

## Until there is Nothing left

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“On the right day the right song can last forever.”<sup>1</sup>

Critic Walter Pater’s dictum “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music”<sup>2</sup> presages the impact of sound on the visual. For Modern artists its logical conclusion was to be found in the ethereal realm of abstraction, producing, paradoxically, a hermetic visuality. But in our digital era, when instantaneous scopic regimes are ever-more pervasive, sound loosens its hold by ushering in a dimension of time.

The concern with the *time* of images, with their enduring temporal aspect, lies at the heart of João Onofre’s work, which incorporates video, installation, performance, photography and drawing. Sound and popular music play an essential role throughout his oeuvre by extending temporal perception and drawing explicit links between the space of the work and that of the audience. Accordingly, argues the artist, “my interest...resides in how to bring about time as the subject of the moving image through sound.”<sup>3</sup>

Screenwriter and film director Cameron Crowe maintains that he *hears* his movies before writing them. He is also known for playing music on his film sets to create a particular mood. Playing a punk rock track at full volume prior to a scene with Philip Seymour Hoffman leaves the late actor sitting with his head in his hands:

“I was playing the music that you’re listening to in the scene,’ I explained. Many faces were now looking at me, staring. ‘Yeah, I know,’ said Hoffman patiently. ‘I was already acting it.’”<sup>4</sup>

Crowe’s story stresses the performative function of music, its capacity to produce actions. His assertion suggests that sound is able to determine both tangible and intangible aspects of a visual medium: it tells a story, it locates the protagonists, and, most importantly, it creates the atmosphere, that most fleeting of *conditions*, according to philosopher Gernot Böhme:

“Atmospheres are totalities [that] imbue everything, they tinge the whole of the world [...] in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state [...] something between things and the perceiving subject.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cameron Crowe, “Almost Famous – Movie Fone: Cameron Crowe on ‘Almost Famous,’ ‘Say Anything...’ and Where He Keeps the Boom Box”, interview by Moviefone, 10 February 2011, in <http://www.theuncool.com/2011/02/11/cameron-talks-to-moviefone/>

<sup>2</sup> Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione”, in Adam Phillips, ed., *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> João Onofre, “You can’t entirely control fire... João Onofre, Laurence Crane and Andrew Renton in conversation” in *Tacet*, exh. cat. (London: Marlborough Contemporary Art, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Cameron Crowe, “Moviemaking, from the Soundtrack up”, in *LA Times*, 25 September 2005, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-sep-25-ca-crowe25-story.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Gernot Böhme, “The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres”, in *Ambiances: International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space*, 10 February 2013, <https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/315>.

Correspondingly, Onofre's installations and videos produce a set of conditions, which in turn give rise to particular spatio-temporal impressions. Far from intangible, such spaces are carefully arranged visual and sonic manifestations - "scripted spaces"<sup>6</sup> that do no less than to choreograph *feeling*.

The artist's apparent concern with the macabre appears to pervade the atmosphere of several works, but it ought not to be taken entirely at face value. The reference to death in certain titles may point to the linguistic appropriation of the title of a work of an influential peer such as Bruce Nauman who tuned a violin to the notes DEAD. Equally, the pop group Super Furry Animals released a track on the 1997 album *Radiator* with the title "Bass tuned to D.E.A.D.", a lament of lost love. Onofre's *Acousmatic arrangement inside an invisible square* (2013/2014) comprises 12 Koshi Windchimes of which 1 is tuned to the same notes, while *Untitled (bells tuned to D.E.A.D.)* (2017) is a system of call and response between bells located within earshot or one another on churches across the Portuguese city of Coimbra.

The work *Box sized DIE* (2007-2008) extends the mortal analogy by employing a Death Metal band to perform inside the soundproofed iron cube. It reprises aspects of Minimal artist Tony Smith's *DIE* (1962) who likened the monolithic sculpture's 6ft dimensions to a coffin. In this instance Onofre's inference is not simply linguistic but real, since the group must perform until the air runs out, a prosaic assertion that death be the end of *duration*.

The artist's allusion to confinement continues in *Untitled (N'en Finit Plus)* (2010-2011) which borrows the title from Petula Clark's French cover version of the American hit "Needles and Pins" (1963) and is performed *acapella* by a young girl standing at the bottom of a pit in a field under a starry sky. The hole signifies as a freshly dug grave, and extends the artist's concern with our mortal coil, also demonstrated by the photographic series *Every Gravedigger in Lisbon* (2006), a set of seven photographs which depict the eponymous individuals wearing sunglasses grouped by city district. Their professional competence, honed through repetition, allows them not to see the deceased or to partake in the grief of their passing. Familiarity or repeated exposure inures them to the emotion engendered by the act of interment. The sunglasses may refer to anonymity, or they may suggest that their wearers are "blind" to their task. The process of passing from one place to another grants an image to the irrepresentable, something that must be put in the place of the person no longer present, and which absorbs the feeling of loss. The poet Wallace Stevens posits that "reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor"<sup>7</sup>, since we are held by concepts inherent in language. Accordingly, death places us outside of language.

The presence of *place* is powerfully inflected in the artist's work. The often external locations of the videos cement his relationship with the city of Lisbon and the landscape of its environs. In *GHOST* (2009-2012) an island topped by a large palm tree floats down the river Tejo towards the sea. Although no specific soundtrack was composed for the work, the footage is accompanied by the sibilant of the vast 25<sup>th</sup> of April suspension bridge

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<sup>6</sup> Norman M. Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: a History of Special Effects*. New York: New Press, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, Milton J. Bates, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 195.

passed under by the isle; its great scale visually dominates the riverfront, but its resonance is immediately recognised by any inhabitant of Lisbon and visitor alike. In archaeoacoustic terms, the noise of the bridge is etched on the city as a signature, a sonic mirror.

The *double* provides a resonant motif in Onofre's work, and it surfaces in a number of different guises. In the musical tradition the cover version reprises tracks from earlier times, allowing them to resonate across the ages. Correspondingly, the sound installation *Untitled (cactuses)* (2011) presents two turntables that play dubplates of Jeff Buckley's (1994) and Nina Simone's (1966) covers of James Shelton's "Lilac Wine" (1950) in "phasing".

This type of sound composition, also entitled Phase Music, was inspired by Terry Riley's tape loops and developed by Minimalists such as Steve Reich.<sup>8</sup> Two or more instruments play identical sequences of notes at subtly different tempi, shifting gradually out of unison, moving from a slight echo to a distinct doubling of each note towards a complex ringing effect. This sonic resonance between two notes can be extended to the aggregated experience of Buckley's and Simone's tracks. The dissonance and ringing as the songs go in and out of phase form part of the attentive listening process, and are entirely intentional, while musical performances feature countless instances of unintended slippages or by-products.<sup>9</sup> Onofre's sonic work *Untitled* (2016) consists of a compilation of all the seminal Portuguese guitar player Carlos Paredes's breaths which punctuate his playing extracted from his studio albums. The virtuoso's breath is inserted into the place traditionally occupied by the music, and points us to an *absence* as the heart of the work. It also recalls Georges Perec's lipogrammatic novel *A Void* (1969) written entirely without the letter "e". Something must be put around a textual or sonic void for it to be experienced, be it a circumscription or indeed a protracted series of breaths.

This idea of emptiness and silence proliferates throughout art and sound practice from Minimalism onwards. Nonetheless, the composer John Cage rejects quietude by arguing that "there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound."<sup>10</sup> He maintains that "silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech...and an element in a dialogue."<sup>11</sup>

Consequently silence is an impossibility only achievable in death, a perceptual feature explored in his seminal work *4'33"* (1952) in which pianist David Tudor sits at a grand piano for the duration signaled by the title. The instrument remains mute, but the silence is punctuated with ambient noise in the hall. Onofre's video *Tacet* (2014)<sup>12</sup> reprises the historical work's structure and timing, but the pianist is also employed as a firestarter who prepares and

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<sup>8</sup> Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1968) was performed in 1969 at the Whitney Museum of American art by artists such as Michael Snow, Richard Serra, and Bruce Nauman, underlining the close relationship between modern art and minimal composition.

<sup>9</sup> While DJing, Daft Punk's Thomas Bangalter was struck by the live feedback as he plugged in a turntable and led him to create a musical track from the mishap by turning the sonic by-product into musical content.

<sup>10</sup> John Cage, quoted in Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> John Cage, *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Tacet* indicates a pause or period of silence in musical notation.

destroys the piano by setting it alight. Cage's relative silence is amplified by the roaring flames as it consumes the instrument.

The immolation of any cultural artifact suggests the breaking of a taboo – with echoes of burning books, places of worship or individuals – but it also signifies as an act of purification, a catharsis leading to renewal. Where the length of Cage's work remains arbitrary, Onofre's interpretation has a greater urgency since the danger to the pianist ramps up progressively as the fire creeps closer. Here the precisely reenacted duration coincides with the limits of endurance.

Duration has been a constant feature for artists since the 1960s with works such as Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964), a plot-less eight hour slow motion film of the Empire State building in New York, or Cage's *Organ2/ASLSP (As SLOW as Possible)* (1987), a piano score adapted for the organ and lasting, in its most recent incarnation, 639 years. Onofre's more recent peers include artists such as Stan Douglas, Christian Marclay or David Claerbout whose videos intercut images and sound so as to alter the perception of time. Claerbout calls duration "not an independent state like time, but an in between state."<sup>13</sup> Thus, duration may be said to operate as an interval between events that pause it.

In some of these works, paying attention ceases to offer a rewarding experience as time appears stretched beyond its bearable limit, and gives way to new forms of viewing and listening. In a strongly mediatized society the notion of attention has become an important commodity.

"Individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for 'paying attention', that is for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli."<sup>14</sup>

The videos *Untitled (Sun 2500)* (2010), *GHOST (2009-2012)* and *Untitled (leveling a spirit level in free fall feat. Dorit Chrysler BBGV dub)* (2009) chronicle single actions, often in real time. The monotonous simplicity of the movements – craning in, floating by, and falling down – belies the complexity of the organization and hardware required to enact them. They recall the phenomenon of "completion bias", denoted by the sensation of pleasure experienced by fulfilling specific tasks, often also related to obsessive-compulsive behaviour in which individuals are compelled to repeat simple actions. Indeed, the hoisting of a 9 metre sailing boat with a gigantic crane into a 10 metre swimming pool in a built up inner city location in *Untitled (SUN 2500)* is especially rewarding due to its unfeasibly snug fit. Accordingly, though Onofre's videos maintain both the singularity of the action and the satisfaction of completion, their execution remains extremely arduous, and in the case of leveling a spirit level in freefall, utterly impossible. The documentation of a single action stresses the durational aspect of video above the narrative of cinema.

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<sup>13</sup> "David Claerbout: The time that remains", Parasol Unit, London, in <https://parasol-unit.org/whats-on/david-claerbout-the-time-that-remains/>

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 2.

“The long take has been at the centre of the shift from film to video... [while] the change from projection to installation has, if anything only increased the attention paid to the time-form.”<sup>15</sup>

The importance of installation art cannot be overstated since it is synonymous with the space of the exhibition, and thus that of the viewer. By harnessing the space of the audience as an integral part of the work, the majority of Onofre’s videos are presented as complete installations, rather than simple cinematic projections. Projections – driven by *frontality* - privilege the notion of the two-dimensional window view, which presumes a passive onlooker, in direct contrast to the immersive audience engagement encountered in installation, “as if the wall between the real and projected worlds had been torn down.”<sup>16</sup> According to theorist Boris Groys, installation “privatizes” the space of the otherwise “public” nature of an exhibition<sup>17</sup>. Consequently, it becomes the private province of the artist who allows access to the audience, but under strict viewing conditions.

These actions lead to a conflation of the space of the work with the intimate sphere of the spectator. Author Don DeLillo’s novel *Point Omega* (2010) opens and closes with the description of an installation that scrutinizes the passage across the limen between fiction and reality:<sup>18</sup>

“It felt real, the pace was paradoxically real, bodies moving musically, barely moving, twelve-tone, things barely happening, cause and effect so drastically drawn apart that it seemed real to him, the way all the things in the physical world that we don’t understand are said to be real.”<sup>19</sup>

Progressively, his narrator’s senses become attuned to the presence of the other spectators in the installation – the way in which their bodies interrupt the projection, casting shadows and shapes, and the manner of their own (in)attention and social interaction. It is as if the outside were leaking into the work as “life is not a collection of events, life is a scene.”<sup>20</sup>

We encounter two opposed modes of spectating: extreme focus and disengaged viewing. Close attention tends to be associated with a flat screen, while immersive viewing is more circumspect. It marks an important shift from cinema to video where the former locates content in the screen interface while the latter moves the emphasis forward towards the space of reception.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Bird, “Andrei Tarkovsky and Contemporary Art: Medium and Mediation,” in *Tate Papers*, no. 10, autumn 2008, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/10/andrei-tarkovsky-and-contemporary-art-medium-and-mediation>.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Marcbabu, quoted in Richard Brody, *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2008), p.73.

<sup>17</sup> Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> DeLillo stated that his visit to the installation *24 Hour Psycho* by Douglas Gordon at MoMA, New York, gave him the idea for the novel in the first place. The artist’s work slows down the celebrated film by Alfred Hitchcock to last an entire day.

<sup>19</sup> Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> David Claerbout, “I sculpt in duration”, interview by A. Will Brown, *Studio International*, 12 May, 2016, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/david-claerbout-interview>.

“In the dialectical tension that marked the classical regime of representation, video art marks the final victory of suspension over suspense.”<sup>21</sup>

Philosopher Henri Bergson describes duration as “the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing [...] the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, [...] showing the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older. Without the survival of the past into the present there would be no duration, but only instantaneity.”<sup>22</sup>

But memory is not wiped clean by events; it does not remove one past in favour of another as they remain co-present. The space-time continuum is then defined by succession *and* simultaneity.

“The past is ‘contemporaneous’ with the present that it had been.”<sup>23</sup>

Gilles Deleuze’s assertion stands in contrast to the perpetual present that supposedly marks our experience of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Art Historian Jonathan Crary argues that present-day circumstances promote an “instrumentalized and unending condition of visibility [...] which can be characterized as a generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks [...] It is a time that no longer passes.”<sup>24</sup>

Onofre reverses this relentless condition of visibility by translating it into a sonic dimension in *Untitled (orchestral) (2016-2017)*, a site-specific sound installation controlled by the daily passage of the sun. The score written by Miquel Bernat was performed by concealed robotized percussion on the towering metal boilers that hulk within a monumental, decommissioned power station. The installation trades the fire of the original power source for the heat of the sun. Though visually unaltered, the dormant engines and the building are rearticulated by the score as a percussive sonic performance, where past and present resonate with one another in the body of the audience.

Language Philosopher J.L. Austin describes performativity as the capacity of speech and communication to act or to consummate an action. Performative actions operate outside constative or descriptive language since they cannot be said to be either true or false, instead they effect change.

Onofre avails himself of the performative power of language, but instead of employing it to bring something into being, he uses it to initiate the *long goodbye* of gradual disintegration. *Skull* (2003) uses light sensitive fax paper to gradually erode the message “everything disappears”, while *El Pais Gris* (2005) and *La Repubblica Griggia* (2007) feature pages from newspapers fading to grey through repeated photocopying.

“[...] the void, the empty projection screen, the empty sheet of paper [acts] as an apparatus for a possible and perfectly conscious marking and assertion of

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Bird, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 1999), p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 5-8.

text or object, confronting a world that is thoroughly determined and occupied by meaning, subject to an alienated power of disposal.”<sup>25</sup>

This surfeit of objects and information has been subjected to a process of emptying out by successive generations of artists. Roman Opalka’s work *1965/1-∞* (1965-) consists of a series of grey canvases painted individually with white numbers, with the artist adding one percent of white on the background of each new canvas and eventually merging the numbers with the whiteness of the primed ground. The length of Opalka’s own existence may be measured by the 233 paintings.

Onofre’s drawings from the *Running dry* series (2005-2007) and *Degradation* series (2007) reprise the theme of deduction and decline. Both sets are demonstrations of tautologies, as the actions alluded to by the text and the execution coincide precisely with one another.

This gradual silencing of language calls to mind the poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s emphasis of the spaces between letters and words on a page. His theory of “espacement” maintains that the open space between words becomes the precondition for a text to appear as such and to indicate a lack of definitive meaning and destination; although the words refer to one another, they do not form a closed structure. Philosopher Jacques Derrida adopted Mallarmé’s notion, arguing that “the movement of signification is possible only if each element [...] stands in relation to what it is not.”<sup>26</sup>

Onofre invokes the alternation between meaning and its absence in his works; the shadow of failure remains palpable throughout the artist’s Sisyphean struggle with self-imposed tasks, a familiar trope in art from Modernity onwards, which underlines the burgeoning interest in futility. This stance highlights the importance of process above completion, since the latter remains endlessly deferred. It is this very state of protraction which comes to typify the work since the inability to fulfil a gesture also suggests that its meaning is adjourned.

Marcel Broodthaers’s film *La Pluie (Projet pour un Texte)* (1969) films the artist sitting at a desk writing with a fountain pen in the pouring rain. It focuses on the writer’s fruitless attempt at lending permanence to his words, which are immediately dissolved by the downpour. The film shows “the process of a failed production of a text – not as the documentation of an idea but as a literal demonstration of failure.”<sup>27</sup>

Onofre’s *annotated scores* are derived from his videos and largely replace writing with musical notation; notwithstanding, they do represent a coherent form of language that tapers towards performative action since they are instructions to play or sing music. Moreover, their authorial provenance has an unresolved quality as they chart the journey between the artist, the composer and those interpreting and performing the scores. In this way, they fulfil the double function of a set of commands and the documentation of a creative process.

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<sup>25</sup> Sabine Folie, *Writing Turned Image: an Alphabet of pensive Language*, in *Un Coup de Dès* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2008), p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Différance*, in Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp 3-27.

<sup>27</sup> Sabine Folie, *ibid.*, p. 228.

The video soundtracks of the artist's films are also given material form through vinyl records. Here, instruction gives way to coded documentation etched into the surface. While these discrete works may be listened to on a turntable, they are usually held up with an especially cast silver nail through the centre. Onofre's rudimentary display gesture lends a visual presence to the supposedly immaterial, namely language and sound.

"Nails have a fixative power...to bind one thing to another. [...] When a thing is brought into contact with another it makes an *alligation*. [...] Included in this is the binding of two things together in alligation by a nail, so that one might influence the other."<sup>28</sup>

Onofre's alligation between the objects also points to a partnership with its roots in the culture of occultism, dominated by invisible forces and phenomena, echoing his preoccupation with mortality discussed previously. What is beyond remains unknowable and it is for this reason that the restless mind speculates.

In order to defer closure the artist seeks to *show* only what is at hand rather than *tell* what is implied. The emblematic quality of his videos allows the viewer direct access to the signifier -the sound or picture- while rendering the signified - the idea- unstable. The general lack of postproduction also recalls the influence of early cinema, which predates film editing and relies on movement generated before a locked-down shot - a headstand performed on a traffic light, or a bike courier riding between destinations to make a delivery.

In the artist's oeuvre nothing is quite *when* or *where* it ought to be, because time is *out of joint* while actions and objects are misplaced. In order to validate this skewed state of affairs, Onofre employs professional individuals and groups whose performance, despite their best efforts, never entirely escapes the spectral doubling of the *real*.

"I have these people doing what they do for a living: singing, acting or something else" [they are] "already part of a culture of spectacle."<sup>29</sup>

By employing tactics of *defamiliarisation* that echo the ideas of critic and theorist Viktor Shklovsky, the artist's films allow an escape from a normative reality to an evolving *process* of reality that fully engages the spectator. To do this, he carefully observes familiar conventions and competences but alters the context in which these are played out.

The dissociation between the message and its mediator *Untitled (I See a Darkness)* (2007) features two young boys performing the eponymous Will Oldham song. The situation is *uncanny* since something repressed continues to return, which they cannot comprehend as the darkness they sing of is an adult sensibility, unattainable by prepubescent children. It is as if the boys were suspended out of time, they can sing the words but their meaning is deferred into later adulthood.

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Duffy, "Concerning the Use & Symbolism of Nails", *Three Hands Press*, <https://threehandspress.com/concerning-the-use-symbolism-of-nails-by-martin-duffy/>

<sup>29</sup> João Onofre, Interview with Gerald Matt, in J.J. Charlesworth and Gerald Matt, *João Onofre* (Bregenz: Magazin 4, 2004), p. 44.



While some of Onofre's videos play with individual aptitudes, they are at their most poignant when harnessing groups of players, when single bodies cohere into an *organism*. In *Instrumental version* (2001) the artist uses a choral ensemble to perform an a cappella version of the seminal electronic song "The Robots", by Kraftwerk. "The mother of all techno tracks", argues Onofre, "has the sense of 'passé futurism' about it."<sup>30</sup> The absurdity of the idea might be demonstrated in theory, but its implications are only fully borne out through the performativity of an action, "when" according to writer Kenneth Goldsmith "you do go through the process of having done it instead of proposing it."<sup>31</sup> The human interpretation given to the song by Onofre runs counter to Kraftwerk's mechanical emphasis. The struggle lies in giving a human voice to the machine by mimicry, as a neat inversion of the role of technology, which always seeks to follow the human lead.

"The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine."<sup>32</sup>

Notably, comedy results when two different frames of reference are set up and a collision is engineered between them. Indeed, the rise of mechanization in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century leads to the slapstick in early cinema; physical gags and pratfalls dominate silent movies as a result of human frailty contrasted with the dependability of machines, argues Jörg Heiser.<sup>33</sup> Though Onofre's videos harness humour, it is never at the expense of the performer, or indeed the viewer, since the very fallibility of human action is central to his work. "Human imperfection", one might argue, "has more considerable virtues than the exactness of machines."<sup>34</sup>

The "mis-take" which underpins so much humour is central to the artist's video *Imus in girum et nunquam igne consumemur* (*we move in circles at night, and are never consumed by fire*), derived from an ancient palindromic riddle referring to the flight of moths attracted to the flame, also used by theorist Guy Debord to title his last film from 1978, which remarks on the irony of life lived in "the complete vacuity of mediatized society."<sup>35</sup>

Onofre's subtle alteration of the original palindrome maintains the circular motion but removes the lethal contact with fire. The artist's video shows a team of firefighters hosing down a man who is clearly not on fire and gives him first aid; the pathos of clear and present danger by burning is thus inverted to become bathetic as the character must endure the process of being pointlessly saved.

The work *Joke job project* (2005) takes the artist's predilection for absurdity to its logical conclusion. He engages the services of a young

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<sup>30</sup>Onofre, *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> "Kenneth Goldsmith interviewed by Philip Davenport", October 2011, in *The Dark Would. Volume Two: Anthology of Language Art*, Philip Davenport, ed. (New York: Apple Pie Edition, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1914) (New York: Dover Publications, 2013), p. 11b.

<sup>33</sup> Jörg Heiser, *All of a sudden: Things that matter in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Photography from the Verso*, G3, (June 1924), p.39.

<sup>35</sup> Guy Debord, "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni", *Spectacle Theater*, <http://www.spectacletheater.com/in-girum-imus-nocte/>.

modern literature graduate to edit a book of jokes downloaded from the internet by punchline. He employs professional competences in a skewed manner, preventing the performance of duties within the normal work conventions.

Onofre's works do not generally comment on the process of production or indeed on the place where it is plotted and prepared, namely the studio, once considered the private sanctum of an artist. Katy Siegel writes that today the studio embodies "the relation between the production of art and other kinds of production in a society at a given moment, and the relation between work and life."<sup>36</sup>

Onofre's series of studio-based videos retain the carefully crafted humour present elsewhere. *Untitled (vulture in the studio)* (2002), *Believe (levitation in the studio)* (2002), and *Catriona Shaw sings Baldessari sings LeWitt re-edit Like a Virgin extended version* (2003), cast the space as a permeable, experimental situation that combines research, production and display; here the presence of his peers looms large: John Baldessari's remarkably awful singing of LeWitt's seminal "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1969) to various inappropriate tunes leads Onofre to re-score the work to the famous Madonna track, albeit with the introduction of a professional singer to improve musical matters.

Bruce Nauman's earlier studio actions from the 1960s, such as failed levitation, walking about and playing an instrument, are prosaically described as "art is what an artist does", an assertion given an emotional charge by Bas Jan Ader's *I'm too sad to tell You* (1971) in which the artist is filmed weeping uncontrollably, a suggestion of "the perceived authentic in an inauthentic artworld", and demonstrating a "comportment that seems unmistakably meaningful."<sup>37</sup>

Like Nauman and Ader, Onofre struggles to remain authentic and avoid the taint of *mediation*, a feat hard to achieve in an age dominated by ever-more baroque iterations of technology.

"What is happening is really happening."<sup>38</sup>

In the artist's videos we see everything that is at hand in the way it presents itself. They are not products but staged *events* without a public performance that rely on intensive preparation, patient rehearsals and painstaking staging. The artist conceals the labour, as well as the sacrifice required to bring these moving images to light.

In *Pas d'action* (2002) a tightly framed group of young dancers simultaneously rise on *demi-pointe*. The individual struggle to maintain the poised action transmits to the entire group, which begins to subtly oscillate in a single motion, as if pertaining to a unique entity, while avoiding what Onofre calls the "domino effect"<sup>39</sup> and tumbling out of the frame.

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<sup>36</sup> Katy Siegel, "Live/Work", in *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*, edited by Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 313.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Dumbadze, *Bas Jan Ader: Death is Elsewhere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Stefan Sulzer, *The Day my Mother touched Robert Ryman* (Zurich and Stuttgart: Edition Taube, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> João Onofre, interview with Gerald Matt, *ibid.*, p. 46.

"Stillness in an image emphasizes its performed quality,"<sup>40</sup> writes social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson, asserting the posed aspect of the photograph above the movement of video. *Pas d'action* almost lifts the distinction between inertia and mobility, since the dancers attempted stasis – the high-point of formality and technique<sup>41</sup> -ultimately fails as it dissolves into movement, or, to put it another way, when the video attempts to become photography, only to collapse back into video.

Artists have a long but often uneasy relationship with the stage - be it as a filmic set or the theatre – populated by actors. As we have seen, Onofre, like other notable artists, identifies more closely with the relatively recent discourse of video rather than with the weighty history of cinema. Equally, his use of the "stage" can be more closely identified with the area of performance originating from the art studio.

Art Historian Benjamin Buchloh asserts that artists such as "[Vito] Acconci, [Dan] Graham and Nauman had reincorporated the theatrical in both speech and gesture but they did so precisely in total opposition to traditional definitions of theatricality. They had enacted theatricality as manifestly outside of conventions or rhetoric, enunciation, and dramaturgy."<sup>42</sup>

Seminal artist and theatre director Tadeusz Kantor became notorious for a system of theatre that discouraged acting, where actors were made to struggle with things beyond their interpretive concerns; their skills were appropriated rather than employed accordingly and used as demonstrators who were simply doing their jobs, arguing that "the actor's 'behaviour' should 'paralyze' the reality of the text, be juxtaposed to it."<sup>43</sup>

An oblique example of this struggle is suggested in *Thomas Dekker an interview* (2006) where Onofre scrutinises the relationship between life and fiction. The former child actor is being interviewed as the alien character he played in John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* (1998) - in which he is the sole survivor - but the answers are provided by Dekker, who has known no other life except that of the movies. Interviews with film stars ought to yield something, no matter how contrived, about the life of the actor, yet uncannily Dekker's identity remains fused with that of the character, leaving him unable to distinguish art from life.

But if the actor's embodiment of his character finds him slipping effortlessly between realities, the inability to empathise with a character unsettles the make-believe of fiction. The struggle of the performance is palpable in *Casting* (2000), which features a long line of models invited to deliver a single stanza, fraught with existential struggle, originally spoken by Ingrid Bergman in *Stromboli*.<sup>44</sup> Their earnest and repeated attempts are undermined by their lack of acting skills and their poor Italian, resulting in a

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<sup>40</sup> Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (New York: Verso, 2019), p. 117.

<sup>41</sup> In 1832 Marie Taglioni forever altered ballet by dancing on point throughout the ballet *La Sylphide* which was seen as suggestive of weightlessness and levitation, and marked a shift away from dances that involved footwear with heels.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, in *James Coleman*, George Baker ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: October Books, MIT Press, 2003), p. 92.

<sup>43</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, quoted in Michal Kobialka, "A Visual History of Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre", in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 7, no. 1 (autumn 1992), p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> *Stromboli*, feature film directed by Roberto Rossellini, in 1950.

stilted *Kantoresque* delivery devoid of emotion and empathy, which reveals the mechanism of a *game* being played out *ad infinitum*.

“The fielders in the field sleepwalk and those in the middle populate their dream. [...] A strip, a square, an oval, a circle, a rope, a boundary, an edge, a field. These shapes and forms, mutually agreed upon but making no sense otherwise, delineate the ground upon which they stand and stare.”<sup>45</sup>

Novelist David Price describes the latitude given to fielders in a sporting game, but they perform as if in a dream, their actions held together only by the procedural memory of repetition.

While Onofre’s continuous shots enhance “the impression of realness”,<sup>46</sup> they are complemented by the “tuned spaces”<sup>47</sup> or auditory atmospheres produced by his soundtracks; they feature manipulation of pop covers that have a deep mnemonic impact on the audience, since “popular music is the only cultural reference we hold in common anymore.”<sup>48</sup> In the sphere of music, repetition taps into a network of recollection amplified by the songs’ ubiquity:

“When you experience something viscerally it’s a more profound knowledge than when you know it only cerebrally.”<sup>49</sup>

The presence of deeply felt emotion lies at the heart of Onofre’s works especially if we consider that “feeling is a process as precisely organized and mechanistically exact as thinking.”<sup>50</sup> Pioneering cineaste Hans Richter writes that “film offers no ‘stopping points’[...] as feeling and sensing [...] is [...] a process-movement.”<sup>51</sup>

The continuous shot is a classic technique employed in cinema – from D. W. Griffiths’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958) to Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002) – to engage viewers in the total environment of their films. Continuity enhances the hermetic nature of an enclosed ecosystem, augmenting the coherence of a fiction to coincide with the audience’s own space.

The circular pan presents a recurring feature in Onofre’s work and is especially effective in *Untitled (Zoetrope)* (2019) as it matches the spectator’s gaze with the lens of the camera, which circles the elliptical *chiaroscuro* stage populated by a silver-clad gospel choir, a rock band, and a group of rugby players. The film, lasting 2 hours and 22 minutes is scored by Foreigner’s

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<sup>45</sup> David Price, *The Fielders* (AND Public, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> João Onofre, interview with Gerald Matt, *ibid.*, pp. 44-48.

<sup>47</sup> Gernot Böhme, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Allison Anders, “Interviews”, in *Celluloid Jukebox: popular music and the movies since the 50s*, eds. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton (London: British Film Institute, 1995), p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> Sherrie Levine, interview with Jeanne Siegel, in *Sherrie Levine*, exh. cat., eds. Jeanne Siegel and David Deitcher (Zurich: Kunsthalle Zurich, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Hans Richter, “The badly trained Soul” (1924), quoted in *Experience: Culture, Cognition and the Common Sense*, eds. Jones, Mather and Ochill (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016), p. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Hans Richter, *ibid.*, p. 43.

1985 hit "I Want to Know What Love Is"<sup>52</sup>, which acts as a continuous soundtrack for the work as well as providing cues and instructions to the performers. The band plays on and is joined at intervals by the choir, interspersed with sporadic intonations of the refrain by individual members of the rugby teams who are tackled before completing the line.

"Music plays a crucial role [...] establishing a sense of the era while often reverberating beneath the surface of a given scene, complementing the action like a Greek chorus."<sup>53</sup>

Western music is generally linear and finite, while traditional Gamelan music is highly repetitive and uninterrupted, stressing a cyclical form. Onofre inserts this sustained musical presence into the soundtrack by extending a brief section of a single pop ballad across its duration, creating a sonic ebb and flow.

"Even when only a brief snatch of a popular song is heard in a film, it automatically alludes to the presence of the rest of the song as a separate entity existing outside the soundtrack,"<sup>54</sup> [and gives] "voice to feelings and attitudes not made explicit by the visuals [...] as musical allusionism to speak for characters."<sup>55</sup>

The emotions of the protagonists throughout the artist's filmic oeuvre are never fully vented as the circumstances to do so do not allow it. They are held in check by the struggle to perform against impossible odds in a world seemingly stacked against their best endeavours. Their feelings are deep but plainly stated: they ask "what love is", they "see a darkness", and despair of "the night without end". Onofre composes dark sonic tapestries that resonate with feeling without ever tipping over into sentiment. He knows the difference between a thing and its shadow.

*At the zenith you cut the shadows back  
To their proper size  
You teach them to bow to you  
And as they bow they disappear*<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> "I Want to Know What Love Is" reached number one in the UK Singles Chart on 15 January 1985, displacing Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?", staying there for three weeks, and knocked Madonna's long-running "Like a Virgin" out of number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 on 2 February 1985. Onofre has also used Madonna's song in his work.

<sup>53</sup> "Out of Time: The Brilliant Soundtrack of Hal Ashby's 'Coming Home'", *Indie Outlook*, 7 May 2019, <https://indie-outlook.com/2019/05/07/out-of-time-the-brilliant-soundtrack-of-hal-ashbys-coming-home/>

<sup>54</sup> Lauren Anderson, quoted in Pauline Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtrack and Synergy* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 68

<sup>55</sup> Lauren Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>56</sup> Vasko Popa, "The Shadow Maker", in *Selected Poems*, trans. Anne Pennington, intro Ted Hughes (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 122.

