

Embodied Research: On the Question of Subjective Time

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The ambience of the apartment space in which we conducted our practice- the pacing of the flatmates across the wooden floorboards, the dripping of water in the heater, the methodical loading of the dishes and then the whirring of the washing machine, the opening and closing of doors throughout the old building- charged the space with myriad times. While initially obtrusive, this experience of time in relation to the practice-space foregrounded the affordances of subjective time in embodied research. During performance practice, we often negotiate the participants' subjective sense of time through objective time for the sake of repeatability. For example, we found that the subjective experience of twenty objective minutes is relatively reliable for the purpose of our practice. Within such timeframe, discourse on and experimentation in the phenomena of subjective time could reveal new technique of research in embodiment, both on the level of everyday life and on the level of specialized performance technique.

We proposed an intentionally broad research question, as to initiate a collaborative journey along a specific pathway of embodied technique: How do "internal time" and "external time" interact and relate? And then the requisite: What are some substrata of subjective time? In other words, what aspects of embodiment and of the space informed different experiences of time.

We pondered how various physiological traits inform an experience of "internal", or embodied, time: bone structure, muscle tonality, height, relative length and weight of body parts, heart rate, cerebrospinal fluid biorhythm, the duration of certain physical actions such as the relative full bending of a joint or extension of a ligament. How do the physiological traits manifest subjective time? Maybe in the duration between two actions, or in the quality of the action itself. The body then is a compound of various durations and tempo, which themselves are in constant flux- shifting in relation to external reality, psychology and so on. How do they harmonize? Which experience of time becomes "internally" predominant?

Among the surfacing physiological traits, the breath stood out; a physiological element which can be manipulated and is often audibly exteriorized. The manipulation of the breath allows for the manipulation of embodied experiences, specifically of time in this context. Externally, the breath seemed to indicate a "time-signature" independent from that of the movement

improvisation; notable as the tendency in dance practice is to seek a synchronization between breath and movement.

When discussing “external” time, we noticed how phenomenologically significant the ambience, or sound, of the space is in informing temporality. Working with our eyes closed, the time quality of the space became hardly distinguishable from its material reality; the question driving the movement became ‘when I am’ more so than ‘where I am’. Blurring of the qualities of material space made potent certain visualization practices; for example, Michael Chekhov’s ‘atmosphere’ exercises which visualize the space as vibrantly charged with emotional and symbolic-material qualities. The affective experience of “external” time as “temporal space” can be attributed to additional elements, such as temperature and lighting.

When working with music, we questioned how it informed different experience of time on different layers. For example, the tempo of the music and the quality or mood, perhaps attributed to its genre, informed distinct experience of time that occasionally intermingled. Similarly, the temporality of the music manifested a sense of space that remained distinct from the temporality and quality of the practice space, and here the two felt essentially codependent.

The interplay and conflict betwixt several experiences of time- of the practice space through its ambience and visualized qualities, of the music through its tempo and mood, of embodiment through physiological durations (breath in particular)- informed an exciting sense of ‘playing’. Take for example the relation between embodied time through movement duration, and the temporal quality of the practice space. Committing to the quality of the space through movement allowed a sensation of focus and availability, the space becoming a partner to relate to and rely on. Much like the sensation of “riding” the beat of the music. Externally, the body foregrounded the temporality of the space, particularly in moments of quiet, and deceleration or suspension of movement.

Time becomes a perspective through which embodiment- here explored primarily through dance practice- is experienced, and through which it negotiates with material reality. In further research, we can ask: How does embodied research of specific substrata reveal relatively reliable affordances of embodiment? How can the subjective experience of time be reliably communicated to a spectator? How can subjective time be utilized as an area of “indirect” performance technique? How will the research in embodied time be affected by other types of practice, other bodies, and other spaces?