

Makeshift communities of practice

Notes on *Sitting with the Body 24/7* by Heike Langsdorf and radical_hope

By Jeroen Peeters, February 2015.

In February 2015 I clipped a newspaper article about a giant ball pool, installed during two weeks in a bright gallery space in West London by the design office Pearlfisher. The image shows a circle of eleven adults partly submerged in what appear to be 81.000 white, small plastic balls; all of them are cheering as they keep their bodies afloat, reminisce their childhood, or enjoy the oblique approach to that day's meeting. A blogger commented after visiting: "I felt supremely calm after exiting the pool, which has so far been used by people of all ages and for several business meetings. I can definitely see how it would aid creativity, it's a bit like being in a vacuum, with no distractions just your own thoughts and sense of space." All the talk is about creativity, multi-sensorial experience, reconnecting with childhood – yet this 'experiment' was also a stunt by a creative agency, the whole environment a billboard of sorts, fully embedded in today's experience economy. Our society seems to crave such spaces of relaxation that provide alternatives to demanding work schedules and the stress they entail. Yet, what kind of alternatives do we want? Can we have a say ourselves in these experiments and the ways in which they are fashioned?

Around the same time, under the umbrella radical_hope the dancer and artist Heike Langsdorf and a group of collaborators set up the project *Sitting with the body 24/7* at the Monnaie Centre in Brussels. This "retreat in public space" happened in the framework of Kaaitheater's Burning Ice festival, placing its questions in relation to sustainable development: "Our lives are governed by an economy that never sleeps. What is the impact on our relationship with time, work and our body?" *Sitting with the body 24/7* created a space for practicing everyday activities that involve the body: sitting, lying, standing, walking, resting, making, dancing, speaking and seeing. All of it was organized according to a strict time schedule that allotted two hours to each practice from 6.30am until 11.30pm, observed by a timekeeper sitting solemnly in the space with an hourglass and a bell.

Installed in a shopping mall, with large windows giving to the street, the space was furnished with white moquette, pillows and blankets. Well-designed information panels at the window introduced the space of practice and its time schedule in four languages, but the space itself had a somewhat generic outlook, which made it hard to tell what precisely was going on there: a dance studio, a meditation centre, a gym, yoga classes, an art gallery? Perhaps all of it, but not the familiar practice of shopping... In the public space, amid advertisement panels, the public transport, shopping windows and the hustle and bustle of the city – how do we recognize practices in their specificity? How can we tell everyday practices apart from artistic practices outside the common institutional framings of art? Does the difference matter?

To meet the confusion, there was always a host outside on the sidewalk to engage in a conversation, explain the project to interested passers-by, or hand out brochures. "You are

invited to watch our activities or enter the space and delve into action yourself.” Some of the practitioners were collaborators of Langsdorf’s, others visitors who could join in for free, for a single session, during a whole day, or several times during the week. Some were experienced in certain corporeal practices and could deepen their embodied knowledge, others would explore the basics after being teased into the space by the project’s brochure or posters presenting the practices with an image, a drawn manual and the promise of a Chinese fortune cookie – take for instance ‘walking with the body’: “Getting many things out of the way and instead, following one thing.” Others would come inside and simply observe, yet others would stay outside and observe everything through a large window, discuss what they see or simply pass by and not bother. If the strict score of *Sitting with the body 24/7* organised the various practices in a precise and decisive manner concerning time and technicality, the project as a whole left leeway for choosing *if and how* one participated in it.

What did *Sitting with the body 24/7* produce as an experimental space of practice and as a work of art? The project sought to propose alternative approaches to time, work and our bodies, but what exactly is it the people participating in it were practicing?

Starting in the early morning with ‘sitting with the body’ and then followed by lying, standing and walking, each particular activity was introduced by a ‘teacher’ who would guide the practitioners through it during the two-hour session. The preparatory phase involved specific warm-up exercises, followed by half an hour of doing the practice according to a single task that created focus. Sitting, lying and standing were still, meditational practices that produced nearly sculptural imagery. They reminded me of the work of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark and her ‘rites without myths’, sessions in which she would prepare people’s bodies with objects in an imaginative practice that paired sculpture and therapy. Take ‘lying with the body’, in which someone would lie down on their back for half an hour, supported by blankets and cushions, the legs propped up with a pile of books, the eyes covered with a small sandbag, the open palms held to the ground by stones. Or ‘standing with the body’, which creates a still image, but arouses in the practitioner also an active negotiation with gravity and an attention for small impulses and patterns in the body. ‘Speaking with the body’ and ‘seeing with the body’ built on similar principles of physical training, perceptual focus and corporeal self-observation.

Although this way of working is familiar to dancers, practices and the ‘techniques of the body’ remain difficult to share and talk about. The embodied knowledge of training and deepening a particular practice over many years cannot be compressed into an image or into language – what could a temporary practice space of one week offer in this respect? Or in the case of everyday practices such as walking, speaking or seeing – what exactly is the ‘expertise’ one could develop and perhaps transmit? Heike Langsdorf had asked all her collaborators to bring three books that mattered to them, which constituted a small and heterogeneous library with reflections on practice. In between sessions, reading and informal conversations accompanied the physical practices. Every evening *Sitting with the body 24/7*

closed the day with an open conversation with guests to discuss a particular (artistic) practice, starting from the question: “What is the resonance of a dedicated practice on an individual and on a group of people?” These corporeal practices afford sustained attention and give a sense of the body as an internal technology one can own and develop. Repeated over a long period of time they become an ingrained skill and a craft that facilitates choice and freedom.

‘Walking with the body’ left the solemn atmosphere of the gallery and its ‘living sculptures’ behind, precisely because it was close to the walking bodies of passers-by, spectators or anyone entering the space. The practice itself led the gaze upon oneself and upon everyone else, in an embodied contemplation of what the anthropologist Marcel Mauss coined ‘techniques of the body’ in the 1930s, those corporeal attitudes learnt over a long period of time in which physical and social elements intertwine to produce individual traits, and thus as many different ways of ‘walking with the body’ as there are bodies. In *Sitting with the body 24/7*, walking directed the gaze quite literally outward, through the window and towards the city and its urban practices.

How can we tell everyday practices apart from artistic practices outside the common institutional framings of art? Does the difference matter? After 1pm *Sitting with the body 24/7* hosted a silent lunch, followed by a space of rest where people could take a nap, bring their knitwork or read the newspaper. It ended every day at 3pm with ‘making with the body’, the construction of a mandala, a symmetrical pattern with all the objects in the space. After a hesitant start and the careful placement of objects, the whole space would mostly be crammed after five minutes – how to spend the remaining 25 minutes? The subtle adjustments and negotiations through doing that followed were always different and always wonderfully poetic, often with people placing themselves as objects in the mandala, handling themselves as living stuff amid the stuff. People forgot about the technicality of craft and corporeal techniques, yet their attention remained focussed in caring for this makeshift community of practice.

I found these moments always liberating, also for the reflection on practice they offered. They came close to what the sociologist Etienne Wenger terms ‘communities of practice’, in which a group of people with specific competences, both varied and overlapping, cooperate to achieve a certain goal. “A shared practice connects participants to each other in ways that are diverse and complex. The resulting relations reflect the full complexity of doing things together. They are not easily reducible to a single principle such as power, pleasure, competition, collaboration, desire, economic relations, utilitarian arrangements, or information processing.” The group is concrete, its goal can change during the process, which is negotiated through actions (rather than discussion) that create a ground for informal exchange and a shared learning process. “Practice resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do.”

The concrete, makeshift quality of constructing the mandala provides a lens to look at the other practices, but also at *Sitting with the body 24/7* as a community of practice that

precedes the week it opened up to the city, and that continues to exist afterwards – inevitably in a transformed and expanded form. The group of collaborators that set up *Sitting with the body 24/7* was a motley crowd indeed. Heike Langsdorf and the core group of practitioners have hybrid careers and practices that they brought to the project. Many people offered advice or support, or worked as volunteers to take care of the space and keep it running 24/7 – a glance at the credits of the project suffices to realize it challenges the usual economy of artistic production in the subsidised field.

It seems to me that it is perhaps not so much in the rituals of learning processes and ingraining skill but in the *experiments* with collaboration that today's performing arts hold a promise for society. The essayist and dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven never tired of pointing out the importance of “slow, sustained practices” in the performing arts for building social networks: “The processes that lead to stage activities are almost always the result of a *collective* practice with a *limited* group of people: designing and performing the work are closely connected; there is direct personal communication between everyone involved in the project; everyone can more or less create an idea of the work as a whole, and in that way retain a connection with it.”

Sitting with the body 24/7 can hardly be called a piece, yet it doesn't come as a surprise to me that most of Heike Langsdorf's collaborators have a history in the performing arts. What they bring along is an appetite for experimenting with ways of spending time and organizing work, and especially with models of collaboration. How to own your life, work and practice as an artist or researcher *and* do this in a relational context? Explicitly framed as a ‘retreat in public space’, *Sitting with the body 24/7* brought up questions of practice and collaboration in relation to citizenship.

The makeshift community of practice constructing a mandala together also offers a glance into the diversity of visitors participating in the project. Even though active participation in the physical practices was met by many visitors and passers-by with some inconvenience at first, inhibitions were diminishing in the course of the week. This growing involvement made abundantly clear that many people in a city like Brussels are constantly looking for meaningful ways to spend their days (or part of it): commuters, functionaries and business men, unemployed people and volunteers, artists and activists, bloggers and photographers, teenagers and homeless,... What binds them in *Sitting with the body 24/7* is a mutual engagement in a ‘disinterested’ activity outside of daily routines. They use an artistic space of practice as an opportunity to negotiate the freedom to spend their lives, time and labour in ways alternative to the productivity of capitalism that exerts pressure on the welfare state as we know it. The sustainability and *Zukunftsfähigkeit* of these makeshift communities of practice might reside in developing skills of collaboration and a repertoire of “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts” that enables them to negotiate meaning and choose the kind of cooperation they want in today's world.

Once more: How can we tell everyday practices apart from artistic practices outside the common institutional framings of art? Does the difference matter? Every day at 5pm *Sitting with the body 24/7* experienced its performative peak with ‘dancing with the body’, half an hour of continuous shaking on a live soundtrack (by Philippe Chatelain). At the time of rush hour, the practice drew a lot of attention from passers-by and elicited a mixture of rejection and fascination. People shaking with their heads covered and dressed in loose patchwork dresses made of silk scarves – this appears to be both a familiar (‘Ah, this is dance!’) and a profoundly foreign image that exceeds the quotidian imagination.

While a group of people was dancing inside the space, another crowd gathered outside at the large window, as a mirror group pondering the image and the practice, watching and discussing. It struck me how people were using their smartphones in various ways: passers-by staring at the tiny screen shuffling past with a slow, stooped gait, seemingly unaware of how the device affects their physicality; others taking pictures as if shielding off the unfamiliar, then filming to hold on to the uncanny fascination a little longer, or why not, making a selfie (‘I was there!’). Most interesting were small groups of teenagers making little documentaries (which they just act out, and perhaps post on the Internet, perhaps not) in which they comment upon things, experimenting with these new technologies, with a sense of self, with ways of behaving in public space – in the streets and in the cloud. They were most deliberately acting like a community of practice, negotiating their freedom and defining their citizenship, and this, crucially, in relation to an artistic project and to other urban practices.

In such moments, *Sitting with the body 24/7* created a complex dynamics in unexpected ways, in which leaving leeway for choosing *if and how* one participated in it suddenly took on a larger scope than the naive proselytism of so much participatory art. *Sitting with the body 24/7* did not only install a space of practice, nor simply frame other urban practices, at best it provoked a situation of ‘artistic citizenship’ in makeshift communities of practice.