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AS THE SAVIOUR  
OF THE ROUTINE  
IN THE PANDEMIC ERA**

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# DANCE MOVEMENT AS THE SAVIOUR OF THE ROUTINE IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

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## Abstract

Routines are originally considered to be the pillars of stability and security. They make us feel homey and in control, even if they can be boring and monotonous. Brushing teeth, dressing or cleaning are tasks that we perform almost automatically every day and in their repetitiveness we find a balance against the unpredictability of reality outside our homes. Usually, the routine is acceptable because it can be disrupted. Breaks are necessary to appreciate the ordinariness. But what if the ruptures are eliminated? What if everyday routine becomes a permanent condition? During social quarantine restrictions, the number of domestic videos in which people are doing various domestic chores in a performative way began to increase rapidly on social networks. Of course, the intertwining of dance and everydayness is not a new phenomenon. But what if it is no longer a dance that appropriates elements and gestures of everyday life, but it is everydayness that parasitizes on dance? In my study, I will try to demonstrate how the obligatory curfew deprives everyday habits of their original function and why this dance or performative movement can be one of the effective tools to bring the safety and familiarity back in the routine. I claim that so-called performative presence can make everydayness and ordinary bearable again.<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

Routine, Performative Presence, Dance, Pandemic, Everydayness, Rupture.

## 1. Introduction

Dance critic Gia Kourlas recently wrote in one of her texts for the New York Times that today we are all dancers.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic prescribes choreography of our movement and we must follow it - to be at least two meters apart, to avoid any touch, to walk along the edges of the sidewalks so that others can pass around us safely. „The pandemic has created something fascinating: a new way of moving, a new way of dancing in the streets.“<sup>3</sup> Shops, pharmacies and even banks use tape on the floors to specify the exact trajectories of our steps. They define boundaries, conduct the dynamics of our dance. The collective “choreography” is dispersed into hundreds of solo performances.

The COVID-19 pandemic is in many ways reminiscent of the plague pandemic described by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. It also sectionalised the space, froze the movement. The plague, like coronavirus, required “multiple separations individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power.”<sup>4</sup> We can say that some state governments today live a bit of a “dream of a disciplined society”, a “utopia of the perfectly governed city”<sup>5</sup>.

In recent months, cities have become Foucault's disciplinary spaces, in which gatherings are suppressed, where each individual has its own specific place, where we can supervise everyone's behaviour, punish but also appreciate it (in Slovakia, for example, through text messages from the Public Health Office). Our bodies have become "docile bodies" governed by restrictions, prohibitions, obligations. We are moving under the weight of much greater responsibility, physical contact can cause fatal consequences. Street "dancing" has become moral.

The pandemic restrictions not only changed the way we move in public space but also significantly affected the experience of our everyday life in the privacy of our homes and flats. Millions of people have been required to work from their home offices, students have commenced distance education, parents have become teachers. We celebrate the birthday with our relatives through Skype, we participate in conferences, concerts, or yoga classes through Zoom. Hundreds of thousands of us found themselves in lockdown, in obligatory quarantine, or have been placed under curfew. We have been in a new model of reality since the spring. And I think I'm right when I say that we also live in a new model of everyday life.

In my study, I will be particularly interested in how the pandemic affected daily habituality and routines that traditionally gives us a feeling of homey and control. Brushing teeth, dressing or cleaning are tasks that we perform almost automatically every day and, in their repetitiveness, we find a balance against the unpredictability of reality outside our homes. But what if everyday routine becomes a *permanent* condition?

My initial impulse to this topic was the identification of the rapid increase in the number of domestic videos on social networks in which people are doing daily chores in a performative way during the lockdown. They started to show the removal of dishes from the dishwasher or the dusting as choreographic sets. Of course, the aestheticization of the banal is not a new phenomenon in the age of Instagram or TikTok; however, forced domestic isolation has fundamentally contributed to its even more significant expansion. Why? Why do people need *to perform* everyday routine?

In the following parts, I will try to demonstrate how the lockdown deprives everyday habits of their original function and why the dance or performative movement can be one of the effective tools to bring the safety and familiarity back to the routine.

## **2. Routine and its Rupture**

We cannot escape everyday life, writes the Austrian philosopher Konrad Paul Liessemann in his book *The Universe of Things*. According to him, life would not be possible to live if it were otherwise. We all are doomed to perform minor or bigger stereotypical tasks. Some of them are existentially necessary and almost unchanged (sleeping, eating), others, more variable, are

defined by our social or work being or by our hobbies (morning running, dinner with friends, work meetings, Twitter scrolling).<sup>6</sup> Each of us does something regularly every day.

Routines are originally considered to be the pillars of stability and security. They "bring order and control to lives that may otherwise seem entirely determined by the contingencies of context."<sup>7</sup> According to Liessmann, a sign of everyday life is that we almost do not perceive it and its function is not to make our life more interesting, but to allow us (in it) to exist. Philosopher and aesthetician Arto Haapala claims that routine, as an activity that is performed on a regular basis, gives us a sense of control, something we can count on. "Everydayness is identified with such qualities as comfort, ease, safety, and coziness,"<sup>8</sup> writes philosopher Kalle Puolakka with reference to Haapala and aesthetician Ossi Naukkarinen. They argue that "the ordinariness, routines, and familiarity which constitute the "everydayness" of our everyday lives are integral and fundamental aspects of human existence"<sup>9</sup>. Jessica J. Lee goes even further when she says that it is about these repetitive activities and habits that make a house into a *home*: "We do not necessarily clean the house for the sake of cleanliness itself, we clean for our own satisfaction and to make our homes more comforting for ourselves and others."<sup>10</sup>

On the other side, a routine can be also boring, monotonous, and dull. Naukkarinen emphasizes that ordinariness "has both positive and negative, plus rather neutral, aspects to it, depending on how we see it"<sup>11</sup>. Also, Ben Highmore, a cultural studies scholar specializing in everyday studies and philosopher Yuriko Saito remind us that everydayness cannot be associated only with concepts such as homey or warmth. Its character is ambiguous. Highmore states that routine can be "simultaneously comforting and frustrating"<sup>12</sup>. Even according to Saito "most people experience everyday life sometimes as a dreary and monotonous routine and some other times as a familiar safe haven"<sup>13</sup>. At the time of the pandemic curfew, it is precisely this annoying dimension of routine that is intensifying, and the feeling of frequent repetitiousness accelerates. The routine becomes only dreary drudgery for us. We can no longer rely on its aura of reassurance and settlement. Why is it happening? Why does domestic isolation make the routine *a burden*?

Usually, the routine is acceptable because it can be disrupted. Breaks are necessary to appreciate the ordinariness. But what if these breaks are eliminated? I would like to list two possible ruptures of the daily routine:

The first is the interruption of the ordinary by some *extraordinary experience*. One that is the exact opposite of the routine and is, therefore, something unique, unrepeatable, unexpected, exciting - such as a vacation, a surprising visit or phone call, an accidental meeting, a celebration in a restaurant... We need a temporary departure from the everyday to love it, to appreciate it even more. At the end of the holiday, we are looking forward to lying back in our bed, watching Netflix during breakfast, and ironing our shirts while listening to podcasts in the evening.

The second disruption lies in the presence of a certain *conscious aesthetic dimension* in the routine which can make monotony colourful. We are not talking here about some external elements that infuse aesthetics into the routine but rather we see routine filled with inner aesthetic potential. I will explain this through the example of Yuriko Saito: “Many claim that there is an “art” to laundry hanging, such as creating an order by hanging similar kind of things or items of the same color together or by hanging objects in order of size. Furthermore, the reward of skillful laundry hanging is also aesthetic: the properly hung clothes retain their shape and carefully stretching clothes before hanging minimizes wrinkles. Finally, the fresh smell of sun-soaked clothes and linens cannot be duplicated by scented laundry detergent or softener.”<sup>14</sup> This second distraction indicates that we normally see the aesthetics in everyday situations which make them bearable.

However, the problem is that pandemic eliminates both of these ruptures - the curfew significantly limits the possibilities of unusual experiences and also gradually weakens our ability to perceive the aesthetic potential of routine activities. The almost never-ending household isolation turns every possible extraordinary into the ordinary and aesthetic into the anaesthetic. It also creates routine from activities that we did not consider as a routine before. Originally sedative repetitiveness suddenly became a reminder of isolation and an uncertain future. Consequently, if we didn't want to completely reduce life to a set of anesthetized acts, we would have to start looking for ways to return the routine to its original function. Dance has become our new rupture.

### **3. Dance and Everydayness**

During the lockdown, choreographer Ryan Heffington began holding live dance classes on Instagram called *SweatFest* in which, among other things, he also performs choreographic sequences that reflect domestic isolation – for example, so-called refrigerator run. Kristen Warner describes her experience with his lesson: “He invites us to run, in slow motion to the fridge, exaggeratedly opening the door using your whole body not just arms (...) we’ve gone (even if we didn’t quite mean to) from exercising to dancing and a mundane, regular pandemic activity.”<sup>15</sup> Sarah Wildma also reports on her impression of the class: “We’re told to sweep the house (“get the corners, honey!”) and wash the windows. We “write an email” and send it away.”<sup>16</sup> Heffington, whose work has long disturbed the usual views on dance<sup>17</sup>, this time disrupts the daily home exercises, which also converted to the routine in many households during a pandemic. It prevents us from practicing them on autopilot. At the same time Heffington shows how we can smash various domestic necessary rituals through dance and find something special and strange in this heightened banality of our everyday lives.

Of course, the intertwining of dance and everyday life is nothing new, it has already started in the 1960s. It was especially Steve Paxton, considered the founder of contact improvisation, who rebelled against the conventions of modern dance at that time by appropriating trivial activities such as eating, dressing, smiling into his choreography. He was mostly fascinated by human walking which he observed at the markets in New York early in the morning. Dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham also declared that any move can be a material for dancing, any part of the body can create movement and it is possible to dance in any space. In one of Paxton's most famous works, *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967), dozens of people walk the stage seemingly ordinary and aimlessly, sometimes stopping or sitting down. Everyone, of course, moves in a unique and precisely defined way. When Paxton was given the task of creating a one-minute dance at school, there is a story that he sat down on a bench and ate a sandwich for sixty seconds. For him a non-artistic act became a source of a deeper knowledge of his body and himself.

Paxton generally claimed that dance brought us back to our nature and did not perceive it as the contradiction of everyday life. What was a revolution sixty years ago is a well-established, anticipated, and even required component of contemporary dance today. But what happens when the parasitism proceeds oppositely? What if it is no longer a dance that appropriates elements and gestures of everyday life, but it is everydayness that parasitizes on dance? What are the consequences of contamination of everyday life by dance movements?

#### **4. Performative Presence**

Dance performance places the body in a state called performative presence. The performer's attention is at this moment completely focused on the action performed, he is fully aware of it. He also consciously experiences it considering a given space, time, and the audience. He is present in action *here and now*. "To experience the other and oneself as present means to experience them as embodied minds; thus, ordinary existence is experienced as extraordinary — as transformed and even transfigured,"<sup>18</sup> explains theoretician of theatre and performance Erika Fischer-Lichte. This means that when I commence my daily activities performatively, firstly, the autopilot will turn off. Suddenly, I find myself to be fully occupied with the routine. As a result, I begin to feel my body differently and also my perception of space and time in which the routine is performed, will change. "Dance refocuses our focusing mind on very basic existence, and time, space, gravity open up to creativity,"<sup>19</sup> writes Kourlas. Let's look at these changes in our relationship to the home environment in a little more detail:

1. Relation to the body: By placing the body in a performative presence, it will turn it in the subject and an ephemeral object at once. Through the dance movement, the body will determine that it is the performer of the routine. At the same time, converting the body into an object will

allow me to take an aesthetic distance from it and I will be able to isolate the routine from its practical context. As Saito states: “It is clear that the familiar and the ordinary can generate an aesthetic experience when we render them unfamiliar and extraordinary by isolating them from their everyday context and shedding a different light on them.”<sup>20</sup> Due to this act, I know that I can achieve dominance over the routine as both, a performer and a choreographer, at once. I control the movement and I can recover (at least at that moment) the feeling of steadiness in the routine.

2. Relation to space: Dance movement allows me to experience space differently, to perceive its size or purpose otherwise. Maybe thanks to dancing, I’ll start vacuuming the bedroom in an unusual direction. Space seems more flexible to the performative body, the contact with objects in it can suddenly be completely surprising and unexpected. In some places I may suddenly feel cold or warm, the touch with the surfaces of shelves or upholstered sofas can be rougher than it used to be. In a performative presence, familiar things begin to change their identities and functions. Considering the pandemic isolation, where the apartments sometimes resemble a prison, transforming them into performative scenes, we can free the space from the crampedness of the four walls. Kristen Warner and Clare Croft confirm this kind of feeling: “Spontaneity is possible because he [Heffington] assumes your home is ready to be a dance floor, and if you move with your household objects, the claustrophobic can be transformed into something expansive, strange.”<sup>21</sup>

3. Relation to time: The standard routine clearly structures my day. I brush my teeth for three minutes, I have 20 minutes set aside for breakfast, the washing machine will wash for two hours, I have to respond to emails between 3 and 5 pm. Performativity can change the perception of time. It has the power to speed it up or slow it down, psychological time is about to dominate over objective time. Being *here* and *now* interrupts any relationship to the past or the future. As a performative body, I forget the depressing vision of endless pandemic custody. I focus on the presence and allow myself to break free from the linear experience of time.

4. Relation to the audience: A dance performance is a traditional live interaction of a performer and a spectator in the paradigm of *here* and *now*.<sup>22</sup> This relationship has, of course, a specific position in the case of domestic amateur performances. As the goal of these acts is not to create a work of art or an artistic performance, the recipient is essentially irrelevant in most cases. If the spectator enters this event at all, it happens mostly after the event is finished, via videos on social networks. So, there is no direct immediate response of the performer to the viewer. The interaction occurs in following likes or comments and does not retroactively affect the performative activity. I incline to the opinion of philosopher Kevin Melchionne who claims that this kind of performance “is not simply for the pleasure of the onlooker, but also for the homemaker, who takes pleasure in the process.”<sup>23</sup> According to me, it is especially for the homemaker.

## 5. Conclusion

In my study, I tried to suggest that by appropriating some dance movement into our everydayness, we give our infinite pandemic habituality its necessary disruption and our routines can regain their function of the pillars of stability. Thanks to performative presence we will be aware of our bodies, we will replace anaesthetization with attentiveness. And paying attention is a prerequisite for any kind of aesthetic experience. Yuriko Saito confirms that “we can capture the aesthetic texture of ordinariness experienced as such, as long as we pay attention to what we are experiencing rather than acting on autopilot.”<sup>24</sup>

If we look at the pandemic as a tool for the destruction of the familiarity and security of everyday life, dance can be considered as an instrument for the aesthetic deconstruction of the everyday. It will split its rational basis into a system of dance compositions, by which we suddenly look at the everyday differently, we enrich it with the necessary small rifts that make everyday bearable again. We weaken the practical function of routines at the expense of the aesthetic function. We make the invisible visible again. We experience the reenchantment of everydayness.

Turning pandemic housework bodies into dance housework bodies does not mean elevating a trivial activity to art but restoring everydayness and returning its tolerability and natural role to everyday life. Simultaneously, we will deprive our bodies of the required obedience for a while and give them a little aesthetic rebellion through dancing.

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<sup>1</sup> The study was created within the project KEGA no. 016PU-4/2018 entitled „Compendium Aestheticae: Edition of Teaching Texts for the Study Program of Aesthetics“.

<sup>2</sup> Gia Kourlas, “How We Use Our Bodies to Navigate a Pandemic,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.ny-times.com/2020/03/31/arts/dance/choreographing-the-street-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Kourlas, “How We Use Our Bodies”

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, Inc., 1977), 198.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Kalle Puolakka, „Does Valery Gergiev have an everyday?“ in *Paths From The Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics*, eds. Oiva Kuisma, Sanna Lehtinen and Harri Mäcklin (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019), 136.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Highmore, „Homework. Routine, social aesthetics and the ambiguity of everyday life,“ *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 307, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950238042000201536>.

<sup>8</sup> Puolakka, „Does Valery Gergiev,“ 136.

<sup>9</sup> Oiva Kuisma and Sanna Lehtinen and Harri Mäcklin, eds., *Paths From The Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Jessica J. Lee, “Home Life: Cultivating a Domestic Aesthetic,“ *Contemporary Aesthetics* VOLUME 8 (2010), <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=587&searchstr=Jessica+J.+Lee>.

<sup>11</sup> Ossi Naukkarinen, “Everyday Aesthetics and Everyday Behavior,“ *Contemporary Aesthetics* VOLUME 15 (2017), <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=802&searchstr=Naukkarinen>.

<sup>12</sup> Highmore, “Homework,“ 311.

<sup>13</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Introduction, Kindle.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, “Home Life.”

<sup>15</sup> Kristen Warner, and Clare Croft, “Dance Routines, Pandemic Routines: Ryan Heffington's "SWEATFEST",“ *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 1, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Wildma, “I’m Dancing My Way Through the Pandemic With Ryan Heffington,“ *Vogue*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/dancing-through-pandemic-ryan-heffington-sweat-fast>.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Heffington is best known for choreographing the music videos for Sia’s Chandelier or creating the choreography for the science fiction series The OA.



<sup>18</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> Kourlas, "How We Use Our Bodies"

<sup>20</sup> Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, chap. 1.3.2.

<sup>21</sup> Warner, and Croft, "Dance Routines."

<sup>22</sup> Juraj Korec, "Telo v kontexte tanečnej performance," (PhD diss., Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, 2018), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Lee, "Home Life."

<sup>24</sup> Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, Introduction.

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