and leisure, public and private spheres cease to exist, how can we situate and reconfigure our bodies and subjectivities in relation to a society which privileges productivity and efficiency as a mode of being in fleeting stationary moments of reprieve?

Zooming into these pauses, that are dormant yet stirring with micromovements, the assortment of works and experiences in this exhibition occupy and carve out a liminal interstice, a space that calls the all-encompassing logic of commodification into examination. In the same vein, artists in the exhibition interrogate our conventions involved in inscribing meaning to our everyday activities, while challenging established definitions of survival, selfhood, and autonomy in order to explore strategies that might capture the hegemony of capital. By unravelling the ways in which technological processes have transformed our lived experience into disembodied abstractions and behavioural patterns, these artworks reveal the mechanisms that ensnare human and natural life within the matrices of control and self-exploitation.

The selection of works from Tlön Projects’ *imaginary collection* is shown against the historical backdrop of A Tale of A Tub: it formerly functioned as a public bath and wash house—which served as a site for domestic labour, cleansing and recovery in the Justus van Effen Complex in Rotterdam. ...*barely pausing/pausing barely*... draws particular focus to private and domestic acts: a number of works trace the phantasmic presence of bodies and environments displaced in the schisms of nature and artifice, belonging and alienation, and are asynchronous to our immediate time and space. Other works bring to the fore personal struggles in the age of angst and disorientating data flows. Seen together, the articulations, gestures and activities encapsulated within the artworks are simultaneously done and undone, and in their seemingly unvarying repetitions open up a potential break from the cyclical trap of work, life, and rest in a time bound by discipline and self-management.



A Tale of A Tub
Space for contemporary art and culture, Rotterdam
www.ataleofatub.org

¹ Erin Manning, *Relationescapes* : movement, art, philosophy (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), p. 43.

“What happens if you can no longer self-repair? To be depleted is not to die: it is to barely do something else. Exhaustion is a culmination of history presented in one body, then another, then another.”

Anne Boyer, *The Undying*²

Technological innovations have emancipated many from the workplace, distributing these labour activities across the entire spectrum of our lives. Driven to become more entrepreneurial with our own resources, rest might be the last frontier against the machinery of capitalism. Timetables – an invention of the Industrial Revolution – ushered in the shift to time thrift as a virtue, thus drastically altering our relationship to time as a resource to be optimised and not squandered. Confronted by these imperatives of optimisation, conceptual painter Rosemarie Castoro, in her text-based work, *Untitled (Concrete Poetry)* (1969) presents a poignant observation of our experience of time, encumbered by our meeting-filled agendas. In *Vacation Time* (1970) – part of her ‘stopwatch’ works – she meticulously inventoried durations of her everyday studio activities following her idiosyncratic timekeeping system. The pair of works open up new readings of time beyond established conventions. The latter piece in particular could be interpreted as a wry commentary on the value of lapses of productivity and small bouts of free time within our task-driven existence. Extending into radical developments in the fields of science and technology, the complex tensions between enhancements of quality of life and life-extending experiments become evident in Rachel Rose's video installation *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013). Juxtaposing footage shot in a zoo, a robotics perception lab and a cryogenics lab, Rose's work is an exploration of ‘deathfulness’ – defined in her words as “being alive, feeling dead” in a biological reality that is increasingly engineered. This is a world where lifeforms are unhinged from their natural surroundings and circadian rhythms, emptied of sexual, social, survival cues and emotions, and are propelled into the transhuman future of abstract insentient immortality.

As we laud the positive impact of breakthroughs in science and technology, media theorist Langdon Winner coined the term technological somnambulism, to describe how in his view, humans have sleepwalked through our negotiations with technology. One such example can be found in the developments in machine intelligence, where our kinesics are mediated to such extremes that our gesticulations can be detected and codified as marketable data. How can we know the dancer from the dance, or in the case of Julien Prévieux's *What Shall We Do Next? (Sequence #2)*, (2014), how do we know the body from the movement? His work features dancers enacting a chronology of a standardised vocabulary of gestures that have been patented, dissociated from our corporeal bodies and haptic sensibilities, and rendered purely functional.

When all our movements become both so automated and precisely predicted, it appears that there is little room for our bodies to act out of free will. gerlach en koop's (*at last*) *under the influence of that strange perplexity of inert irresolution* (2009-11) attends to the themes of natural instincts and the exanimate body from a different frame of reference. Taking its title from Herman Melville's book *Moby Dick*, it refers to a state of inert irresolution, a paralysis that can overcome a whale when its urges to attack and to flee are equally strong. Whalers provoke this state to make the process of killing the whale, or in whale-hunter speak, gallying the whale, easier. An echo of this struggle can be found in Eva Kořátková's set of busts, *Untitled* (2014) from her series *Not How People Move But What Moves Them*. They are not only metaphors to psychological states, but also a depiction of bodies as objects, incapacitated by inner dispositions and exterior constraints. Just as our bodies oscillate between modes of autonomy and subordination, when desensitized, these attempts in recalibrating our somatic cadences with the external demands of our regulative realities become a succession of dissonances sustained by unremitting toil and self-defeat.



² Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, vulnerability, mortality, medicine, art, time, dreams, data, exhaustion, cancer, and care* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), p. 238.

“Displacement is not just from one spatial location to another, but from one nature-changing entanglement to another. It’s always a question of transformation - transformation in relation.”

Brian Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest: Activist Philosophy in the Expanded Field*³

In our world assembled by mass-manufactured products that shape and are designed by us, makers, users and consumers, these objects are effectively interfaces of our relationships with the world. However, in this day and age, not only the objects themselves, but we, too, become interchangeable, subjected to the mass dispossession of time and praxis. This estrangement – both alien and familiar at the same time – seems to be a necessary process in our self-reckoning. In a bid to make the skewed interconnection between worker and the consumer goods they produce and consume visible, Li Jinghu’s *Waterfall* (2016) is a collation of old mobile telephones he bought from migrant workers from his hometown, Dongguan in South China, also known as “the world’s factory”. Arranged to resemble a waterfall, the column of phones contains video footage of water flowing from faucets in these workers’ dormitories. Li’s work is a sensuous and empathic reflection on the stark realities that are, at times, violently shaped by human desires and economic inequalities. On the other hand, Neil Beloufa’s installation *Untitled* (2013), merges scrappy construction structures and readymade materials to create modular environments containing scenarios that confront the viewers with both our fictional fantasies and hard truths in our aspirational, and lifestyle-dominated world. Beloufa’s work thrusts us into an assemblage of incorrigible realities at home and elsewhere, and takes aim at our deep-seated fears of leading a mediocre and self-delusory existence.

This foreboding disquietude is reverberated in Jason Dodge’s *Poison hemlock in bass flute* (2011), an instrument that has its finger holes and windway sealed with wax to hold a lethal hemlock, the same plant Socrates had to ingest as punishment for impiety. In line with Dodge’s practice of using objects as carriers of actions past, the bass flute – longing for a player, and emptied of its original function – is an unfinished object sustained by unfulfilled potentiality, only to be consummated through one’s demise. The mechanics of the market, in particular the correlative, and not necessarily mutually favourable relationship between an artist and client, is playfully explored in João Onofre’s *Promise of a Sculpture* (2012), outlining the conditions for the creation of an artwork. As stipulated by the agreement, the work will only be constructed when a dowser finds water, thus unravelling the workings behind belief, artistic labour, and invisible divine powers in this deferred exchange. Directing our attention to the physical site of the exhibition, Ryan Gander’s *Evidence of Absence* (2019) contains 24 LED numbered cubes that mark the positions of artworks on show. The unused cubes are displayed in the two open Peli cases that function as charging stations for their day-long battery cycles. The used and unused cubes are connected through their joint and individual temporal and spatial narratives, and set alongside as signposts in the interim of the exhibition. Out of sync, and partially undone, these objects embody present and belated narratives, allowing for object-figure-background relationships to shift, while providing room for unanswered questions to respond to the volatile realities that might define them.

When one takes a temporary hiatus from the external world and retreats to the confines of our interior spaces, what can manifest out of the confronting sense of alienation with one’s surroundings? Inspired by Paul Klee’s assertion in 1923 that a drawing should be, “An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for walk’s sake,” Ceal Floyer’s part-performance, part-sculpture work, employs a line painting machine usually utilised on sports grounds, to create a line in the exhibition space. Through transposing familiar objects into unpredictable contexts, Floyer’s snaking stripe opens up an interval where pause and chance intersect. Additionally, the line’s manoeuvres retrace the bond with our environment, all the while registering the enigma of transpired events *post hoc*. Slippages between the domestic sphere and the psyche are sinisterly portrayed in Anna and Bernhard Blume’s *Küchenkoller* (1986), part of their lifelong photo-novel of German middle-class life spiralling out of control. Anna Blume plays the role of the stereotypical housewife in a manic domestic scene with disobedient potatoes flying in all directions, as though they have lives of their own. Translated into English as *Kitchen Frenzy*, the



³ Brian Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest: Activist Philosophy in the Expanded Field*, (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017), p. 8.

German title is a pun on the condition known as “prison frenzy” – the state of insanity that sets in when inmates are imprisoned for extended periods of time – this set of disorienting scenes could be interpreted as an upheaval against rationality and established social norms. Similarly, Louise Bourgeois fuses writing and domesticity – two recurring subjects in her oeuvre – in her embroidered works on household fabrics consisting of edifying, ironic, and moralising statements that are at odds with the protective comforts of one’s home. These unfiltered psychologically charged proclamations, stem from her life-long work that delves in the themes of home, female identity, and displacement, while grappling with conflicting ungovernable internal turmoil that fuel Bourgeois’ practice.

An ongoing subject addressed by a number of works is the notion of belonging, as well as the exploration of the transformative and regenerative potential within various modes of disavowal and withdrawal. The subliminal torment of desire, angst and subjectivity shapes the core of Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann’s para-architectural installation *L’Amour est plus froid que la mort #2* (2015). Titled after Fassbinder’s film *Love is Colder than Death*, the large-scale work is created from an image after her reading of Genet’s *Querelle de Brest*, a work which Fassbinder adapted in 1982 into his final film. Fabricated out of steel and oversized velvet cushions, the work is an amalgamation of dualities, not unlike the fervent love/hate relationship and identity struggles of the fraternal brothers in Genet’s novel. Burrowing deeper into the realm of the unconscious, Ansuya Blom’s *Mômomeasure VI* (2015) is a portrait of late playwright Sarah Kane. The sculpture comprises a free form supported by a metal bar in which a broken-down quote from Kane’s play *Psychosis* is inscribed, as well as the measurements of the form it holds. With *Mômomeasure VI*, Blom asks how subjectivities and fractured human experience can emerge in resistance to conventions of being, as they struggle to find expression. Blom’s series is titled after Artaud *le Momo* – *mômo* meaning ‘mad’ in Marseille slang – a name and persona Antonin Artaud adopted sporadically. In this body of work, the artist takes a stance against a society obsessed with reducing human beings into numbers and standardized beings to a point of madness greater than the madness that Artaud or Kane could put into words.

Brody Condon’s *Without Sun* (2008), a compilation of footage found online showing young people who describe and document their experience with psychedelic drugs on camera to the best of their ability, addresses the exasperation of finding one’s bearing and withstand the dreary malaise of life. Made in reference to Chris Marker’s experimental classic *Sans Soleil* (1983), Condon’s piece responds to the themes of the inadequacies of memory, travel and destabilisation, as explored in Marker’s piece. The recorded materials of these youngsters’ inner journeys are marked by snippets of broken speech and body spasms. The work is a testament of the quest of one’s identity that is at times messy, and squarely in defiance of legibility – all part of the narcissistic performative rites of personal evolution. In the haze of different modalities and data flows we negotiate daily, the frantic and elastic use of language and voice as material can epitomize the jarring reality of our subjectivities. As we traverse the internet sphere and our mediatized reality, our positions vis-à-vis concepts of private, and public, consumption and self-affirmation are constantly under revision. In *where what happened to people happened in the head* (2018), Nora Turato mines from her experiences in an information-ridden world of obverse messages and opinions. The textual audio-visual piece gathers marketing slogans, political statements and other sound bites into a hotchpotch of text fragments, presented as subtitles accompanied by the artist’s efficacious delivery. Through the torrent of words, where flippant remarks can occupy a levelled plane with urgent social critique, Turato traipses across differing contexts and moods in her vocalisations, teetering from internal monologue to a high-octane public tirade. In the face of the stupefying sense of disenchantment and resignation to one’s daily realities, she generates new interpretation and relevance to emptied clichés by constantly contradicting one antagonism with another, be it from the point of view of ideology, ethics, or subjectivities. The rejection of the legibility in these personal expressions become tactical moves for individuals to gain agency as a furtive response to this gridlock of late capitalism, albeit temporary.



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“The line of objective time knows nothing—and wishes to know nothing—of the present as immediate subjective presence. As for subjective life, crushed into mere points of space—joy, gratification, reverie—it would rather know nothing of time-that-slips-away, linear time, the time of things.”

Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* ⁴

How can we reclaim pockets of dead time, or dislodge temporal experiences outside of the rhetoric of productivity that is so engrained in our modes of living? Susan Hiller's *The Secrets of Sunset Beach* (1988) employs photography and changing light conditions, to probe what may seem to be an infallible, fixed reality, whilst embracing the dynamic environment we inhabit. The photographic series map out a web of spatial interconnections in a humdrum interior of an unknown occasion, from multiple vantage points. The chiaroscuro-like lighting in each photograph sheds light on the permeable nature of our reality and of the site. The ambiguity of meaning in the collection is further amplified by the dense layer of secret hieroglyphic writing in light, part commentary and part disturbance to the otherwise banal event in an everyday setting. The obscure gaps of cognition offer the prospect to bypass the hegemony of contemporary chronological systems, and leave room to inscribe our own meanings, which in Hiller's works, materialize in the form of indecipherable automatic writing. In Pierre Huyghe's *L'Écrivain public* (1995), the observation of one's surroundings takes place within a live performance, where an author (Elfie Tromp) witnesses happenings of an exhibition she too takes part in. Adopting the role of transcriber of events of one's own sensations, Huyghe's act of displacing the public writer – a professional who still provides letter-writing services in France – into the exhibition space, triggers seepages from one written reality to another, adding to the patchwork of ephemeral moments.

...pausing barely/barely pausing... can be envisaged to encompass its own circadian rhythm. Within the exhibition space lies a macrocosm encompassing a multitude of movements, discernible or otherwise. Out of all the works on view, David Horvitz's *Nautical Dusk (II)* (2017) utilises time in its pure form as its material, to sever the pragmatic link between time and work, and recast it in cyclical temporalities of natural lunar and solar movements. Seafarers distinguish nautical dusk from civil dusk to refer to the moment when the horizon at sea becomes indistinguishable in the darkness of night, making it impossible to use it as a means of navigation. When the instruction piece is shown within an exhibition context, the daily closing hours of the gallery are adjusted to reflect the different times of nautical dusk every day, following the time of year and location of the exhibition on the planet. By opting for an alternative system of time, Horvitz reinstates the value of taking time outside of capitalist hegemonic forces, where for a passing instant, one might be able to experience the present moment directly, and reorient our bearings in our own terms, unmoored from the trappings of what we know as 'contemporary life'.

Christina Li

The exhibition *... barely pausing/pausing barely...* marks the first edition of an annual collaboration between A Tale of A Tub and Tlön Projects and presents a variety of artworks selected from the *imaginary collection* of Tlön Projects. This imaginary collection is formed by the convergence of selected artworks from various international private art collections, whereby Tlön Projects aims to generate access to artworks which otherwise would have been largely shielded from public access.

The works comprising *...barely pausing/pausing barely...* originate from the following collections: Laurent Fiévet, France, G + W, the Netherlands, Nieuwenkamp & Zaalberg, Hungary, Family Servais, Belgium.

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⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), p.382.