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Returning to the Stairs: On Temporality and Self-Portraiture

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Abstract

This digital media exploration consists of the video “Returning to the Stairs” (20 min.) made in 2020 and a short text discussing the work in terms of temporality and a possible relationship to cinematic self-portraiture, based on a voice-over narration performed live as an accompaniment to the video.

In July 2020, when I spoke these words as a voice-over to the video “Returning to the Stairs,”¹ we lived in the year of the golden rat, or metal rat. In 2008, the previous year of the rat, the earth rat, I was performing my sixth year in what was later to be called *Animal Years* on Harakka Island, in Helsinki, Finland. Usually, the twelve-year cycle of the Chinese Calendar begins with the rat. My series, however, had begun with the year of the horse. By now, in 2008 that is, I knew I was engaged in a series, wanted to explore different directions on the island and chose the northern shore for my weekly visits. My main work was posing on a rock by the shore in the position resembling the statue of the little mermaid in Copenhagen and standing in the water, taking some water in a jar and pouring it back to the sea. On the way to the shore, I made an additional video image, placing the camera on a tripod above the stairs, facing north-north-east and then walking down the stairs and back up again. Unlike previous years I tried to stick to a relatively regular time, right before dusk and sunset.

The synopsis of the two-channel video installation *Year of the Rat – Uphill - Downhill* (19 min 12 sec) in the Distribution Centre for Finnish Media Art reads as follows:

1. (left) With a lilac scarf on my shoulders I walk down the steps on the Northern shore of Harakka Island approximately once a week before sunset between 26th January 2008 and 24th January 2009.
2. (right) I walk up the steps during the same times.

On the 21 July 2020 (a few days before the event where this text was performed) I decided to return to those stairs, and record an image with my current camera, using HD quality and 16:9 format, rather than the DV-quality and 4:3 format I used in the original work. My plan was to insert the old two-channel work in this new recording, and I wanted to repeat the same action as a frame of sorts, walking up and down the stairs in the beginning and at the end – which meant some careful timing.

Similar revisits and compilations are made for all the twelve years in the *Animal Years* series, as part of my efforts to reactivate or actualize these works today. That is what I promised to do in the plan for the four-year Academy of Finland funded research project

How to Do Things with Performance, together with Hanna Järvinen, Tero Nauha and Pilvi Porkola. Some years, like the year of the rat, I used several sites and made several works, so I have tried to choose the most important work and revisited that site, or, then made several revisits, like in this case. I had already revisited the rock below the stairs, the primary site for the main work *Year of the Rat – Mermaid*, in August 2018. That revisit resulted in a video essay called “Revisiting the Rock: Self-diffraction as a Strategy,” published in GPS (Global Performance Studies) issue 3:2. (Arlander 2020b) “Revisiting the Rusty Ring: Ecofeminism Today?” which is based on my return to the site of the year of the ox, is published in this journal, volume 3, number 1 (Arlander 2020a).

In most of these video essays or compilations, I have not only returned to the site of the yearly performances for camera, but also revisited texts that I have written with those performances in mind. And that poses a problem for me now, when revisiting *Year of the Rat Uphill – Downhill*, because I have never written anything about that work. The installation has been shown once after the original exhibition in Katarina gallery in Helsinki in November-December 2009; it was shown in the Helsinki Kunsthalle as part of the exhibition called “Me: Self-portraits Through Time” from May to August 2017. I remember being astonished that it was selected for that show, unbeknownst to me, because I never thought of the work as a self-portrait. But of course, it is a self-portrait, too. And unlike the works where I pose with my back to the camera in order to downplay my identity and personality and serve as a more general human figure (even if that is rarely possible), in this work you can clearly see my face and who I am when I walk uphill. Because I am moving, I stand out from the environment, and because the stairs and the white pumphouse in the background are human constructions, the landscape seems secondary, a mere setting. Temporality, however, which is always central in these works that depict a year and the changing seasons, is probably also accentuated by the movement.

I have often explained that I try to depict time passing, but what does that actually mean? In a text called “Performing Landscape for Years” (2014) I described the twelve-year project that resulted in *Animal Years* with three aspects related to time:

1. The cyclical time in nature consequent of the movement of Earth is distinct from humanmade cycles of time. The cyclical time of video-installations (based on nonstop-loops) stands in contrast to the linear or narrative time of most live performances and films and can be compared with cyclical, static and progressive dramaturgy, terms used in classical drama-analysis or with the techniques of time distortion in post-dramatic theatre.
2. The duration of production and consumption do not coincide in performances for the camera; the performer's experience of duration differs from the viewers' experience of duration watching a video work. A single duration of production can be transformed into various durations of consumption.
3. Repetition rather than continuity can produce an experience of extended duration, if moments of time are repeated continually. An illusion of real time can be produced for the viewer, which is unlike the shared experience of duration in real-time aesthetics used in classical performance art. Repetition becomes duration in the experience of the performer, over time, producing a form of refrain, even an existential refrain (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). (Arlander 2014, 27)

By way of conclusion, I added:

The contrast between a comforting cyclical time and the inevitable irreversibility of linear time is actualized at the end of a cycle. At the end of this twelve-year process, after literally performing landscape for years, I ask myself what I have learned about time. And my main observation is embarrassingly trivial: time takes place through constant change, in cycles of various duration, but you do not notice the transformations without attending to the seemingly static elements, the repetitions. (Arlander 2014, 31)

These aspects of temporality are of course specific for that project. Another account of the same project could emphasize other aspects of temporality (Arlander 2016).

In a collection called *Performance and Temporalization: Time Happens* (2015), the editors Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly, and Maeva Veerapen examine temporality from many perspectives. One of their main points is that time is not a given, but the result of processes like “perception, measure, experience and worlding” (Grant et al. 2015, 3). “Time is the product of processes of temporalization. Time temporalises, is temporalised” (3).

Moreover, performance allows for “unique embodied, emplaced, experiential approaches and perspectives” to “the question of the coming-forth of time” (3). The editors present various philosophical debates regarding time, like the questions of “tense, passingness, reality, relativity and reversibility” (4) in the analytic philosophical tradition, or the concerns around objective and subjective time in the Continental tradition (4). While “Heidegger’s early work” elaborates “the structure of time as the basic constitution of the human” (5) the poststructuralists deal with “duration, presence, historicity, narrative, genealogy and process” including “Deleuze’s (1988) appropriation of Bergsonian ‘duration’ and the Whiteheadian ‘event’” (5). Thus they distinguish several positions and traditions in the philosophical enquiry of time, such as “the analytic, the phenomenological, the poststructuralist and the messianic” and note that the question remains unresolved (6).

Meanwhile, “performance studies scholars debate notions like liveness and presence,” while “diverse artistic practices engaging places, things and bodies in installations, environmental art and durational performances are concerned with time” (7). In performance art, temporalization is a core concern; film, video and music are explicitly temporal forms and “[d]ancing bodies are not ‘in time’, they are ‘of time’” (8-9). Despite the importance of temporality in many forms of art there is nevertheless “a lack of well-developed methods for understanding the experience of time in performance and other art practices” and “the relations between time, space, place and the world” (11). The collection is divided into four sections focused on 1) world, space, and place, 2) self, movement, and body, 3) image, performance, and technology and finally 4) apotheosis. The text that I will utilize here is from the third part, namely “A Certain Dark Corner of Modern Cinema,” by Adrian Martin (2015, 180-189).

Martin discusses the celebrated filmmaker Naomi Kawase’s cinematic self-portraits and contextualizes them within the discussion of self-portraits in experimental film and video, such as the work on its genealogy by Raymond Bellour. Bellour understands the “truly fragile vein of exploration in the audiovisual self-portrait” as “a certain dark corner of modern cinema” (181) despite canonical and celebrated self-portraits such as Chris Marker’s *Sunless* (1982). Martin places Kawase in that dark corner as well. I would not

place my video works in that corner, however, and in the following I am by no means juxtaposing my work with Kawase's. Rather, I utilize some of the classic distinctions that Martin refers to in order to analyze my work.

To begin with I use neither of the “two essential gestures of this pictorial form: filming oneself in the mirror... and filming one's own elongated uncanny shadow” (Martin 2015, 181), but show my body more directly. The artist's body is “at the core of the filmic self-portrait, but almost never at its literal, visible centre,” Martin writes (182). “If we see the artist's body at all, it is usually through an indirect, fleeting mediation” like a shadow, or an accidental reflection (182). There is, however, an “inescapable documentary aspect” in cinematic self-portraits, including “the evidence of time passing, of ageing, of mortality” (182). And that aspect is clear in my work as well.

Martin refers to Michel Serres' idea of the body, which “moves in Euclidean space, ... *sees* in one space (projective), *feels* in another (topological), *suffers* in yet another (somatic)” (182). These spaces relate to the “three major dimensions or orderings of time operative in cinema (and its subsequent mediations in video and media arts),” he adds, which could be simplified to “‘story time,’ ‘plot time,’ and ‘emotional time’” (183). He describes them as follows: Story time “is the complete, imaginable slice of time covered or evoked within a narrative, conceived in a linear, unfolding sense” (183). In my example this could be either the year of the rat in 2008-2009, or the total span of time from 2008 to 2020. Plot time refers to the “specific ordering of story time into a structure that lasts the duration of the work—usually in a condensed and shuffled, achronological form, with flashbacks, flashforwards, ellipses and so on” (183). Only in the case of so-called “real time” do these two dimensions coincide. In my example there are no flashbacks or flashforwards but plenty of ellipses formed by the jump-cuts between the weekly repetitions in 2008, as well as the big jump of twelve years between the year of the rat then and now. The third dimension, or emotional time, “time as an elastic or plastic matter that contracts or expands according to how we *feel* or experience it” (183) is perhaps the most problematic one in my case. Does the rather mechanical repetition evoke boredom in the viewer, or induce calm and peacefulness, or perhaps apprehension in the face of the inevitable...?

Martin discusses “two major, dominant options: cutting (montage) versus long take (*mise en scène*)” (186). He notes that there are film directors associated with the cut or edit and the contrast, shock or ‘third meaning’ created by the connection of two shots and other directors associated with “the *long take*, the organic coherence and clarity of real space unfolding in time” (186). He emphasizes, however, that there is a third way, combining both. Martin mentions the critique towards some of the films trying to follow this ‘third way’ as “modishly New Age,” presumably suggesting that “we are all one with nature; past, present and future trace a single, unbroken weave; we all form one, collective soul; and so on” (187). I would not place my work in any of these categories—I would not claim it to be film —although I can understand that the monotonous repetition of the same image and the recording of the seasons might suggest something resembling this third way. Unlike some other years where I sit immobile on a rock or in a tree, however, the movement up and down the stairs does not invite readings that focus on the human figure merging with the environment or the like. The movement keeps focus tight on the human moving, although the seasonal changes that provide the main development or narrative in this cyclic structure give some prominence to the place and the environment.

The idea of a self-portrait, however, is the most puzzling one. Compared with more traditional filmic self-portraits where the filmmaker as filmmaker, as the provider of a personal subjective perspective on the world, is somehow foregrounded, the self-portrait here is rather blunt and simple, seemingly objective rather than subjective simply because the camera is static, on a tripod. Walking up and down the same stairs with the same scarf, come rain or shine, provides an almost embarrassingly brutal, even comical depiction of a stubborn artist, probably creating associations to obsession rather than research... As one variation among many in a series of years, a series of attempts at exploring repetitive actions that can become cyclical, the work nevertheless has a place, and some relevance, I hope. And through the double perspective provided by combining the revisit and repetition in real-time of the action in a previously created time-lapse video, temporality is foregrounded, for sure.

At this point I invite the reader to watch the 20-minute video “Returning to the Stairs” and observe what reflections or diffractions on temporality they will experience...

<https://vimeo.com/779424719>

Some concluding remarks:

When returning to the video I looked at the details distinguishing the revisit, the real-time video serving as the frame for the time-lapse video, the inserted two-channel installation, such as the reddish-brown private dress standing out against the greenery during the revisit in contrast to the pale lilac scarf, which I wear over black clothes during the repeated performances. The size of the scarf was much larger than I remembered, and when I looked more carefully I saw that it really does shrink during the year, probably as a result of being soaked in various seas, and is much smaller at the end than in the beginning—a curious materialization of time passing, albeit within that one year rather than between 2009 and 2020.

The contrast between the real-time video and the time-lapse, the “now” (2020) and the repeated “double flash-back” (2008-2009), is further accentuated by a passing boat and some people walking through the image. The framing is slightly different, too, with the opposite shore visible behind the trees only in the time-lapse, not in the real time image. The trees and shrubs have grown, and the movement of the leaves in the wind keep the real-time image alive. The time of day and the direction of the light accentuate the greenery and the shadows in the real-time frame, while the flashbacks are all in evening or afternoon light and seem mostly pale. Thus, not even the summer images in the time-lapse fully coincide with the frame.

Another surprise was the direction of the action on the stairs. In the beginning the human figure walks uphill towards the viewer past the camera, and at the end she walks downhill disappearing into the image. This makes sense as an idea; she comes to the stairs to look and remember and then goes away again. While performing the action was the opposite: placing the camera on the tripod, turning it on, walking down the stairs, waiting for a

moment and then returning up the stairs to turn off the camera. When returning to the video now, I see that not only the temporal layers of the images mix, but also memories of the real actions. For a reader-viewer a somewhat similar layering might take place, if the action in the images is mixed with other more or less related memories of stairs or walking—uphill, downhill, now, and then.

Endnotes

¹ This text is based on a narration prepared for a presentation at the NSU (Nordic Summer University) meeting 26-27.7.2020 that this time took place on Harakka Island, the site where these works were made. It was part of “Precarious Playground,” which consisted of an introductory walk and a screening of “Returning to the Stairs” with a voice-over narration performed live.

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