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Photo: Danspace Project

Sussing Out (and Settling Into) Slowness

by Emma Cohen

Slowness was a conversation between dance-artist [Okwui Okpokwasili](#), scholar Saidiya Hartman, multimedia-artist Simone Leigh, and Tina Campt, a Black feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art. Part of this conversation was recorded via Zoom and posted on Danspace Project's website for 24 hours on April 24th. What follows is a response to and reflection on this rich and wide-ranging conversation.

Time has become distended of late. Days swell and drag—mine come to a standstill around 3:30 without fail. And yet it's suddenly May. Or, no, not May yet. Almost. It's easy to lose track. I find that if I try to write in my journal about the (non)events of the previous day, my memory comes up completely blank. It's tricky differentiating one moment from the next when everything happens against the same backdrop. Anyone who's stayed in a hospital for a while could tell you that.

My instinct when thinking about slowness is to start treading a familiar cognitive path: [speed](#) is the pace of capitalist [time](#), the pace of assembly lines and optimized search engines. Slowness is the glitch, the breakdown of relentless progress. It's fundamentally anti-capitalist and quite possibly the Pace Of This Moment.

Parts of this train of thought might be valuable. It feels true that the pandemic is highlighting just how unsustainable the relentless momentum of capitalism really is. At least in my circles, it is the resources coming out of socialist and anarchist traditions—[mutual aid networks](#), [peer-to-peer wealth distribution](#), mental and physical [health practitioners](#) offering their services at sliding scale or for barter—that are successfully providing much-needed relief and support. Based on principles of [consensus](#) and collective decision-making, these alternative systems of resource-distribution are sometimes criticized for moving at too slow a pace...and yet, here in this simultaneously rapid and sluggish crisis, these systems fashioned in opposition to capitalism have managed to flourish.

The violence of capitalism is on full display. It's a system driven by profit to the exclusion of all else. We need to create another set of arrangements. The crisis is so severe not because people are sick but because capitalist medicine can't take care of us. - Saidiya

Hartman

Capital ... runs on consumption even when it's consuming itself. - Tina Campt

But, of course, it's not quite so simple. Speed might be emblematic of capitalism, but so is extreme slowness. Think of the pace of bureaucracy—how many of us have spent hours on hold with the unemployment office in the past few weeks? And slowness might be emblematic of this pandemic for some, but for many others, things are moving more quickly and urgently than ever before.

I want to be able to neatly declare that we ought to use this moment to embrace slowness in opposition to capitalist speed, but those categories are messier than they first appear. Capitalism can be sluggish, yes, and slowness can be dynamic....

Slowness is "not only a question of kinetics, but also of intensities, of generating an intensive field of microperceptions." - Tina Campt quoting André Lepecki's book, [Exhausting Dance](#)

Having resolved for the hundredth time to meditate daily, I find myself nearly overwhelmed by the speed with which anxious tension ricochets from my throat to my chest, stitching itself between my ribs. Who knew there was such energetic activity going on in my intestines?

So, it's not just about movement. It's about literally the intensification of all forms of perception down to this really tiny minute level. What happens if we actually mobilize slowness? What would happen if those folks like construction workers were to slow it down? How can we exploit that to slow down capital... and at the same time to be able to ramp it up for ourselves, to be able to perceive more, connect more? - Tina Campt

Last October, I performed, very slowly, in the woods. There weren't many people watching—mostly there were trees. For a while (maybe an hour? hours do pass quickly when moving slowly) I was mostly conscious of the quiet, of the micromovements of my limbs, a twinge in my calf. But eventually, I grew aware of the rushing of the nearby creek. Had it been so loud before? The trees, too, seemed to be taken up by a racket of subtle movement. There wasn't a storm—this was how they had always moved—but by the second or third hour of the evening, the landscape seemed endlessly agile.

Slowness harboring rapidity feels less like a paradox when I can conceive of slowing down as a change in reference as much as a change in pace. Maybe slowness can look like a shifting of attention. From muscles to energies, from buildings to plants.... Can lethargy and grief and death be invited into our everyday awareness instead of lingering on the margins? Can we fully turn towards and learn from all the work that disabled folks have already been doing to explore the experience of [crip time](#)? By recognizing that the [people most affected by this crisis](#) are those that were most marginalized to begin with, can this be an opportunity to truly center our attention on the experiences of people of color?

Artists, performers ... the people who have lost jobs, who don't know where income is coming in ... in a way they're also caretakers of a kind of condition, of a kind of space. - Okwui Okpokwasili

Yes, I like the idea that artists (maybe dancers in particular) can support and shepherd these shifts in attention. I hope that they (we) can maintain these modes of being beyond the duration of this immediate crisis—after all, there are plenty of ongoing crises lingering in the background of this more immediate one.

I'm wary of viewing times of rest and slowness as nothing more than breaks that will allow us to work harder later (even when that hard work is the work of social change and progress). I'm trying to stay with the idea that full-out slowness can be rigorous and intensely effortful, that dynamism and change can be happening *now*, even when things look slow.

Slowness is the modality of shirking and striking. - Saidiya Hartman

[Slowness](#), Danspace Project [PLATFORM 2020: Utterances from the Chorus](#), Zoom Recording, April 24.

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