



## **Social acceleration and social distancing in the social factory**

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Sociologist Hartmut Rosa posits that modernization is not only a multileveled process in time, but also signifies a structural (and culturally highly significant) transformation of time structures and horizons, which he captures by the concept of 'social acceleration' (2003). According to Rosa, social acceleration comprises three spheres, including technological acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of pace of life. Paradoxically, technological acceleration – which logically ought to decrease the time needed to carry out everyday processes of (re)production, communication and transport – seems to have caused an increase in the scarcity of time instead of slowing down the pace of life. Many people 'feel hurried and under time pressure'. Indeed, we seem to do more in less time: we seem to be reducing breaks and doing more things simultaneously. An acceleration society, as Rosa puts it, therefore only applies to a society 'if, and only if, technological acceleration and the growing scarcity of time (i.e. an acceleration of the "pace of life") occur simultaneously' (2003, 10).

Contemporary performing artists manoeuvre in this acceleratory society between projects and operate in a post-Fordist and neoliberal economy of work. Post-Fordism, which describes a work regime grounded in flexible work formats and immaterial labour, should be distinguished from neoliberalism, which resurged in the 1970's alongside the rise of post-Fordism and from then on has become the dominant guiding principle for economic thought and management, at least in Western society. Neoliberalism is also an ideology and has become a hegemonic mode of discourse in political-economic thinking in favour of a withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision. Its impact on labour is complex, but the neoliberal form of governing is grounded in maximizing market liberty and entrepreneurial freedom through deregulation and privatization, thus restructuring society according to the principle of the dynamic process of competition.

The art world operates for a large part in the gift sphere, precisely on the basis of competition. Subsidies can be structural or conditional. Generally, cultural institutions that facilitate artistic work can apply for two- to four-year structural funding while most independent artists have come to rely on project-based subsidies. In Belgium, the majority of artists are dependent on public funding that finances their projects. This funding can be direct, for example through project subsidies that enable artists to have a working budget for a creation, or indirect, for example through residencies that offer infrastructure for rehearsals and sometimes also technical support, lodging, meals etc. Public subsidies for the performing arts mainly support the lucky few in the creation of artistic products, which are typically in the form of live performances. The material

and immaterial returns of such a project are highly dependent on presentation opportunities. In the best case scenario, the outcomes of an artistic project are sold to a number of venues in exchange for a performance fee that generally covers the presentation costs. It merits mention that the salaries of the directly involved art workers (performers, technicians, ...) constitute a major cost, but this also may include transportation, set-up and clean-up of the set, as well as travel and accommodation of the involved people. Venues can afford to pay a certain number of performance fees partly with their own structural subsidies and partly with the revenues they gain through the ticket sales. Unfortunately, as writer Wouter Hillaert also has observed, the classical diffusion model of the performing arts has been under much pressure in recent years. There is a problem in distributing these live performances: a lot of work is produced with subsidies, yet very little is presented. In his extensive article in *rekto:verso* on this issue in 2017, he gives voice to various programmers and production managers from Flanders and Brussels. A variety of drawbacks are summed up, such as the decreasing financial resources, the strict evaluation of financial records, more risk management, and oversupply among other things.

It goes without saying that within this regime, independent artists are sometimes obliged to tap into multiple incomes in order to provide and make a living. Several artists do not only create their own performances, but they also teach and work for other people's projects as a performer, as a dramaturge, as a movement director, you name it... Since artists cannot always count on receiving project subsidies, they have to hedge against income insecurity through multiple jobholding. Therefore, in terms of social security, Belgium knows a rather unique freelancing system in the independent arts sector that enables artists to work with short employment contracts rather than self-employed. A vast majority of Belgium-based artists work according to this logic. Their schedules are filled with work activities, such as rehearsals, writing applications, management, networking, promotion – yet their paid work activities are more often than not just dots in that landscape. Today these dots are wiped off of their calendars, leaving many of them empty-handed for who-knows how many weeks.

### ***The show may not go on***

The precarious position of freelance and project-based artists in the context of the health measures taken to prevent the coronavirus from spreading is becoming more and more exposed. Obviously, this is not less true for other fellow human beings. Let's not forget that also the underemployed, and the unemployed, the self-employed and the contingently employed in other sectors are of course greatly affected economically by the lockdown measures. The lockdown is a wise decision to prevent the virus from spreading. It is a very wise decision to protect high-risk groups. But shouldn't we use that very same logic to protect the fragile precariat, also a high-risk group. At least in terms of socio-economic and psychological health?

I have become harrowingly aware of my own privileged position, contentedly working from the home office where 'my show' just goes on. I have no worries whatsoever about this and next month's pay check, which will very likely remain unaffected by the measures taken. At the end of this crisis, I will probably even have saved some money that I'd otherwise spend on drinks, dinners and coffees-on-the-go on my daily commute. I have very little concerns about stockpiling groceries as we run a little organic in the country side, where we have plenty of vegetables. If the home feels too claustrophobic, I have 3 hectares of private land to retreat to. I am comfortably uncomfortable. I haven't got any monetary concerns about cancelled trips or events. If I was able

to spend the money in the first place, I don't require a refund. In fact, I feel guilty even because I had made plenty of reservations for upcoming performances for which I was supposed to pay at the ticket office only on the very night of the performance. Now I wish I would've paid these tickets in advance, because at least I would have somehow made a small contribution to supporting the cultural sector that is now suffering unseen losses.

Countless artists are now even more insecure than ever about their incomes for this month. And maybe next month too. Yet, individual financial troubles cast aside, they go on with the show. In times of social distancing, they offer us open access to recordings of their work. They offer us free virtual museum tours. They offer us online dance classes. They give us thought-provoking poems to read. They continue to create powerful video performances. Quarantine dances. Renditions of corona-inspired cough songs. A tenor sings from his balcony. We are moved. We are amused. All. For. Free. Because we are all in this together. Most of us are home alone, but together alone. We must remain distant yet near. From a distance, we create social cohesion. Every single one of us in one way or another affected by these measures. To a greater or lesser extent. Not everyone can see the big picture yet, but we are trying. We are learning as we go. We have to care for each other. Collectively.

### ***Decelerate, contemplate, recuperate***

In the context of social acceleration, Hartmut Rosa distinguishes five forms of deceleration and inertia (2003). Whereas the first two forms denote the natural and anthropological limits of acceleration (such as the speed of perception, or acceleration limits within excluded tribes), the fourth and fifth categories identify intentional forms of (social) deceleration which enable conditions for further acceleration (such as the yoga retreat). The third form encompasses an (unintended) effect of acceleration. In this category, slowing down happens when incidents impose dysfunctional and pathological forms of deceleration. Such incidents are not necessarily of external nature, such as an accident causing a traffic jam or a volcanic eruption causing a mandatory mobility pause - remember Eyjafjallajökull in April 2010? More often than not, they affect the body in a more direct way, in the form of disease or injury. Since technological acceleration allows us to do things faster and more efficiently, we feel like time is suspended when the mechanisms we are so used to fail or cannot function. These mechanisms can refer to technology itself, such as modes of transportation or communication machines, but also to our very own bodies. In this regard, Bojana Kunst points out that 'this slowing down and waiting is frequently felt in contemporary culture when the dispositives that regulate and organize our flexible subjectivities no longer work: for example, the protocols of moving through the city, social networks, airports, motorways, mobile phones.' These forms of deceleration have an immediate influence on us. In moments like these, she concludes, 'we are stuck with very little else to do but hang in there and become powerless observers of our own chronological time' (2015, 122).

If this dysfunctional and pathological deceleration may feel like wasted time, let us take on a different perspective. Let us grab the opportunity to gain back control over time in this accelerated time regime and put it to use for reflection. We have been working too much. As Franco 'Bifo' Berardi puts it: 'we need a massive reduction in work-time, a prodigious liberation of life from the social factory, in order to reweave the fabric of the social relation' (2009, 213). We have been going too fast, too furiously. Let us be alone together. Let us decelerate. Let us heal.

## Works Cited

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