

## ‘100-DAYS HOUSE’

### Blackout as political action

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The impossibility to imagine some alternative to capitalism has been one of the most recited statements in the recent years.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theorist Kathi Weeks has challenged this claim, suggesting that by now we may well be able to imagine the end of capitalism but we continuously fail to imagine the end of work (2016: 253). Triggered by her statement, this chapter is concerned with the notion and practice of (non)work, thinking it through a specific instance of the deliberate ‘blackout’ that was initiated by *Veem House for Performance* in Amsterdam. Weaving together theoretical debates on (non)work, production, and action, I will discuss the case of Veem as a site of political action. By switching off the lights and not working for 265 days a year, Veem has challenged common understandings of work as constant productivity and function. (Non)work in the arts here has transformed into engaged action, that is into activation and *energeia*. With this gesture of a blackout, Veem has set off an energetic field of possibilities for the invention of (new) needs and forms of action within the performing arts.

In October 2016 *Veem House for Performance* announced that from 2017 it will start working only for 100 consecutive days per year, which amounts to the running costs as covered by the State subsidy they have received until 2020 (see Veem Press Release 2016). Veem, a known house for production and presentation of contemporary performance, research, and critical discourse in Amsterdam, made this choice a few months after the Amsterdam Funds for the Arts (AFK) allocated considerably limited financial resources to Veem although they accredited their plan as ‘excellent’. This happened in the context of massive cuts to the arts budget by the government. Inspired by Virginia Woolf’s provocation made in 1915 that ‘the future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be’ (see Solnit 2014), Veem was ‘dark’ on 1 January 2017, and then continuously for 265 days. This was followed by partial opening for the final months of the year that the venue called a ‘100-Days House’. Anne Breure, the artistic director at Veem, called this blackout an ‘attitude’: ‘“100-Days House” should not become a brand that others copy but rather remain a practice of (self-)questioning that has performative, aesthetic, and practical facets and that is hence subject to mutate in the coming years’ (Breure 2017). At the same time, Veem has issued keys to the locks of the house that could be purchased at a fair price by those wanting to participate in the events taking place during the 100 days. Keyholders could become Veem ‘housemates’.

Similar to the previous years, Veem’s program consists of a diversity of experimental performances, book presentations, talks, and reading sessions. In this way, it avoids sending out wrong impressions about the ‘100-Days House’ behaving as a festival or as a theme-based event. There are, however, some recurrent topics that have been more prominently voiced in the curatorial logic of the events, such as social imaginaries and feminism,<sup>2</sup> which render noticeable Veem’s concerns about the future in the arts and in society at large.

Dramaturgically, the limited number of working days draws attention not only to the work that could be seen, but even more so to the sense of absence and the much longer period of nonwork. Instead of making artistic compromises and cutting the program and its associated costs, Veem highlighted the impossibility of constantly operating under such precarious conditions. The rationale of this decision and its political and artistic consequences have been addressed through social media and in public talks and articles by Breure and others.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, in the previous years there were times when no public programming was possible at Veem, due to lack of budget. Hence, the magnitude of the cuts and the gap between funding expectations and artistic responsibility became thematised and visible. Veem also began to address its public as housemates, therefore placing emphasis on notions of intimacy and co-habitation.

Veem's action is situated in a context of pervasive budget-cuts in the arts sector in the Netherlands (and internationally), and of neoliberal demands for constant visibility and frenetic (artistic) production. Against this background, artists and art institutions tend to operate under a 'survival mode' through compromise, exhausting negotiations for funding, and continuously chasing new productions and the presentation of 'new' ideas. As Bojana Kunst shows, 'the open, interdisciplinary, unstable and flexible character of contemporary artistic work is not only an aesthetic quality but one deeply connected to the ways how the work is produced' (2015: 135). As she argues, such work is produced under precarious conditions, where money is insufficient and there is exploitation of intellectual, linguistic and communicative processes that are at the basis of artistic work (*ibid.*). Art workers are expected to be continuously creative, visible, and productive in spite of those conditions. Accounting for the fusion between process and product in the arts, Boyan Manchev (2016) has also been concerned with questions about artistic work. 'We cannot imagine any social existence or artistic activity without production', Manchev has argued, and 'yet, we shouldn't misunderstand this proposal by homogenizing it with the constant and pressing demand for production, where the disguising of products as "non-products" is becoming normative' (2016: 52). In effect, Manchev makes a plea to invent a new concept of production, which comes together with his proposition to relate it to action as *energeia*:

(O)ur task today is to think of art, performance and dance precisely as action – on the side of actuality, on the side of action, on the side of *energeia*. Thus, we need a radicalization or an extension of our understanding of the work as an *energetic effect* instead of a product.

(Manchev 2016: 53)

The dramaturgical underpinnings of Veem's 'attitude' trigger an approach to work as activation in ways that echo Manchev. This is not only in Veem's radical change in the temporality of the mode of production in the arts, but also by the political implications that the decision to not work resonates with.

At this point it is useful to turn to Weeks's (2016) theoretical analysis of conditions and possibilities of nonwork, which display the failure of imagining the end of work. With her article 'Utopian Therapy: Work, Nonwork and the Political Imagination' (2016), she has contributed to postwork speculation by critically interrogating existing nonwork strategies. Her article points out that it is impossible to envisage a radically new relationship to nonwork and to imagine it in a way that does not recite strategies of the past or of the future (2016: 259). Alluding to the Krisis-Group and to Fredric Jameson, she has explained how every human action is nowadays analogous to work because there is such an intimate relationship between human life and work. Contemporary subjectivity, Weeks has argued, is constructed through work and the anxiety for losing the 'individual selves' in the case of nonwork is extreme (2016: 252, 260). Three different approaches to nonwork are laid out in her article – work as unproductive, as differently productive, and as reproductive of the subject as a worker – to convincingly propose that they are all 'too locked under the orbit of work as we now know it' (258). Failing to imagine the end of work, however, also suggests that we should confront this incapacity and seek to understand the conditions that provoke it. According to Weeks, who refers here to Marx, one has to 'cast nonwork not as time within which we can meet our existing needs, but in relation to the possibility of new needs' (2016: 261). Under this light, nonwork should not be conceived as a model or a state of things, and it would be a mistake to illustrate it through current examples. Configuring the limitations of our imagination will contribute to inventing the new needs in life. Seen in this light, nonwork can be regarded as processual, as

a pause or as silence, as a mindful time-taking to embrace uncertainty and to reconfigure the course of things. Veem's initiative to pause and 'switch off the lights' therefore seems to be of such heightened political significance.

According to Hannah Arendt, an important property of action is the capacity to initiate, to energise, to set into motion (1998). This is an Aristotelian conception of action also known as 'entelecheia' (*en telei echei*), which means that the 'end' (*telos*) of action exists in the activity per se (Arendt 1998: 206). Hence, *energeia* is a notion that blurs process and product, action and work, which respectively refer to the activity that does not lead to any product and to the activity that does.<sup>4</sup> *Energeia* marks the triggering of action through activity; the 'end' of action resides into its own capacity to activate, to energise. André Lepecki (2013) has also discussed *energeia* in relationship to dance, explaining that it acts by mobilising other actions. It 'qualifies movement (*kinesis*) not only as something that moves, but as a motion that acts' (2013: 30)

Veem, in this sense, has engaged itself in action as *entelecheia*, a mode of initiation that seeks to avoid closure within a marketable model or solution. By incorporating nonwork and darkness within its modes of working, it has *energised* inter-sectorial attention, reactions, and debates regarding the position of the arts in society, what it may mean to act politically today and how to engage with the political and financial infrastructures in the arts.<sup>5</sup> Echoing Weeks's analysis, the period of not working has put 'into work' processes of reconfiguration that involve Veem but also move beyond it. Its political impact thus resides in pausing to spend time 'in the dark', not-working, in order to potentially invent (the needs for) the future. Because as it is pointed out in Woolf, earlier, the future residing in darkness can be hopeful exactly because it is not yet fully marked.

## Notes

- 1 The claim is that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism', which has been recounted by Fredric Jameson (2003).
- 2 The programme can be seen online: <https://veem.house/EN>, viewed 27 October 2017.
- 3 Indicatively: 'Veem draws on vision and fair practice to transform into the '100-Day House' (Press Release 2016), 'Eigenzinnig Veem geeft het goede voorbeeld aan danssector' (Van Der Putt 2016), 'Veem beperkt zich tot 100 dagen' (Van Der Berg 2016), 'Veem Huis voor Performance kiest voor kwaliteit door minder voorstellingen' (Ekker 2017), 'Anne Breure: "We mogen niet niet-politiek zijn"' (Beeckmans 2017).
- 4 Action was traditionally differentiated from work and labour, for instance by Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, but it is no longer so. For a discussion on the post-Fordist fusion of work and action and how this can be critically redirected in the performance theory and practice, see: Georgelou, Protopapa, and Theodoridou (2017) *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance*.
- 5 The aforementioned articles and interviews about Veem indicate that.

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