Pause Between Pauses

Chloé Griffin


Night sounds are like signals reaching outside time. Outside what is tangible. From bodies disappeared into airflows converging again to repeat conversations, dialogues undone, redoing, meeting again.

Is this her grave? Where is it? Valeska Gert, Tänzerin. But there’s no date on it… why? Why is there no date on it?

She wanted to have a red coffin… maybe she didn’t want a date.

Strange… It’s very strange. Like she wants to take herself completely out of time.
She said ‘when I’m dead I want to be buried in a cornfield because then the corn grows into my flesh, takes my flesh, and I become bread, no longer dead’.

She thought a lot about this idea of eternity.

This is true, this is true, and she did, yes, which is essentially what the Pause is: taking yourself outside. An impossible idea.

Also what you say about the endlessness, this is not finished... her work is not finished, and it seems to be exactly what she wanted, what she intended — like a zombie!

A continuum, a living idea.

She was working with her body really as something different. There’s her brain and then her body is really just an instrument to show something else — to embody the abstract. She wanted to transfigure her body into abstract ideas.

She said, for example, ‘I was dancing in 1920 with flickering movements like a film’. Like the flickering light of film — like traffic, her piece traffic — how does one body perform traffic?

Yes, yes, in different speeds, in different cars,
in different colors, it’s also about thinking — traffic —
she doesn’t listen to only what the body is saying to do, but
she’s just looking
how to embody traffic, from simply the word.
Different perspectives in one image,
in one body,
in one body, which is given through her body, so her body is
just a medium, nothing more.
She goes very far.
Out of range. Outside symbolic borders.
The idea is always this: everything won’t fit together but the
image you get is also an harmonic image, even if grotesque in
a way. Reality is grotesque, it’s not harmony.
And her pieces Baby or Death or the Procuress, what you could
consider organic realities. Very textual. The dirty body, decay,
lust —
she was interested in realism. And she of course saw this also
as abstract. But it was always based in realisms and cogni-
tions.
She felt that her piece Baby was not kitsch, not expression-
ist — she felt this was realism.
If you perform a little baby and you are 75 years old, per-
forming it so realistically like she did, of course another ef-
fect happens:
mortality.

When was *Baby* written? Did she write it at the same time as *Death*?

I think in the 1920s already, I think *Death* was earlier.

*Death* was before *Baby*?

Yes. It was art in a way that you take an element from reality and transform it to some other medium, like dance.

She liked to play with people’s sensibilities of art. I read that she said she didn’t want to have anything to do with art.

Nay, I wouldn’t say. Peter Penewski told me that in the 1950s she told him to go to a John Cage exhibition. She was absolutely informed about this modern art, but she was not integrated, she remained outside.

And Günter Brus, from the Vienna Actionism, a very good drawer who did some hardcore performances, says: “then I saw Valeska Gert sitting alone.”

One day she gets a letter from Otto Muhl, also a member of this group: “we saw that you performed an orgasm” — but they misunderstand, they want to combine life and reality to bring it into one thing: to make reality into art. And this is not what Valeska did — she just performed. You really see it in *Baby*, when she’s finished, she just makes: cut. Now I’m here, I’m a lady, a 75 year old — not a baby anymore. cut.

The moment of performance is so intense that it’s not sustainable.

You cannot maintain that raw essence without becoming maniacal.

This idea: we open our body and become them by art or by performance.
Art imitates life or life imitates art —

in art you try to open up your real life, something like that — not possible. Bizarre.

Yet Valeska integrated her art into her life by opening these dingy bars and she wrote four autobiographies.

This was her only chance to not become invisible.

She was writing her history.

She said ‘Oh these cabaret bars are so boring’. So she performed the kz commander Ilsa Koch.

Who was going there?

She said all the men from Judy Garland...

All the men of Judy?

Her husband and all the immigrants from Europe from the 1920s, 1930s—Dada artists. She said that Tennessee Williams was working there as a server and that he was stealing money, so she kicked him out. And this seemed so typical Valeska. She wasn’t really angry; she just said “he was cheating me with money so I kicked him out.”

I read that she thought The Beggars Bar was her jungle, that she was like a hunter.

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2 Der Kohlkopp (Berlin, 1932); Die Bettler Bar (West Village, NYC, 1941); Café Valeska und ihr Kuchenpersonal (Zurich, 1946); Die Hexenküche (Berlin, 1950); Der Zeigenstall (Kampen, 1951).

3 Mein Weg (1931); Die Bettler Bar von New York (1950); Ich bin eine Hexe (1968); Katze von Kampen (1973).
Yes, and Jackson Pollock was in her bar—a lot of interesting people. If you create a space with a special spirit, people come to you, you don’t have to invite them to your home, you make a public place.

Do you think she needed the attention?

Yes, yes, but afterwards it was more of a production space. She asked other people to perform. She would blow them up, she would pump them up full of air, because she has a talent—not to manipulate—but to make people look very interesting. There is a picture of a beautiful girl walking through the bar holding a candle and a bottle and it’s called *Candle Dance*. I mean imagine: 1950, a girl going across the stage and making a *candle dance*—very subculture, very modern.

Do you think being outside enabled her to be instinctual with her ideas—to arrive at these visionary points?

I would say she was a visionary because she has good intuition to where borders are. She always feels new borders. And she is absolutely perfect to see through these things. Like a Rückblick. A backward glance. She really has a look. In the 1950s, during the trial against this Nazi woman, Ilsa Koch, she makes a performance that integrates this person, a woman in the ’50s, like “oh I’m just a little knitting woman, I’m just a housewife.” She integrates this normality, and makes it even more grotesque. What Valeska shows in her performance is that this woman—this Nazi—is not full of lies, she’s just full of Widerspruch. Of contradictions. Things not fitting together. But for this woman, this is normal. She feels totally normal. She does not see herself as a monster, she thinks she’s a nice person.

Valeska is more than one time here: she is three times here.
Interesting, the borders. She uses her body in different tenses of time. Takes it as a means of possession. Bodily? Borders to possess.

We don’t know where the borders of our bodies are. You know this experiment with the two fingers: you touch your finger with mine and then feel them together. You can’t tell where I start and where you start. So you don’t know where the borders of your own body are really, you get totally confused. You don’t know where borders start, and where they end. These are Valeska’s experiments. The physical things she works with.

For example she said—as I remember—“I was going down on my knees, the dance was called Sprung, like the Olympic game ‘Leap’. I was on my knees and I started looking at the audience longer and longer, because so light no jump can be, which is a jump only existing in your brain.”

To transform this dynamic action into the abstract liberates it into an endless, bodiless space.

And this idea of a pause, of time. Not death, but pause, which is time made static — still motion. Like death, but different — an anticipated tense meant to resume. A true form of the abstract.

A pause doesn’t even exist. Pause is complete concept.

You don’t know the end and you don’t know the beginning. And you know that a pause has to have borders, in the beginning and the end. A pause has to have an end, without an end it is not a pause anymore.

You take time, already an abstract, and then you take something (a fragment) inside there.

What was the premise for that piece?

She said that Bertolt Brecht discovered her while she was performing the Pause between pauses in films, when they changed the film rolls.
I like the way you just said she performed the *Pause* between pauses.

No. I don’t know if she did the *Pause* piece in the pause.

Oh. What?

I have only a book where you see a lot of dances with titles and one title is *Pause*. Most dances are known, like *Nervosität*, and then there’s this one dance: *Pause*—but there’s no description.

So in a sense this concept is yours as well as Valeska’s?

Yes, like Marcel Duchamp’s urinal, there is no original existing; it’s just from a photo. The book is about dance from 1923 or something. Nobody talked about this modernity. The book came out with photos and titles. Nobody talked about it. Just like nobody talked about the ready-mades until the ’60s when Andy Warhol said this was amazing, and then they reproduced the urinals. Nobody taped these performances and no urinals were left, only a cup. No original ready-mades were left, all were remade, only the photos existed from the original.

These things are so ephemeral. It’s really about challenging the imagination of the future. And this really connects with her because she was so fascinated by the future. She wanted to live when she is dead.

Yes this fits. But I wasn’t the first to discover it. Susanne Foellmer, a dance scientist who comes from the feminist movement, wrote in her book— a very good book, very scientific book—that Valeska also danced perceptions of slow motion, of film, elements of new aesthetics, new techniques, also the *Pause*. Susanne described something really different, because the men always described Valeska as dancing
the prostitute, the wet-nurse, the birth giving, so you really see a very different view from Susanne Foellmer, a feministic view. She’s German.

Was she one of the first to write about Valeska in Germany?

She was the first to focus on Valeska and compare her to other women in art, really good artists. She was the first to bring her out of the cabaret,

out of the Weimar,

and bring her to the modern. Like Marcel Duchamp’s urinal—it’s just the gesture, it’s just the decision

— the moment of jumping off.

And now I’m writing a book about the Pause. And there are other scientists that have made ideas of Pause. I think this is an open space, everyone can use her—this is absolutely in the sense that she wanted. Nobody can say Pause is mine.

Transfiguring her body into Pause enables a borderless becoming. Flesh to corn to bread. And the idea of pause is an untenable thing in its very essence.

And here is an example, a new interpretation of the Pause by Philipp Gutbrod: the body shape of Valeska in the Pause looks similar to the viertelpause—the quarter rest—the symbol of the musical notation of the pause. That this could be the reason for giving the image the title Pause.

It’s so interesting that these dances exist only in pictures now. They’re static—but void of movement. It reminds me of her piece Sprung—The Leap—in that performance, it is as if she stays in the photograph, in the position from which the imagination now goes... you can’t take it further.
the bodies that remain
She says ‘my main intention for my dances is shortness and simpleness of form. Clear. Kurzes und einfachheit.’

I like how this shortness or briefness relates back to the tense nature of a pause. And also to the structure, space and process of the body. Like briefness exemplifying these mortal bones in relation to the elements around us. And simplicity: just this traceable body boundary. Unlike a painter or writer, she uses simply her own temporal body.

I think she understood that if you combine three or four things in the same moment, things which are not fitting together, you become full of life and endless. And this she understood. Most actors think ‘I must fulfill this role, play this ugly or this evil one…’ and she understood that you open space if you are not so in one direction, but also a step to the right and left and backwards. Therefore her performances were recognized as full of life.

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I read that she thought a lot about this idea of eternity.
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Strange. It’s very strange. Like she wants to take herself completely out of time.

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Why do we need bodies? Around our selves — this other whirling of mass — blood, water, air and other things: brackets, boundaries, beautiful limitations. Pressings. Red coffins. Our bodies and — the Pause — between our bodies. Next decay.

The Pause —

a soul

between beginning and end. A body’s end. The finishing of our red mass material. What finish? To dirt? Into the passage of some other finishing? And then?

The Pause —

again

outside time — (inside). To take on the eternity. To embody

Endlessness.
Valeska Gert was born in Berlin in 1892. She was a German Jewish dancer, actress, and avant-garde performance artist.

In 1938 she emigrated to New York city, where in 1941 she opened The Beggars Bar in the West Village. In 1947 she returned to Europe and a blockaded Berlin.

In the 1960s and ’70s she appeared in films by directors Federico Fellini, Rainer Maria Fassbinder and Volker Schlondorff. In 1978 she was invited to play in Werner Herzog’s remake of Nosferatu but died 10 days before the shooting on March 16th.

Wolfgang Müller is a Berlin artist, musician and author. He founded the multi-media performance art group Die Tödliche Doris (active 1980–1987) and has published numerous books, including most recently Subkultur Westberlin 1979–1989 (Fun-dus, 2014).