

**AUTONOME SYMPTOME IN EINER
KOLLABIERENDEN ZEITWIRTSCHAFT**

**AUTONOMOUS SYMPTOMS IN A
COLLAPSING ECONOMY OF TIME**

1. SYMPTOMATOLOGY

The symptom is the subject's other, its downfall, but perhaps the subject *needs to fall* in order to realize itself. It has to fail, to act up, to stutter, in order to become more than a purely notional subject, more than a mere theoretical or legal entity. For Enlightenment and Idealist philosophy, the subject was disembodied and identified with a rational core. Kant reduced it to pure abstract will, obeying an equally abstract law by freely choosing to do so; for Hegel, the subject was Spirit positing itself as other to the object. But beyond and beneath these grand philosophical *Entwürfe* [notions], the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also saw an increasing interest in the other side of the coin, in the dark side of the subject: love, paranoia, somnambulism, and other forms of madness. It is not for nothing that E.T.A. Hoffmann, the great Romantic author of gothic tales in which reality is perpetually shifting, would provide Freud with one of his great literary case studies: *Der Sandmann*.

The symptom is the point at which excessive or contradictory demands on the self cause the subject to loop into destructive cycles, to congeal into compulsive tics that make a mockery of any claim to being a reasoning and autonomous agent. Radicalizing Freud, the Surrealists would seek to liberate the symptom and *make it autonomous*. No longer in need of cure, the symptom became itself the cure. In *écriture automatique* and related techniques, the author became a medium, a channel. Louis Aragon and André Breton celebrated the "Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie" in

La Révolution Surréaliste in 1928. Calling hysteria the greatest poetic invention of the late nineteenth century, Breton and Aragon sought poetic justice for "the so-called pathological *attitudes passionnelles*."¹ The Surrealist authors claimed that hysteria was not a pathological state but a supreme means of expression that subverted the normal relationship between the subject and the moral order (seduction being an integral part of it). Publishing various photographs of the most famous Salpêtrière hysteric, a woman referred to as Augustine, Aragon and Breton leave away the "iconographic" attempts to make the states legible, transparent to reason; they become autonomous symptoms mocking earlier attempts to codify *attitudes passionnelles*.²

Thus the avant-garde engaged in a liberation of the symptom and its celebration of a form of expression that constituted an attack on social constraints; the contemporaneous discovery of the "art of the insane" by Expressionists and Surrealists turned patients' scribbles into valid expressions that transcended their status as putative symptoms of schizophrenia, hysteria, or paranoia. In recent art theory, Georges Didi-Huberman has taken up the project to liberate the symptom, waging war against Panofsky and the tendency to turn the visible into the readable; the symptom, for Didi-Huberman, is what frustrates and sabotages such an endeavor, a vortex in the realm of the visible.³ In a sense, Didi-Huberman returns the Freudian symptom to art history; Freud himself had credited the work of the medically trained art historian

Giovanni Morelli as an influence on his theory of the symptom.⁴ By diagnosis recurring stylistic “tics” in ways in which details such as ears and hands were represented in Renaissance paintings, Morelli had been able to attribute anonymous paintings to specific artists.

On the other hand, against such attempts to liberate the symptom and treat it as a quasi-autonomous formation stands a *symptomatological* practice such as Andrea Fraser’s, which is deeply rooted in psychoanalysis. Having started out by playing the museum guide Jane Castleton in *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), Fraser soon let go of any suggestion that she played specific characters. In pieces such as *Official Welcome* (2001), she instead turned herself into a jukebox of instable quasi-subjects beleaguered by performance anxiety. In staging symptomatic slips and mis- or over-identifications, Fraser reclaims the symptom as the site of truth on the subject and its phantasms. However, one might go one step further and argue that the symptom is in fact itself the site of subjectivization; rather than being the downfall of the subject, the symptom becomes a medium of subjectivization. The subject needs to act up and to stutter if it is to be more than a theoretical abstraction.

There are various genealogies of Institutional Critique, various periodizations of its development since the early 1970s. In Hito Steyerl’s account, the third phase (after the artist’s “integration into the institution” and “integration into representation”) is marked by his/her integration *into precarity* – “while institutions are being dismantled by neoliberal institutional criticism, this produces an ambivalent critical subject which develops multiple strategies for dealing with its dislocation.”⁵ One strategy might be to embrace the symptom, to perform the symptom. In a recent essay, Fraser asks “whether constructions of artistic autonomy, perhaps like some of those of critique, serve defensive functions [...] that ward off affectively experienced and invested conflicts, social or psychological, by disowning the bad parts of them and expelling them from the boundaries of the ideally autonomous field, practice or self,” and emphasized that “meaningful autonomy and agency can only develop out of an acceptance of dependency and determinisms.”⁶

The burnout syndrome is a mainstay of today’s psychosomatic economy, just as hysteria was around 1900. If hysteria was the product of an economy that relegated women to the domestic sphere, the burnout is

the manifestation of a neoliberal economy that submits men and women to a relentless pressure to make the most of their time, to perform.⁷ A commercial by an internet company showing a manager happily absconding from the office and enjoying the park on a beautiful summer day puts a positive spin on the fact that the office, for many people, is now everywhere and all the time. Franco Berardi has noted that cyberspace is endless, but *cybertime* is not – cybertime being the organism's capacity for processing information from cyberspace.⁸ The burnout is a temporal pathology, a time-ache. Increasing flexibility has led to an increase in psychopathologies. Every act or non-act can have repercussions on one's career; one is forever following and trying to boost the market rate of one's future. People analyze and anguish over comments by colleagues or superiors; how do others see one's recent performance and how will this impact one's survival?

A burnout confronts performing subjects with the other in themselves, with a heteronomous rest that cannot be made to jump through hoops.⁹ Paradoxically, at the moment when the subject is no longer able to kid itself about following its own imperative, its own will, when in fact it is obeying that of the market, this "acceptance of dependency and determinisms" can in fact become an assertion of autonomy. As a "failure to perform" as a good neoliberal subject, a burnout can itself become an act of subjectivization. Such an act entails the embrace of one's symptoms. Why not treat them once more as *autonomous symptoms* with a logic of their own? Why not be attentive to and intervene in symptom formation, to use your symptoms as materials? To be unable to travel somewhere

and give a talk may be experienced as a defeat, but it can also be seen as a sovereign articulation of the "I would prefer not to" of Melville's *Bartleby* – so popular these days in intellectual and artistic circles, and itself seeming to spring from dumb and almost sub-human resistance that, paradoxically, reinstates *Bartleby's* subjectivity as potential.¹⁰

2. DANCING TO THE MUSIC OF TIME

If every economy ultimately is reduced to *economy of time*, as Marx put it, certain choreographies can help to bring the characteristics of the current temporal economy into focus.¹¹ Jérôme Bel's choreography *Cédric Andrieux* (2009), for instance, makes the time of preparation and self-abnegation that goes into dance performances the subject of the performance itself, showing the labor and time that underlie the moments on stage. The piece is part of Bel's series on individual dancers, who tell the audience about their lives and dance extracts from various pieces. Cédric Andrieux danced for Merce Cunningham for years; when he dances extracts from pieces by Cunningham and others, there is no music; his breath is clearly audible, stressing the intense labor required for performing Cunningham's choreography – which, as Andrieux emphasizes, regularly push dancers to and beyond the limits of their capabilities. Practice with Cunningham was a “slow and laborious process;” the nearly impossible things Cunningham demanded resulted in a feeling of humiliation, as Andrieux cannot keep his torso in a strictly horizontal position; when balancing on one leg, he makes little jumps so as to not lose balance. During daily practice, Cunningham had the dancers do the same exercises every morning. Noting that it was a Cagean “Zen thing” for Cunningham, a way of emphasizing that every moment is unique and that there is in fact no such thing as repetition, Andrieux adds that “for me, mostly it's totally depressing.”

The performance is not, however, some kind of debunking exercise. Andrieux notes that Cunningham never remarked on mistakes, stressing that “it's when movement starts to be awkward that it becomes interesting.”

Charles Atlas's recent nine-channel video installation *MC⁹* forms a complex spatial and temporal edit of “video dances” and other video material that Atlas shot with Cunningham and his company.¹² Generating a complex rhythm emphasized by the bleeping countdown leaders that interrupted the loops, the work's image- and soundscape amounts to an elegant reconfiguration of dance that was already (partly) choreographed for and with video. Video dance is made to be seen and re-seen in different contexts; the ephemeral time of dance becomes the stored time of video, which can be synchronized (or synco-pated) with various moments of lived time. The installation reassembles video clips in such a way as to foreground the viewer's active role, stimulating him or her to move back and forth to get a sense of the rhythms and modulate them by his or her movements, by his or her performance as viewer. Similarly, Yvonne Rainer's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan: Hybrid* (2002) creates a heightened sense of spectatorial activity by having a single projector – with dance rehearsal footage shot by Atlas – move around a circular space, necessitating constant adjustment of one's position.¹³

The projection shows rehearsals of Rainer's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, combined with images of Vienna and quotations from authors such as Kokoschka, Loos, Schönberg, and Wittgenstein. Within the projection, text columns and moving and still images move along either horizontally or vertically, and the projection itself moves around the (circular) space of the installation. A quotation about the contradictory demands made on young women and the effects of this in middle age ("No wonder so many of Freud's patients were middle-aged bourgeois women") is combined with footage of a girl held aloft, both in the rehearsal space and onstage: "I want to fly on one finger." Another quotation speaks of stifling and cumbersome female clothes, whereas the rehearsal footage shows male and female dancers in what amounts to comfortable unisex clothing – which is adjusted only slightly (with an eye on color) in the final changing. Many quotes deal with the status of art as a substitute for politics in Vienna around 1900 ("The life of art became a substitute for the life of action.") and images of Rainer's dancers are juxtaposed with works by Klimt, with the Secession façade, and fin-de-siècle interiors.

In the 1960s, Rainer has opposed the cult of the quasi-transcendent dancer, incorporating everyday movements into task-oriented choreographies that still demand great discipline and precision from the dancer(s).¹⁴ One consequence of Rainer's aesthetic is a change in status of the rehearsal, and *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan: Hybrid* privileges the rehearsal as the time of collective learning and guided improvisation. And the limits of performance are also broken down in a different manner; the video is installed so as to circle around the viewers, as if to emphasize its status as a loop that turns the time of performance into the time of exhibition, and as if to foreground the viewer's own movement in relation to the piece, movements that effectively make him/her part of the piece. The exhibition space has increasingly become a repository of dance in part because the exhibition space is a space where the borders of performance are translucent – both in spatial and temporal terms. It is here that dance can truly engage with the contemporary regime of permanent and general performance. The results of this can be profoundly ambiguous, as when Rainer's *Trio A* is performed by young dancers in exhibition spaces.

Trio A lasts about five minutes, but the dancers begin the dance at different moments and then perform *Trio A* two or three times, which creates an oddly looped temporality that gives the viewer the possibility to “zap” between different “channels.” While *Trio A* was always intended as a dance “performed simultaneously but not in unison by three people,” this fractured temporality functions differently in the museum, as the exhibition-based performances necessarily get the kind of focused attention associated with the theatre.¹⁵ As Kari Rittenbach has observed on the occasion of the group show *Move: Choreographing You*: “as two dancers performed Rainer’s choreography asynchronously, a number of nearby visitors casually handled the hula-hoops stacked in the corner of the room (props for a Christian Jankowski installation),” noting that the piece’s “intricacy went almost entirely unrecognized” under these circumstances.¹⁶

In this respect, a solo exhibition such as Rainer’s traveling 2012 retrospective is of course preferable, though the fundamental characteristics of these exhibited *Trio A* performances by multiple dancers remain paradoxical. In the museum, it is not always clear if one is watching a “real” performance or a rehearsal or warm-up, as both can take place in the same space.¹⁷ The performance loops proliferate, and they enter into a dialogue with the nearby video loops, the 2012 retrospective contains a loop of the 1978 film of Rainer performing the piece. On the occasion of the Vietnam War and its televised horrors, which can be “shut off” at will, Rainer once contrasted television with the “enduring reality” of her body.¹⁸ However, the museum versions of *Trio A* acknowledge that while you can turn off

your TV, or your laptop, it is all but impossible to unplug yourself from the “media day” constituted by TV, the internet, as well as exhibitions.¹⁹

In contemporary exhibitions such as Rainer’s retrospective, looped films and videos create a modulated but continuous time of performance – of recorded and constantly repeated performances on video, but also of *viewing performances* by the visitors, who inhabit the same space as the dancers. The fact that there is no music also underscores that the medium of *Trio A* is ultimately a shared temporality. The live versions of *Trio A* make it possible for museum visitors to experience this dance live, but “liveness” itself has been transformed. This is no longer the liveness of traditional theater or dance; it’s *daily work* in the age of the media day with not enough hours.²⁰

Different modalities of dance in the media-saturated economy of permanent performance were examined in Charles Atlas' television essay *Hail the New Puritan* (1986). In this staged documentary on Michael Clark and his dancers and collaborators, the opening segment shows an oneiric scene in which dancers go through their motion while others pose and preen. Leigh Bowery, queer performer par excellence and Clark's costume designer, opens his mouth to reveal TV static, and the static then becomes that on a TV screen next to Michael Clark's bed; we see Clark wake up in his studio/apartment, and a day of rehearsals and interviews begins. After studio segments of Clark dances set to songs by The Fall, the staged day ends with a different type of dance: with Clark and others clubbing, and voguing. At night, the relentless practice necessary for performing Clark's dances is replaced with a different kind of dance. Interestingly, part of this final segment shows the crowd imitating Clark's poses; Clark as it were "controls" their movements from a stage. This segment suggests that the media day never ends, and that the distinction between performing and viewing is eroding.

In 2010/2011, Clark presented dance rehearsals and performances in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, and in 2012 he repeated the exercise as part of the Whitney Biennial, where both he and Atlas did "residencies" *in the exhibition*. As part of this project, "non dancers" from the public were invited to partake in workshops and perform a piece written especially for them; this project turned the punk ethos of "anyone can do it" into a contemporary participatory mass event at the heart of the culture industry – with free labor provided by those who were happy to

have this unique opportunity. Nonetheless, as symptomatic articulations of and interventions in the current economy of time, all these dance (and video) projects are also lessons in living with symptoms, in living with dependency of the constraints that our temporal economy imposes, and with the effects it generates in us.

In an economy of time in which there is never enough time, the question becomes *how to live with oneself as an aggregate of symptoms* – symptoms that continue to shape one's actions even after they have abated. In *Cédric Andrieux*, the dancer mentions his relief upon leaving Cunningham and shedding the detested "unitard" outfit. He wore more comfortable clothes and experienced less physical pain dancing for Trisha Brown or Bel – with the latter, "We are people before we are dancers." Repeating Cunningham's repetitions, *Andrieux* examines himself as a quasi-subject and quasi-object, as body in perpetual training which at one point decided that it preferred not to.

3. BECOME YOUR SYMPTOM!

As a social disease par excellence, the burnout syndrome is one convenient label for a form of depression that seems to be directly traceable to the exigencies of our temporal economy. Could these and other symptoms also become more than apparently transparent expressions of this economy? Could they reassert their opaque autonomy and become *interventions in it*?

In a recent interview with *The Guardian* in his Ljubljana apartment, Slavoj Žižek seems to stage himself as a philosophical polit clown – perhaps as a perverse response to an interviewer focused on human interest. He refuses to discuss his new book on Hegel and instead regales the journalist with jokes about anal sex, consensual rape, fellatio, decadent but somehow politically conscious holidays in Dubai, and his household: “I live as a madman!” he exclaims, and leads me on a tour of the apartment to demonstrate why his kitchen cabinets contain only clothing. “You see, there’s no room anywhere else!” And indeed, every other room is lined, floor to ceiling, with DVDs and books. On the indignity of having to deal with

students, he expounds: “I especially hate when they come to me with personal problems. My standard line is: ‘Look at me, look at my tics, don’t you see that I’m mad? How can you even think about asking a madman like me to help you in personal problems, no?’” The interviewer notes that “volumes of his own 75 works, translated into innumerable languages, fill one room alone” as a quasi-monument to a pathological permanent production that pushes cybertime to a point where it falls back onto itself.²¹

Žižek would certainly seem to enjoy his symptoms, and in the interview he appears to perform himself as a one-man version of the group in Lars von Trier’s *The Idiots* (1998), who fake symptoms of mental retardation as an anti-bourgeois gesture. The mock-surrealist play *The Idiots* entails the creation of fake symptoms in order to shock the bourgeois and to be able to lead a shameless life – but in some cases, particularly in the character of Susanne, this project turns out to be a way of camouflaging real trauma. In this sense, *The Idiots* still belongs to the world of *Festen*, Thomas Vinterberg’s film about dirty Freudian

family secrets erupting at a bourgeois birthday party. The first part of von Trier's recent *Melancholia* (2011) invokes *Festen* rather explicitly: once again, exemplified on a grand bourgeois party (a wedding party this time) and a dysfunctional family. However, this family is not exactly teeming with the dark, traumatic secrets of patriarchy; the patriarch has withdrawn leaving various understudies in charge of keeping up appearances. The paternal and paternalistic role is taken over by two employees: the house steward, who is tellingly called "Little Father," and an eccentric wedding planner played by Udo Kier.

Festen is characteristic of the cinema of symptoms in today's *Autorenkino* – for example in superior Michael Haneke films such as *Caché*, *La Pianiste*, or *Das Weisse Band*, viewers are expected and trained to become connoisseurs of symptoms.²² With such films, symptomatology becomes the new iconology: the symptom becomes the new sign, and breakdowns become the new code. In *Melancholia* we enter a different logic, where symptoms play a much more autonomous role; it is through their autonomy that the protagonist, Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst), asserts an erratic autonomy of her own. Within hours, Justine manages to sabotage her own wedding as well as her career. She works at an ad agency, where her boss seems convinced that she has some innate knack for producing slogans, as if it is some quasi-biological process that can happen at any moment; he has an assistant trail her in order to make sure the results are noted down. This could be seen as von Trier's sardonic take on "creative" work as ongoing and taking up the whole time-of-life, yet Justine does not give the impression of caving in under the

pressures of cybertime. While Justine could be diagnosed as depressed, it remains unclear what this depression is. It seems to challenge contemporary classifications (such as burnout) as well as ancient models such as the old doctrine of fundamental human humors, of which melancholia is one.

The fact that the film derives its title from a planet that has left its constellation and is now on a collision course with earth is a sign that everything in *Melancholia* is out of joint, and behavior asserts symptomatic autonomy in the face of possible explanations and therapies. The more von Trier himself seems to become entangled in a bowdlerized therapeutic mythology ("about coming to terms with his own depression and with his inner Nazi"), the more resolutely anti-therapeutic, anti-psychiatric, and anti-cathartic the films become. In this respect, both von Trier's earlier *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* can be related to Berardi's insistence that "Depression can't be reduced to the psychological field. It questions the very foundation of being," and that philosophically speaking, "depression is the moment that comes closest to truth."²³ For the depressed, sense stops to make sense, as he or she extracts him or herself from the symbolic order and the circulation of binding signs. This is what Justine does, and what *Melancholia* does. Depression here appears not in the psychological register. It is not a condition demanding a therapeutic intervention; it is itself an intervention.

Symptomatic interventions are also examined – and restaged – by Dora García in her 2010 performance *Real Artists Don't Have Teeth*. In this piece, García has a performer enact the discourse, including extreme pathological outbursts, of artists such as Jack Smith, Antonin Artaud, and Lenny Bruce. Part of a larger project that takes as its point of departure Franco Basaglia's anti-psychiatric writings on the "culture of the deviant," this work seeks to recapture the potential of practices that, taken as productive deviancy instead of as pathology to be cured away, liberate the symptom from clinical (or indeed art-historical) disenfranchisement. This should not be mistaken for traditional "psychobiography," reducing the artwork to manifestation of the artist's inner struggle and traumas. García's return to antipsychiatry is much more pointed than that. With her performer shifting from "regular" lecture-style performance to convulsive twitches and outbursts, we are watching a virtuoso performance that stages the loss of control in a highly controlled manner. Is this, then, "just" a contemporary simulation of the "authentic" symptoms of yesteryear, an exercise in psychiatric nostalgia for the real? One might, on the contrary, say that García's project takes the symptom to a point where such questions no longer matter. What matters is "the invention of somatic practices," to use a phrase by choreographer Mårten Spångberg.²⁴

When *Real Artists Don't Have Teeth* was performed on certain days in García's show at the Spanish Pavilion of the 2011 Venice Biennale, the piece acted in a dialogue with other works, especially her *Instant Narrative* – a work in which the visitors see a description of themselves and their movements, perhaps with added literary speculations about them, appear in real-time on a screen, typed by a writer behind a laptop elsewhere in the space. This uncanny doubling foregrounds the viewer's role as an actor of sorts, as a performer in cybertime, as a symptomatic producer. One question to emerge from this would be if such an instant narrative can be related to other narratives within and outside of the cultural sphere. Can there be *coalitions of symptoms* that assert a collective autonomy?

As with von Trier's Justine and García's performers, symptoms tend to sabotage socially regulated forms of communication; at their most extreme, they tend to generate solipsism. But pathologies come in all shapes and sizes, and in some cases an anti-psychiatric cultivation of the symptom as form, as obstruction, to the smooth functioning of the current economy of time may be possible – and it is ultimately possible only if this cultivation becomes collective organization, however small or large, formal or informal. In organizations such as the Precarious Workers' Brigade and the Carrotworkers, underpaid and precarious cultural workers assert the untenability of their position, while there are also examples of coalitions between art workers and other types of workers – such as illegal migrants existing in a shadowy, parallel economy of time.²⁵

In a political economy of time that is rapidly running out of future(s), such coalitions are as fragile as they are necessary. They easily disintegrate because the diverging types of work result in different subjectivities and different pathologies, which can explode with the full force of the symptom. However, the fact that they come into being at all is no smaller demonstration of the symptom's power to act up.