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**Chapter 12**

# The Use of Uselessness

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Within a modernist economic framework, there is a lot of inconvenience that needs to be minimized in order to maximize profit and to secure the desired outcomes. In economic terms, production is what it's all about, or, as Peter Sloterdijk would say, the production of productivity (Sloterdijk 1989). This chapter describes the developmental process of a performance practice that seeks to resist this modernist credo of production and wealth creation. Performance, it seems to me, should not be part of this machinery. Instead the work presented here advances a deliberate deployment of the notion of uselessness as an antidote and as an attempt to challenge the ubiquitous imperative to work and to always be useful. The chapter also explores how the research material, circumstance and moments of inspiration, became part of that which is performed.

## A Brief Run through

The enquiry began in 2002 with a series of location-specific works with materials found on site, a set of interventions that looked like 'work' but didn't make anything and left no (visible) trace. In brief: another dancer, Elgin Clausen, and I carried river water from one side of a bridge to the other, whilst working in opposition to each other, with one carrying water from right to left and the other from left to right (Flush, or the possibility of moving towards an impossible goal, Geneva 2002). Thereafter, I invited a group of performers to feel and vocalize our individual pulse rhythms to create an arbitrary composition of sounds entitled Composition of the Arbitrary (Kappenberg 2004). I ironed leaves in an autumnal garden and talked with the visitors about leaves and ironing in Extreme Ironing (Kappenberg 2007). In a variation of this work I set up ironing boards at a train station to iron discarded newspapers and handed the warm papers back to the never-ending stream of commuters (Kappenberg 2008). In Venice, another performer, Dorothea Seror, and I suspended a feather pillow over a canal to let the wind pick up the feathers and take them for a ride (Kappenberg and Seror 2011).

## The Next Step

The above events were part of a process that took 12 years. The experience of doing the performances influenced the practice over time, strategically and tactically. For example, interventions tended to take place in everyday settings, close to the audience. In these situations, it made sense to meet people's eyes and respond to their questions, and eventually talking became a significant part of the work.

As part of my low-cost and process-only approach, I was interested in working with materials that were freely available. This led me to using natural substances like water and autumn leaves. In Darwin's Worms (1999: 40), Adam Phillips wrote: 'Nature is astonishingly prolific, a prodigal process going nowhere special, sponsored by destruction and suffering'. Working with freely available and abundant natural materials made wastefulness, inconsequence and redundancy possible, behaviours that are generally alien in capitalist economies, which privilege efficient production processes and wealth creation. Within the capitalist framework, only the supposedly 'useful' has value. Interested in mocking this prescribed and one-dimensional way of living, I choreographed repetitive tasks and cyclical movement sequences that echoed the prolific aspects of nature. At the same time, the repetitive quality of the performed actions emulated the monotony of much of daily labour, be that physical tasks, administrative jobs or work in the digital domain. Thus, the interventions mirrored both the wasteful and prolific aspects of nature and the urban preoccupation with production and accumulation.

In order to facilitate these kinds of interventions, I focused on hybrid spaces in which urban and social patterns converged with natural elements. Half culture, half nature, they allowed for interventions that were almost probable but ultimately absurdly ridiculous. Urban rivers and tidal waters made ideal sites, as did environments that undergo seasonal changes, such as public and private gardens. If natural elements were not available, I turned to discarded items such as the newspapers left behind by commuters, which also lend themselves well to wasteful and inconsequential endeavours. I drew furthermore on the sphere of art, which has its own value system and rules. Art allows for, and even celebrates, seemingly strange, absurd, and ludicrous events. In the arts, time is not measured as it is in everyday life. Common notions of utility and purpose do not apply. The French writer, essayist and journalist Catherine Clément has written about the capacity of art to depart from everyday experience. In Syncope, The Philosophy of Rapture, she laments the constraints that modernity imposes on individuals and the lack of down time or time out that is afforded to its citizens (Clément 1994). She believes in art as a last vestige of a space in which other kinds of experiences, surprises and unaccounted journeys are still possible (1994: 20–21). The performance practice I was developing tapped into this potential and into the freedom of art to challenge norms and conventions, to kick up dust, to surprise, to enrapture, and to allow passers-by to get lost, even for a moment.

However, after several task-based performances, I felt that I was still too 'busy' in the sense of always doing one thing or another, and that I was still too close to what I was trying to subject to critique. The compulsion to always do something runs right through performance practices such as dance and performance art. Performers generally do, move or act when they perform. In Exhausting Dance, André Lepecki has argued that this drive to continuous movement and agitation and the inability to resist this compulsion is part of a collusion of dance with modernity, with its privileging of mobility and productivity (Lepecki 2006). The early days of performance art were perhaps less affected by this compulsion, such as Robert Morris and Carolee Schneeman's Site (1964), Robert Wilson's performance tableaux and Gilbert and George's The Singing Sculpture (1969), which drew mainly from painting and the still image and therefore restrained movement, as Anthony Howell has argued in his review of their practices (Howell 1999: 2, 4). Later instances from performance art are, for example, events that feature sleep as a performative act, like Tilda Swinton sleeping in the Serpentine Gallery in The Maybe, a collaboration with visual artist Cornelia Parker (Parker and Swinton 1995). But sleep or sleep-like states mean that the performers become object-like, and this was the wrong association in my attempt to claim, or reclaim, uselessness for the individual, the ordinary person, the citizen. A more suitable example is Marina Abramović and Ulay's Imponderabilia (1977), where the two artists stood naked in a

doorway narrowing the passage and forcing visitors to turn towards either her or him if they wanted to get through into the gallery space. Here, the two performing bodies were interfering with the movement of the visitors. Their proximity and the inevitable physical contact with the visitors stopped them from becoming too object like. It forced audiences to confront and acknowledge their gender, vulnerability and humanity.

In the performance entitled Difference between One Who Knows and One Who Undergoes (Kappenberg 2013), I tested a new approach. This performance was first conceived for Vogelfrei, a Biennale in Darmstadt, Germany, which occupied a number of private gardens in a neighbourhood of the city. Audiences were given a map and walked from one garden to another. Most exhibits were sculptures, but there were a few performances. I searched for conditions under which I could (just) be present without pursuing a work-like activity, and the ornamental figure of the garden gnome, well known in Germany, provided the perfect ploy. I invited the owners of the gardens to propose garden gnome themes ahead of my intervention and selected three of the themes. Dressed as a garden gnome with baggy clothes, boots and pointy red hat, I spent one day in each of the gardens, sitting in my outfit amongst a few scattered props suggesting that day's theme, doing nothing. For the first theme, 'garden gnome fishing', I stuck a long wooden stick vertically in an upside down wheelbarrow and sat alongside. For the second theme, 'garden gnome with pipe', I stuck a plastic pipe into the garden fence and sat nearby, and for the third theme, 'Hanging Gardens', I hung a set of gardening tools in a tree and sat below. Besides being there, I made no effort to do anything. Visitors often laughed when they stumbled upon me on their tour through the exhibiting gardens, and when I moved a little or nodded in their direction. Taking a relaxed approach, returning looks and speaking with the passers-by avoided my slippage into objecthood.

The garden gnomes we know today have a long and varied history and fuse a number of different, mythic, real and literary figurines; written records give evidence of early precursors or dwarfs in ancient Egypt, but also in ancient Crete and in the Roman Empire, as well as in Venetian accounts, in Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque architecture and in Goethe's romantic poems, more often than not associated with benevolent faculties and cheerful spirits (Hartlaub 1962). Mystical gnomes were often believed to live in nature, in forests and mountains, and associated with tireless work and industriousness. At times they were linked to the mining trade, as in the case of a small Roman figurine which already features a pointy hat and a minor's lantern, but which is shown sleeping. There is some speculation that this particular sculpture is representing a child labourer, indicating the possibility of children working in mines also in Roman times (Hartlaub 1962: 12). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gnome-like figures were introduced into the gardens of noble families, and into parks. They were typically made from sandstone and represented something like servants or fools. The garden gnomes we know today were first fabricated in around 1870 in a small German village, Gräfenroda in Thüringen. They are again representing miners, child labourers with pickaxes, wheelbarrows and lanterns. Their red hats have become a signature garment and are believed to have been stuffed with cotton wool to protect the heads of the miners. Historically the small figurines therefore represented hard work and people believed that, when gnomes were exhibited in gardens, they magically did the gardening when everyone was asleep. The association with the miners and with industriousness has diminished, however, over the years and today's figurines are seen as decorative and more or less kitsch objects. At times, they are issued with musical instruments to sweeten their presence (1962: 32). In Germany they do, however, still have a mystical air and symbolize the freedom of the fool, and may be shown with their pants down, with a whip or with a gun, drunk, having sex or pointing the finger.

Appearing as a live garden gnome gave me the opportunity to be the fool for the day, to

spread out and offer my presence, and not to feel compelled to do anything. The costume had a certain familiarity and a somewhat disarming folkloric air. However, my live presence and my relaxed kind of inactivity created a strangeness that was enough to unsettle the visitor and to provoke many questions. In particular, people wondered how I could possibly manage to do nothing for a whole day. I proposed that they could join the garden gnome club, upon which they would receive a red hat that would allow them to sit in their own gardens and be inactive whenever they wanted, under the condition that they would not be allowed to do anything at all, not even weeding. There were no subscribers.

**Figure 1**: Difference between One Who Knows and One Who Undergoes (Kappenberg 2013). Photo: Ute Ritchel.

In theatre and on the stage, a costume conveys a character, transforming the actorperformer into a performing body and supporting the work of representation (Monks 2013). In everyday life, however, costumes also work in other ways: in my project, they lend themselves as a choreographic strategy or a hinge with which to disrupt the everyday. As Tim Etchells writes with regard to contemporary performance, it is often intent on exploiting and blurring old dialectical separations such as 'inside and outside, fiction and reality, audience and performer' (1996: 119). Within this mode of performance and in the context of the everyday, a costume can act as a theatrical element and serve to represent something, but it is not certain as to what is 'costume' and what is not. This invites speculations as to the relation between an individual and their performing persona, and also raises uncertainties with regards to the edges of the 'performance'. Particularly in site-specific performances and in those that do not advertise the event, the location or the duration, there is much room for uncertainty on the part of the audience. In site-specific interventions, a place as well as its histories and narratives loosely provide a frame for an event, but sometimes this frame or framing only becomes apparent through the intervention and it can also shift and change. Often it is the interplay between an intervention and the place that constitutes the performance. A live and costumed garden gnome in a garden, for example, affects a visitor's experience of that garden. A garden is a garden, but this status can be challenged through the uncanniness of a costumed figure that seeps into the surrounding area giving the environment a stage-like quality. In such an event, a garden also becomes a stage. On the other hand, a garden is always already an artifice in that it represents 'nature' within an urban context. A costumed figure could therefore be seen to make evident the artifice that is inherent in every garden.

This shift of status, and the uncertainty it brings, causes a little frisson in the passer-by and facilitates a shift in attention, a change in the mode of looking and noticing that is generally associated with the movies or the theatre. I am not concerned with the kind of spectorship that is offered by theatre, but I can draw on these debates to perhaps elucidate something that appears to happen in the encounter with a performative situation in an environment that is not usually associated with performance. In a review of the work of the performance artist Rose English, Deborah Levy describes this particular shift in theatre audiences arguing that 'the empty conceptual space of the theatre is a place where we can be caught in the adventure of "looking at the mystery of looking"' (Levy 1998: 41). Theatre audiences expect the unexpected and they are prepared to open their eyes to that which takes place in front of them. As Levy argues, viewers encounter 'a visual and kinetic world that is curious and pleasing, a world that is made up of moments that could go any way' (1998: 41). In the absence of a proscenium arch or a designated theatre space, this shift in the quality of attention is not as easily achieved, but exhibits or performances that take place

in familiar everyday surroundings can surprise or provoke precisely through the lack of clear differentiation between the performance and the environments. Walking from garden to garden, Darmstadt's visitors could not be sure what was an exhibit and what was not. The live garden gnome benefitted from this uncertainty and surprised audiences, blurring boundaries also between object and human, and between joke and serious proposition. The title of the work, Difference between One Who Knows and One Who Undergoes, signalled an importance of experience and process, with regards to both audiences and the performer. Spending days 'just' sitting in one of the gardens, I was not only representing uselessness, but also dedicating myself to doing nothing, undergoing idleness in a way that went far beyond my own patterns, both as a performer and as myself.

In December 2013, I took part in site/space, an initiative by Performance Space, a venue in Hackney, East London. For these events, artists just turn up on the day and improvise in response to a chosen site nearby. On this particular day, performance artist André Verissimo had chosen a square in Bow, a multi-cultural area of East London. We were a small group of four performers and we had no sign saying that we were artists or explaining our presence in this neighbourhood. I was the only one in garden gnome outfit, with red hat, red boots, large top and bucket. I was cautious as we were not part of the local community, and our creative exploration – and my demonstrative inactivity – could be an unwanted intrusion or imposition. At some point, whilst sitting on the pavement attending to the cool air around me, I was approached by a couple of young boys who had been observing us from the distance. They asked: 'Are you talking to the devil?' I replied: 'No, I am talking to the air'. Unphased, and perhaps intrigued by my response, they asked: 'What is the air saying?' I replied: 'The air does not speak, it only listens'. Apparently satisfied they walked on a few steps and stopped again, this time watching one of the other performers, André Verissimo, who was standing still and balancing an empty take-away container in one of his hands. They joined in, copied his posture, sang a few lines and walked away. The interlude was a memorable encounter and playful interaction with complete strangers. Through our explorations, we had on some level joined the boys and others who were hanging out on the square and we had been passing time not unlike them. We had been operating outside of productive modes, and perhaps our 'useless' explorations echoed their own doing or not-doing.

**Figure 2**: Site/Space (Verissimo, Kappenberg 2013). Photos: Marco Berardi.

In the context of a productive society, this mode is generally perceived negatively as a waste of time, to the effect that most people avoid this state at all costs and fill their time with one activity or another. As Heidegger wrote in a letter in 1963, 'That which is most useful, is the useless. But to experience the useless is today for man the most difficult thing' (Ordine 2013: 30–31). In a lecture entitled 'Wasting time' in April 2015 at the Jerwood Space, London, Joshua Cohen reflected on the ubiquitous imperative to work that dominates modern life, and on the condemnation of all forms of non-doing: 'Idle time, time without content, is a source of contempt, confusion and terror' (Cohen 2015). Time has become synonymous with productivity, and 'time without content' has become unthinkable and unacceptable. Informed by his work as psychoanalyst, Cohen began his lecture by proposing:

> Art and psychoanalysis give expression to the nagging voices of the enigmatic and excessive selves that we can't get rid of, those elements of our inner lives that can't be integrated or contained in our ordinary self-image. These are the remaindered, unwanted or wasted elements of life that escape recognition. (Cohen 2015)

Figures such as the live garden gnome speak to, and embody, these ‘remaindered, unwanted or wasted elements’, the part of our selves that doesn’t fit into our ordinary selves. To illustrate his point, Cohen gave the example of 1980s cartoon image of a woman lying in bed with the inscription: ‘I didn’t go to work that day […] I don’t think I’ll go tomorrow’. Below the image was a second caption: ‘Let’s take control of our lives and live for pleasure not pain’ (Cohen 2015). The captions suggest a deliberate and wilful rejection of the imperative to work, in much the same way that the live garden gnome refuses to join in. Both the gnome and the cartoon lady snoozing in her bed also demonstrate no inner conflict, and this is perhaps the most shocking aspect. The live, ornamental garden gnome is, much like the cartoon image, someone who does not go to work today and will not go tomorrow. This garden gnome is not a worker on a break, and her being is not defined through work, in stark difference to most of us whose identities tend to be defined by what we do and whose lives tend to be structured through when we work.

Besides reflecting the predicament of the visitor, this state of non-activity of the garden gnome also challenges the notion of the artist as producer, and of the art work as ‘work’ or as evidence of work undertaken. The performing gnome refuses, again: she does nothing and she does not supply evidence of work undertaken. Cohen illustrated this point through the example of Tracey Emin’s infamous installation My Bed, for which she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999. Cohen commented on the artwork’s double refusal to not only expose a scenario of idleness, but also to refuse the work that art is traditionally expected to do. Instead of complying with the notion of the art object as refined labour, My Bed speaks to ‘the profoundly ambivalent status inactivity has in our culture’(Cohen 2015). As Cohen contended, this ambivalence is caused by a mixture of fascination and horror, and by associations with infantile gratification, slothfulness, wastefulness and irresponsibility. Cohen assigned this condemnation to the sociocultural inheritance of the Enlightenment, its privileging of reason and mastery, but some of it is also the effect of the economy of capital which emerged alongside the Enlightenment and which has been responsible for casting its citizens as a means to increase wealth. If the advance of knowledge and the sciences facilitated a new approach and an acceleration of productivity, it was the power of capital that measured all things in respect of its productiveness. In the end, it is the collusion between the different forces, between rationalism and capital, which has generated the particular culture in which wasted effort and unproductive time are equated with moral laxity.

## Formation of a Concept

The series of works discussed in this chapter are engaged with a literary and philosophical discourse which subjects to critique the effects of capital on the formation of identities and modern living. Part of the modern scenario is the exhausted individual. An early, literary embodiment of the exhausted can be found in Goethe’s Faust, originally published in 1808. In All That Is Solid Melts into Air, Marshall Berman discusses a scene of Faust’s journey in which the protagonist looks at the coast and the ocean before him and exclaims that all should be mobilized for profit, controlled and industrialized. However, the devil is left dazed and exhausted, because Faust’s drive and ambition have exceeded his own (1982: 62).

> Long ago Mephisto called up the vision of a speeding coach as a paradigm of the way for man to move through the world. Now, however, his protégé has outgrown him: Faust wants to move the world itself. (1982: 62)

Berman argues that Faust's visions 'take on a radically new form: no longer dreams and fantasies, or even theories, but concrete programs, operational plans for transforming earth and sea' (1982: 62). From then on, the world served 'new collective human purposes', as Berman claims, in a radical paradigmatic change. This operational plan continues to operate and appears to have spread over the entire globe. It does not tolerate any slowing down or deviation. This is the wider context, which casts each of us as labourer and producer, whether we are professionals, students or artists. This is the context that makes hanging out on a city square so unacceptable. But this is also why the notion of the useless is gaining currency.

An equivalent to this Faustian scene from the other side of the globe is perhaps the image of Under the Wave off Kanagawa (Kanagawa oki nami ura), also known as The Great Wave, a woodcut by Japanese artist Hokusai from around 1830. It was created at a time when the American military stationed gunships in front of Japanese ports, forcing Japan to open its door to international commerce and to the American market, having until then restricted trade to dealings with the Dutch and the Chinese. The Great Wave is said to represent both the turmoil of this moment and the desire to be part of global developments (MacGregor 2012: 514–18), not unlike the sentiments explored in Goethe's Faust. The wave of modernity was, and is, global and appears to be unstoppable: On one hand the developments facilitate individual freedom and local, national and international mobility. On the other hand, as suggested by the title of Marshall Berman's publication All that is solid melts into air, a phrase taken from Marx's Communist Manifesto, modernity signifies the complete dissolution of old structures and boundaries, and the imposition of exhaustive and exhausting economic regimes. These regimes demand a complete identification of the individual with their work as argued by Max Weber in his sociological study entitled The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, published in 1904–05.

The work of French philosopher Georges Bataille also sits within this context and constitutes a vehement critique of the utilitarianism that dominates modern life. Writing in the 1930s and up to the late 1960s, Bataille is critical of the idea of the 'professional man' and of idealist notions such as Nietzsche's Superman; for Bataille the successful person is only a fragmentary being. In On Nietzsche: the Will to Chance, he writes:

> When a man limits his desires, for example, to the possession of power within the state, he acts, he knows what he has done. It matters little if he fails; he profits from the outset. He inserts himself advantageously within time. Each of his movements becomes useful. It becomes possible for him to advance, with each passing instant, towards his chosen goal. His time becomes a progression towards this goal (that is what we usually call living). (Bataille 1997: 336)

Bataille insists on the need to challenge this kind of functionality and purpose. He claims: 'Only by refusing to act, or at least by denying the pre-eminence of the time reserved for action, can I maintain the quality of wholeness within myself ' (1997: 336). The critique is directed against a capitalist credo of production, which subsumes humankind into a notion of progress that is ubiquitous in capitalist states. According to Bataille, the problem is that within the economic value system of Western societies, activities pertaining to nonproductive expenditure are reduced to a concession and to a minor role, while those activities and individual efforts which lead to either production or conservation of wealth are considered primary. He writes:

> Pleasure, whether art, permissible debauchery, or play, is definitely reduced, in the intellectual representation in circulation, to a concession; in other words it is reduced

> to a diversion whose role is subsidiary. The most appreciable share of life is given as a condition – sometimes even as a regrettable condition- of productive social activity. (Stoekl 1985: 117)

Bataille argues furthermore that societies, and individuals, ought to have considerable interest in loss. He explains this need for loss through the example of a son who is not allowed to express what 'gives him a fever' or to speak about his interest in that which provokes horror. Instead, only acquisition, conservation of goods and rational consumption are permissible and will be supported by the father (1985: 117). Bataille describes this is a flat and untenable conception of existence, which allows only for a limited breadth of experience within a limited space and time. According to Bataille, the excluded aspects of culture comprise excessively expensive accessories, cults and sacrifices, sports activities and artistic activities (1985: 118–20). Termed non-productive expenditure, he argues that they could offer permissible forms of pleasure and play and constitute an acceptable but limited loss. Curiously, most of these activities have become a regular feature within the contemporary consumer culture, such as large sports events and extreme luxuries. However, they are encouraged not so much because they allow for loss, but because they generate enormous profits.

Another significant feature of modernity is discussed by Jen Harvie in her book Fair Play, Art, Performance and Neoliberalism (2013). She argues that modernity is rooted in seventeenth-century century liberalism, an ideology which promoted the idea of individuality unconstrained by instituted regulations (2013: 12). This ideology was formative of the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and celebrated even by its avantgardes (Turvey 2011). According to Harvie, twenty-first century's neoliberalism is made up precisely of these 'principles of diminished state intervention and enhanced individual liberty to seek self-reward', and they predominantly 'work in the service of maximizing private profit' (2013: 12). In other words, the promotion of individual agency is harnessed in neoliberalism for the sake of profitmaking. The promise is self-realization, the reality is an identity founded on work and unlimited availability for work. As Harvie writes: 'Workers are constantly "on call"; work is unstoppably dispersed, saturating all life' (2013: 53). Within the neoliberal construct of the individual as worker-producer-consumer, modes of doing nothing and spending time have become highly contentious and are perceived as equivalent to failure. In this context, a performance practice that plays with different forms of uselessness, or non-productive expenditure to use Bataille's term, offers a form of resistance. Bataille's notion of unproductive expenditure substantiates the significance of wasteful interludes and endorses the celebration of uselessness. But unlike Bataille's own pursuit of the limits of experience and his transgressive involvements that have to take place out of sight, my performances take place within the everyday, on the street or in designated public spaces, and consist of more or less ritualistic interventions that are sanctioned by the institution of art and permissible as such. Wastefulness is performed here through excessive amounts of effort, ennobling of waste, inactivity or slowness, which is nevertheless enough to disrupt the economy of the everyday.

## The Garden Gnome Paradigm

In a new performance in 2014 for the Dear Serge programme of the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, I redeployed the garden gnome figure. In response to Bexhill's fame as the home of British motor racing, I devised a piece entitled Slow Races (Kappenberg 2014) as an inversion of the traditional 'Day at the Races'. A group of seven performers dressed as

garden gnomes undertook an infinitely slow race lasting five hours. Wearing the signature red hats, they loitered in loose configurations that gradually with no clear objective moved through the spaces and staircases of the De La Warr Pavilion and its terraces. The seven gnomes were simply present, observing, listening and celebrating their perfectly useless selves. They were not concerned with past or future but existed only in the here and now. If approached by members of the public, they responded accordingly: if asked where they came from they pointed to the space directly behind them; if asked what they were doing, they replied, 'slow racing'. The performance deliberately wasted time. In defiance of the exhausting pressures of modern life, the garden gnomes claimed their right to dawdle.

In this project, the garden gnomes multiplied and developed a voice that could be communicative or enigmatic. The conversations that ensued did not distract from the habitual silence of works of art but rather drew audiences into the spell of the work. The different configurations and almost sculptural presence of the seven gnomes across spaces and staircases echoed minimalist sculptural traditions. Working as a group allowed the performers to 'just' be present and to focus on their physical relation to space, place and time. I am writing 'just' because focusing on presence is conventionally perceived as not very much activity in the sense of a visible doing of something that has a visible outcome of sorts. The performers were engaged however in continuously scanning their environment, watching, listening and generally sensing the space and their own bodies, noting stillness and the activity of others, attending to the moment but without the necessity to respond or to engage. This garden gnome paradigm allowed for a suspension of the habitual pressures, and the specific costumes also did some of the 'work', so that the performers could appear to be doing more or less 'nothing'.

**Figure 3**: Slow Races (Kappenberg 2014b). Photos Emma Marshall.

The performers attended to the qualities of every instant. Through their still presence they became the 'owners' of the space much like fools or court jesters, whose sovereignty is second only to that of the King. They stood, walked, lay or otherwise positioned themselves wherever and whenever, in disregard of the normal rules of behaviour of any given space, be that an entrance or hallway, a staircase, a café, a terrace or a lounge. Framed by the costume and playing on the familiarity of the garden gnome figure, the performers stood in the midst of ordinary life, infiltrating the everyday with a celebration of 'uselessness'.

This garden gnome conceit allows for a certain deception in the work, whereby a lighthearted approach disguises a critique, by means of costume, visual poetry and humorous propositions. Patrick Laviolette has written about truth and deception in performative practices, arguing that deception is a necessary part of the formation of identities and historical ideas (Laviolette 2006: 113). Performance is after all part of the symbolic and mythic aspects of a culture (Martin 1981: 79), and creates 'material, visual and embodied metaphors' in order to reflect on cultural and socio-economic conditions (Laviolette 2006: 140). The use of costume, the visual poetry and the humour are all part of a deliberate ambiguity intended to generate curiosity and to playfully mirror and undermine an urban fabric, whilst performing an implicit critique. This critical function is that which is alluded to by the notion of use in the title of this chapter, The Use of Uselessness. The uselessness is of course somewhat compromised in that the performances are scheduled and performers employed, and the whole thing is part of an institutional structure which underpins the project. Nevertheless, uselessness is embodied and becomes visible in the live event, and

uselessness intervenes within the given context.

## Declaring the Concept

As part of my gnomic explorations, I became interested in further developing the gnome's voice, to allow the figure to speak her mind in a more deliberate fashion. I searched for ways to explicitly articulate my interest in that which constitutes our humanity (Ordine 2013: 117). Numerous questions arose: Given that I had researched the history of debates on use and uselessness, could I talk about this history as part of the performance? The problematic relationship with uselessness is not just a modern predicament, as some audiences might well be thinking. So why not reveal the research? Could the she-gnome claim enough of an authority to speak, or what kind of authority could she borrow to make herself heard? How would audiences value the art work if the gnome revealed the concept and its roots, if she declared what is appropriated and from whom? And, finally, would the sharing compromise the intended uselessness, or could I appeal to reason and logic and nevertheless promote, and invoke, uselessness?

The next performance was modelled on an existing declaration and became a declaration itself, entitled All Human Beings Are Born Useless and Equal in Uselessness (Kappenberg 2014a). At the time, I had been invited to make a piece in honour of artist Monica Ross, a colleague of mine from the University of Brighton who had sadly died a few months earlier, on the 14 June 2013. This date was also the date of the 60th occurance of her performance Anniversary – an act of memory (Ross 2005), for which Ross had recited, from memory, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The last three of these performances had been conducted by Andrew Mitchelson as Monica Ross had become too ill to perform. In an interview with artist Brian Catling for the European Live Art Archive, Ross had furthermore stated that art had a role to play in securing spaces that are free of purpose in order to allow for 'the strange, the uncanny, the not required' (Ross 2010). She clearly believed in the idea of art as a useless endeavour and I began to write a speech for the garden gnome in which I used her exact words to explicitly state the concept, the importance of performance as useless enterprise. I also set out to bring my research into the performance, to talk about the historical background and to add in my conclusions. Given that uselessness is part of that which secures our humanity, I appropriated the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, or UDHR, and turned it into the *Declaration of the Human Right to Uselessness*, or UDHRU. In order to claim the necessary authority, the she-gnome declared herself to be the General Assembly of Garden Gnomes.

*Stage direction: A speaker dressed as a garden gnome, with red boots, purple tights, stripy dress, large green top and pointy red garden gnome hat, stands on an upside-down bucket and holds a silvery lantern in her left hand and a plastic flower pot with plastic flowers in her right hand. She stands still for quite a while; eventually she speaks. Her body is kept fairly still during the whole performance, balancing on the bucket. Occasionally she gestures with the plastic flowers in her right hand. She says:*

> That is the great thing about performance, in that it is absolutely useless – said the artist Monica Ross. For one of her performances she used to recite, from memory, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

She also said:

> Art really needs to keep open a space which is useless, so that things can come into that space which are not designated as required or needed, because if everything is

> required or needed, then things are not going to happen, not going to appear. So the strange, the uncanny, the not required, needs a door. (Ross 2010)

However, as Martin Heidegger said in a letter in 1963,

> to experience the useless is today for man the most difficult thing. The useful is understood as that which is practically useful and of immediate technical purpose, like that which produces an effect of some kind with which I can do business or trade. […] However, that which is most useful, is the useless. (Heidegger 2001)

Europe – or the West – has grappled with the idea of uselessness for a long time, at least since Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, through Dante, Montaigne, Giacomo Leopardi, Bataille, Ionesco and so on.

In 1831/1832, the Italian poet, essayist and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi and his friend Antonio Ranieri proposed the publication of a weekly journal that was designed to be useless. It was intended as an act of resistance against a century entirely dedicated to utility. They declared in a Preamble:

> We recognize openly that our journal will have no use. […] And in a century in which all books, all printed papers, and all business cards are useful, we consider it reasonable to finally publish a journal that professes to be useless; man wants to distinguish himself […], when all is useful, he can only advance the useless in order to provoke thought. (Leopardi and Ranieri, quoted in Ordine 2013: 21)

Not surprisingly, the Florentine authorities did not agree to the project and the journal was never published.

A large part of us is 'owned by money', but the useless is that which renders us more human, said Nuccio Ordine in a little booklet published just last year, entitled *The Use of Uselessness* (Ordine 2013: 22).

Now, if uselessness is that which renders us more human, do we not have a right to uselessness? I leave that with you for the moment.

*Pause.*

One man on the other side of the debate was John Locke. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* from 1693, Locke argued vehemently against poetry and other pursuits, which would make young people waste time and lose money.

> Tis to me the strangest thing in the world that the father should desire or suffer [poetry] to be cherished or improved. Methinks the parents should labour to have it stifled and suppressed as much as may be; and I know not what reason a father can have to wish his son a poet, who does not desire to have him bid defiance to all other callings and business. (Locke 1693: 99)

According to Locke, if something didn't earn money, it wasn't worth pursuing.

On the same side of the debate as Locke was the industrialist and educator Mr. Gradgrind, a character from Charles Dickens' novel Hard Times (Dickens 1854). Dickens' city, Coketown, was an unforgettable city in which everything was dominated by a philosophy of utility. Protagonists raged a daily battle against all that which could impede productivity. Mr

Gradgrind said:

> Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir! (Dickens quoted in Ordine 1013: 29)

But Uselessness is that which renders us more human (Ordine 2013: 32).

In a speech at the University of Madrid in 1934, the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca 'advocated the pursuit of useless activities, in order to "nurture a little grain of madness", without which it would be "unwise to live"' (Federico Garcia Lorca quoted in Ordine 2013: 27–28).

We have a right to uselessness.

And here, therefore, the General Assembly of Garden Gnomes proclaims:

*Standing still on the upside-down bucket the speaker raises the plastic flowerpot in her right hand above her head in a gesture reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty. She continues:*[1]

> **Article 1.**
>
> All human beings are born useless and equal in uselessness. They are endowed with unreason
> and should not act towards one another for any purpose whatsoever.
>
> **Article 2.**
>
> Everyone is entitled to all the uselessness set forth in this Declaration, without distinction
> of any kind, such as education, occupation, deployment, unemployment, retirement.
> Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the order of dysfunctionality to
> which a person belongs, be that by association, institution or nationality.
>
> **Article 3.**
>
> Everyone has the right to be less, to do less and to protection against utilitarian constructs.
>
> **Article 4.**
>
> No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and utilitarianism shall be prohibited
> in all their forms.
>
> **Article 5.**
>
> No one shall be subjected to purpose or to cruel, inhuman or useful deployment.

*The speaker takes down her right arm and resumes:*

> Here, therefore, The General Assembly of Garden Gnomes has proclaimed this Universal Declaration of the Human Right to Uselessness as a common standard of practice for all peoples and all nations, to the possibility that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education, of art and useless pursuits, to promote respect for this right and by random measures, national and international, to invite its universal and spontaneous recognition and observance, among the people of all cultures.

*This marks the end of the speech of the garden gnome. Duration: 12min.*[2]

The speech was both a review of some of the research as well as the completion of a process. Audiences listened, seemingly convinced by the garden gnome's expertise in the matter. After all, the she-gnome knew both the history of uselessness and she knew what it felt like to be useless. Standing on a bucket probably also helped.

The piece constituted a significant shift in approach. It was not a ritual for an environment but a monologue, and the upside-down bucket served as a stage, neatly framing the action. The bucket was in fact the very bucket I had used in Geneva in 2002, for Flush, or the possibility of moving toward an impossible goal. While Flush had been conceived for a particular location, the speech has been presented in many different kinds of contexts and performed in conferences and symposia, exhibitions and gallery spaces as well as at a cabaret night at the Cockpit Theatre in London.2 After an extensive process there was, eventually, a body of work. But this 'work' refused to be work in the

**Figure 4:** *All Human Beings Are Born Useless and Equal in Uselessness* (Kappenberg 2014a). Photos: Bernard G. Mills, Emma Marshall.

conventional sense. As works of art, the different performances were merely part of a process in which – and through which – ideas were developed and took on a form. The French philosopher Maurice Blanchot made many attempts to rethink the notion of work, and to withdraw the work of art from what is commonly known as work. He called this *désoeuvrement*, a kind of un-working. Perhaps art as a whole is a domain in which we can withdraw from work, from the instrumentalization of the everyday, to explore potentiality and process instead.

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1. The following Articles are modelled on the actual articles of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, such as Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. See: http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/.
2. To date, the speech has been performed at: Symposium Monica Ross, University of Brighton (8 March 2014); Flows, Performance Space, London (March 2014); Body Performance Festival, Bath Artists' Studios, Bath Spa (March 2014); Ludus Festival, Leeds University (April 2014); Performing Process: Sharing Practice, Centre for

Dance Research (C-DaRE), Coventry University (June 2014); Dear Serge, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill (July 2014); Labouring with no matter, Circus Street Market, Brighton (July 2014); Neoliberalism and Everyday Life, Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics, University of Brighton (September 2014); Body and Space, Middlesex University London (September 2014); SOS Performance Art Faction, Unit 7 Enclave, 50 Resolution Way, London (2 May 2015); Biennale Vogelfrei 2015, Symposium im Darmstadtium, Darmstadt Germany (11 July 2015); Voila Mixed Tape, Cockpit Theatre London (13 November 2015); The Network of Research, Annual Research festival, University of Brighton (11 July 2016); IDOCDE, part of ImPulsTanz, Vienna (29 July 2016); Performing, Writing, Massey University Wellington, New Zealand (14 March 2017). See: http://www.ckappenberg.info/all-human-beings.