

From Passivity to Potentiality: The *Communitas* of Stillness

- [Emma Cocker](#)
- [Volume 12](#)
- [Issue 1](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- ['still'](#)

Drawing on my recent experience of working in collaboration with the artist-led project, Open City, I want to explore the potential of an active and resistant - rather than passive and acquiescent – form of stillness that can be activated strategically within a performance-based practice. The article examines how stillness and other forms of non-productive or non-teleological activity might contribute towards the production of a radically dissenting – yet affirmative – model of contemporary subjectivity. It will investigate how the performance of stillness within an artistic practice could offer a pragmatic model through which to approach certain philosophical concepts in relation to the construction of subjectivity, by proposing a practical application of the various ideas explored therein. Stillness is often presented as antithetical to the velocity, mobility, speed and supposed freedom proposed by new technologies and the various accelerated modes by which we are encouraged to engage with the world. In one sense, stillness and slowness have been deemed outmoded or anachronistic forms of temporality, as fastness and efficiency have become the privileged terms. Alternatively, stillness has been reclaimed as part of a resistant – or at least reactive – “counter-culture” for challenging the enforced and increased pace at which we are required to perform. The intent, however, is not to focus on the transcendent possibilities – or even nostalgic dimension – of stillness, where it could be seen as a form of escape from the accelerated temporalities of contemporary capitalism, a move towards a slower, more spiritual or meditative existence by the removal of or self-imposed isolation from contemporary societal pressures. Instead, this article attempts to explore the potential within those forms of stillness specifically produced in and by contemporary capitalism, by reflecting on how they might be (re)inhabited – or appropriated through an artistic practice – as sites of critical action.

The article will suggest ways in which habitually resented, oppressive or otherwise tedious forms of stillness, inaction or immobility can be *turned* into active or resistant strategies for producing the self differently to dominant ideological expectations or pressures. With reference to selected theoretical ideas primarily within the writing of Gilles Deleuze – especially in relation to Spinoza's *Ethics* – I want to explore how the collective performance of stillness in the public realm produces an affect that both reveals and disrupts habitual patterns of behaviour. Stillness presents a break or pause in the flow of events, illuminating temporal gaps and fissures in which alternative or unexpected possibilities – for life – might be encountered and encouraged. The act of collective stillness can be understood as a mode of playful resistance to, or refusal of, societal

norms, a wilful and collaborative attempt to break or rupture habitual flows. However, collective stillness also has the capacity to exceed or move beyond resistance by producing germinal conditions for a nascent community of experience no longer bound by existing protocol; a model of “communitas” emerging from the shared act of being still. The focus then, is to reflect on how the gesture of stillness performed within the context of an artistic practice – such as that of *Open City* – might offer an exemplar for the production of an affirmative form of subjectivity, by arguing how the *practice* of stillness paradoxically has the potential for increasing an individual's capacity to act.

Open City is an investigation-led artistic project – led by Andrew Brown and Katie Doubleday – that explores how public space is conceptualised and organised by interrogating the ways in which our daily actions and behaviours are conditioned and controlled. Their research activity involves inviting, instructing or working with members of the public to create discreet interventions and performances, which put into question or destabilise habitual patterns or conventions of public behaviour, through the use of invitations, propositions, site-specific actions and performative events. The practical and theoretical research phase of the *Open City* project was initiated in 2006 in collaboration with artist/performer Simone Kenyon. During this phase of research *Open City* worked with teachers of the Alexander Technique deconstructing the mechanics of walking, and observed patterns of group behaviour and ‘everyday’ movements in public spaces. This speculative phase of research was expanded upon through a pilot project where the artists worked with members of the public, inviting them to attempt to get lost in the city, to consider codes of conduct through observation and mimicry, to explore behavioural patterns in the public realm as a form of choreography, and to approach the spaces of the city as an amphitheatre or stage upon which to perform. This culminated in a series of public performances and propositional/instructive works as part of the *nottdance* festival in Nottingham (2007) where audiences were invited to participate in choreographed events, creating a number of fleeting and partially visible performances throughout the city. Members of the public were issued specific time-based invitations for collective and individual actions such as ‘Day or night – take a walk in which you notice and deliberately avoid CCTV cameras’ or ‘On the high street during rush hour ... suddenly and without warning, stop and remain still for five minutes ... then carry on walking as before.’



Image 1: Open City, documentation of publicly-sited postcards.

As part of this phase of activity, I was invited by *Open City* to produce a piece of writing in response to their work – to be serialised over a number of publicly distributed postcards – which would attempt to critically contextualise the various issues and concerns emerging from the investigation-led research that the project had been developing in the public realm. The postcards included an instruction written by *Open City* on one side, and my serialised text on the other. I have since worked more collaboratively with *Open City* on new research investigating how the different temporalities within the public realm might be harnessed or activated creatively; how movement and mobility affect the way in which place and locality are encountered or understood. My involvement with the project has specifically been in exploring the use of text-based elements, instructions and propositions and has included further publicly-sited postcard texts and the development of sound-based works using iPod technology to create synchronised actions. In 2008, I successfully secured Arts Council of England funding for a practice-based research trip to Japan with *Open City* in which we initiated our specific investigations around stillness, slowness, obstruction, and blockage. During this phase of research we became interested in how speed and slowness can be utilised within a performance practice to create points of anchor and location within the urban environment, or in order to affect a psychological shift in the way that space is encountered and understood.



Image 2: Open City, research investigations, Japan, 2008.

On one level, *Open City* can be located within a tradition of publicly-sited performance practices. This genealogy of politically – and more often playfully – resistant actions, interventions and models of spatial occupation or navigation can be traced back to the ludic practice of Surrealist *errance* or aimless wandering into and through the Situationists' deployment of the *dérive* and conceptualisation of "psychogeography" during the 1950s and 60s. In its focus on collective action and inhabitation of the everyday as a site of practice, *Open City* is also part of a trajectory of artistic activity – epitomised perhaps by Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* – intent on blurring the line between art and life, or in drawing attention to those aspects of reality marginalised by dominant discourses and ideologies. Performed as part of an artistic practice, non-habitual or even habitually discouraged actions such as aimless wandering, standing still, even the (non)event of 'doing nothing' operate as subtle methods through which to protest against increasingly legislated conditions of existence, by proposing alternative modes of behaviour or suggesting flexibility therein. Artistic practice can be seen as a site of investigation for questioning and dismantling the dominant order – or "major" language – through acts of minor rebellion that – whilst predominantly impotent or ineffective – might still remind us that we have some agency and do not always need to wholly and passively acquiesce. Life itself becomes the material for a work of art, and it is through such an encounter that we might be encouraged to conceive other possibilities *for* life. Through art, life is rendered plastic and capable of being actively shaped or made into something different to how it might habitually be.

However the notion of 'life as a work of art' is not exclusive to artistic practice. Various theorists and philosophers – including Nietzsche, Foucault, Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari – have advocated the necessity of viewing life as a kind of project or mode of invention, suggesting ways in which one's "style of life" or way of existing might be produced or constructed differently. They urge us to consider how we might actively and consciously attend to the full possibilities of life in order to become *more human*, by increasing our "affective capacity," that is, our capacity to affect and be affected in affirming or "augmentative terms" (Deleuze, *Spinoza and Us* 124). In one sense, Spinoza's *Ethics* offers a pragmatic model – or guide to living – through which to attempt to increase one's potential capacity for *being*, by maximising the possibility of augmentative experiences or joyful encounters. Here, Spinoza formulates a plan or model through which one might attempt to move from the "inadequate" realm of signs and effects – the first order of knowledge in which the body is simply subject to external forces and random encounters of which it remains ignorant – towards a second order of knowledge. Here, the individual body is able to construct concepts of causes or "common notions" with other "bodies in agreement." The "common notions" of the second order are produced at the point where the individual is able to rise above the condition of simply experiencing effects and signs in order to form agreements or joyful encounters with other bodies. These harmonious synchronicities with other bodies harness life-affirming affects whilst repelling those that threaten to absorb or deplete power. It is only through the construction of "concepts" – an understanding of causality – that it is possible to move from the realm of inadequate ideas towards the production of "adequate ideas from which true actions ensue" (Deleuze, *Spinoza and the Three Ethics* 143). According to Spinoza's *Ethics*, the challenge is to attempt to move from a state in which existence is passively experienced – or suffered blindly – as a series of effects upon the body, towards understanding – and working harmoniously with – the causes themselves.

In his reading of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Gilles Deleuze suggests that this shift occurs through consciously selecting those affects that offer the possibilities of augmentation (an increase in power through joy) rather than diminution (the decrease of power through sadness). Whilst Spinoza appears to denounce affects as simply inadequate ideas that should be avoided, Deleuze argues that there are certain life-affirming or joyful affects that can be seen as the "dark precursors" of the notions (*The Three Ethics* 144). According to Deleuze, whilst such "signs of augmentation remain passions and the ideas that they presuppose remain inadequate," they alone have the capacity to enable the individual to increase in power, for the "selection" of affect is in itself the "condition of leaving the first kind of knowledge, and for attaining the concept" (*The Three Ethics* 144). For Deleuze-Spinoza, the production of subjectivity is a form of endeavour or "passional struggle," whereby the individual attempts to increase his or her capacity for turning affects or signs into common notions or concepts (*The Three Ethics* 145). Deleuze argues that the "common notions are an Art, the art of *Ethics* itself: organising good encounters, composing actual relations, forming powers, experimenting" (*Spinoza and Us* 119). This is then a life-long project or *practice* – the

making of life into a work of art – focused on increasing one’s potential to affect and be affected by signs that increase power, whilst simultaneously reducing or minimising one’s threshold of affectivity towards those which diminish or reduce it.

I am interested in the role that the artist or artist collective could have in the production of this Spinozist model of subjectivity; how they might function as an intermediary or catalyst, creating conditions or events in which augmentative affects – such as those made possible through a dynamic or active form of stillness – are increased and their energies harnessed. Here perhaps, the affective potential of an art practice is in itself the “dark precursor” of common notions, drawing together bodies in agreement by calling into being an audience or community of experience. On one level, the artist performs an analogous role to Spinoza’s “scholia” – the intermittent sequence of polemical notations “inserted into the demonstrative chain” of propositions – within the *Ethics*, which according to Deleuze:

Operate in the shadows, trying to distinguish between what prevents us from reaching our common notions and what, on the contrary, allows us to do so, what diminishes and what augments our power, the sad signs of our servitude and the joyous signs of our liberations (*The Three Ethics* 146).

Certainly the project, *Open City*, attempts to draw attention to the habitually endured –or suffered – signs and affects of contemporary experience; striving to remedy the sad affects of capitalism through the production of playful, disruptive or even joyful interventions, events and encounters between bodies in agreement. The disempowering experience or affect of being controlled – blocked, stopped or restricted – by societal or moral codes and civic laws, is replaced by a minor logic of ambiguous, arbitrary and optional rules. Such rules foreground experimentation and request an ethical rather than obedient engagement that in turn serves to liberate the individual from habitual passivity.

Open City attempts to reveal – and then resist or refuse – the hidden rules that determine how to operate or perform within contemporary capitalism, the coded orders on how to behave, move and interact. It exposes such insidious legislation as constructs whose logic has been put in place or brought into effect over time, and which in turn might be revoked, dislocated or challenged. For *Open City*, the performance of stillness can be used as a gesture through which to break from or rupture the orchestrated and controlled flow of capitalist behaviours and its sad affects.



Image 3: Open City, documentation of performance, Nottingham, 2008.

Random acts of stillness produce moments of friction within the smooth, regulated flows of contemporary capitalism; singularised or inconsistent glitches or jolts that call to attention its unnoticed rhythms and temporal speeds, by becoming its counter-point or by appropriating its “language” for “strange and minor uses” (Deleuze and Guattari 17). Dawdling or meandering reveals the fierceness of the city’s unspoken bylaws, whilst the societal pressure towards speed and efficiency is thwarted by moments of deliberate non-production, inaction and the act of doing nothing. In one example of collective action – at noon on a shopping street – around fifty pedestrians, suddenly and without warning, stop still in their tracks and remain like this for five minutes before resuming their daily activity. In another, a group of individuals draw to a standstill and slowly sway from side to side; their stillness becomes a device for affecting a block or obstacle that limits or modifies others’ behaviour, creating an infinitely imaginable ricochet of further breaks and amendments to routine journeys and directional flows.

Open City often mimics or misuses familiar behavioural patterns witnessed in the public realm, inhabiting their language or codes in a way that playfully transforms their use or proposes elasticity or flexibility therein. Habitual or routine actions are isolated and disinvested of their function or purpose, or become repeated until all sense of teleological imperative is wholly evacuated or rendered absurd. For example, a lone person stops still and holds their hand out to check for rain. Over and over, the same action is repeated but by different individuals; the authenticity of the original gesture shattered and separated from any causal motivation by the reverberations of its uncanny echo. Such performed actions remove or

distance the response or reaction from its originary stimulus or excitation, creating an affective gap between – a no longer known or present – cause and its effect. This however, is not to return action back to realm of Spinoza's first order of knowledge – where the body only experiences effects and remains ignorant of their cause – but rather an attempt to create a gap or space of "hesitancy" in which a form of creativity might emerge. Within the act of stillness, habitually imperceptible rhythms and speeds become visible. By being still it is possible to witness or attend to the presence of different or heterogeneous temporal "refrains" or durations operating beneath and within the surface appearance of capitalism's homogeneous flow.

Open City attempts to recuperate the creative potential within those moments of stillness generated through the accelerated technologies of contemporary capitalism: the situational *ennui* endured whilst waiting or queuing; the moments of collective and synchronised impasse controlled by technologies such as traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, and even – though perhaps more abstractly – the nebulous experience of paralysis and impotency induced by fear, anxiety and uncertainty. Performances attempt to neutralise these various diminutive affects by re-inhabiting or re-framing them; 'turning' their stillness towards a form of memorial, protest or social gathering, or alternatively rendering it seemingly empty, unreadable or absurd. This emptiness can also be understood as a form of disinterestedness that refuses to react to immediate stimulus – or lack of – and rather remains open to other possibilities of existence or inhabitation. Stillness is curiously equivocal, an "ambiguous or fluctuating sign" that has the capacity to "affect us with joy and sadness at the same time" (Deleuze *The Three Ethics* 140). The external appearance of stillness is ultimately blank, its "event" able to affect a "vectorial passage" of contradictory directions, towards an "increase or decrease, growth or decline, joy or sadness" (Deleuze, *The Three Ethics* 140). *Open City* attempts to transform the – potentially – diminutive affects of stillness into "augmentative powers" by occupying the stillness of contemporary capitalism as a disguise or camouflage for producing invisible performances that hijack a familiar language in order to misuse its terms.

More recently *Open City* have adapted or occupied the moments of stillness made possible or enabled by everyday technologies: the inconsistent rhythm patterns of stopping, pausing or circling about on the spot exhibited by someone absorbed in a mobile-phone call, text messaging or changing a track on their MP3 player. Here, certain technologies allow, legitimate or even give permission for the disruption of the flow of movement within the city, or are used as a device through which to explore and exploit the potential of collective synchronised action through the use of recorded instructions.



Image 4: Open City, public performance from the Dislocate festival (Yokohama, Japan, 2008).

The alienating and atomising affects of such personal technologies – which are habitually used and isolate the individual from their immediate surroundings and from others around them – are transformed into tools for producing collective action. In one sense, *Open City's* performances operate as a form of “minor art” as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, where a major language – the dominant order of capitalism and control – is neutralised or deterritorialised before being “appropriated for strange and minor uses” (17). For Deleuze and Guattari a minor practice is always political and collective, signalling the “movement from the individual to a ‘collective multiplicity’” where there is no longer an individual subject as such but “only collective assemblages of enunciation”(18). The minor always operates within the terms of the major but functions as a destabilising agent where it attempts – according to Simon O’Sullivan – to “stammer and stutter the commodity form, disassembling those already existing forms of capital and indeed moving beyond the latter’s very logic” (73). However, as with all acts of deterritorialisation there is always the potential that they will in turn become reterritorialised; assimilated or absorbed back into the language of the “major”. This can be seen, for example, in the way that the proposed radical potential of the flash-mob phenomenon has been swiftly recuperated through the language of the corporate publicity campaigns of high-profile companies – specifically telecommunication multi-nationals - for whom the terms ‘community’ and ‘collectivity’ are developed as Unique Selling Points for further capitalist gain.

By contrast, the intent of *Open City* is to create an event that operates not only as a visible rupture, but which also has the capacity to transform or

radicalise the subjectivities of those involved beyond the duration of the event itself. *Open City* encourage the movement from the individual to a “collective multiplicity,” through performances that produce synchronised action where individuals become temporally united by a rule or instruction that they are collectively adhering to. Publicly distributed postcards have been used to invite or instruct as-yet-unknown publics to participate in collective action, setting the terms for the possibility of imagined or future assemblies. Or more recently, recorded spoken word instructions listened to using MP3 player technology have been used to harmonise the speeds, stillness and slowness of individual bodies to produce the possibility of a new collective rhythm or “refrain” (Guattari, *Subjectivities*). For example, within the Dislocate festival (Yokohama, Japan, 2008) a group of individuals were led on a guided walk in which they engaged with a series of spoken instructions listened to using MP3 player technology. The instructions invited a number of discreet performances culminating in a collective moment of stillness that was at once a public spectacle and a space of self-contained or private reflection.



Image 5: Open City, public performance from the Dislocate festival (Yokohama, Japan, 2008).

Once still, the individuals listened to a further spoken text which interrogated how the act of ‘being still’ might shift in *meaning* moving from or between different positions. For example, stillness can be experienced as a controlling or restrictive mode of enforced waiting, as an act of resistant refusal or protest, or alternatively as a model of quiet contemplation or idle daydreaming.

For Spinoza, a body is defined by its speeds and slowness – by the relationship between motion and rest – and by its capacity to affect and be affected. In attempting to synchronise the speeds and affectivity of individuals through group action, *Open City* create the conditions for the production of Spinoza's "common notions" – or second kind of knowledge – through the organisation of a collective or shared understanding of causality by bodies in agreement. Acts of collective stillness also function in an analogous manner to the transitional or liminal phase within ritual performance by producing the possibility of "communitas," the transient experience of togetherness or even of collective subjectivity. In *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play*, anthropologist Victor Turner identifies a form of "existential or spontaneous communitas" – an acute experience of community – experienced by individuals immersed in the "no longer/not yet" liminal space of a given ritualistic process, in which "the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance" (44). Stillness is presented as pure disinterestedness, a non-teleological event enabling nothing but the possibility of a community of experience to come into being.

Within *Open City* then, the gesture of stillness recurs as a device or "event-encounter" for simultaneously producing a break or hiatus in an already existing formulation of experience, at the same time as creating a gap or space of possibility in which to imagine or affirm an alternative mode of being. Referring to the Deleuzian notion of encounter, O'Sullivan reflects on the dual presence of rupture and affirmation within the moment of encounter itself whereby "our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted" (Sullivan, xxiv). He argues that the encounter:

Operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities. It produces a cut, a crack. However ... the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently (Sullivan, xxv).

Open City attempts to create the conditions for these dual possibilities – of rupture and affirmation – through the production of joyful encounters between bodies within the event of performed stillness. Stillness operates as a double gesture where it creates a stop or block – a break with the already existing or with the events of the past – and also a moment of pause, the liminal space of projection; a future-oriented or preparatory zone of pure potentiality. Stillness thus offers the simultaneous possibility of termination and of a new beginning, within which it becomes possible to move from a paradigm of resistance – to the present conditions of existence – towards one of augmentative refusal or proposal that invites reflection on a still future-possible way of life. Poised at a point of anticipation or as a prophetic mode of waiting, stillness offers the promise of as-yet-undecided possibilities where options for future action or existence remain momentarily open, not yet known. Collective stillness thus always has a quality of "futurity" by creating the transitional conditions of *communitas* or the possibility of a community emerging

outside or beyond the temporal frame of capitalism: a community that is *still in waiting*.

References

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. "What Is a Minor Literature." *Kafka toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Spinoza and the Three 'Ethics'." *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. D. W. Smith and M. A. Greco. London: Verso, 1998.

———. "Life as a Work of Art." *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. New York: Columbia U P, 1995.

———. "Spinoza and Us." *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Trans. R. Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988.

Guattari, Felix. "Subjectivities: For Better and for Worse." *The Guattari Reader*. Ed. G. Genosko. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996.

Foucault, Michel. "An Aesthetics of Existence." *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*. Ed. L. Kritzman. London: Routledge, 1990.

O'Sullivan, Simon. *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Spinoza, Benedict. *Ethics*. Trans. A. Boyle. London: Everyman, 1989.

Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.