

## **Time is Running: System HM2T's *perform* and (long) durational performance**

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0.00 Helge Meyer

Helge Meyer is a German performance artist. He creates solo works, also is part of the group Black Market International and together with other German artist, Marco Teubner, forms a duo System HM2T (the abbreviation signifies first letters of performers' names and the number of performers in the group). In this paper I will speak about an initial work of the System HM2T *perform* (1999). Because of the work's deliberate simplicity it is a good demonstration of some principles which Meyer uses, in both, solo and collaborative performances. I also consider *perform* as an exemplary work of so called (long) durational/endurance art.

„[Meyer] is interested in questions of pain, duo work, cooperation and the history of images,<sup>1</sup> or at least this is what he writes about himself. Other important themes in Meyer's work might be the notion of human memory, the role of the audience in performance art and the time. He is also a researcher - one of the important sources for this text was his dissertation *The Image is Pain: An Extensive Research About Suffering and Self-Inflicted Injuries Within the Field of Performance Art*. (Meyer 2006)

One might assign the German artist to the tradition of what is in the art world known as a *long durational*, respectively just *durational* or *endurance* (performance) art. There is a lot of confusion in those terms. In the coming paragraphs I approximate some of the issues connected with the time in performance art and position Meyer in this context. The aim is not to offer a fixed definitions, but rather just to linger in the river of time for a couple of minutes.

*You should speed up, because the time is running.*

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1 Meyer, Helge. „BIO / C.V.“ *Performance Art Research* portfolio. Accessed 29 February 2016.  
[http://www.performance-art-research.de/bio-cv\\_en.html](http://www.performance-art-research.de/bio-cv_en.html).

## 01:20 Durational performance

Fruitful basic definition of a *durational performance* resulted from the symptomatically named panel *Challenging Smooth Consumption: Durational Performance as Cultural Misfit* lead by a performance studies scholar Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen:<sup>2</sup>

Durational performance is a form through which TIME is manifested in its original (natural) purity and brought to the forefront as pivotal to the experience. [...] Durational performance challenges audiences' habitual patterns of full consumption of cultural products. The length of durational performance exceeds the average standard length of most performing arts and film events: approximately two hours. Therefore, there is a transgression of consumerism [...], in terms of the work's length (duration), speed (slowness), silence, observation (perception), introspection, immateriality, and lack of entertainment. [...] *Durational performance can be considered a cultural pause from the nine-to-five urban routine; a break for reflection on existence.*<sup>3</sup> (Skjoldager-Nielsen – Pujol, 2009)

We invented symbolic system in which the time is represented by hours, minutes and other questionably objective units. What fades away in our everyday lives is the notion of time as something else than its numeral display – its more „original (natural)“ (Ibid.) elusive nature. According to Skjoldager-Nielsen and other panelists durational performance (art) „challenges smooth consumption“ (Ibid.) of time by exposing it as the main theme and lengthening it above usual.

An average length of the most performing arts and film events is labeled in the quotation to be two hours. It is a simplification written from a Western point of view (as we can see for example in the Bollywood cinema or Indonesian traditional Wayang Kulit theatre where the common length could be much longer). But it is agreeable that specific audiences are used to a certain length in a so-called time-based art.

For Helge Meyer to call a piece „durational“ it should has a minimal length of three hours (Meyer 27 January 2016) or one and a half hours respectively (Meyer 16 February 2016). After one

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<sup>2</sup> I am omitting parts of the definition not only due to its length but also to avoid sections which I do not consider entirely accurate and which questioning would not be beneficial for the timescale of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> (capitals and italics EP)

and a half („more or less“(Meyer 2008)) hours of a Black Market International performance „the ideas are not the main content [...] anymore,“ (Ibid.) according to Meyer, due to the physical exhaustion and a change in perception. „After three hours there always something breaks and something collapses. And to work out of this collapse is something that interests me. And it's the same when we work with Marco on durational pieces.“ (Meyer 27 January 2016)

Of course every performance has always a certain duration and thereby every performance is durational but the custom in the art terminology is to understand durational performances as those in which a duration itself is in the forefront. It often happens that such an art work thematises a duration on the formal level and at the same time has for the given context unusual length. As I showed in the Meyer's and precedent Skjoldager-Nielsen's quotations, there is a certain need to define this „unusual length“. It is understandable demand, yet its rigor is surprising and leads to an amusing paradox: before experiencing the indefinability of time it is not an exception to at first define in what time frame it will happen.

What for Meyer is rather a question of an approximate tool, for one of the icons of the durational performance, Marina Abramović, the precise definition of which work can and which can not be labeled as a durational, is more crucial. To be precise: Serbian artist uses the expression „long durational performance“, but to my knowledge there is no difference being made between durational and long durational performances in the art world and both terms are interchangeable.

Abramović states: „A long durational work is any work (of performance art, dance, theater, film, music, opera, and others) whose performance exceeds 6 hours.“ (*Marina Abramovic Institute* 29 February 2016) It is quite a unique and radical statement which on the one hand makes dealing with a long durational art much easier, on the other a generalizing like this leads to the lack of sensitivity towards individual artworks. Such a rigorous selection based on the self-proclaimed limit might be harmful in the fragile sphere of art.

*I hope you are keeping on time.*

#### 04.30 Six hours

It is worth mentioning that Abramović plans to open the „Marina Abramovic Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art“ in Hudson, New York. The focus of the institution will be on presentation of different long durational works (according to her definition of course), not only from the field of performance art. There are high demands towards visitors of the museum from her: „every visitor [will be] outfitted in a lab coat, the distinction between artist and onlooker will melt away [...]“ (Abramović in Ryzik 2012). Experiencing Abramović's institution would be specific also for other reason: „When you arrive [...] you have to sign a contract that you will stay a minimum of six hours,“ (Abramović in Ryzik 2012) sketches the artist. Journalist Melena Ryzik adds: „There is no penalty for leaving early, but endurance is rewarded.“ (Ryzik 2012)

I am wondering how would another artist, Trout Monfalco, enjoy such a visit. As he puts it in his article *Endurance Art – Six Hours is Too Long*: „In a time when most people find it hard enough to go see a two hour performance, busy with other things in their life [...] who and how many show up for a six hours performance? Why do they go?“<sup>4</sup> In Abramović's point of view (long durational) art is something almost close to a religion. „I'm asking you to give me your time, and if you give me your time, I give you experience,“ (Abramović in Weiss 2012) she offers.

It is interesting to see the connection between long durational works and a devotion. Trout Monfalco does not have a time to perceive this kind of art. But I would actually say that it is not so much about the amount of time but rather about the trust. One has to really trust in one's work when executing such a piece and the similar passion has to be mutual with the audience. In that sense I am on the Abramović's side, because „to give a time“ and not to expect payment means to ignore the known „time is money“. What she offers is more important than money: „Give me your time, I give you experience,“ she says.

#### 06:00 Titanic versus La Région Centrale

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<sup>4</sup> Monfalco, Trout. „Endurance Art– Six Hours is Too Long.“ *Art Here and Now* blog. Accessed 29 February 2016. <http://www.arthereandnow.com/endurance-art-six-hours-is-too-long/>.

On the contrary what I found questionable in Abramović's concept is omitting of the form: of the content and the structure of the specific art work. Let me show you what I mean using an example from the sphere of a film art.

James Cameron's 194 min *Titanic* is, compared to other Western feature movies, unusually long. Such a long runtime supports a spectacular narrative of the movie, the story of big Love and the big Tragedy. The actual length is not anyhow thematized in the film, it is rather just a frame resulting from the needs of a narrative. The viewer can acknowledge that the movie is long but it does not lead her/him to any special experiencing of or thinking about the time.

On the other hand there is Michael Snow's 180 min *La Région centrale* which consists of the one continuous shot of the North Quebec landscape only. The main theme of the relation between the time and space is here supported by the extreme (for such a content) length of the piece. The form here is not only an aesthetic choice as in the case of the *Titanic* but a necessity. Without an extreme length, the „meaning“ of *La Région centrale* would be very different.

If the border which Abramović proposes would not be six hours but 190 minutes, the *Titanic* would be included into her institution for preservation of (long) durational art and *La Région centrale* would not. In this hypothetical situation the work excluded would be that one which actually thematizes duration. It also brings me back to the question of the illusion of objective time. My guess would be that to watch a shorter *La Région centrale* where there is no dramatic arc could feel as a much longer experience than watching slightly longer Hollywood blockbuster. Shortly – one way of looking at the genre of (long) durational art is not only to think about „how long“ it is but also „how“ it is done.

When thinking about „how“ in (long) durational works the aspect of difficulty is often highlighted and the term *endurance art* is being used.

#### 07.40 Endurance

I see two ways how to approach the word „to endure“. In a one sense „to endure“ could

mean negative „to experience (pain or suffering) for a long time“ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 31 May 2016) which implies some highly unpleasant, involuntary situation, for example torture. But one might read the word also from a more positive perspective in a sense of „to regard with acceptance or tolerance“ (Ibid.) or „to remain firm under suffering or misfortune without yielding“ (Ibid.)

In the performance and body art the second interpretation of the term might be considered to be more common. Performers are not only showing us their suffering but also their ability to linger in those unpleasant conditions, to endure them by the power of will, with an inner dignity, with humbleness or assertive resistance, with concentration. Of course it would not be true with all the works created in the genre but it is an approach which might be found in works of many different (long) durational artists, such as in above mentioned Marina Abramović, in Helge Meyer and the groups he is part of or in the works of Chinese artist Zhang Huang, whom I take now as an example to demonstrate my argument. *Maybe you should speed up?*

Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (1994) lasted for forty minutes only. In this piece Huan, naked, with honey-smear on his body, sat in a public toilet in the East Village, Beijing. The work is certainly about enduring in the meaning of resisting to something uncomfortable - sitting in a malodorous toilet in a summer, covered by big amounts of flies had to be tormenting. Nevertheless, as scholar Hentyle Yapp points out, this work is often simplified as a purely political appeal commenting on the appalling living situation in Beijing suburbs through Huan's suffering (Yapp 2013).

In a contrast to the endurance Yapp introduces the word lingering: „Zhang not only endures, but also lingers in the pleasures and difficulties of discomfort [...]. He cultivates himself not to simply question and endure through the power; instead he performs a more complicated notion of lingering in power and discomfort.“ (Ibid.) I agree with Yapp, just with an exception of separating between the endurance and the lingering. As I suggest above „to linger“ is already included in „to endure“.

This being, this lingering, is happening in time. I am thinking about a relativity of time again. Maybe this „objectively“ short piece could be also labeled as a (long) durational considering Huan's own subjective experiencing of a time... What becomes important here is what was already mentioned above in the text – inseparability of the form and the content. Huan shows us his „being-in-time“ by which the notion of time, of a duration becomes an essential part of the piece.

Similarly to Huan, Meyer and Teubner also linger in time in their work *perform*. Let me now proceed (*I know you are in hurry*) with this art piece.

10:00 *perform*

*Perform* series took place in the University of Hildesheim, Germany, in five days, 7.-11. September 1999, one performance a day, each twelve hours long. Let me present you short descriptions of individual performances created by the System HM2T itself:

#1 7<sup>th</sup> September 1999 Walking in the Courtyard

„[...] we were walking a chosen path for all the time, back and forth. No other action was added. After twelve hours an alarm clock ended the work.“<sup>5</sup>

#2 8<sup>th</sup> September 1999 Walking Tied Together on the Entire Area

„[...] we walked tied together so that one always had to walk backwards.“ (Ibid.)

#3 9<sup>th</sup> September 1999 Drinking Water

„[...] each of us drank nine litres of water continuously. A selfmade pissoir was visible where we refilled the urine back into the emptied bottles after we finished them.“ (Ibid.)

#4 10<sup>th</sup> September 1999 Storytelling in the Catacombs

„There is a cellar system under the university where Marco and me went. There is no light. We sat there and talked for twelve hours. The audience could come down and listen. We never knew how much and who was there...the rule was that at least one of us has to talk.“ (Meyer 16 February

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5 Meyer, Helge – Teubner, Marco. „'Peepshows': Live performances and video projection“. *Performance Art Research* portfolio. Accessed 29 February 2016. [http://www.performance-art-research.de/texts/peepshows\\_live\\_performances.pdf](http://www.performance-art-research.de/texts/peepshows_live_performances.pdf).

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#5 11<sup>th</sup> September 1999 Acting Twelve Times in Front of the University Main Entrance

„We occupied a place in front of the library. Each of us brought six objects, so twelve objects for twelve hours. We improvised with them.“ (Ibid.)

About the whole work Meyer writes: „In the series (our first work as a duo) we tried to free the work from all the theatrical issues. There was only a concentration on the simple body work and the change of the behaviour because of the heaviness of the task.“<sup>6</sup>

11:00 Dramaturgy

What I appreciate about the series is a dramaturgical decision of the System HM2T to start their cooperation with this kind of a self-exploratory work: „In the beginning [of the cooperation between two artists] there were simple body tasks that we performed for long durations to find an own language in the wide field of art form where we feel to fit in.“ (Ibid.) Meyer and Teubner were basically exploring their field, testing their capacities and possibilities. This almost laboratory art research did not take place only in a conversation but in a form of a regular artwork. The simple ideas of System HM2T were not revolutionary but as one can read in the group manifesto: „System HM2T does not claim uniqueness of the generated images. System HM2T is aware of a possible relatedness to similar events, which is the motivation for further experiments.“<sup>7</sup> What remained in the following works was a focus on the physicality and enduring but there was a development, as indicated in the quotation. More objects or different media were introduced and the actions became more complex and complicated.

11:20 Sensitivity

A System HM2T did not choose a neutral gallery for execution of their work but different

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6 Meyer, Helge – Teubner, Marco. „'Peepshows': Live performances and video projection“. *Performance Art Research* portfolio. Accessed 29 February 2016. [http://www.performance-art-research.de/texts/peepshows\\_live\\_performances.pdf](http://www.performance-art-research.de/texts/peepshows_live_performances.pdf).

7 Meyer, Helge – Teubner, Marco. „Manifesto.“ *Performance Art Research* portfolio. Accessed 29 February 2016. [http://www.performance-art-research.de/performance\\_en.php?type=system](http://www.performance-art-research.de/performance_en.php?type=system).

outside and inside spaces. By that they till some extent articulated specificity of the chosen sites and were able to confront not only invited but also random audiences (common strategy in Meyer's work). On the other hand only *Storytelling in the Catacombs* was inseparable from the chosen site. Other parts could be presented in a neutral space, even that with a different tone. Similarly there was not any focus given to the specificity of the local audience. But the fact that artists consciously chose different open spaces already showed their future interests in what might be called site-specific work. Shortly, some of the main aspects of the System HM2T (or Helge Meyer's solos) had yet to be born out of this initial work.

11:40 Boredom

*Soon it will be over. Don't give up!*

Now what is the relation of the piece to the (long) durational/endurance art? In the *perform* one simple activity was being performed throughout the whole day. By that an appeal of our consumer society to produce, to count minutes and to separate time to units, was denied. Helge Meyer, in relation to how to perceive durational works, recommends: „Please, come, stay as long as you can and then take a break. But then come back and again stay as long as you can.“ (Meyer 27 January 2016) But how enjoyable can it be to watch two men drinking water for hours?

I was not present in Hildesheim in the year 1999 but I make my guess that to watch different parts of the piece for several hours could be easily boring. As watching of many durational works actually is. I did not talk about the notion of boredom yet, but it is often present in (long) durational performances. This „problem“ is also common with a practice of meditation: „Sometimes you need to be bored to see something behind the boredom.“ (Ibid.) Audience member fighting the boredom is in the similar position as a meditating monk. The same applies for an artist due to whom this unusual meditation is allowed. If the viewer wants, if (s)he has a time, it is possible to join. If not, only the image, however strong, is left without the spectator physically experiencing the piece together with a performer.

12:30 Trust

A straight connection through the shared time is not possible to achieve with all durational pieces, some of them are even meant to be experienced rather indirectly. For example with an artist Tehching Hsieh it would be very difficult to follow directly his *One Year Piece (1981-1982) (Outdoor Piece)*. At first he made a contract in which he promised not to enter any building or a vehicle for a year and then he tried to follow those rules. Tried, because we do not really know if he ever violated the contract or not. It was not possible (or almost impossible) to follow and check him the whole year. Even though it would have been very strong and challenging way how to experience this piece, my understanding of the work is that its intention was different. An above mentioned concept of the shared time in (long) durational performances does not work here. The performer and the audience were not enduring together but the performer was enduring and the audience thinking of, experiencing Hsieh's adventures on the mental level. One could imagine Hsieh's misery in New York winter streets, if one would believe he really followed his rules and was for a year avoiding entering a building.

This aspect of Hsieh's works brings an essential questions about a trust in our present society. What is the value of the trust nowadays? Whom do we trust? Is there a trust to humanity? What is the value of a spoken promise? And written?

The notion of the trust is also fundamental in the realm of (long) durational performances in general. The length might be clearly communicated to the audience (like in performances of Hsieh or in a *perform series*<sup>8</sup>) or just between performers. When the partner is missing and the audience is unaware of the inner time logic of the piece the task is even more difficult – one has to be honest with oneself only. As I know from personal experiences the latter is the most difficult to fulfill.

Luckily one of the advantages of performance art is that even an artist's failure might become beneficial for the piece. In the case of *perform* not being able to finish the work would

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<sup>8</sup> For the *perform series* Meyer and Teubner invited an audience through flyers and posters. Exact starting and ending times (7am to 7pm) were displayed as well as choosed sites. (Meyer 19 and 20 February 2016)

answer the question where physical (or psychological) limits of two performers were. But it is also true that such a development would significantly change a meaning of an otherwise rigorously framed piece.

Coming back to what I called the dramaturgical decision, one can again see a logic behind. Choosing a highly demanding work based on a trust as the first collaboration is an effective way how to test your artistic partner. The questions behind might be: is there a common devotion? Common passion to endure a difficult tasks together? Members of the System HM2T created for themselves a personal ritual of partnership and they executed it openly in public spaces - by that they invited audiences to be witnesses of the ritual.

In *perform* it was possible to watch for a few hours Meyer and Teubner, for example, drinking water and later to come back and to continue the observation. Physical experiencing of the activity was strengthened for the audience by the fact that they could trust to the performers. Meyer and Teubner announced they will perform for a specific amount of hours in a certain space. Which they did and it was possible to confirm by visiting the announced spots. Specific strict rules not only brought the notion of trust to the relation performer-performer but also to that of audience-performers. For the successful fulfillment of the „ritual“ for all participants - performers and audiences - it was necessary to accept and follow those rules, to endure the situation as „agreed“.

14: 30 Performing time – performing a performance

The basic inner rules of *perform*, such as „to walk back and forth“ seem easier to follow than Hsieh's *12 Square Meters* in which artist exposed himself to an immediate discomfort. But when repeating however simple activity for a longer time, gradually it becomes more and more difficult. There is a potential in the most light and joyful action to become its complete opposite (and vice versa). In a works long enough it often happens that the „body takes over. [...] the performer has no chance to work intellectually anymore because the body does not allow to work intellectually anymore.“ (Meyer 27 January 2016) If the *perform* would be executed by robots, it

would have only its durational aspect. Because it was done by two men there was also a strong notion of a physical challenge included. Hence important component of the work was also the endurance, lingering in the increasing discomfort and its repeated overcoming.

In my eyes *perform* is a highly successful exploration of what might be in the contemporary art called durational, long durational or endurance performance. The actual actions that created the content of the work were not very important and could be actually replaced with many similar ones. The main point was their repetition for a long period by which a space for different experiencing of the time was opened.

By announcing the times and locations of the performances in advance and by successful repeating of decided simple tasks notions of the endurance, boredom and trust, often present in here discussed genre(s), were strongly present.

Each one performance of the series was (two times) longer than what is the required length for a piece to be called a long durational by Abramović (six hours). But what makes them exquisite examples of the (long) durational genre is not (only) their length but rather an introduction of different understandings and experiencing of the time in performance art.

It is a work rigorous, academic, eclectic but because of a deliberate decision. It basically says something like: „The question of the piece is a time in performance art and that is also what is being performed here: the performance art and the time.“ And still there is more than just this tautological concept. Because of its actual executing, not only theorizing about, the *perform* had the power to directly, emotionally, physically influence the audiences and their instant time perception.

*The text is now over. Thank you for your time. 16:00*

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## **Interviews**

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## **Artworks**

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*Perform Series #2: Walking Tied Together on the Entire Area*. System HM2T. Performers: Helge Meyer, Marco Teubner. Performance of 8 September 1999, University of Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany.

*Perform Series #3: Drinking Water*. System HM2T. Performers: Helge Meyer, Marco Teubner.

Performance of 9 September 1999, University of Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany.

*Perform Series #4: Storytelling in the Catacombs.* System HM2T. Performers: Helge Meyer, Marco Teubner. Performance of 10 September 1999, University of Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany.

*Perform Series #5: Acting Twelve Times in Front of the University Main Entrance.* System HM2T. Performers: Helge Meyer, Marco Teubner. Performance of 11 September 1999, University of Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany.

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