

Manuel Pelmuš

## WHAT DO THE VIEWERS SEE?

Manuel Pelmuš trained as a choreographer; he lives and works between Oslo and Bucharest. His work reflects on the experience economy, production values, strategies of disappearance and the politics of visibility in our media-driven society. In this essay, he interprets Carole Douillard's *The Viewers* and its potential as a political act.

As *The Viewers* slowly take up their positions in a public space in Oslo, let's say on the roof of the Opera House, they know they will be standing there for a long time.

Time, taking time, having time, wasting time, time to think, time to look, time to be together.

Time is a luxury most of us can no longer afford. From this privileged position, in a privileged country, they use their time to look around.

At first glance, everything looks quiet. The landscape is beautiful and serene.

As they look further into the landscape they stumble upon an area of newly built high rises blocking their view. Privatised public spaces turned into luxury apartments and corporate offices. They zoom in, in an attempt to look closer.

In 2016, in London, in the immediate vicinity of Tate Modern, the new inhabitants of luxury buildings felt disturbed by visitors having access to the upper terraces of the museum. They complained that their privacy was being violated by the curious gaze of people inside a public institution. They filed a lawsuit against Tate Modern.

Public space seen as a threat to private interests. Looking too close. Getting too close. Being too close.

Public gaze getting too close to private affairs becoming an offence.

*The Viewers* insist on looking from a public point of view. Their gaze is constructed collectively as public scrutiny of current affairs.

As *The Viewers* stand still and hold their formation, their bodies stand in alliance with other bodies in formation, past and future, in the streets, in the squares, laying claim to space as public space<sup>1</sup>. Contesting the strict division between public and private. They embody a plurality that re-configures public space, actualising and producing anew memories of other bodies assembling throughout history. Keeping these memories (a) live and projecting them into the future.

They stand close to each other. For each other. With each other. Holding ground. Holding it together. Holding on. Holding on for others. For others to join.

In 2013, in Istanbul, a man arrived in Taksim Square with just his backpack. He chose a spot and stood still for hours, hands in pockets, gazing towards the Ataturk Cultural Centre. He returned to the same spot every day and spent several hours in the same position, claiming space with his body at a time when public assemblies were forbidden in the city.

As his body and his action started spreading across time and (virtual) space via rumours, media, and other bodies, people started to join him. One by one, copying his posture, looking together in the same direction. His body becoming many. Many becoming one. His gaze a collective gaze.

Repeating, replacing, supporting one another as a living network of solidarity. Re-imagining the public sphere. Mobilising an ongoing dialogue between their presence, passersby and social space.

*The Viewers* stand for others, in alliance with others' struggles. Mediating different historical moments of solidarity and forms of assembly.

Recirculating collective memories and the politics involved in the representation of these memories.

By standing still *The Viewers* insert another temporality into the time of the city and of the passers-by. A different intensity into the regular pace of the crowd. Their immobility stands in stark contrast with today's requirements of being productive and efficient at all times.

In 1977, Croat artist Mladen Stilinovic made his iconic photography series entitled *Artist at Work*, in which Stilinovic is pictured sleeping in his bed in eight different positions with his eyes open or closed. The performative immobility of these sleeping positions scrutinizes the ideology and politics of work.

Stilinovic makes an ironic criticism of the western artist's obsession with productivity and work. In his manifesto, *The Praise of Laziness*, written in 1998, he mocks artists' obsession with "production, promotion, gallery system, museum system, competition system (who is first), their preoccupation with objects," and praises the virtues of "staring at nothing, non-activity, dumb time".<sup>2</sup>

*The Viewers* stare back at the pervasive predicament of our neo-liberal times and its infatuation with round the clock activity and the depletion of resources this condition imposes on us and on the Earth.



Grønland Torg, June 2019

But maybe *The Viewers* see something else that prompts their stillness. Maybe their refusal to move or act is connected to a deeper understanding of our present historical and political predicament. Maybe their stillness constitutes a suspensive response, proposing other modes of re-thinking action during pressing political times.

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Mladen Stilinovic, "The Praise Of Laziness", *Moscow Art Magazine* nr. 22, 1998.

In 1992, a curious series of still-acts were performed by several choreographers gathered for a month-long choreographic laboratory at Cité Universitaire in Paris, as noted by dance theorist Andre Lepecki.<sup>3</sup>

The well known Portuguese choreographer Vera Mantero refused to move during one live event stating that “the political events in the world were such that she could not dance.

Stillness as political action. Acting still. Stillness as an act of resilience.

What if *The Viewers* are standing still in order to see better. To keep an eye on things. And by paying close attention they make us more attentive.

They look down from the North on how desperate and underprivileged people running away from wars and famine are blocked from reaching our continent in safety. On how our dismantled borders are reappearing in ever greater numbers. On how nationalist melancholia has again become the spectre haunting Europe. On how we divide ourselves more and more into a few rich and many poor. On how public space is increasingly instrumentalised by undemocratic private forces.

In 2014, Yves Citton wrote his book entitled *The Ecology of Attention*. He analyses the politics of attention from the point of view of today’s pervasive economy of attention. Citton argues that attention must be understood as transindividual: neither individual nor collective but manifest at the point where both the individual and the collective are constituted. Attention, like affect or desire, is a point where the most intimate individuation intersects with collective conditions and relations. By shaping and designing attention, we construct and transform the way we care and pay attention to one another collectively. “An attention ecology,” Citton argues, “can create the conditions for new collective intelligence.”<sup>4</sup>

Today public space must be addressed under new conditions of pressure exerted by a neo-liberal world view.

*The Viewers* keep looking and standing. But for how long will they be able to do so? The temporality of the public confronts the temporality of the private.

*The Viewers’* gaze also becomes an economic gaze.

Under today’s increasingly precarious living conditions one should affirm new forms of solidarity. With and for the commons. With and for the people standing on the streets all over the world holding the powers that be to account.

*The Viewers* are quiet. This quiet immobility stays with us. Their muted presence produces a performative suspension of what may follow.

Will they start shouting? Will they simply remain? Will they start marching? Will they be joined by others? Will they make demands? How long will they stand there? And why?

<sup>3</sup> Andre Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Read, *The New Inquiry*, 18 December 2014.

