[WRAP: Author's Accepted Version (version after peer review, before copy-editing)]

For Performance Research 100th issue

Andy Lavender

On Duration

[title changed during proofing process to 'Living in the moment: duration now and then']

When did duration begin? By which I mean, when did the notion of *time passing there and then in the life of the performer/spectator* become significant in performance? Not the local detail of how long the piece might be, but the focus on duration itself as a constituent of our experience?

To approach an answer, let's start not exactly at the beginning but at an obvious reference point. Discussions of duration in art usually light upon Henri Bergson's writing on duration and experience in *Time and Free Will* (1889), *Creative Evolution* (1907) and *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1912) – and this essay is no exception, not least since Bergson's writing takes on additional resonance in a digital era. We are interested in duration not so much in terms of length than as a virtual massif of experience.

Christina Chau gives a useful potted summary:

> For Bergson, duration is the time that we experience subjectively. It not only entails the perception of the present as it unfolds, but it is also the memory of the past

> affecting the experience of the present. Therefore, the present preserves images of the past while gathering the potential future, both of which coexist virtually with the present. In this sense, duration is both a continuous unity while also heterogeneous in nature. (Chau 2017: 102)

Chau articulates a prevailing account of Bergson's thinking: duration is less a measure of time, and more a function of the *feeling* of time passing. As we can doubtless all attest, a performance can be fifteen minutes long and feel as though it drags (those markers of unstopped duration, 'endlessly' and 'interminably', might crop up in conversation afterwards); or else six hours long (or longer) and so continually absorbing that you don't know where the time went (as, from my own perspective, Ex Machina's *The Dragon's Trilogy*, Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* or ZU-UK's *Hotel Medea*).

Reading Bergson now, what's striking is how a philosophy that combines late-nineteenth-century concerns with positivism, interiority and vitalism also reverberates with tendencies in digital culture. Bergson argues that 'we project time into space, we express duration in terms of extensity'; what's implied in this conjunction of the temporal and spatial is 'the perception, no longer successive, but simultaneous, of a *before* and *after*' (Bergson 2013: 101). This prefigures a digital notion of time, the sort of availability that we now assume (through digital distribution, ever-extending chats and timelines, and growing digital archives) of an accumulating past held within a continually reforming present. This is a present that understands a post-present always already unfolding – one that can moreover be deferred, visited later, enjoyed plurally. *Simultaneity* in Bergsonian thinking is a key perceptual trope. *Synthesis* (a central term) prevails over separation in the perception and

experience of duration (2013: 9, 10). *Succession* (Bergson is talking here of conscious states, analogous to the musical phrase), can be thought of as 'a mutual penetration, an interconnexion and organisation of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought' (101). How disposed this is to ideas of process, becoming, flow, seriality and synchronicity that characterise our engagements in digital culture.

Yet Bergson was also of his time. His work circulates around the 'unit' of mathematical calculation, the determinate swing of the mechanical pendulum, the striking of the hour on a neighbour's clock – those instances of calibrated measurement that are then effaced in the more subjective domain of duration. Katherine Biers reminds us that

> Late nineteenth-century popular plays were alive with the sights and sounds of working clocks, their pointing hands, swinging pendulums, and striking bells announcing the time of significant events and actions in the fictional stage world. … Circa 1900, precise, active, and individual timekeeping had become a necessity for information work within a rapidly globalizing economy. (Biers 2018: 318)

The latter was characterised by transport schedules, commercial opening and closing times, and the standardisation of international time zones. Whilst the minutiae of time became more critical, so the *representation* of time became newly important, and the *experience* of time concomitantly negotiated. Bergson's thinking, then, takes place amid this chronocentric churn. Meanwhile in 1889, when his doctoral thesis *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* was published, Strindberg's *The Stronger* was first performed and *Creditors* published, Tolstoy presented *The Fruits of Enlightenment* (a

play directed a couple of years later by Stanislavsky), Chekhov wrote *The Wood Demon* and a couple of one-act dramas, and Maeterlinck's first play, *Princess Maleine*, was published. The theatre was turning to a new realism that was already sketched with shades of symbolism and expressionism, in its efforts to depict actual circumstances and experiences whilst figuring these through aesthetically diverse modes. This isn't to suggest (in answer to my opening question) that duration began in 1889, but time took on a conceptually different shape during this period, and in parallel experience was figured differently in and through artworks.

'Durational art' and 'durational performance' tend to describe longer-form pieces than the nineteenth-century play (even though the latter might sometimes be experienced as an endurance) and a tranche of body-art and time-based work from around the 1960s onwards. As André Lepecki suggests, 'Adjectively, "durational" is used to describe artworks that last longer than the average/expected amount of time that chrono-normativity imposes on art.' (Lepecki) – whether for hours, days or years. Celebrated instances include Robert Wilson's KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE (1972), which lasted for seven days; Tehching Hsieh's series of year-long performance pieces between 1978-86 (the last of which, *No Art Piece*, involved a complete renunciation of artistic practice); and stretchingly, John Cage's *As Slow as Possible* (1987), an organ piece with a duration of 639 years.

All of which said, durational performance can also be significantly short, a lesser than usual chrono-expression. Think of Samuel Beckett's *Breath* (1969), for instance, in which there is an inspiration (we understand inhalation) and an expiration, bookended by a cry ('an instant of recorded vagitus'), with punctuations of silence. Together the sequence lasts for around

35 seconds. Or consider an apogee of durational art – and a literal reference point – Cage's *4'33"* (1952), the title of which provides the precise timeframe for a musical performance by any number of players and instruments, none of whom play during the piece, leaving the auditor/spectator to contemplate the sound of the not-entirely-silence that ensues.

In these works, duration matters not so much because it requires endurance that entails a form of suffering (an aspect of time-based art that Lepicki and the performance artist Marina Abramović emphasise), but because it provides an intense focus on a being/becoming that takes place over time. Both pieces emphasise the attentive engagement of the audience member, and here we can reconnect an aesthetic of intensity of affect with the longer-form pieces of performance art, and indeed an understanding of duration that spans the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. In her discussion of late-Victorian melodrama, Biers describes 'a heterogeneity of subjective times that escape public inscription' (2018: 319) – a Bergsonian way of putting it, perhaps. The notion of heterogeneity applies in the abstract spaces of *Breath* and *4'33"*, whilst it attains fresh impetus in digital culture alongside the idea of heterochonology. Cued by Bergson's description of single units giving way to experiential flow, we can consider how component parts of artistic assemblages might contribute to particular affective formations even whilst we acknowledge their multiplicity. It's this collation of diversely effective elements – in temporal terms, the 'hetero' in heterochronology – that gives duration a particular flavour for contemporary cultural consumers.

We can turn to those media of fixed impression, photography and painting, to help provide a perspective on this – and in turn, a position on duration in performance. In his essay

‘Heterochronies’, Giovanni Careri discusses three Renaissance paintings by Caravaggio that hang in the Contarelli Chapel in Rome:

> Facing me above the altar, St. Matthew writes instructed by an angel [*St Matthew and the Angel*, 1602], to the left Christ calls the saint to follow him [*The Calling of St Matthew*, 1599-1600], to the right he suffers martyrdom [*The Martyrdom of St Matthew*, 1599-1600]. Many temporalities interact in this situation: the moment of the *Now-Time* belonging to the spectator, the time of the *Then* in which these scenes are supposed to have taken place, the time of the creation of these works at the end of the sixteenth century.’ (Careri 2018: 149, original emphases)

Unfolding these temporalities in relation to *The Calling of St Matthew*, Careri notes the distinctly periodised clothing worn by the tax collector and those around him (sixteenth-century – that’s to say, contemporaneous with the artist) and the different garb of Jesus and Peter (‘antique’, so associated with the setting of the gospels). History is both insisted upon – people are of their moment – but effaced in the context of sublime visitation, as if Christ can transport through the centuries to arrive whenever and wherever he pleases.

Multiplications of time also occur in *The Martyrdom of St Matthew*. Careri pithily observes that whilst he is being assailed by his assassin, Matthew’s ‘body is *already* half in the tomb while he is *still* alive and *already* admitted into heaven’ (161, original emphases) – a suggestive instance of Caravaggio’s ‘heterochronic interaction of times’ (153). Careri doesn’t muse upon the relations between the three paintings as a sequence, but their arrangement evidently contributes to the sense of time as both pluralised and synthesised. The trio might easily be read as a triptych showing past, present and future; or else as a series of narratival

now-moments; or as a symbolic continuum of determination and destiny, sacrifice and suffering – not unlike the multiple readings offered by Bill Viola's *Nantes Triptych* (1992), a video installation that shows a birth, a death (that of Viola's mother) and, between them, a body suspended vertically in water. In both cases, the images demand to be read synchronously and holistically (we might say in a Bergsonian manner) rather than as an assemblage of discrete parts. Duration, here, is proliferated, and the effect of such multiplication of moments is to emphasise aspects of actuality by putting us in the face of the lived experience of action and consequence. Indeed, Careri suggests that '[m]aking the "real" enter the space of representation is one of the principles of Caravaggio's poetics' (162).

This reminds us of Roland Barthes' account of the operations of photography in *Camera Lucida*, not only by way of the *punctum* (the arresting detail) but also the *noeme* – an essential realisation of a present that was once witnessed and endures as of record, a permanent demonstration of iteration (see Shurkus 2014: 69, 73). The photograph (normally) suggests that there is a *noeme*. The painting might figure a 'real' through different representational means. In performance, a focus on the passing of presently-lived time has a similar effect. It interposes the 'real' of temporal process in the topic/fiction/theme/moment of the performance itself. Barthes' celebrated statement that 'Every photograph is a certificate of presence' (1993: 87 [ch 36-check]) might be reformulated: every performance is an endorsement of presence – it's just that some performances bring this aspect of their ontology into the foreground of our own participatory encounter.

There is a pertinent difference between performance and the still image: the real enters not only the space but also the *time* of representation. It is encountered chronologically, precisely in and through the passage of time inhabited by performance's (re)presentation. In his discussion of Caravaggio, Careri deliberately invokes Walter Benjamin's construction of *Now-Time* (*Jetztzeit*) – conceived not as a shallow concern with the immediate here and now, but a rich engagement with the present moment. de la Durantaye describes it (following Agamben) as 'a conception of time focused on the radical opportunity that each moment brings with it … on the dynamic *instant* rather than on the progressive and normalizing *continuum*' (de la Durantaye 2009: 102, original emphasis). In performance, because of performance's inherently bracketing and presentational aspects, this now-time is emphasised such that its effects (affects) sustain over time – any instant is potentially a situation of immediacy, even if experienced within a continuum, and the continuum itself might be a situation of prolonged immediacy.

In this sense, duration in performance has a different quality than it does in photography or visual art. In the latter, you can *take your time*, and encounter (understand, experience) heterochronies within a durational moment of your own choosing. In performance, your time is taken for you. If 'duration' describes the passage of time required for any particular sequence, the experience of duration will always to an extent be done to you, arranged as a consequence of *this particular* set of embodied and spatialised figurings taking place in *this particular* organisation of flow. Duration thereby has a kind of concreteness in performance. It is doubled, by virtue of being always-also topic (where you recognise it) and managed immersion (where you experience that which you cannot avoid, at a pace arranged for you).

An awareness of duration in performance is always the production of presence (including your own).

This returns us to the Real. It is precisely this sense of duration opening out into actuality that lies behind Marina Abramovic's account of the potency of durational art. In 2010, Abramović presented and performed in *The Artist is Present*, a piece that lasted for 716 hours (so just under a month) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Abramović sat in a chair, engaged in a mutual gaze with an individual seated opposite her (one of a series of members of the public) – all before a larger audience of spectators who were free to come and go. The piece might also have been titled 'The Spectator is Present', exemplifying a motif of embodied involvement that has long characterised durational art and immersive performance. It was apparently during this performance that Abramović had the idea to create an institute for 'new long durational projects' (Abramović 2013; see also MAI). The quest is for various sorts of experiential authenticity. As Abramović said in a lecture in Athens, 'If you keep doing something for one, two, three months – this is not performance, this is life itself.' (Abramović 2016).

In his 'Introduction' to *On Duration*, the volume of *Performance Research* that provides the inception to this essay, Edward Scheer observes that 'we seek a return to the performative of bodies and gestures, in short, a return to a *durational* ethico-aesthetic to foreground the sense of experience over structure' (2012: 1, original emphasis). This is a call to the kind of witting engagement in and through duration that Abramović espouses, and a Bergsonian attention to process rather than form. Even so, duration remains cultural. We have learned that it is a function of experience, rather than a fixed measure of a passage of time – but the

value of duration varies, whether as a particular length of time, a passage for endurance, a field for ethical encounter, or a commoditised span of engagement. Of course, the notion of duration in performance doesn't have a clear starting point. Historically, it might suggest the five days of the Dionysia, the weeks-long Shrovetide medieval carnivals, the conventionalised timeframe of the well-made play (enabling theatre-goers to catch the last train to the suburbs), or the kinetic art of the 1960s amid what Chau calls 'a period of temporal turbulence' (35) by way of accelerating technological growth, machine speeds and production processes. A similar chrono-shift characterises our own cultural moment, as speed becomes routinised and attention divided, while tastes (literal and aesthetic) demand more intense absorption over time – slow food (as well as fast food), serial consumption, reiterated pleasure. There is an intensity of affect, through cultural processes of concentration and exaggeration.

Duration is predicated on a present-tense encounter amid the passing of time. However, the experience of the now-moment will change over time, not only across history but also in the weft of a single situation, since durationality has its own pressure and effect – the longer something lasts, the more it builds, tires, reminds, deepens, shifts. Time and place (as ever) form a vector, but in performance the vector is an experienced phenomenon, a space in which the present stretches to another present and change is lived. As Stella Baraklianou suggests (in relation to photography), 'This experienced time is change, perpetually, anew. … Time is thus made of various plurals of the present' (2013: 141). It is this pluralising of the present that helps explain the attraction of duration. In a contemporary performance economy that privileges encounter and experience, duration provides the substrate – an opportunity to live in the moment plurally, repeatedly, and extensively.

REFERENCES

Abramović, Marina (2013) 'Why Performance Art Is a Tool to Change Human Consciousness', *Good* (20 August 2013), https://www.good.is/articles/why-performance-art-is-a-tool-to-change-human-conciousness (accessed 12 August 2018).

Abramović, Marina (2016) 'A lecture on "The History of Long-Durational Work"' (22 March 2016), text by Interweave for MAI, https://mai.art/as-one-content/2016/4/6/history-of-long-durational-work (accessed 12 August 2018).

MAI (Marina Abramovic Institute) https://mai.art/about-mai/ (accessed 12 August 2018).

Baraklianou, Stella (2013) 'Pasearse: Duration and the Act of Photographing, in John Mullarkey and Charlotte de Mille (eds), *Bergson and the Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film, Performance*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 131-147.

Barthes, Roland (1993 [1980]) *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage.

Bergson, Henri (2001 [1911, 1907]) *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, London: The Electric Book Company, 2001.

Bergson, Henri (2013 [1910, 1889]) *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson, London and New York: Routledge.

Biers, Katherine (2018) 'Clock-Watching: Melodrama, Realism, and the Dialectics of Time', *Theatre Survey*, 59:3, 318-339.

Careri, Giovanni (2018) 'Heterochronies: The Gospel according to Caravaggio', in Dan Karholm and Keith Moxey (eds), *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology, Anachrony*, New York: Routledge, 149-168.

Chau, Christina (2017) *Movement, Time, Technology, and Art*, Singapore: Springer 2017.

de la Durantaye, Leland (2009) *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Lepecki, André (n.d.) 'Duration', http://intermsofperformance.site/keywords/duration/andre-lepecki (accessed 12 August 2018).

Scheer, Edward (2012) 'Introduction: The end of spatiality or the meaning of duration', *Performance Research*, 17:5, 1-3.

Shurkus, Marie (2014) 'Camera Lucida and Affect: Beyond representation', *Photographies*, 7:1, 67-83.