

CHAPTER 18

Transformations of Everydayness in the Pandemic Era

Michaela Paštéková

Abstract: Philosopher and aesthetician Arto Haapala (2005) claims that the routine gives us a feeling of homeyness 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 daily routine becomes a permanent condition? If the ruptures that disrupt it go away? The global pandemic has exposed us to a new model of existence. By accelerating the extraction of daily routine's monotonous cycle, it disrupted its basic function - to keep our lives within the limits of (apparent) normalcy. One way to restore the status of support to everyday rituals is to place them in an aesthetic dimension. For example, by making the dusting a performative act. What happens to a routine when we “infect” it with the language of a dance performance? In my paper, I will address the question of how the pandemic changed the perception of everyday rituals and how the dance or performative movement can be one of the effective tools to bring the safety and familiarity back to the routine.

Keywords: Routine, Performative Presence, Dance, Pandemic, Everydayness, Rupture

1 New Choreography of Our Reality

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* (1977). 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” (Foucault 1977, p. 198).

Dance critic Gia Kourlas (2020) wrote in one of her texts for the New York Times that today we are all dancers. 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” (Ibid.). 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 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 birthdays with our relatives through Skype, we participate in conferences, concerts, or yoga classes through Zoom. Hundreds of thousands of us found ourselves in lockdown, in obligatory quarantine, or have been placed under curfew. Since the spring 2020, we do not only live in a new model of reality, but also in a new model of everyday life.

In the present study, I am particularly interested in how the pandemic has affected daily habituality and routines that traditionally give us the feeling of homeliness 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? What if we are left with nothing but the routine?

2 Break the Routine!

Routines are originally considered to be the pillars of stability and security. 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) (Puolakka 2019, p. 136). But all of them “bring order and control to lives that may otherwise seem entirely determined by the contingencies of context” (Highmore 2004, p. 307). According to philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann (2010), 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 (2005, p. 52) claims that routine, as an activity that is performed on a regular basis, gives us a sense of control, something we can count on. Each of us does something regularly every day. “Everydayness is identified with such qualities as comfort, ease, safety, and cosiness,” writes philosopher Kalle Puolakka with reference to Haapala and aesthetician Ossi Naukkarinen (Puolakka 2019, p. 136). Haapala and Naukkarinen argue that “the ordinariness, routines, and familiarity which constitute the ‘everydayness’ of our everyday lives are integral and fundamental aspects of human existence” (Kuisma, Lehtinen and Mäcklin 2019, p. 16). Environmental historian Jessica J. Lee (2010) goes even further when she says that it is about these repetitive activities and habits that make a house 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.”

On the other hand, a routine can be also boring, monotonous, and dull. Naukkarinen (2017) emphasizes that ordinariness “has both positive and negative, plus rather neutral, aspects to it, depending on how we see it.” 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 (2004, p. 311) states that routine can be “simultaneously comforting and frustrating.” Even according to Saito (2017, p. 2) “most people experience everyday life sometimes as a dreary and monotonous routine and some other times as a familiar safe haven.” 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? There could be at least two possible ruptures of the daily routine. The first is the interruption of the ordinary by some *extraordinary experience*. This experience is the exact opposite of the routine and is, therefore, unique, unrepeatably, unexpected, exciting - such as a vacation, a surprising visit or phone call, an accidental meeting, a celebration in a restaurant, and so on. 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. I am not talking here about some external elements that infuse aesthetics into the routine but rather that we see routine filled with inner aesthetic potential. We can explain this through the example of Yuriko Saito (2017, p. 131):

Many also talk about the ‘art’ of laundry hanging, such as creating an order by hanging similar kinds of things or items of the same colour together or by hanging objects in order of size. It also means that, when hanging socks, they should all face the same direction [...]. Furthermore, the reward of skilful 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.

The second distraction indicates that we normally see the aesthetics in everyday situations which make them bearable. However, the problem is that the 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 has suddenly become a reminder of isolation and an uncertain future. Consequently, if we do not want to completely reduce life to a set of anesthetized acts, we have to start looking for ways to return the routine to its original function.

3 The Performative Presence of the Body

During the lockdown, a rapid increase in the number of domestic videos on social networks in which people are doing daily chores in a performative way was identified. 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 do people need *to perform* everyday routine? I will demonstrate that dance or performative movement can be our missing rupture that brings the safety and familiarity back to the routine.

The intertwining of dance and everyday life is nothing new; it already started in the 1960s. Especially Steve Paxton, who is considered the founder of contact improvisation, rebelled against the conventions of modern dance at that time by appropriating trivial activities such as eating, dressing, and smiling into his choreography. He was mostly fascinated by human walking that he observed at the markets in New York early in the morning. Dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham also used to declare 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 (Banes 1987, p. 6). 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 Robert Dunn's composition class, there is a story that he sat down on a bench and ate a sandwich for sixty seconds (Rainer 2018). 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?

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. So when Gia Kourlas (2020) proclaims that "if this pandemic is teaching us anything, it is that we need to return to our bodies," performative movement can be one of the ways to do it.

Theoretician of theatre and performance Erika Fischer-Lichte in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008, p. 93) refers to the dichotomy of "having a body" and "being a body". In the context of this study, to *have a body* means doing a routine in a way, where the body serves only as a practical tool for doing some habitual activity. The body

is instrumentalized to achieve a goal. Of course, *we* move the hand to brush the teeth, or we press the button to turn the vacuum cleaner on, but we are not really *there*, we are not *present* in the action. The process of *becoming a body* starts in the moment we begin to do a routine consciously and that means, also, performatively. Performance forces us to be in the body, to be 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,” explains Fischer-Lichte (2008, pp. 99-100). The performative presence in this case does not mean to create something new, to let something extraordinary appear. “Instead, it marks the emergence of something very ordinary and develops it into an event” (Ibid.).

By placing the body in a performative presence, it turns it in the subject and an ephemeral object at once. Through the dance movement, the body determines that it is the performer of the routine. At the same time, converting the body into an object allows us to take an aesthetic distance from it and we are able to isolate the routine from its practical context. As Saito (2017, p. 22) 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.” Due to this act, we know that we can achieve dominance over the routine as both a performer and a choreographer, at once. We control the movement and we can recover (at least at that moment) the feeling of steadiness in the routine. This means that when we commence our daily activities performatively, firstly, the autopilot will turn off. Suddenly, we find ourselves to be fully occupied with the routine. As a result, we begin to feel our body differently (because we are a body) and also our perception of the 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,” Kourlas (2020) writes.

Dance movement allows us to perceive the size or the purpose of the space otherwise. Maybe thanks to dancing, we’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 we 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, by transforming them into performative scenes we can free the space from the crampedness of the four walls. According to Fischer-Lichte (2008, p. 107), to consider some space performative means to see it as unstable and constantly changing, as something that is constituted only in the process of performance. This ability stands in opposition to any kind of routine. The routine knows in advance all the paths of its movement.

The standard routine clearly structures our day. We brush our teeth for three minutes, we have 30 minutes set aside for dinner, the washing machine will wash for two hours, we have to respond to emails between 8 and 10 a.m. 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. We focus on the presence and allow ourselves to break free from the linear experience of time. As a performative body, we forget the depressing vision of endless pandemic custody.

A dance performance is a traditional live interaction of a performer and a spectator in the paradigm of the *here* and *now* (Korec 2018, p. 23). 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. Kevin Melchionne (1998, p. 198) likens the aestheticization of domestic process to a performance. But as Lee (2010) notes, “this performance, Melchionne argues, is not simply for the pleasure of the on-looker, but also for the homemaker, who takes pleasure in the process.”

4 Conclusion

We cannot escape everyday life, Liessmann states in his book *The Universe of Things* (2010). 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. And we feel comfortable in this regularity, as long as there is something to disturb it, to be its counterpoint.

The COVID-19 pandemic was initially a major break, which utterly changed the way we act. But very quickly, this rupture has become the so-called new normal that consumes everything around us and transforms it into a routine. Some people have found a way to resist this never-ending sameness in performative movement. I have tried to suggest that by appropriating it into our everydayness, we give our pandemic habituality its necessary disruption and our routines can regain their function of the pillars of stability. Thanks to performative presence we can be aware of our bodies and replace anaesthetization with attentiveness, and paying attention is a prerequisite for any kind of aesthetic experience. Yuriko Saito (2017, p. 3) 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.” As I tried to suggest in my study, to place something into the conscious aesthetic dimension makes the monotony and repetitiveness bearable.

Bibliography

- BANES, Sally, 1987. *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. USA: Westleyan University Press.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika, 2008. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Translated by Iris Jain SASKYA. New York: Routledge.
- FOUCAULT, Michel, 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan SHERIDAN. New York: Random House Inc.
- HAAPALA, Arto, 2005. On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place. In Andrew LIGHT and Jonathan M. SMITH, eds. *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 39-55.
- HIGHMORE, Ben, 2004. Homework. Routine, social aesthetics and the ambiguity of everyday life. In: *Cultural Studies* [online]. Vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 306-327 [Accessed: 24.3.2021]. Available at: doi: 10.1080/0950238042000201536.
- KOREC, Juraj, 2018. *Telo v kontexte tanečnej performance*. PhD dissertation, Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava.
- KOURLAS, Gia, 2020. How We Use Our Bodies to Navigate a Pandemic. In: *New York Times* [online]. 31 March 2020. [Accessed: 12.11.2020]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/arts/dance/choreographing-the-street-coronavirus.html>.
- KUISMA, Oiva, Sanna LEHTINEN and Harri MÄCKLIN, 2019. *Paths From The Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics*. Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics.

- LEE, Jessica J., 2010. Home Life: Cultivating a Domestic Aesthetic. In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* [online]. Vol. 8 [Accessed: 10.10.2020]. Available at: <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=587&searchstr=Jessica+J.+Lee>.
- LIESSMANN, Konrad Paul, 2010. *Das Universum der Dinge: Zur Ästhetik des Alltäglichen*. Wien: Zsolnay-Verlag.
- MELCHIONNE, Kevin, 1998. Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 191-200. Available at: [doi: 10.2307/432257](https://doi.org/10.2307/432257).
- NAUKKARINEN, Ossi, 2017. Everyday Aesthetics and Everyday Behavior. In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* [online]. Vol. 15 [Accessed: 17.10.2020]. Available at: <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=802&searchstr=Naukkarinen>.
- PUOLAKKA, Kalle, 2019. Does Valery Gergiev have an everyday? In: Ossi KUUSMA, Sanna LEHTINEN and Harri MÄCKLIN, eds. *Paths From The Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics*. Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, pp. 132-157.
- RAINER, Yvonne, 2018. Yvonne Rainer on Steve Paxton. In: *Artforum* [online]. Vol. 57, no. 1 [Accessed: 24.3.2021]. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/print/201807/yvonne-rainer-76345>.
- SAITO, Yuriko, 2017. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*. New York: Oxford University Press.