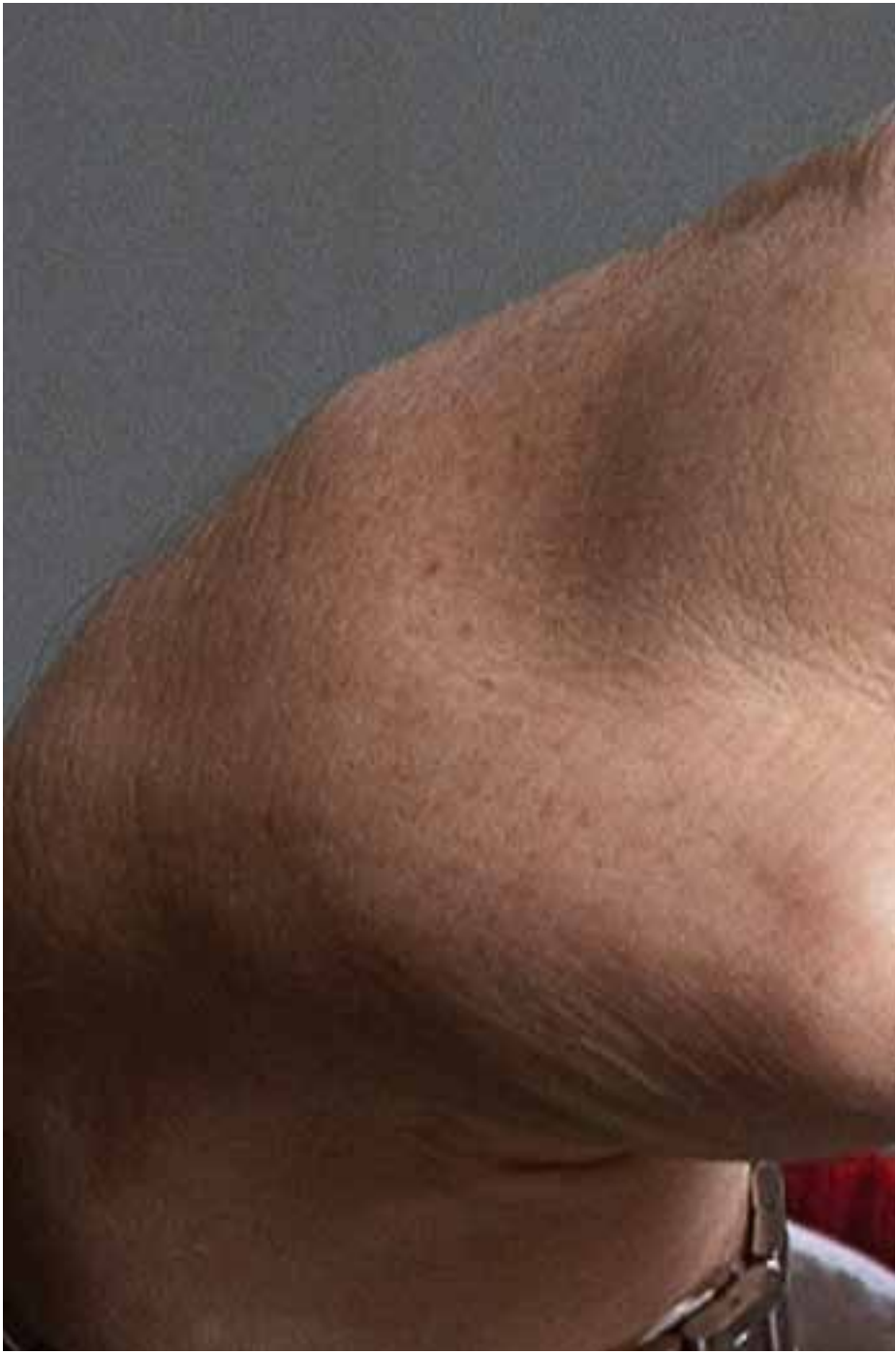

The Perfect Sound, 2009, 14’30”

Rehearsal in Occurrent Art

Frans-Willem Korsten

Don’t Do It Wrong, 2007, 10’13”

Don’t Do It Wrong, 2007, 10’13”

Don’t Do It Wrong, 2007, 10’13”

1

Etymologically speaking, harrowing and raking are synonyms for the verb “hearsing”, from French *hercier*, which comes from Latin *hirpex* (harrow). This, in turn, harks back to *hirpus* (wolf) in Oscan (one of many languages now extinct). Hearsing: going over it, heaping it up. And because it has to be done over again and again: re-hearsing.

Prelude

As a child of four I would watch from my bedroom window, peeking through the curtains, as farmers worked the soil until late in the afternoon or evening. With either a horse (one of the last to be thus employed) or tractor going to and fro, they would plough the land at the end of the seasons. Then they would come back a couple of months later, early in the year, with harrows to smoothen out the clumps of upturned soil. Later in the year, after harvesting, they would return once again with their rakes, handheld or mechanical, to gather and heap the corn and the straw. As the sun was setting, they would still be working, arms and machines going to and fro—while I kept watching until the field was fully "done".[1]

As for my fascination with seeing the farmers doing their repetitive work, it cannot be explained in terms of content. Indeed, it is very hard to define what the activity of harrowing and raking is 'about'. Let there be no mistake: nothing is simply what it is. Obviously harrowing and raking are concerned with much more than the basic activity itself. For one, all these activities are aimed at something. Yet it was not the aim of the activities *per se* that mesmerised me, although it did matter. What I was following was the stages of a process, or in other words progress, that would have to be completed. Meanwhile, I never entirely forgot myself as a spectator, as I was both inside and outside my room, at once within and beyond the frame of my bedroom window. That is to say, I was looking at something progressing through or within a frame while at the same time feeling myself to be part of a frameless action in progress that, to me in hindsight, felt like a rehearsal insofar as something was clearly being prepared—but to what end?

The works that can be gathered under the theme of rehearsal are *Don't Do It Wrong* (2007), *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular* (2007), *Shoum* (2009), *Everything Is Gonna Be* (2008), and most recently *My lifetime (Malaika)* (2012). They are all concerned with a process of rehearsal, in the sense of a preparation. At the same time they deal with the literalness of progress—if, that is, we understand progress in its original sense, as the basic movement from one stage to another while something is being recurrently done.

A similar dynamic is operative in some pieces by Katarina Zdjelar. Here we find both the recording and performance of some particular repetitive physical action, which is not a repetition as such but rather a rehearsal, one that is spellbinding.[2] Because of the manner in which this rehearsal is conducted, recorded and edited these pieces produce a fascination with the rhythm of an activity that at first seems to be exclusively concerned with going over something, with gathering something together and piling it up. As with my fascination with the work of farmers, what makes Zdjelar's work meaningful and compelling, or what makes us look at something in a frame, while simultaneously being a part of a frameless action, is partly the progression by stages inherent in these rehearsals. At the same time, the way in which the camera is used can also be defined as an intense form of concentration in a constant "present", following and recording the physical process of rehearsal. This process in itself is vulnerable because its outcome is uncertain, or because the activity being done is both open towards a future and exhausting; it is enclosed within a longing for the moment of its having been done.

First and foremost, however, the recurrent activity of working the land demands discipline, hard work and can be something that is enforced. Let me begin by dealing with this issue of discipline and the question of the extent to which it is, and is not, a defining marker of rehearsal—or of subjection.

Reaching an End – or Becoming One

One could define the theme of rehearsal in Zdjelar's work in terms of *mimesis*. When, in *The Republic*, Plato defined the essence of an orderly society as a matter of repetition

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (originally published in 1975) Foucault focuses on the institutions that fall under the rubric of the state, or that embody the state, and that teach us to function in an orderly and proper way in society. In this context the repetition inherent in rehearsal is aimed at discipline while also being a form of discipline itself.

or *mimesis*, he was following the same trail that Michel Foucault would pursue in the twentieth century. As Plato pointed out, the process of repetition is not a formal matter but a disciplinary matter of bodily inscription or, literally, incorporation. This is why subjection, if done properly, will lead the subjected not to experience the subjecting power as somehow alien, but to feel at home with it. Power never merely enters our bodies as if they pre-existed that Power. Rather, it defines them through a process of repetition as "one"; it defines their rhythms, their poses and possibilities as somehow natural.[3]

Rehearsal that both is, and aims at, discipline is the major theme of Zdjelar's *Don't Do It Wrong*. From the very first scene onwards, in which people can be seen revolving around the pivot of a staircase down the end of a long and narrow, cleanly polished hallway, Foucault's disciplining institutions are invoked: bodies, individual and collective, are being formed into "one". That we find ourselves in the middle of a process of repetition and rehearsal becomes clear when we meet one of the small bodies that is being trained to become "one"—with itself and the nation state. The "body" is that of a girl who, perhaps for the first time, has been chosen to carry the national flag at the beginning of what appears to be just an ordinary school day. However, as becomes apparent from the girl's extreme nervousness, the rehearsal process has not yet reached its final stage. Or, to put it differently, rehearsal appears in this case to be distinctly different from *mimesis*-as-repetition.

Yet the nervousness is not limited to this girl alone. It seems to be in the air, though one cannot help but wonder where the nervousness comes from when it is evidently just the very regular start of a very regular day in a very regular primary school. No doubt, part of the

Take, for instance, a musician training by playing a series of notes on his or her instrument, or a child trying to learn a text by heart. Both will make mistakes, but this is something that is not worrisome because it can, and will have to, be done over again. Repetition.

overall nervousness has to do with the everyday chaos of parents trying to get their children to the crowded school and the right class on time. Yet it is also a more fundamental nervousness, as becomes apparent from the remarks of the school principal, who deems the parents as undisciplined as the children themselves: "It's almost April and we still didn't teach parents how to enter and leave the school!" This somewhat irritated but also nervous voice of authority was already palpable in Plato's treatment of *mimesis* as repetition. The primary danger in Plato's eyes was that the young might repeat the wrong things, such as the bizarre fantasies of literature, which would lead to deformed bodies in a consequently deformed state. But Plato was also emphatic in defining *mimesis* as *repetition* because he feared the uncertainty inherent in rehearsal. Such an uncertainty, or danger, is the result of the intrinsic relationship between rehearsal and the real.

If we consider a process of sheer *repetition*, the danger inherent in a mistake is not all that serious.[4] A mistake made in rehearsal, by contrast, actually has an effect on the real. There is a telling shot in the piece where a boy leans the national flag against the wall while his face expresses something to the effect of: "Here? Like this?" Then he shrugs his shoulders and walks away. But the flag threatens to topple over! There is an instant response: a teacher, a figure of authority, rushes in to rescue the flag. Even in rehearsals, the flag must not be allowed to fall. Were it a simple process of repetition, it would be of little concern if the flag happened to fall—one would merely have to pick it up. In a process of rehearsal, on the other hand, the flag cannot be allowed to fall because it would affect—even threaten—the end result, the very aim of rehearsal in terms of progress: the

flag is supposed to stand straight and be held properly. Since preparing for the real may also turn out to be playing with the real, as a result of which the real is no longer the dominant aim, the very act of rehearsal is invariably charged. Or, to put it differently, rehearsal may well imply a multiplication of realities, something Plato would presumably have viewed with concern.

Powers of the Fragment: Occurrence of Being Overtaken

Two pieces, *Shoum* and *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular*, pay close attention to this multiplication of realities, as implicit in the very title of the latter. The impossibility of becoming "one", the defining aim of rehearsal, is formally embodied in both cases by a fragmentation of what we hear and see. In both we are looking at organs without a body: in *Shoum*, a couple of hands, in *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular*, a head, or a hand seen raking a plectrum over the strings of a guitar. And in both cases the voice that we hear, or the sound of a guitar, implies that there is in fact a body, or a body as a whole, that is connected to an instrument. Yet it remains a body by implication only.

The independence of image and sound, or the non-coincidence between the two, points to an aspect of rehearsal that defines the process of rehearsal not in terms of what it is organically aimed at but in terms of its inherent, fragmentising powers. The same can be said of the focus on parts of the body—or close-ups of a performing body—as opposed to the body in its entirety. That there is effort involved in the process of rehearsal, that it is something that can be done right or wrong, is not

Everything Is Gonna Be, 2008, 3’35”

Everything Is Gonna Be, 2008, 3’35”

It is much like Gilles Deleuze's famous alteration of two plus two *equals* four (2 + 2 = 4) into two plus two and four (2 + 2 & 4). Indeed, if we take two and two together we will have a new entity, "four", that cannot be fused properly with the previous twos.

conveyed by the countenance of the woman playing the guitar. On the contrary, her face clearly attests to the pleasure and enjoyment in simply trying things out. Rehearsal, it would seem, is not a one-directional process. In a fundamental sense, while rehearsing, one may stumble across the unexpected. Instead of doing something right, one may find something new that all of a sudden appears to be right. In rehearsing one song, or one sound, one may find another—or a better—one: the possible beginning of another.

The fragmentation intrinsic to rehearsal is a major theme in *Shoum*. In this video work the 1984 song "Shout" by the British band, Tears for Fears, is fragmented on both a linguistic and acoustic level while apparently being rehearsed. In effect, the piece shows how rehearsal may work against the logic of representation—Plato's great fear, and after him the fear of many others—and thus against the fusion of the representation and the represented.[5] With *Shoum*, the original song is evidently not the aim; it is not the thing one would copy, as would be the case in a true repetition. Rather, it is the thing which, in the course of the rehearsal process, leads to a multiplication of realities. Fragment by fragment, we see the emergence of something new.

The funny thing is, we might even see a positive side of *discipline* at work here, or, more importantly, of a distinct form of subjection that is rather different from the one that has dominated Western thought in the last decades or even centuries. Over the past decades and centuries, discipline has generally been considered the key aspect of subjection. As the title of the above-mentioned study by Foucault illustrates, such subjection is invariably connected to some form of punishment. Discipline is something one has to undergo, or obey, in

The argument is distinctly Hegelian here. One can only be free, such would Hegel's dialectical argument be, if one is at the same time not-free, that is to say, if one is obeying a law, since one has been taught, and as a result one has learned, how to obey a law.

order to become a subject.[6] However, in the case of both *Shoum* and *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular*, discipline can be better defined in terms of an energetic attempt to persist, to progress, without knowing beforehand what it is one is progressing towards. Neither the woman playing the guitar, nor the two men appropriating "Shout" have to be taught a lesson. They are not giving themselves a lesson either. Here, the process of rehearsing is not one of disciplining, although it clearly demands discipline. Indeed, while such discipline is aimed at learning, it is a type of learning that has fairly little to do with teaching. The form of subjection involved is not dialectically construed and constrained, but relates better to what Benedict de Spinoza, and after him Gilles Deleuze, termed "conatus". Bodies, and even parts of bodies, are trying to find out what they can do, what they are capable of, as they stumble across the new. Subjection is not at stake here, although a form of subjectification is. Subject, considered as the one who acts, and subject, considered as the topic of concern, are finding one another.

These two forms of discipline imply two radically different forms of participation on the part of any viewer. The subjecting form of discipline works within the parameters of theatricality in the sense that the subjected one will have to appear in front of an audience that is looking to see whether he or she will do it right or wrong. Doing it wrong in front of an audience will be a form of punishment in itself, and will probably also lead to other forms of punishment. This is probably what makes the girl so nervous in *Don't Do It Wrong*. This is, by the way, also what makes it the more meaningful that *It* has a capital "I": the thing to be performed is not something to be toyed with. In contrast, the positive kind of discipline

works within the parameters of what Deleuze dubbed "dramatisation"—by which he indicated the jump from the virtual to the actual. Such a jump is not realised out of the blue; it has to be enacted, or *done*. What was already real, but virtual, becomes real and actual (palpable, seeable, sensible) because something is apparently being done. Such a jump into something new, into something becoming actualised, can be traced in the face of the woman playing the guitar. We see it every time she smiles, as if in surprise, at what she has found, found out—not so much in terms of discovery (for then it would already have been there in terms of possibility, perhaps waiting to be discovered), but in terms of utter surprise. To be sure, instead of finding something that was apparently already there, something *occurs*.

The noun "surprise" implies having been overtaken by something else. This may help to show that the form of subjectification I am referring to is not the result of an act of will, an intention or a form of consciousness. Nor is it one of disciplinary teaching (subjection). For in this case the effect of discipline, as an action that is persistently repeated-as-rehearsal, is that one is overtaken, struck and affected by something else. As a result thereof one finds oneself to be not within the theatrical frame of someone or something else, but in a domain one had not known before. In this sense such action might be thought of as "pure":

> *Pure*
> The word will return throughout this book in a refrain, doubtless to the discomfort of many a reader schooled in the critique of its conventional associations of moral superiority, particularly as regards race. It is used here in an unconventional

The Perfect Sound, 2009, 14’30”

The Perfect Sound, 2009, 14’30”

The Perfect Sound, 2009, 14’30”

7

Elmina's fortress was first established by the Portuguese (hence its Portuguese name) but was taken by the Dutch in 1637 before being sold to the English in 1871 for the paltry sum of 47,000 guilders.

> sense, borrowed from James. "Pure" is James's qualifier for the bare-active first flush of emergent experience. The just-emerging of experience is pure in the very specific sense that it is "virtually both subjective and objective."
>
> (Massumi, 2011: 10)

This is Brian Massumi speaking, quoting William James, the American philosopher of Pragmatism. As may be clear, it demands some courage to speak of purity in the context of the scholarly debates of the last half century. Surprise can be enacted, to be sure. But how else might one describe the real experience of surprise as being "pure"?

Doing It Again: Fatigue in History

My lifetime (Malaika) was initially made by Zdjelar as part of a larger project in the context of which Dutch artists were asked to work on the historical relations between the Netherlands and Ghana—relations that are dominated by the inescapable theme of slavery and the slave-trade from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. These relations are embodied, even today, by the small town of São Jorge da Mina. Also known as Elmina, the town was the major point of departure for slaves headed towards the New World.[7] In our times it has developed a special relationship with the equally small Dutch city of Gouda in a bid to both accept and rework—or redefine—the past. The title of a study dedicated to this reworking of history is telling in this regard. The study in question is Ester van Steekelenburg's *Elmina: Building on the Past to Create a Better Future* (2008). Before discussing what this future might entail,

8

“U nu de wonderbarelijcke Vreemdigheden te verhalen, die ick hier op mijn aenkomst (als voor my noyt gesien) met verwonderingh, en verbaestheyd aenmerckte, souw my ’t eenemael onmogelijck zijn; …

Het Casteel van verre, Wit, en heerlijk afschijnende, en gebouwt op een Rondom-uytgehouwe Rots (wiens voet van de grooten Oceaen met een Hemels-hooge Barningh bespoelt, en gekust word) en wiens Graften aen de Land-kant tot in den Afgrond schijnen te strekken: van my aen Land komende genadert zijnde, bevondick te grimmelen, gelijck als mede de gansche strand van Duysenden van Swarten; Welckers verf, Naecktheyd, vreemde Posturen, Geschreeuw, en Gejuygh met ongehoorde, en Barbarische Toonen, my so wonderbaerlijck opgetogen maeckte dat ick als betovert, en gansch buyten mijn self, door dien Spoockenden hoop doordringende, endelijck tot binnen in ’t Casteel, en soo voorts by den Heer Generael geraeckte.”

(Focquenbroch, 1986 [1678]: 160.) English translation by the author. For the original see: <http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/origineel.php?origineel=focq001afri01_01_scan0174>

however, it is worth making an effort to delve into the past—also because it may help me to better deal with Zdjelar's *My lifetime (Malaika)*. Though "Malaika" derives from the Swahili word for "little angel", the title, so it would appear, refers to the Ghanese use of the same word to mean "my lifetime". Let us begin by considering the lifetime of someone who came to Elmina in 1668: the Dutch physician, musician and poet Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch, who had been told by his friends that he could make an easy fortune as a doctor in Elmina.

After a hazardous journey Focquenbroch landed on the coast at Elmina on 18 September 1668. In a letter dated 22 September he describes his experience as follows:

> Actually it is simply impossible to tell you about the miraculously strange things (which I had never seen before) that I noticed here, full of wonder and astonishment, upon my arrival. […]
>
> The castle lying there, from afar, white, beautifully glimmering, as it is being built on a rock that has been hewn on all sides (its foot being flushed and kissed by the vast ocean with a soaring surf), and canals on the landside reaching into what seems like an abyss. I, myself, having reached land and having moved a little closer, discovered that the entire beach was swarming with thousands of blacks, whose colour, nudity, strange movements, shouting and rejoicing, in sounds that were unknown and incomprehensible to me, made me so miraculously excited that, as if enchanted, and completely beside myself, I wrestled myself through this boiling mass, to get into the castle and thus close to the Lord General.[8]

This passage is an excellent illustration of the instant alienation experienced by the Westerner upon entering a completely new world, but also of the baroque shock resulting from the mingling of two radically different cultures. The word "miraculous", which occurs twice in the passage cited, is an equivalent of the Italian *meraviglia*, the term used paradigmatically to indicate the effect of baroque art. Hence the doctor feels himself to be "enchanted" or mesmerised. Obviously this was long before the activity of trading slaves would become part and parcel of a racist system—that is to say, long before the full-blown perversity of colonialism. Indeed, the anxieties of it all had not as yet been neutralised by a racist ideology. Things are definitely out of joint here, both physically and psychologically; they are taken out of their own context and implanted in a radically different one. As a result, an exhausting process of attempting to adjust has to begin, as if one were rehearsing to perform adequately in the end. Focquenbroch became incredibly exhausted in the process, as his later letters testify. Then they stop. He died fairly soon afterwards in 1670. Aged thirty, he most likely succumbed to one of the many epidemics.

Zdjelar's *My lifetime (Malaika)*, with its "out-of-jointness" and exhaustive rehearsal process, is like the echo of a response to this history several centuries later. In this case, however, the "out-of-jointness" of things does not give rise to a sense of *meraviglia* but of uncertainty and puzzlement—and indeed fatigue. We witness the rehearsal or performance of a piece of music by an orchestra. Which orchestra this is can be discerned from the letters "NSO" engraved on the back of a cello, which stand for National Symphony Orchestra, in this case Ghana's. The music begins. The orchestra plays

One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular, 2007, 4’46”

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One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular, 2007, 4’46”

Obviously the musical piece itself has a beginning and an end, but it is very much an open question as to whether these count as the beginning or end of Zdjelar's piece. As a result it is impossible to decide on whether we start with someone falling asleep with only his trombone as the last stronghold that keeps him sitting straight, whether we end with that musician, or whether we are in fact supposed to begin right in the middle of the piece.

"Malaika", an iconic piece in Africa's musical history, made famous by one of its most acclaimed artists, Miriam Makeba. Yet the song is performed rhythmically "out of joint", as though it were being performed as an echo. The reason I call it "out of joint" is because the song is not performed, say, "more slowly" than some of the famous Makeba versions. In something close to 2/4 time it is performed to a rhythm that is distinctively European, and understandably so, bearing in mind that it is being played by a classical orchestra. That said, the orchestra follows, but never quite keeps, the beat. The musical performance thus acquires the quality of an echo in search of a source, while audibly hesitating between a European and an African one. Moreover, the members of the orchestra appear to be at a loss: they are shown either poring over the score, trying to find where they are up to in the music, or looking around to see whether it is time for them to join in. One man playing the trombone falls asleep; others arrive late, carrying a chair up above their heads as they make their way to their position.

The piece is looped so seamlessly that it is impossible to know where it starts or ends. We find ourselves right in the middle.[9] Here, Zdjelar's art connects to what has of late been called "activist philosophy" which similarly takes as its premise that philosophy starts in the middle of things. As a consequence:

> Activist philosophy is not a subjectivist philosophy […]. It does not presuppose a subject, only "something" going on. Beginning with event-activity rather than the status of the subject makes activist philosophy a fundamentally *noncognitive philosophy*
>
> (Massumi, 2011: 6).

Likewise, Zdjelar's piece is by no means a documentary that will provide us with more *knowledge* about Ghana's NSO. We get into the middle with "something going on". This something is not simply *one* thing. Clearly the rehearsal of this orchestra is shot through with vectors of current circumstances and Ghana's history. It is perhaps less the individual musicians who show this than the instruments used. It is questionable how long they will hold. The scene in which one musician can be seen falling asleep with the trombone keeping him upright, albeit only just, is telling in this respect. The man is not merely nodding off, as one does from time to time. He is clearly exhausted, simply unable to keep his attention focused and to participate in the activity. His instrument appears to be equally on the verge of collapsing. Attacked by humidity, heavy usage and a long life, the gold plating is flaking off. As a result the instrument embodies a fatigue that makes us wonder when it will give up the ghost for good.

Fatigue, albeit in a different sense, is also apparent in *Everything Is Gonna Be*. This is a piece in which we follow the progress, individually at first, of a group of singers rehearsing the song "Revolution" by the Beatles. Well-fed, well-clothed people, inhabiting well-designed and well-furnished house work towards a decent performance of the song. Still, with the camera so closely following the faces of the singers, there is a palpable sense of their deep-seated fatigue, especially when one of the singers rehearses the song from his armchair. Evidently the very theme of rehearsing gives cause for weariness: when people do not stumble across the unexpected, are not exhilarated by surprise or fail to open up the new at all. Equally often people begin to feel insecure as to whether the whole rehearsal process will

10

The question is whether we, as the visitors of this art, are watching such fatigue or whether we dare to let it affect us. Obviously it is always nice to be surprised. Yet occurrent art may not only, positively, be about the new. It may equally well run up against something, again and again and again, thus leading to pure fatigue, or rather: the purity in fatigue.

ever come to some kind of successful finish. Frequently enough it can feel like a dead-end street.

In both *My lifetime (Malaika)* and *Everything Is Gonna Be,* this dead-end street is very much related to the notion of history. In the latter the theme of the Beatles song, which is about the making of history, stands in sharp relief to the fact that the people singing the song find themselves unable to make history. In the former, *My lifetime (Malaika)*, the musicians of the National Symphony Orchestra find themselves part of an institution that is kept only barely alive. It is the product of a history that may well have had its starting point in decolonisation, but is now clearly headed elsewhere, leaving the NSO behind as one of its many undeveloped possibilities. Struggling to give the orchestra a chance nevertheless, the rehearsing continues to the point of ultimate fatigue. Here, occurrence derives its basic meaning as a form of "running up"—running up against history.[10]

Postlude

The etymology of "rehearsing" (as a recurrent form of harrowing and raking), which runs via the Latin *hirpex* (harrow) to the Oscan *hirpus* (wolf), may testify that the human brain has innumerable ways of associating things with one another, although the visual iconicity between a row of prongs on a harrow or a rake and the teeth of a wolf is quite evident. Still, the etymology may also have a basis in ancient reality. The jaw bone of a dead wolf may well have served to gather the leftovers of grain into a small heap, making a pattern in the soil, going to and fro: re-hearsing.

Then someone would take a stick, a bone or a rod and would move it along the teeth, going to and fro.

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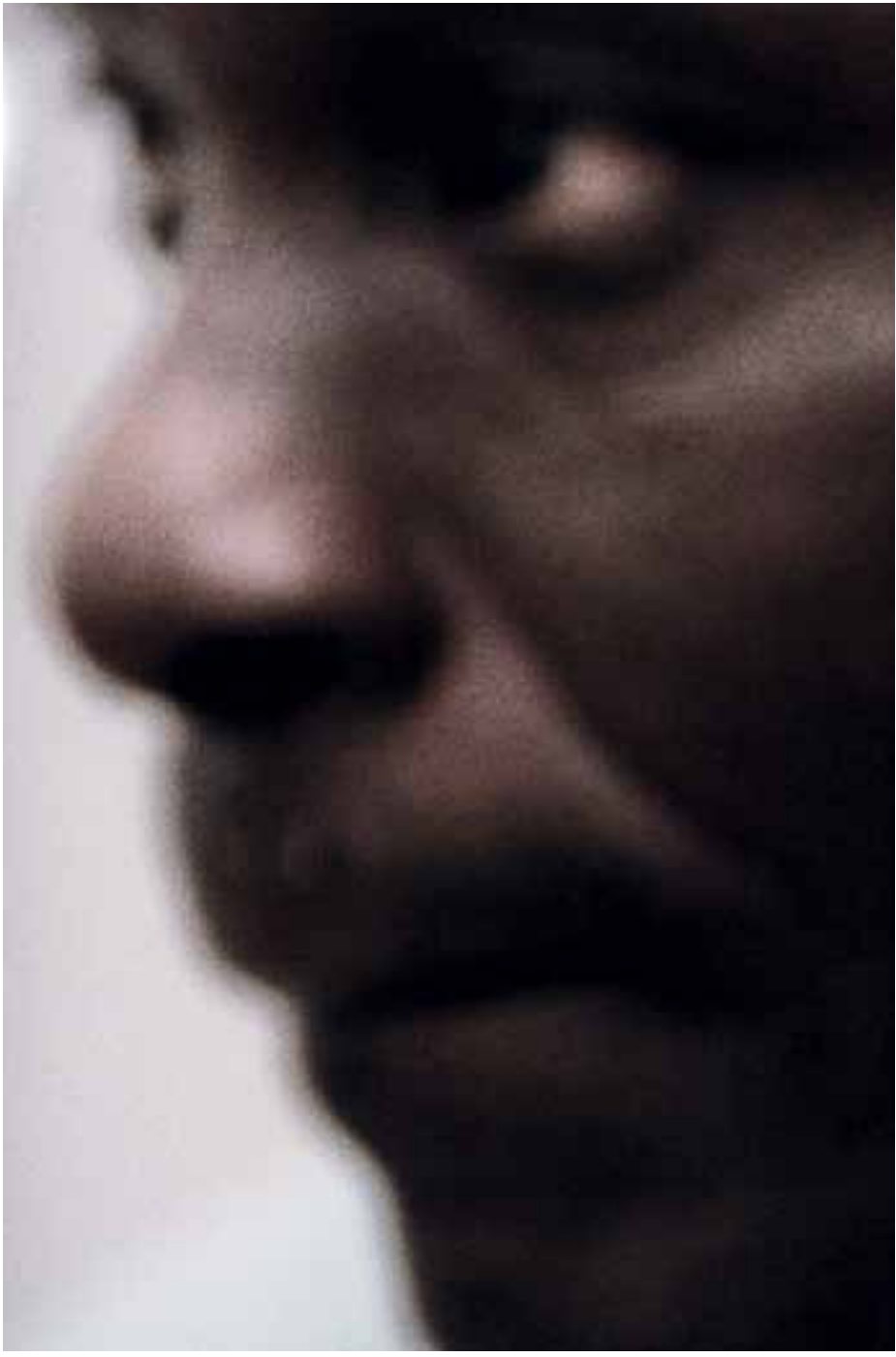
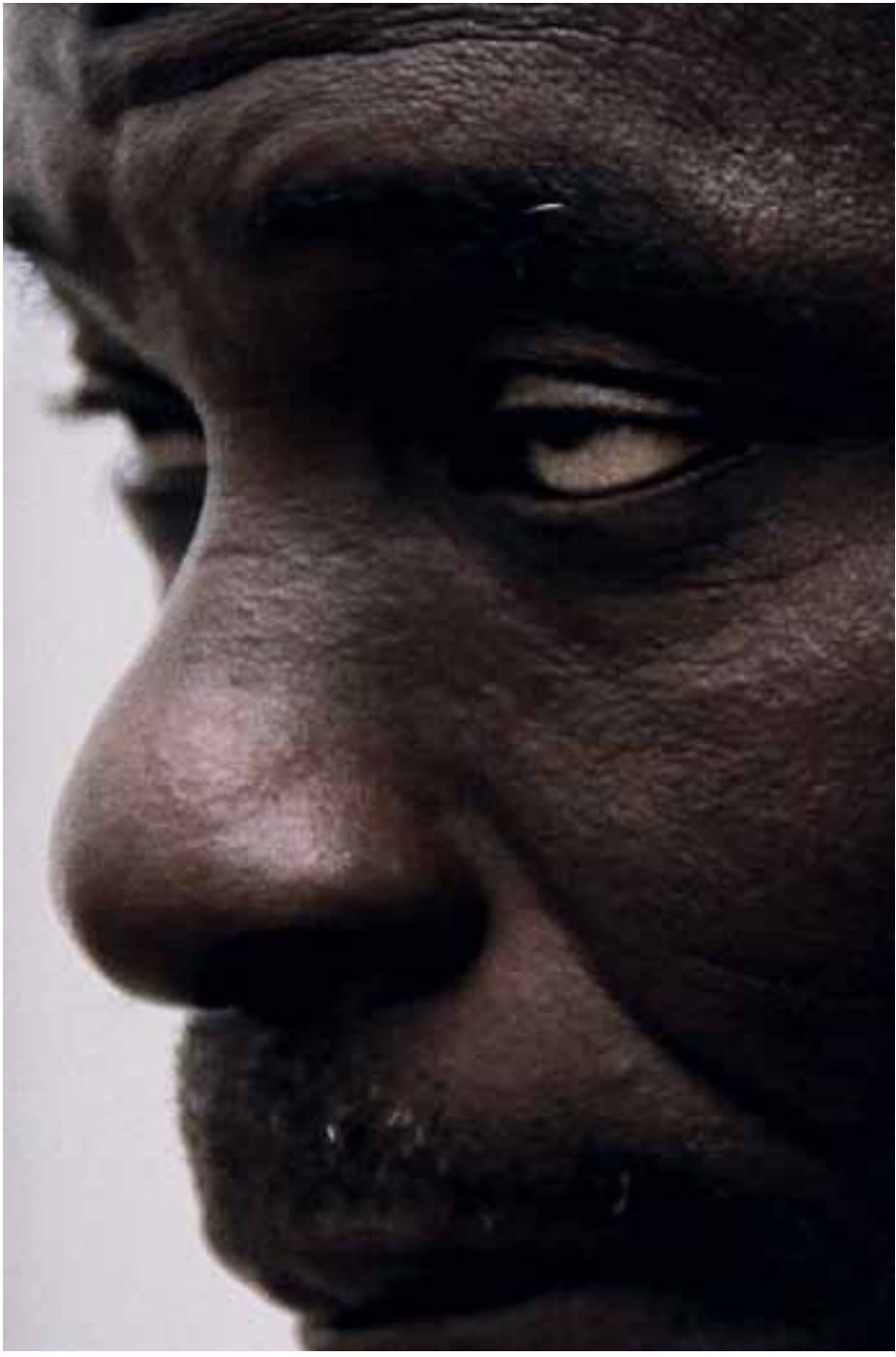
Surprise. Humming together with the rhythm of the stick on the wolf's teeth, people would make music. This would not be something that others would have to watch in any theatrical sense. It would be an activity that would compel people to move along, to progress with the music in its various stages, to be with it and within it. It is very hard to define what this would be about. Still, many years later people might still be saying to one another: "Do you remember when we made music together with nothing but the teeth of a wolf and the sound in our throats?"

Perhaps one could "watch", or rather "be", with Zdjelar's works for a start, as though someone were playing with a stick on the jawbone of a wolf. And perhaps also one should not watch this being done, but rather enter into the process, dramatically, progressing through a process stage by stage, uncertain of its outcome, willing to get to the historical depth of its fatigue, or to be surprised by this "occurrent art".



My lifetime (Malaika), 2012, 5’37”



My lifetime (Malaika), 2012, 5’37”

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