

## Performing Lag Time

Tagny Duff

The flight of time is not a straight path from point A to point B. Nor is the time of flight. The movement of time generates a *lag*—between here and there, departure and arrival, movement and stasis. While flying en route to a destination there is *time lag*; landing in another time zone creates *jet lag*; and when waiting for computer circuitry to crush binary code there is *lag time*. These forms of lag represent time as something that is lost, static or unproductive. The lag I am referring to is anything but fixed or still. It is the time when past

and present collide with futurity. It is the time when we are simultaneously flying and falling. It is “overfull, in excess of the actually-performed action.”<sup>1</sup> This is the excess generated during Tania Bruguera’s inflight performances, videotaped as part of *Vigilantes: The Dream of Reason*.

Travelling on an airplane draws us into an experience of lag time where individuals partake in collective anaesthetics. My daydream allows me to believe that the airplane’s floor is the ground and there is no possibility of falling thousands of feet to my death. The dream allows me to forget that I might not make it to my

destination in a couple of hours, let alone never arrive. I forget the images of hijacked planes and the sound of screaming passengers. The body’s synaesthetic cognitive system has learned how to protect itself from the trauma of accidents and the shock of excess by numbing the organism: “to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become rather, one of anaesthetics.”<sup>2</sup>

In the eight flights that Bruguera took in and out of the United States during the *Time Zones* project in 2004,<sup>3</sup> a small dose of speed is added to the anaesthetized

senses, creating synaesthetic experiences in the form of performances for the video camera. With these performances, Bruguera asks passengers sitting nearby to collaborate by suggesting actions and words for her to use. She also asks them to videotape what takes place. Complete strangers are given the role of amateur videographer and asked to record events in whatever way they choose, without any direction from the artist. As a result, a fellow passenger becomes Bruguera's and ultimately the viewer's prosthetic eye recording and witnessing the silent actions occurring on the plane. This roaming eye examines the details of the airplane cabin,

in real time, without the "optical correctness" and "newspeak eyes" of professionalization found in formulaic reality TV shows<sup>4</sup> (and most performance art documentation). With this body of work, the video recordings and the artist's actions do not exhibit the careful planning or aesthetic parameters of Bruguera's earlier signature pieces. In *Vigilantes*, Bruguera becomes an ambient prop in the video document, not the focus.

The first inflight performance is recorded by Jennifer Oldham and Kyla Miller. They both agree to provide Bruguera with a word and to videotape whatever

happens. One of the women suggests the word "chink," the other suggests "silence." Bruguera responds by writing "chink" on a small mirror. Then she pulls a hair from her head and threads it through a needle. With needle and thread in hand, she looks into the mirror and begins sewing the word "silence" onto the medical mask now covering her face. There isn't a literal connection between the words given and Bruguera's response. The event is without syntax, nor does it represent a pre-formulated message. For two hours the eye of the passenger lingers on Bruguera. We inhabit an intimate space, repeatedly zooming in on the artist's skin

and hair, examining each texture in macro vision.

My apprehension of the word “chink” physically manifests as *time lag*. Frantz Fanon defines time lag as something that delays response, making it always too late to announce one’s recognition of racism.<sup>5</sup> Time lag happens before I can say, “This is not acceptable.” It is the moment when I feel the violence of naming hit my face. Through the force of the camera’s eye, I am suspended in a space of anxiety. I want the video editing to remove this glitch. How can there be no mediation, no removal of this error? Is

this a political statement? Or am I reading racial violence into a harmless word uttered spontaneously in a moment of confusion? There is no ideological closure in this lag.

The second performance takes place on a late night flight, and is videotaped by Kuo Sa Chen. The sound of children speaking in the dark airplane cabin envelops the image of Bruguera chewing on ice and melting it in her mouth. Unlike the first video, the camera’s gaze remains at a distance, positioned across the aisle from the artist. A boy seated behind Bruguera says, “I am afraid of heights.” The artist

remains silent and still. The passengers and the conversations circulating around her are the focus of this recording. Bruguera’s actions are the ambient gestures of someone who is not threatening, just slightly odd. Other passengers pay little attention to her. No one seems to hear her reciting *Ithaka*, a poem by Constantine P. Cavafy<sup>6</sup> that focuses on the importance of passage rather than arrival.

As with the first video, I experience the sensation of flight while watching events unfold on the monitor. The child’s reference to “height” reminds me that the plane could crash, which in turn con-

centrates my attention on the anxiety towards air travel that has heightened since 9/11. Even so, the drone of the jet engine makes me feel sleepy. I get antsy. I look at the time left on the video, in an absurd attempt to find out how much time remains on the flight. I am restless and wish time would speed up. Once again I experience the lag time. Here, the glitch and drop-out normally edited out of performance art documentation to mask the slowness of real time is left unedited, making the movement of image and sound feel too slow. The amateur videographer generates the lag as she experiences it. My gaze crosses with hers. I am suspended.

It is a physical sensation that heightens my awareness of the chair I am sitting on. Here, a physical awareness of the passage of time is amplified.

Pamela R. Haunschild documents the third flight. The eye is fixed on Bruguera, who wears a dental dam strapped to her mouth, and a T-shirt that bears the inscription *Dissent Without Fear*. When Bruguera starts walking up and down the aisle, only two passengers seem to notice. When she disappears into the washroom, one of them leans over the aisle and asks Haunschild what is going on. Haunschild explains, "It's just a video." And then she

chuckles, saying, "We're going to be famous."

While watching this video, I find myself waiting for an accident to happen. I wait for the fall that happens every time we walk. I anticipate the fear of taking off and landing; the fear of falling from the sky; the fear that Bruguera will be detained by airplane staff because of her unusual behaviour. The narrative closure that we have come to expect doesn't take place. The eye of the camera blinks and then the anticipation of the fall is over as abruptly as it began.

The three video recordings described above are very different from one another, but they all embed a lag time that is performed in the circuitry of performance art documentation. These tapes raise critical questions pertaining to the practice of documenting (and archiving) performance events. Traditionally, someone with a trained eye—another artist or a professional videographer, for example—maneuvers the camera with the intention of creating an aesthetically pleasing representation of the live event. When edited, these video recordings of performance affect the sense of sight and sound, not the larger range of sensations

experienced in real time, such as touch, smell and taste. (It can be argued that under these circumstances the senses are anaesthetized). Performance documentation of this kind is typically used for disseminating works, securing funding for new projects, or selling performance-related objects to museums. But when an amateur videographer - one who has no direct relation to the field of art - operates the camera and directly contributes to the performance, the status of the document changes. With projects such as *Vigilantes*, the standard protocol of performance documentation is challenged in significant ways. Here, the performance

for and of the camera does not represent or capture the event as performance art. It generates a synaesthetic experience, where sound and image evoke a tactile and visceral experience of time, one that potentially shocks the senses out of anaesthetic slumber.

This series of inflight performances and video documents represent a major shift in Bruguera's practice. In previous works, she is the central subject of events conceived primarily for an art audience. But with *Vigilantes*, Bruguera (dis)places her identity as "artist" by performing *in situ* on United Airlines flights, where other pas-

sengers also play a vital role in determining how the work evolves.<sup>7</sup> Bruguera is willingly suspended as subject, hovering between anachronism and futurity, both witnessed and forgotten. A sensation akin to the experience of travel.

*Vigilantes* has none of the overt political content found in Bruguera's earlier works, such as the Ana Mendieta re-enactments carried out between 1985-1996, or *Displacement* (1998-1999), which addressed social and political issues directly related to the history of Cuba. With the inflight performances Bruguera generates a vocabulary of actions that are less defin-

able, gestures that meld with the anaesthetized context of the plane and the videographer's recording of what takes place. Here, we see events unfold through unrehearsed eyes, and for the first time Bruguera insists that the videographer be given credit for co-authoring the work.

The *Vigilantes* performances and video documents embrace a lag time that is often edited or omitted in the time of flight. The works highlight the problem of representing an event as performance art or recalling the duration of travel. The tickets purchased for these flights attempt to regulate time, duration, and space of travel,

forming contracts that govern when and where an identifiable subject will travel. They demand that a given subject have a name and nationality authorized to move from point A to point B. At point A, Bruguera is detained at Customs and asked for her passport and American visa. At point B, her identity is checked once again, and her movements documented. Something analogous happens to all artists working within the art system when they claim authorship for the work of art by showing documentation of the original event that arguably has no origin, only a trace among traces.

The lag of experience and the experience of the lag generated through the in-flight performances is irreducible to representation. This is the movement in time that Tania Bruguera's *Vigilantes* compels us to experience. Perhaps this ticket that we read now offers the potential to engage with Bruguera's rethinking of time, not as symbolic sign of a present past, but as a trace and imprint of time, in excess of itself.

## Notes

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1. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 29.
2. Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Art-work Essay Reconsidered," *October* (Fall 1992), p. 18.
3. The return flights were between Montreal/Chicago and Toronto/Chicago.
4. Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *The Accident of Art* (New York: Semiotext(e) and Columbia University Press, 2005), p 73.
5. Homi Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between." *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. (London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1996), p.57.
6. Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) is an internationally renowned poet of Greek origin. *Ithaka* was written in 1894.
7. These performances reflect a spirit similar to that of Bruguera's more recent work entitled *Arte De Conducta*, where unauthorized actions and provocative behaviour amplify and intensify fields of social relations *in situ*.