

Relational Stalinism - The Musical
Michael Portnoy

Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2016

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The Exhibition

“Relational Stalinism “

In opposition to the strangling of museum spaces worldwide by rampant immaterial kudzu, (i.e. Post-French Post-Conceptual Dance, Dance-We-Can't-Call-Dance, Po-Faced Minimalism, Feel-Good Participatory Glibbery, (a.k.a. Too Many Seagulls), and Performance with no qualities whatsoever aside from its leeching of court-approved historical referents, (a.k.a. Fancy Shoulder Piggybacking)), the breed of Relational Stalinism arose in a Theater Internment Facility in Preoccupied Benelux in the late Twenty-Teens. The primary tenets of Relational Stalinism are: Emboldening Confusion, Logocratic Exuberance, and Antic Behaviorism. Relational Stalinist works use a slippery iron fist to unbutton the viewer's buggy of self and catapult her into a realm of truths only palpable through higher forms of irrationality.

This advanced breed of world-bending adopts the degree-zero performance palette as a constraint (performers, in a room, that's it), but pushes it out of monochrome and into a pubotany of deviously vibrant offshoots which stretch participants' language and behavior in the service of invention.

Running across six spaces at Witte de With, *Relational Stalinism - The Musical* is an ambitious assemblage of new performances created by artist Michael Portnoy, enacted and developed with a diverse troupe of dancers, actors, singers and improvisers. Many different registers of performance will simultaneously cohabit the institution, mixing inscrutable role-play scenarios, experimental sketch comedy, hyperactive spectatorship, melodramatic operatic interlude, prog-rock micro-dance and teary-eyed theoretical soliloquy. Combining futurology with satire, this exhibition transmutes the seeds of prevalent approaches to visual arts performance as a form of generative critique.

Relational Stalinism - The Musical is the latest branch of Portnoy's *Improvement League*, initiated in the Taipei Biennial 2010, which seeks to “improve” existing breeds of art-making by pruning, grafting and hybridizing certain lines of thought in a kind of conceptual horticulture.

The exhibition asks how restrictive are the languages, both physical and linguistic, that we use to negotiate the world and our relationship to each other? How can ruptures of logic create new imperatives of thought? Foregrounding confusion as a generative subject position, *Relational Stalinism - The Musical* seeks to unsettle hierarchies of display, taste, and mediation induced by the museum space and to provoke shifts in perception that might open up new relations, meanings, and forms of behavior.

Relational Stalinism - The Musical does not appeal to absurdity in a nihilistic disavowal of the possibility of truth or knowledge, but seeks to militate against the habitual use of language and gesture that limits thought and expression. The exhibition deploys language and movement pushed to breaking point, to open up a new poetics and frustrate attempts to instrumentalize or apply a 'value' to the performances. In this it positions that which takes place in the museum as able to transmute, distort and stretch reality in some imperceptible way through the incantatory power of words and their novel combinations; revolutions of the mind which have implications for reality outside.

This exhibition has been prompted by a response to the current trend of staging performance in museums. It is the contention of the artist that performance has increasingly been brought into the art institution as a neutered form; safely packaged, aestheticized, co-opted and yet unquestioningly framed as 'transformative'. These claims should be up-ended, held up to scrutiny, and perhaps even laughed at.

About Michael Portnoy

Michael Portnoy (1971, US) has a background in dance and stand-up comedy, but switched camps to the field of visual arts around 2006. His performance-based practice is realized in a variety of media, from participatory installation and sculpture, to video, painting, writing, theater and curation.

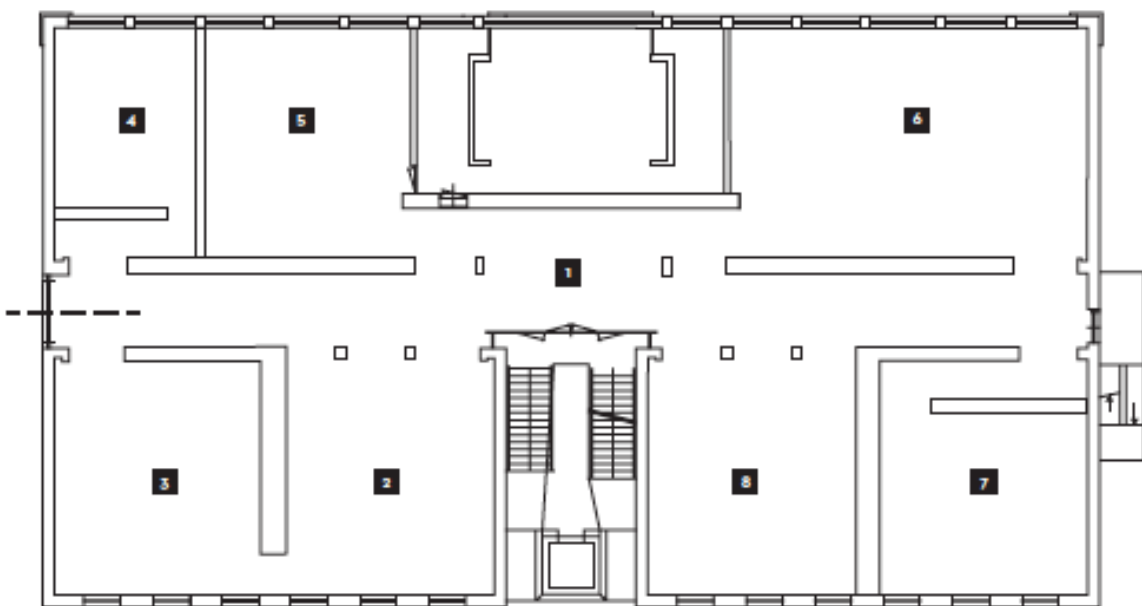
He has presented internationally in museums, art galleries, theaters and music halls, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2015 & 2010); Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2014); Cricoteka, Krakow (2014); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2013); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2013); The Kitchen, New York (2013); dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel (2012); Objectif Exhibitions, Antwerp (2011); Taipei Biennial (2010); De Appel, Amsterdam (2014 & 2010); Performa 07, 09, and 11 Biennial, New York; Kadist Foundation, Paris (2009); Kunstverein, Amsterdam (2009); SculptureCenter, New York (2008); Kunsthalle Basel (2008); and Art Unlimited Basel (2007). His first book, *Script Opposition in Late-Model Carrot Jokes*, was published in 2011 and he is a visiting lecturer at Malmö Art Academy.

Exhibition Walkthrough

The exhibition is formed of 11 performances running in a two-hour loop. Some run simultaneously.

The audience is lead between spaces by performers, and is drawn through the darkened museum by the activation of lights.

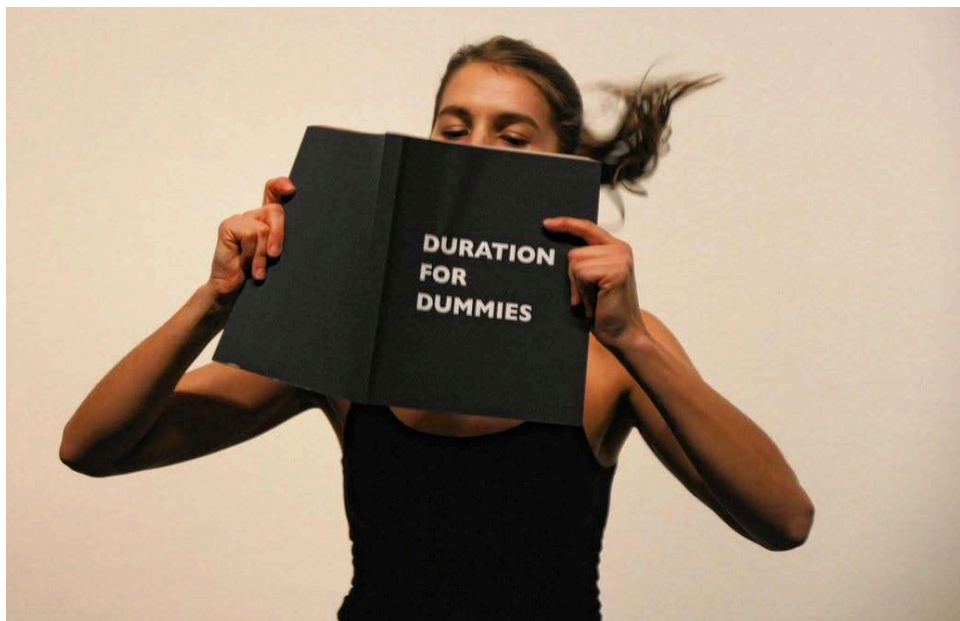
Each performance has its own specific lighting to create a varied palette of performance spaces.



Running Order

- *Mental Footnotes*
- *100 Big Entrances (WdW), Part 1*
- *An(al) Lee(k)*
- *The Citibank Sessions (A Dance of Logic)*
- *The Agglutinators (Rigoberto), 15 mins & Loveday - The Room*
- *DARSTELLERZWANGSLAGE*
- *Advanced Touch & The Citibank Sessions (A Dance of Logic)*
- *77 Blinks*
- *Rooms In Which...*
- *Blues on Blues*
- *100 Big Entrances (WdW), Part 2*

ROOM 1



Mental Footnotes

7 mins

The dance curriculum used to be fairly straightforward - courses in ballet, jazz, Graham technique, Labanotation, etc. Now to be a competitive worker in the immaterial marketplace a dancer must spend winters in PAF building an encyclopedic knowledge of theoretical discourse; Deluzian Disco, Foucauldian Foxtrots, Meillassouxian Mambo, Lacanian Lambada - so much so, and with demanding schedules, to keep up they must research their next show whilst dancing the current one, in 12/4. The dancer reads a stack of eighteen satirical books while performing an exhaustive foot routine.

ROOM 2



An(al) Lee(k)
9 mins

Note to the reader; we apologize for the malfunctioning of this AI. She is suffering from the traumatic effects of a highly constricted role in a piece by Tino Sehgal at the Stedelijk museum, and we are proud to offer her safe haven. Lexically challenged and lacking in naturalistic movement, parts of this young Japanese robot's speech have been outsourced to a British West-End Theatre actor.

ROOM 2



Rooms in Which...

7 mins

This immaterial archive is the world's most comprehensive collection of breeds of "Rooms in which..." some form of participatory performances take place; usually within white walled spaces, usually with members of the public and performers challenging them to take part in activities they wouldn't normally undertake, usually investing things that are totally mundane with meaning, or usually witnessing things that are difficult to do with your body (or really quite easy but not permissible in such spaces.)

Uniquely available to Witte de With visitors throughout the duration of Relational Stalinism – The Musical, we invite you to add to the archive by visiting the head archivist during exhibition hours.

The archive's assistant is pictured here performing one of the many unique and demanding choreographic routes through the dense immaterial shelving system.



DARSTELLERZWANGSLAGE

8 mins

A Post-Fordist worker languishes in Airbnb's around the world, stuck in an endless, melancholic packing and unpacking of her suitcase. A suspenseful operatic soundtrack sneaks through her almost closed mouth, synchronized to her every move.

ROOM 4



Advanced Touch

5 mins per loop

A highly limited number of people (twelve per cycle) are allowed admittance to this improvement of Yoko Ono's *Touch Poem for a Group of People* (1963).

Guided through this confounding ritual by a disembodied head floating three meters above, and her 'Directors of Behavior', participants are taught the intimate mysteries of *Advanced Touch*.

ROOM 5



Loveday - The Room
5 mins

Somewhere, in the bowels of Witte de With, one woman, one trumpet, one audience member, no way out. Will it be you?

“Loveday” subjects the viewer (who has been pulled from the exhibition for visibly letting her mind wander) to a dizzying interrogation, her language constantly folding in upon itself and on the verge of collapse.

ROOM 6



The Agglutinators (Rigoberto)

15 mins

Agglutinative languages are ones that have a severely limited number of root words that must be combined in novel ways to create meaning. Brutally lit by the brilliant white glare of 90s Belgian Dance Theatre, a tribe of lost performers attempts to communicate complex concepts through their individual lexicons of 30 words, each of which is accompanied by a non-illustrative movement. This piece is dedicated to Seventeenth Century philosopher Rigoberto Ballitestera and is indebted to his work in the field of "semantic primes".

ROOM 6



Blues on Blues

5 mins

Cross breeding anguished Greek Rebetiko with mangled American blues lyrics generated by specially designed software; this piece fittingly mourns the end of the Relational Stalinism show.



Citibank Sessions - A Dance of Logic

10 mins

“Hello this is Adrienne at Citibank, I’d be happy to help you today.” As an immaterial laborer artist Michael Portnoy is paid through wire transfers. After 19 years of banking with Citibank, Portnoy stumbled across a loophole in their telephone banking system that enables him to recoup nominal international transfer fees through stretching call center communiqué logic almost to breaking point. Taken further, this performative technique may indeed finally end rampant sub-prime mortgage lending across the US. No call center workers were harmed in this piece.

ROOM 8



77 Blinks

7 mins

On November 11, 2011, Portnoy invited Yvonne Rainer to join him for one glass of tea inside the dormant Thrihnukagigur volcano of Iceland. He videotaped their conversation and later composed a score for taiko drums to the exact timing of her 77 blinks. Each performer has undertaken 3.5 years of eyelid elasticizing boot camp training in the mountains of northern Holland.

The performers dance with their eyelids alone, blinking to the rhythmically complex taiko drum track.

ROOM 8



Big Entrances (WdW) Part 1 & 2

A dancer performs a series of choreographic permutations on the theatrical trope of the “big entrance”. Starting quite simply the directions become progressively complex pushing the dancer’s expressive and interpretive powers to the limit. In a mixture between hyper-realistic acting, dance and pantomime, the performer draws us into the many types of territories (geographic, psychological, political, theoretical, etc.) that one might “enter”. A ongoing performance in Portnoy's oeuvre, added to the directives in this current iteration are a selection of speculative aggrandized spaces boldly promised by Witte de With's recent press releases.

Additional Images













Credits

Directed Michael Portnoy

Choreography Michael Portnoy in collaboration with Mark Bellamy, Thomas Dudkiewicz, Jimmy Guacamole, Margo van de Linde, Keyna Nara, Evelyne Rossie, Loveday Smith, and Gerrie de Vries

Performers Mark Bellamy, Thomas Dudkiewicz, Jimmy Guacamole, Margo van de Linde, Keyna Nara, Evelyne Rossie, Loveday Smith, and Gerrie de Vries

Curators Defne Ayas and Natasha Hoare

Dramaturgy Advisor Maaïke Gouwenberg

Lighting Andre Goos and Jorg Schellenkens

Music Michael Portnoy

Costume Nadia van Luijk, Marieke Pruis, Yoeri Guépin

Production Assistant Sten Saarits

Relational Stalinism - The Musical is a co-production by Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and A.P.E (art projects era)

Cast Biographies

Mark Bellamy (1963, UK) has worked for 25 years internationally in theater, performance, film, TV and radio. He is an actor, mime player, puppeteer and radio presenter. He has worked with amongst others: De Daders, Griff Theater, Golden Palace, Gallili Dance, Feike Boschma, Nicoline Van Harskamp, Sara Van Der Heide, Radio Netherlands and BBC radio.

Thomas Dudkiewicz (1989, NL) graduated from the Theater Academy of Maastricht in 2011. Since then he has worked as an actor, writer and theater maker at institutions throughout Holland and Belgium. He is part of the performance collective Umland who are currently working on the final part of their *Internet Trilogy* at the Productiehuis Rotterdam (*Internet of things / Prometheus the Firebringer*).

Margo van de Linde (1982, NL) is an American-raised Dutch theater director, actress and singer. Margo van de Linde holds a BA Performing Arts from Middlesex University, a BA Performance Studies from the University of Amsterdam and a Masters of Theater from DasArts, Amsterdam. She has worked in the entertainment industry for over 10 years as a comedy improviser and as a Master of Ceremony. As a theater maker, she fuses elements of talkshow, roleplay, cabaret and live music in order to create theatrical portraits of a range of people.

Keyna Nara (1978, BE) is a Japanese / French performer. She studied at Rotterdam Dance Academy and recently received her Masters degree in Theater and Dance Theory at Utrecht University. As a performer, she has worked with several artists including Marina Abramović, Fiona Tan, Joachim Robbrecht, Bruno Listopad, and Krisztina de Châtel.

Claudio Ritfeld (1985, SR) is a poet, musician and dramatist. Self-taught, he joined the Theater Company '020' in Amsterdam where he studied under choreographer Maxi Hill. His practice has since developed from dance to encompass music, writing, composing and dramatic performance. He was recently part of Tino Sehgal's *One Year at the Stedelijk* (2015).

Evelyne Rossie (1986, BE) is a dancer and graduate of Contemporary Dance from AHK, Amsterdam. Recent projects and performances include *Exhibit*, House of Crying Yellow Tears; *Pansy Metal / Clovered Hoof*, Anita Pace & Mike Kelly, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; and *The Free Builders*, Moving Futures Festival.

Loveday Smith (1968, UK) trained for 3 years at East 15 Acting School in London, under Maggie Bury. She has worked for over 20 years with many great directors, including Sir Peter Hall and Sam Mendes. Smith now lives and works in the Netherlands as a voice over artist and member of the Orange Tea Theater ensemble. She took part in Tino Segal's *A Year at the Stedelijk* in 2015. Smith also writes and performs her own work and is currently developing her one-woman show *The Strumpet with a Trumpet*.

Gerrie de Vries (1956, NL) is a Mezzo Soprano, studied at the Sweelinck Conservatorium in Amsterdam, and is known internationally for her interpretations of the 20th century repertoire. She has performed numerous works, often written for and dedicated to her, such as *Pancho Villa*, songs by Robert Zuidam, and *I am her Mouth*, a solo piece by Jan van de Putte. She is currently artistic director of De Helling, an initiative for small-scale music theater in the Netherlands.

Budget and Technicalities

A host institution would be required ensure the following:

- Artist Fee
- Performers Fees (currently 8 performers, some of these could be exchanged for local performers if needed.)
- Travel and stay for both performers and artist (performers are based in the Netherlands. Portnoy is based in US.)
- Per diems

Technical needs of the performances include

- Theatrical lighting
- Radio headphones
- Sound equipment
- Sound engineer

About Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art

Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art is an international public institution with Rotterdam as its home base. Established in 1990, Witte de With explores developments in contemporary art worldwide. Witte de With has been commenting on the social and political predicament since its inception through the presentation of curated exhibitions, symposia, live events, educational programs, and a bold publishing arm.

Contact

For further information about the exhibition and the touring conditions, please contact Curator Natasha Hoare via Natasha@wdw.nl or call +31 10 411 01 44.