

# Make the Impossible Attainable

## The Crafting of Yasen Vasilev's Impossible Actions

In September 2023, we had the joy of bringing a work by dance dramaturg and critic Yasen Vasilev to the New Performance Turku Biennale in Finland. *Impossible Actions* had traveled through eight intense years of slow maturation, and inhabited a magnetic, liminal space in the field. It was movement-based but it wasn't a dance piece; it put the body at the center of a collective exploration, yet it operated through a unique score meant for solo artists; it played with the limits of human embodiment, but the limits were approached in a radically soft, almost imperceptible way.

The theme for this edition of the Turku Biennale was »coming together,« and of the more than twenty performances we included in the program, this one fascinated us for the way the concept of coming together was unpacked and problematized. In the text that follows, I will share several aspects of Vasilev's vision for this work, the crafting process, and the stakes of staging this piece that I would describe as *site-specific* in its own right. Through fragments of a conversation with him, I attempt to address not just his choreographic questions, but some pivotal methodological concerns, and to present his stance towards the political stakes of performance art today.

María Villa — Apr 2, 2024



Jussi Virkkumaa / New performance biennale, 2023, Turku, Taiteen Talo

Emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a »natural order,« must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.

—Mark Fisher

The body is both obvious and hidden, complete, but unfinished, damaged, strange even to ourselves, we who are nevertheless nothing but this body.

—Nina Power

## A discussion about limits

Yasen Vasilev first started developing this approach to dance in 2015, while he was working in the dramaturgy of a solo in collaboration with Ghanaian performance artist Philip Boafo, in Shanghai. Based on his own background with poetry and textual works, the piece's genesis was a collage of texts and discussions. It unfolded as an intense exploration of several months, between writing and iterated embodied responses to it, and gave shape to Vasilev's masters thesis project. He proposed questions triggered by the readings, turning them into provocations for movement, and Boafo brought in bodily experiments and his own knowledge of somatics. As good artistic research goes, there was no predefined script in this collaboration, no pressure to come out with a choreography, but a very intuitive process of slowly assembling theory, images, poetry; an exercise of walking together in the dark.

The choice of method and the questions and texts, however, were not random. They came from a very particular interest in liberating the body from contemporary forms of control, in the Deleuzian sense. So let me stop here to consider what this means, even if just summarily. Because although seldom done in this context, it is always legitimate to ask who needs to be liberated and from what? Most bodies inhabit late capitalist democratic societies in a more or less state of untethered flow. In this world of ours - many would argue - the majority of old constraints and borders have been toppled down one way or another (in art, in gender, sex, religion, or ideology), and people are increasingly able to move across territories, disciplines, and cultures, unrestricted by old barriers in access to knowledge and resources, or limited only by their skill and merits in finding the way, the network, the leverage to do so, and claim a space, a positionality. With increasingly flexible and rapidly shifting societal and economic structures, the content we *consume* is largely free of any moral or aesthetic policing, and we can *buy* into the values we so choose to embrace, however toxic, dark, or libertarian.

The rhythms and behaviors imposed by societies of discipline like those of the Fordian factory, traditional heteronormative kinship, or totalitarian regimes, are no longer the undisputed norm in most of the west. And yet - Deleuze pointed out already in 1992, and we have come to be sharply aware in the last decades - there are other quite pervasive and surreptitious forms of biopolitical control that take advantage of the blurred boundary between private and public life.<sup>1</sup> And there is no hiding from them. They are embodied by the corporation and its colonization of the university system, with its motivational force pitting individuals against each other with promises of stability and success, and constantly micromanaging our performance, monitoring and monetizing our identities, our every move. Our society and our life is based on controlled

access to technologies of information that increasingly modulate and mediate our everyday life, our work, academic production, state services, intimate relations, and leisure time. They thrive on our endless thirst for communication, on harvesting data, gatekeeping and management of processes; on our limitless debt, on exchange and speculation. Deleuze himself announced it way before our current world order was running at dizzying speed: the nature of these forms of control will require equally fluid and responsive forms of resistance. Liberation is as pressing and hard as it ever was. How may art provide any avenues for it?

While thinking about these ideas in the context of embodied practice, and living in Shanghai, it eventually came to Vasilev's attention how state and corporate apparatuses not only have developed surveillance and biometric technologies to recognize our faces or retinas, but they can track our unique walking demeanor. This line of reflection posed him onto what Bojana Cvejić calls a *choreographic problem*.<sup>2</sup> Because, under this light, how one moves becomes automatically a political thing. The problem was, bluntly put: how do we create a movement that would bypass the recognition devices, that would not be perceived as *human*? How do we stop our bodies from being mined for profit? Movement research had a political valence here – how do we resist this, physically?

A *choreographic problem* can be understood as a series of thoughts that guide choreographers into a research process. However, Cvejić explains, this isn't a relationship between thoughts on one side, and sensibility, movement, time, and embodiment on the other; it is not a concept or narrative guiding the movement unilaterally as it were. Instead, when working with a choreographic problem, *thought is both productive and emergent*: it shapes or guides the choreographer's decisions and is itself shaped by the movement research.

In the past couple of decades, dance in the expanded sense had already been discussing how to »exhaust movement,« in Lepecki's terms:<sup>3</sup> how to move away from the paradigm of virtuous incessant motility, how to interrupt the kinetic flow of modern dance, and investigate bodily movement which »might not look like dance.« If these discussions had already afforded striking possibilities in the fields of performance and dance, the question remained: How was it possible to move in a way that would blur the boundary between the human and the nonhuman movement? What could a thought/movement process (or a *thought-in-the-act*, with Manning) like that enable?<sup>4</sup> *Nutricula* is the title of the work that emerged from the collaboration between Vasilev and Bofo in this journey. Vasilev explains:

Around that time, a jellyfish (*Turritopsis Nutricula* is the Latin name) found in the south of Italy – in the place where Nietzsche was writing *The Eternal Return*, apparently, according to *The New York Times* – was getting a lot of attention in the media because it was discovered that this jellyfish is one of the very few organisms on Earth that never die. It doesn't actually reach a natural death. The moment it ends its life cycle, it starts a process of reverse aging. It's also the only organism capable of going back from a sexually mature age to being an embryo. The *Nutricula* is in a constant process of growing old and then growing young again, and it can only die from an outside death. It's an

organism that only has a body and a mouth. So from the outside it looks so simple, but it has a genome that is as complicated as the human genome. [...]

I was fascinated by this organism and especially by this idea of simplicity on the surface and behind it something rather complex. So we started with this movement research around the mouth and the tongue, which is a central part of *Nutricula* and then of *Impossible Actions*. We were very interested in searching for something really raw, a biological process.

The solo piece created a nonaesthetic, powerful physical language, by taking the performer to an intensive struggle with himself to test and reimagine the limits of the body.<sup>5</sup> The ensemble of performer and dramaturg explored through it how to *liberate the body and the physical actions from the meaning that is imposed on them*. And the outcome was quite rough on the body, Vasilev admits today. So this was the inception of *Impossible Actions*, which still works in the direction of enabling unlimited possibilities yet, as I discuss below, operates via softer, subtler, and increasingly rich choreographic and collaborative strategies.<sup>6</sup>



Martin Atanasov, 2021, Sofia, Radar Sofia

### Writing with bodies

As Boafo was responding to these proposals with movement, there was an intuition, a sense of wanting to go into something that is more than human or nonhuman, »something strange and alien almost,« and the jellyfish gave a great deal of insight into how to do it. This more- or other-than-human became an organizing principle for choosing and threading the material within the sequence that today constitutes the score of *Impossible Actions*. Each of the sections that compose the piece were originally avenues to investigate how this movement can come about. When Vasilev addresses the rawness of the work, another layer of this resistance of the piece emerges,

having to do not with biometrics but with the way dance itself is recaptured within the capitalist machine:

In relation to the question of resistance, we also wanted to do something like what Grotowski was calling »poor theater.« We wanted to have the body very fragile and without any theatrical things to support it. And in that way, to also comment on the working conditions and to strip down everything: so, no lights, no music, no costume, no makeup. Philip performed in the clothes he used in the rehearsals, tracksuit and a T-shirt. And so no artist charm and no beauty and no aesthetics. So very, very raw.

This was a desire to work against the grain of an industry and a relationship with artistic work that bears heavily on our roles as art producers and consumers. Vasilev talks about the expectation in performing arts audiences to receive pleasure, be entertained, have fun. A desire, I agree, that is also supported by dramaturgical structures: You are expected to diligently provide the coordinates for decoding what a piece is about, to seamlessly build up a climax, and ensure tension is resolved in a satisfactory »make-sense« ending. No questions hanging in the air to take home and mull over. After many surprises and actions triggering emotions in rapid succession, no true moment of confrontation.

That's why the slow start of these fifteen minutes of lifting the hand, and just being extremely annoying to the audience, was intentional. It was a resistance in that sense as well: going against what you want to see. [...] In the solo that is a central component: if you're doing this by yourself in front of people, totally exposed, surrounded by them, it's almost like asking who's going to blink first, me or you? Who is going to feel uncomfortable, the audience or the performer? It requires a lot of strength to be able to stand alone and do this. And for the collective work, I started asking people to think of it not as a performance, especially in this first part, to think of lifting the hands almost as a collective endeavor with the audience, so that they're breathing together and the audience becomes a part of the piece ... to kind of blur this boundary. I wanted the audience to be always on the level of the performers and with the same light, eliminating as much as possible the division in the stage. People can see each other: audience members can read other audience members' reactions. They are included in a quite important way.

At the level of the organization of the material, Vasilev explains the research process as a way of »writing with bodies,« an idea that was pivotal as *Impossible Actions* was born as a collective piece in 2019, when he was invited to work in Barcelona. After having done the first version of the work in Taipei, Taiwan, he landed in La Caldera where there is a public program called *Corpografias*, a reference to writing that draws a sharp contrast to *coreografías*. While choreo-graphy is literally »dance writing,« the program refuses dance as a rule, declaring it is enough to have a body on stage - in that act, already a great deal of meaning can emerge. How one organizes bodies on stage is already a form of writing.

Vasilev had come back to Europe in 2016 and spent some time building a network, an avenue for the work. He did residencies in different places and started writing for *Springback*, and gradually found in dance a place where this practice could be embraced. From 2016 to 2018, he redid the solo in different places, until, in 2019, he decided to have an open call and use the score of *Nutricula* for a

collective piece. Unexpectedly, many people responded when he offered a three-day open workshop around the concept - in Barcelona, more than 35, in Taipei 25. He would introduce the principles in the workshop, and participants, professional dancers or not, would try it out.<sup>7</sup> But people wanted the process to continue, so it went on for two weeks. He realized then that there was something quite compelling in it, and eventually his interest started shifting from the questions about resistance and the body as a solo, toward the collective space, and the dynamic between individual and collective.

As he put together a group of performers to continue his movement research in a collective form, the score continued evolving. A method to work with a group gradually took shape, and within such space the possibilities of the score multiplied as well. People underwent an intensive collective preparatory process. They were still expected to use the score for a solo, but were also gathered around the choreographic problem and to discuss the critical theory together, and then invited to work on a series of tasks testing the limits and functions of the body to build their personal solos. And by »limits« Vasilev meant not just the movements, forms, and behaviors imposed by social infrastructures, but also those required by the dance discipline and the dance labor - which is still today weighed heavily by modern imperatives of the kinetic, precise technique and abled bodies. Last but not least, he invited them to deconstruct their (un)conscious habits of movement. How concretely was this achieved?



Taipei artist village, 2019, Taipei



Martin Atanasov, 2021, Varna, Moving body festival

The score includes six mental and physical tasks to test and reimagine bodily limits. These included extreme slowness; exploration of different body parts as objects separate from their function; finding a peculiar way of displacing the body; impossible actions; erasure of identity (the face as material); and tongue dance. People are prompted to use these tools to free their bodies and movements from meanings imposed on them, and in the process

each group has a chance to activate, change, and adapt the score based on the collective discussion.

Just to give an idea of the mental space they inhabit as they go into the solo, picture this: Especially in the first part, during the extreme slowness, the task requires their focus to be directed at their own body, and not take any outside information. They don't look at audience members or to any of their peers, and yet are very aware of all of it through soft focus. As part of the »impossible actions« task itself, when developing the movement of each iteration of the score, Vasilev asks participants to create a personal vocabulary of actions following three types of impracticable movements: moving the body towards the outside infrastructure (like pushing the wall, or lifting a column in the room); moving the body toward the body (trying to lick your own ear, or lift your entire self from the ground); and imaginary actions (fantastical procedures like trying to open the window using only your eyes). Based on these, each participant then proposes three concrete actions for the group to experiment with, and from there a particular group sequence is created. It is the group that is writing with bodies, with the minimal creative constraints and interaction rules Vasilev has laid out for them. But even the element of time in this execution of the score has been stretched to operate outside the expected:

I ask everyone to do it in their own timing, to not feel any pressure from the others, so they can be in very different timings. But I also ask to not go up for the next section before the last, slowest person has started this one. So in order to keep this as a cohesive collective journey, there is a dramaturgy of space that organizes the whole, and it goes up, down, up, down. But apart from that, they move at their own pace.

The seventh and last task of the score takes place in the second hour of the piece, and allows the performers to find the ending together in improvisation, inviting them to walk into the unknown again, this time in front of the audience, and rendering always a unique result.

Despite ambitious authorial texts and theoretical affiliations many pieces invoke today when presented to the public, it is rare to find works that would in fact invest critically on the collaborative crafting of the material, and with such awareness of the pitfalls of both individual and group practices. The features described here are just quick brushstrokes on the creative process of Vasilev's piece, but they give a sense of the complexity and richness it offers to participants, which makes it not just an interesting stage work but a substantial formative and creative space for movement research. When compared with the assembly-rehearse-and-display logic of many choreographic productions operating in the mainstream, I find the artistic and critical provisions Vasilev has structured over the years to guide the process of *Impossible Actions* quite remarkable. And I say this not just based on his account of the work as dramaturg, but because participants of the Turku edition attested it vividly both in their commitment to the process and in the conversations after the premiere.

## The personal unleashed

There is another aspect of the work that I found particularly strong while tracing the critical directions Vasilev has pursued here. The initial explorations of *Nutricula*, as already mentioned, followed the idea of going beyond that which we recognize as »human,« and led to rather raw, harsh movements on the body of Boafo, the performer. When telling me about this process, Vasilev admitted something that I found fascinating. They were trying to work with this body in a way that makes it strange and unable to capture, unable to grasp as meaning, as message. They were asking what can this body do? What does it say? And seeing it in an alienated way, so to speak; »defamiliarizing« it somehow. This entailed going against the romantic and modern idea of dance that understands liberation as unrestrained self-expression, which both Vasilev and Boafo considered a form of conformity.<sup>8</sup> They wanted to actually avoid expressing an »I« or a »self,« and to allow a space and time where the self could become something else, or make it dissolve into the movement.

There was this strong element of my external concept or vision for the solo piece, and then what came from the body - that with Philip was very interesting - was ... there was this moment of abandoning the concept or going into something very personal where he would cry or laugh and would suddenly become very vulnerable. And this kept happening, a sort of somatic thing.

Initially I said: »But isn't this the opposite of what we're trying to do?!« Because I was very interested in this nonhuman thing, and then suddenly the work was becoming very, very human and very touching, and emotional and messy. And at first I felt »I don't want to go there.« I wanted to remain in this distant and strange, cold, and nonhuman thing. But I realized I actually had to drop this concept and just follow what the body was telling. And that's how this came to be, this open-ended structure where the score was there, but also there was this moment where performers can liberate themselves from the score, and they can do whatever they want. For Philip it was this moment of expressing accumulated pain, I would say, and for other performers later on, it was other things.

There is a certain beauty to this paradox: in an attempt to put the personal completely at bay, shedding both the performative (representation) and the personal story to try and find this socially unscripted movement, the very pressure of the nonhuman has made the personal self burst out and completely spill over.

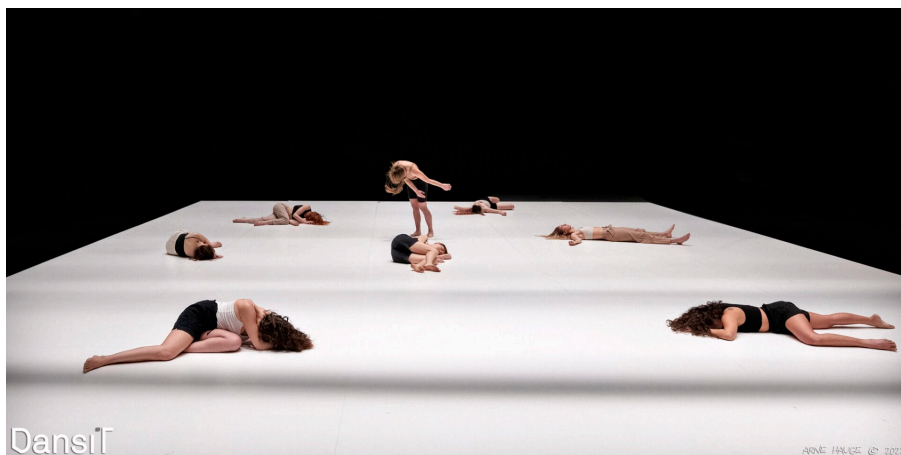
How could one possibly draw a sharp line between the formal and the political makeup of the body? Or between the professional dancer and the person for that matter?

Far from a reading which would make the personal sphere the protagonist of *Impossible Actions*, or declaring that we cannot be liberated from the societal forces that shape us, and from our personal story - thus, we cannot access the impossible -, I believe this puzzling moment of Vasilev's research is evidence of something else. While working or pushing against those pre-established limits, it is

the affective make up of our beings, I would say, that has taken over. It is the affective layer of our existence as *soma*, undivided and transindividual bodies, that refuses both an empty form and to be boxed into traditional humanist, individualist ideas, fixed identities or social roles. The rawness of that movement is profoundly human and vital, animal, at once.<sup>9</sup> And it could and probably should stay that way, while retaining an intensely political aspect, as Vujanović explains:

[...] artistic practices and research processes that cannot very easily become the precondition of production should earn more attention from European dance and performance artists. What characterizes them in general seems to be that they take into account and then overcome the artist's individual psychological realm - the need for self-expression and self-realization, the feeling of being politically incapable, of not having enough space for their ideas, etc. - while striving toward (un)certain outside and in-between, where these feelings are shared and eventually manifest as social and not only individual matters. To use the old saying, these activities show again and again how much the personal is political.<sup>10</sup>

How did Vasilev make sense of all this (pedagogically, dramaturgically), and how could he move forward? Giving in to this internal logic of the piece, he started traveling again on uncharted territory. His critical views had not lost steam, but he knew he needed to work with the movement research questions as they blended in with personal memories and conceptions of self and social, cultural, or political experiences that affect the bodies that move, and the minds that read the theory. He needed to give space for these layers to exist and shape the work collectively somehow, without letting them take over and giving in to sentimental representations. And he did exactly that: he created the conditions for these processes to explicitly fuel the movement and the collective discussion, and, most importantly, in doing so he discovered ways to somewhat defuse them in the creative process. Alternatively put, he invited people to do what Wittgenstein suggests at the end of his magnum opus: We must so to speak *throw away the ladder, after we have climbed up on it*.<sup>11</sup>



Arne Hauge / DansIT, 2022, Trondheim, Rosendal teater



CoFestival, 2021, Ljubljana, Kino Siska, CoFestival

In the eight iterations of *Impossible Actions* to date, the aim to critically reclaim the bodies of the performers has been prominent, but the method has both allowed people to reconsider their bodies and identities and invited them to investigate the unforeseeable possibilities such work opens for them artistically and personally *beyond the self*. Performers have worked on the score using personal writings and movement, based on their bodies and sociopolitical biographies, and operating an internal shift that may remain only visible to them.

I call this piece a *score* because it allows a person (and they don't even have to be professional to come in) to claim it as their own, perform it, but also find a personal motivation to do it and see where it takes them. For every person it brings out different things. And of course, different people have different capacity to open up to the score or to the vulnerability that it might provoke. So that's why I keep working with it, because I realized that there's something more that I don't fully understand; that it is *doing something*. My interest has gone beyond what is shown on stage, and into what they do with the movement. By doing things physically, you are acting on yourself and you are also acting on the so-called audience. But I also believe on a larger scale you are acting on the world. So it's a very different idea of just representing something that you read, interpret rationally, and then it's done. I think it has real consequences.

While thinking of this process as a way to address the body as political battleground, Vasilev is in fact very cautious of not using the body as identitarian devise (an instrument for representing or »performing« discourses of identity politics), which is a question that has been prevalent in the field in the last decades in debates around performativity. He is critical of the drive to make artworks that deal directly and often literally with polarizing societal inequalities and oppressions in an effort to symbolically empower marginalized groups. Recent scholarship has been vocal about the risks of this path,<sup>12</sup> and particularly, Martina Grzinic has questioned this strand of

artworks precisely as it ends up instrumentalized by the same structures it intends to criticize: the violences and oppressions depicted are in the same act losing their teeth against the system and their ability to move us politically, and become tokens we can relate to as »art.«<sup>13</sup> Either stylized and packaged for consumption as spectacle, or bluntly laid out as facts, they end up utterly normalized, a form emptied of all meaning.

Grzinic's perspectives are an important part of Vasilev's conceptual material for this piece because she is very much concerned with the colonization of bodies. And she asks us precisely to look beyond the easy representations, Vasilev explains: Once the physical or geographical colonization is done and fully accomplished, capitalism turns to our own bodies and our immaterial territory of ideas, concepts, emotions and desires and mines them for profit. The question of control presented at the beginning of our conversation stubbornly returns to the table: If this control is exercised, exerted on bodies, how can we resist it?

This was a big question, and for me it points to the need of abandoning self-expression. Can you work with form? Can you kind of eliminate the content? Grzinic speaks about the current arts, where the form presents all sorts of brutal realities in a very unmediated way, in such a form that what is once perceived as reality is made fictional again. ... which actually makes us numb and makes us politically blocked. So from this, I ask if it is possible for movement to take us out of this numbness or create a sort of agitation or a sort of anxiety or disturbance? In the confrontation with the audience that *Impossible Actions* works toward, making the public uncomfortable is a way to deal away with this numbness.

And on the side of the performers, we do not pursue a form that would kill the content, but a form that can allow you to be something else, so that it is emancipatory or liberating in that way: where you are free to stop performing yourself as an identity, or you can become something else.<sup>14</sup>

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This opening to the unexpected, the impossible that is created here, is particularly impactful given that the preparatory work of *Impossible Actions* is not just instrumental to a *mise-en-scène*, but is meant to give something to performers themselves, to take into their own practice. The work creates a temporal space where they can investigate movement together and has proved to give way to some sort of collective building. To Vasilev, even the potential for this to happen is another modest form in which resistance emerges in this work, by creating a crack into the individualism and competitiveness that are ingrained in the art field. The other critical aspect has to do with the enabling force it has for alternative artistic paths in their personal practices:

[...] the sort of critical tools that it gives you to think about movement practice and about your own practice. By going through the solo, you claim it as yours and it can also inform your own work. So as a practice, I think it has this capability to give you tools you can use. The writing exercises that I do operate like that: they're not informing the piece so

much, they are in fact for the performers to take, reflect, think, use as they please, and hopefully help them better understand, position and articulate what they are doing. So it can be also this: it can arm you, prepare you for a fight, let's say.

[...] But it doesn't always work. Sometimes it takes time for the group to activate this shared responsibility and say, okay, let's do this together; let's support each other. People have to abandon the attitude of »This is your work. You are the author, and now you are going to tell us what to do; we are just performers. We >animate,< we do the work, and we go home.« People have to shift a bit. And the shifting has come in different timings for different groups. And sometimes it doesn't happen and performers stay in their usual role, which can be disappointing.



Martin Atanasov, 2021, Sofia, Radar Sofia

### The Echo: disorienting coordinates

With that, we come back to the actual space of the performance, a large empty surface surrounded by the many sitting expectant bodies of the audience in full view, and 13 walking bodies at the center. Pacing at unison for ten minutes, not leaving a square meter of the dance floor untouched, they suddenly stop. And for another 15 minutes it seems like they will never move again. Except, if one is paying attention, as one's eyes wander from one to the next person, something is definitely changing. But what exactly is happening? You can cut the silence in the room with a knife. I can hear my own breath as I observe them. Their eyes seem frozen on an absent gaze. Their intense process both captivates and escapes me. And two hours after, I will leave the room with haunting memories of so much that has taken place, but still wondering, what was all that that I saw? What I felt, or imagined? ... What didn't I see?

Firstly, let us restate that *Impossible Actions* is more precisely described as a *practice* than a dance performance:<sup>15</sup> the piece is about

the creative and critical experience participants undergo through the collective process and the movement research, rather than about an artistic output to showcase. Given the iterative nature of the work, lending itself to be adapted by different groups, we also need to look for the accomplishments of the piece in what has emerged through this long trajectory. The material has been both recycled (using the score) and expanded (in the ever-evolving personal movement vocabularies) as it finds itself every time in a new site, embodied in different subjects and molded by the widely varied critical discussions of the workshops. Even the names of the sections of the score have been the result of these collective processes slowly maturing the piece, as it is mediated by the different cultural milieus: Taipei, Barcelona, Sofia, Varna, Ljubljana, Trondheim, Valetta, Turku. In Sofia, Bratan Bratanov, a performer in the group, described the second part of the piece as an »echo,« a perfect metaphor for what is taking place there. So I would like to jump now to the moment the *Echo* starts, when the score is over, the performers are left with very little instruction and, Vasilev says, basically anything is possible. And the question here is what happens when people are liberated from the score; or rather, from the control of the dramaturg. Because this is also the moment of collectivity, when they are freed from the constrained space of the solo and open their senses to each other. What happens when we have potentially unlimited choices? How do we deal with it *together*? This is for me the second fascinating question proposed by *Impossible Actions*, and the reason we brought it to a live art biennale in Turku.

In Taiwan it was very interesting that we had a lot of discussions about nudity. It's something that stayed with me because Taiwan is the only country in Southeast Asia where nudity is allowed on stage. So the performers had these intense discussions: Should we perform it naked? What would it mean? Can we decide collectively? Or make individual decisions and not pressure anyone in the group to do something they feel uncomfortable with? And I completely stepped out to give them the space to decide as a group what they want to do with this. And eventually they agreed each individual would decide in the process how they were comfortable doing it. Then half of the people were naked, half of the people weren't, but it was a very smooth and natural process. And it was also very beautiful in the *Echo*, especially, when they ended up all together in this pile of bodies on top of each other.

Vasilev explains the level of connection to this question of politics of the body has shifted greatly in different contexts, making very different topics gain traction. In Barcelona, for example, with a diverse Spanish speaking group, it was the question of decolonization that felt urgent and fruitful in the discussions and for developing the solos.

These are the elements that make the piece site-specific: the personal movement material emerging and the topics each group negotiates in the process of assembling their version of the work. In creating a meaningful space for both, Vasilev has made the work responsive to each particular group, thus ensuring an *in-situ* type of performance, in contemporary art's terms; a way to forefront how each group

interacts with these questions, with each other, with time-space and with the particular audience they encounter. Furthermore, I would like to suggest there is a way in which the *Echo* turns into a type of a social »experiment« – not in the social sciences sense of probing subjects as objects of study, but in the sense that live art talks about experiments: as radical explorations of action and presence. Let me explain what I mean with this.

The *Echo* has very simple parameters: Be present, do not speak (use only the body to communicate), work together, and do not leave the space (which is conditional: someone can still leave the space if they need to). This is, of course, deceptively simple. Vasilev says it is actually one of the hardest things for performers: to be present and still work with the body *without performing*. But all parameters added up, it also creates a tangle: performers have their freedom back, but this freedom cannot breach the freedom of others.

I also articulate the *Echo* as a navigation of the group dynamic and boundaries. So you cannot force anyone else into something they don't want to do, and you cannot abandon anyone. You have to somehow negotiate and allow the time for things to develop, to exit the score, to take into account each other, and the audience. To be present in the space and to see how the energy is changing. Because you might have impulses ... and I think that's the difference between the solo and the collective work. In the solo you can do whatever you want because you're alone. But in the collective work, you might want to sing loudly or do a very happy dance, but you have to negotiate with the others. And then maybe, if you have an impulse, softly guide others there, without forcing them or abandoning them in there. So it has to be collective. That's the other parameter. It has to be *presence* and it has to be *collective*.

Vasilev developed several exercises to prepare people for this disorienting moment. Yet he admits it is never quite clear to anyone what will happen in the *Echo*, or what the *Echo* is really about, until it unravels. And it is only after the fact that all the pieces of *Impossible Actions* literally come together for the group. »And when it works, it's magic. It's really beautiful to see,« he says. This comes as a surprise to me ... What happens when it doesn't work? How can you tell?, I ask him.

When I feel that there is a rupture between different members of the group, then I know it's not working. When I see that someone is ignored, or not comfortable with the situation. This can happen, and it's the responsibility of every member and also of the group as a group, to overcome it together in the space.

In the *Echo*, what is at stake is at once activating awareness of self and others, and being responsible for each other. That is what Vasilev means with »collective building« – I cannot think of anything harder and more beautiful to come by these days.

In fact, having the score and the method of the workshop now established and putting things in motion with each group he summons, he has gradually become more interested in what the piece »is doing.« Beyond people being able to trace all the theoretical references while they see the work, he is interested in investigating

the strings that these actions are pulling inside those on stage and around it, and, one could say, to make sense of the full span of the *Echo*.

[...] Now that the score is ready, I almost use it as a base for something else to happen between these people. And I think the more time they spend together, the stronger the bonds they create ... possibly. I don't know. And I think that's also a form of resistance. Because I think everything that we are going through in this current regime that we're living in, is putting us against each other in competition, is pulling us apart in different directions. And I think of this process as a form of resistance to this extreme individualism.

I would like to finish up pointing briefly at the flip side of the »doings« of this work: what is happening on the side of the audience. Going back to Grotowski and Cvejić, it is clear *Impossible Actions* refuses to be a stage work for easy ingestion: It breaks many codes and cues that we rely on as members of the public to read the situation and react »appropriately,« or clap when we sense the end has come and it is time to pack up and leave. Vasilev is comfortable with this, and with any price he may need to pay for pushing these limits.

Now, after having demanded much from its performers, the piece keeps asking for more, this time on the side of the audience. Contrary to what it may seem, the *Echo* isn't a moment of intimacy between performers we (*voyeurs*) are allowed to peek into. These bodies that move on stage do not easily lend themselves to being looked at as a spectacle, they scoff off the aestheticization of the body and its movement, but also the fascination with the deliberately visceral or weird: the *Echo* is not about exoticism or voluptuousness of repressed desires, or the dreamland atmospheres many performances use today as spiced eye candy.

So the piece gives us almost no cues and no easy satisfaction. Well, I'd like to propose this disruption is in fact a great gift. *Impossible Actions* invites another type of echo, one we might not be quite prepared to recognize, disoriented as we are, as it is offered. The (impossible) actions executed by these bodies are asking the audience to drop any expectations and spend the time with them, in their awkward, unspectacular, durational search ... all too human and more than human at the same time. And in this process, the work forces us (onlookers) to look into a mirror: to become aware of our own strange, embodied everyday selves and the affects and uneasiness, fragmentations, connections, and struggles that shape and move us, in ways we may not be able to pin down or articulate. *Impossible Actions* inhabits a form of presence of the body that is opened up for the audience to witness and take part in, raging with questions, and minor gestures, subtle interactions, and wild uncertainty; it asks us to endure it with our gaze, as it unfolds, in the hope that in such threshold we, too, perhaps may grasp the impossible.

**María Villa Largacha** is a curator, educator, and researcher based in Finland. She is the co-curator for New Performance Turku Biennale and works as independent researcher and critic on the interactions of contemporary art and society. In 2019 she created the *Embodied Knowledge Workshop* as basis for her research on experimental practices and critical pedagogies within intersectional feminism. María has a MA in Mediating, Curating, and Contemporary Art, and BA and MA studies in Practical Philosophy. After working many years as an art publication editor in Spanish, she has, in the past decade, focussed on designing spaces for discussion, collaboration, and social sustainability with participatory art methods. She curated the *Conversation Room* project with Ariel Bustamante and is the producer of the *Squirrel's Nest Podcast*. She currently teaches creative writing in the Art and Media MA at Aalto University.

**Yasen Vasilev** is based in Brussels/Belgium and Sofia/Bulgaria and works internationally in the field of contemporary dance and performance as a dramatist, critic, and creator. In Belgium, he most recently collaborated with choreographer Milo Slayers on his second piece *DEMONstratio*, on tour in Flanders/Belgium and Brussels in 2023-2024, and also maintains an ongoing dialogue with choreographer Ehsan Hemat. *NUTRICULA/IMPOSSIBLE ACTIONS*, a long-term artistic research trajectory he initiated in 2015 in Shanghai and in 2019 in Taipei, has been developed and presented internationally in the form of workshops and performances which aim to test and re-imagine the limits of the body, as well as to set up horizontal working models.

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- 1 Gilles Deleuze: »Postscript on the Societies of Control,« in: *October*, Vol. 59, 1992. pp. 3-7.
  - 2 Bojana Cvejić: »Problem as a Choreographic and Philosophical Kind of Thought,« in: *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin (eds.). New York 2017. See also: »The time of Choreographing Problems.« Lecture at the Theatre Academy, Helsinki. <https://vimeo.com/243249056> (accessed March 30, 2024).
  - 3 André Lepecki: *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York 2006.
  - 4 Erin Manning: *The Minor Gesture*. Chapel Hill 2016.
  - 5 The work was commissioned and curated by Anneliese Charek (from Slate Contemporary Dance Company, Shanghai). It was the first piece in a series of live performances called »In the Flesh« Charek initiated for the Minsheng Museum in Shanghai in 2015.
  - 6 A good reference in the history of movement research to understand where and how *Nutricula* (and later *Impossible Actions*) operates investigating nonhuman movement, is perhaps *Self Unfinished* by Xavier Le Roy, 1998. More generally speaking, Vasilev's work inscribes itself into the tradition of dance dramaturgy that Cvejić is discussing (Deleuze, see note 1) which developed from the nineties onwards, that proceeds without script, searching for answers or posing problems to the body and seeing how the body responds to them.
  - 7 In line with resisting the field's patterns of authority and use over bodies, the workshops have been free of cost to participants, and Yasen refuses the notion of evaluating people's »performance« to choose the final performers for *Impossible Actions*. Rather, it has been participants who chose to join and stay in the process, accepting the invitation to embrace this complex investigation guided by Vasilev's pedagogical, theoretical, and dramaturgic expertise. He has also made a point of ensuring that every performer is compensated for their work whenever conditions make it possible, not just him as maker.
  - 8 The poststructuralist critique exposed long ago how the active encouragement and promotion of outlets for individual self-expression is embedded in Western society's forms of control, as Cvejić reminds us once more (see note 1). Theorists like Spånberg and Vujanović, among other writers of the field like Manning, have warned against using movement research and somatics as a retreat into the individual well-being or a method to access some supposedly »pure,« »authentic« expression or the self. Authenticity and self-realization become indeed a

tool to increase the value of oneself in a neoliberal field of competition (See Anna Vujanović and Ellen Söderhult: »Movement Research as a Performance Practice,« in: *Movement Research*. Mårten Spångberg, ed., Oslo 2018, pp. 359–364). Liberation entails in that instance being »free from conflict,« and is presumably achieved by looking inward and addressing structural problems as individual issues we must learn to cope with. Somatic tools are then presented and promoted by the wellness industry as means to increase our resilience, our adaptability to that system which is in turn left untouched politically. For a vision of this trend within the dance field, see also Anna Kozonina: *Somatic Discourse in Contemporary Dance: Embodiment, Criticism and Political Aspirations*. MA Thesis, unpublished. Aalto 2022.

- 9 Brian Massumi. *What Animals Teach us About Politics*. Chapel Hill 2014.
- 10 Vujanović, see note 7, p. 366.
- 11 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London 1922, 6.54
- 12 See Nina Power: »From the Sad Body to the Moving Body,« in: *Movement Research* (Spångberg, see note 8), pp. 29–50, or Spångberg, who observes we have become obsessed with authenticity when it comes to movement and somatics.
- 13 Marina Grzinic: »Biopolitics and Necropolitics in relation to the Lacanian four discourses,« paper, 2012.
- 14 He goes on to say: »I was very influenced at some point by a text by Mårten Spångberg called ›Postdance‹ where he defends an approach to dance, as opposed to choreography, by saying dance has the potential to go beyond control because choreography is connected to discipline and control, to writing and to going back in time. Dance, on the other hand, has the potential of allowing something new to appear and a sort of potential for transformation. So the score lives in between those two: it's not a detailed choreography, but neither a total open-ended space of improvisation.«  
Marina Grzinic: »Biopolitics and Necropolitics in relation to the Lacanian four discourses,« paper, 2012.
- 15 Vujanović, see note 7.

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Beteiligte Person(en)

Yasen Vasilev

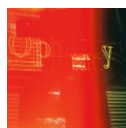
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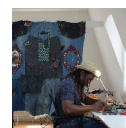
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Hendrik Quast in conversation with Kenny Fries



Endless Sonification, Techno-creolization

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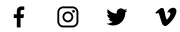
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