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## Moving Images/Moving Bodies Impossible Choreographies in the Exhibition Space

**Abstract:** The widespread presence of moving image art in contemporary art biennials inspired this research about regimes of movement in exhibition spaces. How do we move when the artwork expects us to remain still? How does that affect our aesthetic experience? Starting from an observation upon which bodies get to move in the exhibition and how, I will analyze works by FAFSWAG, Boudry/Lorenz, and Amador & Jr. as they were presented in the most recent editions of SESC\_Videobrasil Contemporary Art Biennial and the São Paulo Biennial, both in São Paulo, Brazil. This paper aims to show not only that movement and stillness are complementary forces intrinsic to the aesthetic experience, but also that the unequal positions of bodies in the exhibition can serve to show how movement and time are elements not equally distributed in our society.

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## 1. Prelude

On the ground floor of the cultural center SESC 24 de Maio in downtown São Paulo, Brazil, a large LED screen stands in a corner. To access the rest of the building, visitors must pass by this spot of the foyer. Showing on screen is the interactive work by the LGBTQI+ Māori collective FAFSWAG from New Zealand (Fig. 1). In their work from 2017, titled *FAFSWAGVOGUE.COM*, the viewer is invited to choose characters with the help of a trackpad and to watch different dance/vogue battles after which they can pick the winner. One is also given the option to watch a short documentary about the winning character's life. Often times, the image just stands still, with the message "pick a battle" blinking on screen and waiting for the next person to start the movement again with a click on the pad. People pass by—the image halts.

This work was being shown as part of the 22<sup>nd</sup> SESC\_Videobrasil Contemporary Art Biennial (2023-2024) in the already mentioned SESC 24 de Maio, which is a 13-floor-high, multi-purpose building in the República neighborhood. This area of downtown São Paulo has a mixed reputation at best. Considered dangerous and risky by outsiders, especially due to criminality rate and the high number of homeless people that gather around Praça da República (Republic Square), it also represents a cultural hub with the Teatro Municipal, a prestigious stage and home of the São Paulo Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as newer cultural centers such as the SESC branch inaugurated in 2017. People go there to practice sports in the courtyards, eat in the affordable restaurant, visit the dentist, study in the library, take part in workshops or simply to rest from the busy and loud surroundings. Most people rush in and out of the elevators and might not notice or interact with the work by FAFSWAG. In order to properly watch the moving images, one needs to stop.



**Fig. 1: People passing by the work *FAFSWAGVOGUE.COM* while a couple interacts with the piece at SESC 24 de Maio, São Paulo/SP, Brazil.**

First theories about moving image art presentation differentiated this form of presentation as freed from the stillness of cinema halls – where the spectator was expected to sit still from beginning to end of the session. The fact that the art exhibition visitor could theoretically move freely, position herself in the space in different ways, decide when to enter or leave the room, and when to start or stop watching a work on screen, seemed to bring a level of freedom to the constraints of the cinema chair – and to free the moving images from the rigid cinema program. This opposition is quickly overcome when we consider, on the one hand, that the cinema hall experience was never a necessarily quiet and still moment for a passive audience. And, on the other hand, as we will see, that the apparent freedom in the experience of the moving image in the exhibition space is nothing but an illusion. As Erica Balsom puts it, “the difference from the spectator of the movie theater is, then, far greater than a simple question of mobility versus stasis; in fact, what is at stake is the spectator’s relationship to time and attention.”<sup>1</sup>

Stillness and movement are opposing but complementary forces in the experience of moving image artworks. How do we move in an art exhibition full of moving images? And who is “we” anyway? Different groups of people will have different conditions for movement and therefore different experiences in the art exhibition. In this essay, I will analyze some examples to better understand how the aesthetic experience in a contemporary art biennial full of screens is not only connected to movement and stillness, but also to regimes of time that are not equal for all the people sharing the same space.

## 2. Experience in the Exhibition

The example of the FAFSWAG work installed in the foyer of SESC 24 de Maio is a peculiar case since it was placed in a semi-public space. The other cases I will analyze are inside the exhibition area, with all its rules and regulations such as not eating, not running, or not speaking loudly. These rules are not always clearly communicated but are implicit for most visitors – and are enforced by the security staff if necessary.

Inside the exhibition, space is clearly divided. Backstage areas with equipment, for example, are kept out of reach for visitors. The entrance is usually clearly demarcated and there are signs on the floor indicating where one is not supposed to step. Some exhibitions have a clear path, with arrows indicating the directions for visitors. Others let people decide more freely on an individual circuit. There is incentive to move around in the space, but it is not a completely *uncontrolled* movement.

<sup>1</sup> Balsom 2013: 53.

The expectation of movement and/or stillness also comes from the works, in their variety of formats and modes of presentation. Some artworks invite the visitor to move around objects – sometimes also screens – to fully grasp the ideas of the artist. Other works, by contrast, present themselves frontally, placing the ideal visitor sitting or standing in front of the work. In the case of moving images specifically, stillness is expected in order to focus on the content shown. Since “concentration and distraction (...) are two equally constitutive components of aesthetic experience,”<sup>2</sup> we can also think about stillness as a condition for attention, while movement is more commonly present during a more distracted path between two points of the exhibition.

An alternance of movement and stillness is therefore usually necessary to the aesthetic experience in the exhibition. As Juliane Rebentisch puts it, the “aesthetic experience (...) exists only *in relation to* an aesthetic object; conversely this object becomes aesthetic only by virtue of the process of aesthetic experience.”<sup>3</sup> Without going deeper in the genealogy and theorization of the concept of “aesthetic experience,” I would like to stress the relation that is established in these spaces between objects and bodies through experience. Neither the visitor alone is responsible for her experience, nor are the artworks the only element determining the limits and possibilities of the aesthetic experience.

This joint experience is embedded in a “spatial dramaturgy”<sup>4</sup> proposed by artists and curators. While Rebentisch uses the term spatial dramaturgy to describe certain installation works and how their theatricality is translated into the physical space, I would like to extend this concept to exhibitions as a whole, especially those that manage to create a narrative not only in the selection of works, but in the proposed alternance between walking and stopping. Even though the narrative of the exhibition is often non-linear and totally dependent on each visitor’s own interests, which are sometimes unforeseeable at the time that curatorial choices are made.

The aesthetic experience is furthermore tightly connected to concepts of time. The temporality of the aesthetic experience, as Rebentisch also argues, cannot be equal to the duration of time-based works such as moving image art. The author talks about a certain tension or nervousness that this causes on the viewer of installation works, and I would argue that this also applies to the experience of visiting a large exhibition, especially an art biennial where moving image art abound. She writes:

The unease that frequently results from this tension – of not having seen everything, [...] or in general, of having walked too fast – reflects the fact that the time of the aesthetic experience can only be limited by an uncompelled decision to leave, that its end will inevitably be arbitrary.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Rebentisch 2012: 195.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: 155.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 166.

The arbitrariness of the visitor's movement in the proposed spatial dramaturgy brings to the fore the impossible task of curators and artists trying to imagine the choreography of bodies and images in the exhibition. With this in mind, I would like to continue the discussion of movement in the exhibition in the next section using one example from the São Paulo Biennial, the second oldest art biennial in operation today.

### 3. (Im)Possible Choreographies

In 2023 the 35<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo's motto was "choreographies of the impossible." It was curated collectively by Grada Kilomba, Hélio Menezes, Manuel Borja-Villel and Diane Lima. The exhibition took place, as the São Paulo biennials have since 1957, in the Pavilhão Ciccillo Matarazzo inside the Ibirapuera Park in São Paulo. The building, designed by the renowned architect Oscar Niemeyer, offers more than 30.000 m<sup>2</sup> and many possibilities of exhibition design. The building itself is already worth the visit for the aesthetic experience, as can be attested by the occasional openings for visitation when the pavilion is empty in between biennials. With the theme of choreographies in mind, one could visit this specific Biennial edition paying even more attention to the dance between bodies and objects in the exhibition.

On the first floor of the pavilion there was a darkened room – a so-called "black box" – with two works by the Berlin-based duo Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. Inside the room there were two projections on opposite walls: *Moving Backwards* (2019) on one side, and *(No) Time* (2020) on the other. Each of them was presented as a single channel screening of about twenty minutes, exhibited alternately with one another.

In *Moving Backwards*, which had originally premiered at the Swiss Pavilion of the 58<sup>th</sup> Biennale di Venezia in 2019, the performers were filmed by a camera in movement while dancing. As the title already hints at, the work plays with movement directions, with the performers on screen executing dance steps moving forward or backwards. It is not always clear if the direction of movement is the result of what was captured during the shooting, or due to digital manipulation of the images (as in a reverse shot). The changes are subtle, and one does not always know if the current scene is manipulated or not. What matters is that either through the dancing and the music, or the doubt about the "realness" of the performed action, the attention of the beholder is usually caught, at least for a few minutes, by the movement on screen. At the end of the work, a shiny silver curtain automatically slides in front of the screen, indicating that "the show is over." Darkness reigns. Only a few moments later, the other projector starts emitting light in the opposite direction, and *(No) Time* starts. Here, the set-up of stage and curtains is made more complex, as is the concept of time: on screen we see automatic doors which open whenever a performer comes from the back and enters the "stage," located between the doors and the camera. Inspiring tunes resonate in the room, the atmosphere is

danceable. Performers bring different dance styles into play, and experiment with queer conceptions of time, as the wall text states. At some point, blind curtains go up and down in the diegetic décor, eventually keeping the performers out of sight. But once again the screen space is expanded into the exhibition room, and blinds go down at different distances from the screen and with different lengths, also in the black box. When the dancing is over, all we hear are the machines of the automatic blinds going back up, preparing for the next loop. But first, the other projector beam goes on and *Moving Backwards* starts playing on the opposite side once again.

In the middle of the room, beneath the projectors which hang from the ceiling, a line of stools is available for the visitors to sit on. You come in, sit down. Twenty minutes looking in one direction, then in the other. A 180-degree shift. At the end of the second video, you get up and leave. That could be the basic movement of the beholder – if one is willing to watch both works. In the room are the elements of the installation – screens, projectors, stools, blinds, speakers, projected light, and music – and the bodies of the visitors. My body reacted to the environment created for the Boudry/Lorenz installation: the dark room, the upbeat music, the life-sized people dancing on the large screen. I wanted to dance. But can you dance in an art exhibition? Which choreographies are allowed in the exhibition room and what are the political consequences of this unexpected movement?

To explore the question of the political meanings of movement in the exhibition space, I am turning to Hagar Kotef who, going back to Hannah Arendt, wrote about the connection between *freedom* and *movement*. Considering freedom of movement the oldest form of human liberty, Kotef sheds a light on the regimes of movement that define identities and belonging<sup>6</sup>. As she argues, “for movement to become so tightly connected with freedom, an entire array of mechanisms, technologies and practices had to be put in place so that this movement would become moderated enough (one could say tamed or domesticated).”<sup>7</sup>

Even though a sign of freedom, movement apparently cannot be completely free. In the Western liberal society, too much or uncontrolled movement is also not welcomed. Kotef uses the examples of border control, check points and walls between nations to show that freedom of movement is as universal as it is virtually inexistent for most. People who move too much, for different reasons – asylum seekers, nomads, homeless people, etc. – are also being distanced from society. Therefore “the process of subject formation is, to a great degree, a project of ‘normalizing’ movements.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Kotef, there is a desired balance between stability and movement in our society.<sup>9</sup> And this balance is determined by instances of power beyond the

<sup>6</sup> Kotef 2015: 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 8.

individual freedom of movement. Scaling down the scope of Kotef's analysis of whole countries and global displacements to the individual movement inside the exhibition, I argue that movement is paradoxically encouraged but also tamed in the art space. And since the proliferation of screens and projections, when there is a lot of movement in the artworks themselves, the desired balance became even more complex.

Going back to the Boudry/Lorenz black box at the São Paulo Biennial, I must admit that I dared the one or the other dance movement, behind the people sitting, but only discreetly and afraid of what others might think if they saw me. It felt like such a natural response to the work, that I wondered how the others were not dancing as well. Particularly in the case of *Moving Backwards*, the spatial dramaturgy had already, at least in the premiere of the work at Venice Biennial, resembled that of a nightclub. But even if the intended choreography for visitors included a moment for dancing inside that black box, most visitors would not allow themselves to enjoy the dance floor, which seemed at first incompatible with the attention needed for the more traditional aesthetic experience. Most visitors are so used to the tamed movement inside the exhibition space, that even places and artworks that allow – or even ask – for a different kind of movement are usually not explored to the fullest.

Even if we are allowed to dance in the exhibition, most of us do not dare to. The tamed movement in the exhibition is internalized and the presence of security guards only reinforces this feeling of a controlled experience. Additionally, the lack of time – which one does not have or does not want to invest – often times keeps us from dancing away this impossible choreography.

#### 4. Unequal Temporalities

Each experience in the art exhibition is individual. But beyond the constraints and control in the art space, we can also explore how socially uneven those experiences can be. People sharing the same space will have diverse experiences of time according to their social class and labor condition, as Sarah Sharma points out. Criticizing the general assumption that the world is accelerating, without considering these different experiences, Sharma writes:

The social fabric is composed of a chronography of power, where individuals' and social groups' senses of time and possibility are shaped by a differential economy, limited or expanded by the ways and means that they find themselves in and out of time.<sup>10</sup>

Power-chronography, as Sharma proposes, is a balanced space-time approach, putting forward the temporal to compensate for a tendency in other theories to focus too much on the aspect of space. The lived experience of time needs to be more

<sup>10</sup> Sharma 2014: 9.



individualized or, at least, considered in its social context. Sharma's theory of chronography of power and unequal temporalities will be applied to observations I made while visiting an exhibition. Taking as an example the SESC\_Videobrasil Biennial which opened this article, I will elaborate on the temporalities of the different groups of people present in the exhibition space, on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of SESC 24 de Maio.

The first group is made of visitors of different sorts. Firstly, there are the classic beholders, people who go there on purpose with enough free time to spare, which they invest in visiting the exhibition in search for the aesthetic experience. There are other people there also with free time, but who maybe went there by chance, because they were in the building for some other reason or were waiting for something or someone. They did not intentionally plan to go there, but spend time in the exhibition nevertheless. Since the entrance is free, they might take advantage of the airconditioned space on a hot day. Another kind of visitors are students of different ages who attended not necessarily on their own free will but are brought by a teacher or instructor. Time is perceived very differently by these different kinds of visitors, with the students for example using the time rather to play with their phones hidden inside the dark rooms of video projections instead of actually paying attention to the artworks.

The second group I would name are workers of different kinds. As a researcher and art lover, I am a sort of in-between – perhaps a professional visitor. Like me, other curators, researchers, and journalists also spend time in the exhibition with a specialized perspective and sometimes taking notes. Teachers and instructors form yet another subgroup of their own, attentive at once of the content of the artworks but also of the behavior of their students. There I also found the members of the educational team, mostly young university students identified by pink T-shirts with the motto of the exhibition. They give guided tours and also stand around during the opening hours to answer questions of visitors. Technicians eventually walk around, checking, and fixing works when necessary. The cleaning personal is also always on the move, passing by a few times during the day to make sure the exhibition area is clean and tidy. The time they spend in the exhibition space probably does not allow them to see much of the artworks. Their attention is devoted to signs of dirt and dust accumulation, not allowing for much of an aesthetic experience. I can't help but notice the racial aspect of the cleaning staff, mostly dark-skinned men and women. The same goes for the final group I would like to highlight: the security guards. The usually dark-skinned men wear shirts, light grey suits, and an earplug on one side. They stand or sit all day during the opening hours in specific spots, eventually taking rounds. Theoretically they would have enough time to also see the artworks, but their focus there is a different one. They observe the beholder to make sure the rules – implicit or explicit ones – are being followed. They protect the artworks, the objects, but also the general order of movement in the exhibition space.



Both groups – including this diversity of subgroups – share the same space. We all woke up, left our houses, moved through the city, and entered SESC 24 de Maio on a specific day, going up to the building’s exhibition on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. But the experiences in that space can by no means be comparable. Following Sharma, one thing that sets people apart is the use of the *time* they have (or do not have), in the exhibition. The temporalities are not and cannot be shared due to the effects of “power-chronography,”<sup>11</sup> this almost invisible power that defines who has time for an aesthetic experience or not, making explicit the social inequalities we are immersed in.

## 5. Performing Inequality

I would like to dwell a little longer in the analysis of the group of security guards of the exhibition to make even more explicit both the ordering of freedom<sup>12</sup> and the uneven politics of temporality<sup>13</sup> in the exhibition. That is also the group that inspired the work of Antonio Gonzaga Amador and Jandir Jr. from Rio de Janeiro. The duo created the “performance company” *Amador e Jr. Segurança Patrimonial Ltda.* (freely translated as Amador and Jr. Patrimonial Security LLC) and have offered their “services” in various museums and galleries around Brazil. The two brown-skinned men perform dressed in black suits, white shirts, and ties – a traditional security guard uniform – and by now have almost fifty different performances in their portfolio. Some of them were also part of the 35<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo.

In their performances Amador and Jr. play with the stereotypes around security guards in exhibitions, such as their attire and expected behavior. They sometimes perform dressed in suits but wearing flip-flops instead of shiny black shoes – a small detail that makes a big difference in how they are perceived by visitors. During another performance, they are fully dressed as expected, but they sit for hours on the floor of the exhibition instead of sitting on a chair or standing on a corner. In a further example, they distribute business cards to visitors offering small jobs unrelated to security and vigilance such as “household repairs,” “proofreading of texts” and “making caipirinha cocktails.” The presence of the otherwise commonly ignored security guards is also made visible in the performance *Sem Título* (Untitled). Instead of, almost invisibly, standing in a corner of the room, one of the guards stands directly in front of an artwork, with his back turned to the piece, as if protecting it. But instead of only protecting the work, they are also keeping the visitors from properly seeing it.

While sometimes their intervention is discreet, as with the exchange of footwear, in other performances they are more proactive and approach visitors. One of these

<sup>11</sup> Sharma 2014: 9.

<sup>12</sup> Kotef 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Sharma 2014.

more intense interactions happens in the performance *Por Gentileza* (Excuse me), in which they ask a visitor to take a picture of the fake guard next to an artwork (Fig. 2). Sometimes, security guards are being asked to take pictures of people in front of artworks or famous landmarks – especially before the “selfie” function of cellphone cameras became more common. This action and the resulting photographs done by the visitors subvert the assumed lack of relation between guards and artworks in a surprising way. What is the aesthetic experience possible for the security personnel, the men and women who spend the most time in the room with the artworks?



**Fig. 2: Performance “Por Gentileza” (freely translated as “Excuse me”).  
Centro Cultural São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, 2023 [Photo: Rubens Gonçalves]**

The final performance by Amador and Jr. that I would like to discuss is called *Ronda* (Patrol). In this performance, they walk in slow motion through the whole exhibition area, carefully putting one foot after the other. In the video documentation of their performance at the São Paulo Biennial in 2023, we can see how some visitors, unaware that Amador and Jr. were not real security guards of the exhibition, stopped and asked them for directions or information, which they responded to without stopping their actions. In this performance, they neither stop in a corner nor move from room to room checking on artworks and/or visitors. Their slow movement challenges the order of movement expected from security guards and at the same time defies the idea of an accelerated temporality that is always optimized so everyone can make the best use of their time as possible – and not waste it by walking slowly and without a clear purpose.

Amador and Jr. in their performances call attention to how other people – in this case security guards – behave or are expected to behave in the art exhibition. By extension, they can help us think about how certain groups move in these spaces, including me and you.

## 6. Final Steps

In this paper I have brought together in situ observations of two recent art biennials and expanded them with the analysis of selected artworks to advance the thoughts around the regimes of movement of bodies and images in the exhibition space. The selection of sources to accompany this discussion was intentionally multi-disciplinary in an attempt to expand the field of film and media studies. I showed that the tamed movement inside the exhibition space refers not only to the rules and regulations of the art space itself, but it becomes a constraint even for the bodies who have the task to enforce the rules – the security guards themselves. When encountering moving image art in the exhibition, the visitor might tend to behave as if in a cinema, sitting quietly and emulating a sort of normalized movement that has been established but is by no means the only possible way to have an aesthetic experience with the moving image.

Going back to the FAFSWAG installation on the ground floor of SESC 24 de Maio, time and space there operate in a complex way. Because it is located outside of the main exhibition area, the rules of occupying the space are slightly different. And because it is an interactive work with multiple possibilities, the time required to see or experience the work is at once longer – to watch all the content – or shorter – if one considers watching only one vogue battle lasting a few minutes.

On a regular workday, I observed a little boy dressed in a spiderman costume who was passing by the foyer with a man, probably his father. While the man stood there and used the touchpad to make the choices of characters and scenes to be played, the boy noticed the cursor onscreen and started to “chase” it with his hands. The father joined the game and kept moving the cursor around for the boy to catch, while music played, and dancers performed their vogue battles. People danced on screen, the boy moved along as well, but interacting not with them but with the cursor, a mediation sign of the interactive functionality of the work and probably not intended as an aesthetic element. The man stood there, in the stillness expected of the beholder – with the exception of the finger moving the cursor, of course. The man and the boy had the time to play. This kind of playful, spontaneous, and unexpected interaction with the artwork was possible due to the location of the work in the semi-public space of SESC’s foyer. The space here was crucial: had it been inside the 5th floor exhibition, similar to a museum, I believe that a security guard might have intervened with the untamed movements of the boy.

Visitors often complain that there is not enough time to watch certain moving image artworks, especially the ones that are very long, during a visit to an exhibition. This

is one of the challenges of time-based works, when time is such a rarefied luxury of the few. In the case of an open work such as *FAFSWAGVOGUE.COM* it was virtually impossible to stay in the SESC foyer for long enough to watch all the possibilities of battles and documentary clips. The people that spent the most time in the foyer were, without doubt, the security guards. Since they sit and walk around for hours, they could potentially get to see all of the available battles during the duration of the exhibition. But as this interactive work makes clear, there is one great difference: the security guards are not given the power to move and stand where they want, and are never given the freedom to choose the winner of the battle themselves.

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- Sharma, Sarah (2014): *In the Meantime. Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

## List of Figures

- Fig. 1: People passing by the work FAFSWAGVOGUE.COM while a couple interacts with the piece at SESC 24 de Maio, São Paulo/SP, Brazil. Picture by the author, October 31, 2023.
- Fig. 2: Performance “Por Gentileza” (freely translated as “Excuse me”). Centro Cultural São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, 2023. Photo by Rubens Gonçalves. Source: Amador e Jr. [https://www.amadorejr.com/por\\_gentileza.html](https://www.amadorejr.com/por_gentileza.html) (8.10.2024).