



Katya Ev

VISITORS OF AN EXHIBITION SPACE ARE SUGGESTED TO 'DO NOTHING'

PAYMENT NOTE N°2021-1-9/3

Date: January 9, 2021

Between

Ekaterina Vasilyeva

Paris, France

Siret:

VAT ID:

and

Steyn Bergs

Born on April 7, 1987, 1984, Belgium

1st Name:

1989, 1st Name: Steyn, Belgium

steyn.berg@proton.com

National register number:

Bank details:

Object: payment for 'doing nothing' as agreed upon in the Contract for 'Doing Nothing' N°2021-1-9/3 d.d. January 9, 2021

Steyn Bergs requests from Ekaterina Vasilyeva the payment for 'doing nothing':

on the date: January 9, 2021
starting time: 14:45
end time: 15:46

1 hour x € 10.25*

Total amount to be paid: €10.25

Payment method: Cash

Ekaterina Vasilyeva agrees and proceeds to immediate payment of the requested amount.

For proof of payment:

Ekaterina Vasilyeva

Steyn Bergs

* Belgium's general minimum wage upon CAO (collective labour agreement) n° 43 of the National Labour Council, which sets the absolute national bottom amount for wages. These apply when there are no other specific sectoral agreements on minimum wages. On Sundays and national holidays the compensation is 200%.

+^(1,3) Steyn

NOTHING/
Notes on ⁺DOING:
Katya Ev's
*Visitors of an
Exhibition Space
are Suggested to
'Do Nothing'*



For all its deadpan self-explanatory qualities, the title of Katya Ev's *Visitors of an Exhibition Space are Suggested to 'Do Nothing'* (2020, henceforth *Visitors*) does not mention what is in fact a crucial aspect of the work: that it employs legal tools to explicitly frame 'doing nothing' as productive labour.¹ A participatory performance piece, it indeed suggests visitors to do nothing, but not without first meticulously spelling out the conditions that 'doing nothing' will be both subject to and enabled by. Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors first encounter a reception desk where they are explained the parameters of the piece. If a spot is available, it is possible to take part and 'do nothing' for any amount of time, and to be financially compensated for every full hour spent in and on the performance. Before commencing, visitors sign a contract that was developed by Ev in close collaboration with a lawyer, and which is legally valid and binding. After the performance, they are remunerated and receive a proof of payment. They are reminded that, now they have sold their time and labour-power to the artist, they are responsible for paying all applicable taxes and social contributions.²

The 'act' of 'doing nothing' itself takes place on a chair placed in the exhibition space and can consist of anything, insofar as the contradictory and ultimately impossible proposition to 'do nothing' must be interpreted and navigated by each visitor as they see fit. Nonetheless, some instructions are given: visitors are invited to be attentive to themselves as well as to their surroundings, to try to be fully 'present.' As such, the performance is supposed to facilitate and foster a pleasant, positive experience of 'doing nothing' marked—again, contradictorily—by a kind of plenitude. This experience, the website for the work states, possesses a “generative emancipatory potential.”³

In these notes, I want to begin to rise to the challenge not only of taking this claim seriously, but also of considering and examining it alongside the work's emphatic equation of 'doing nothing' with productive labour and its concomitant, and acute, emphasis on legal regulation. For, as is evident, the putatively emancipatory 'act' of 'doing nothing' here is compromised and contaminated from the outset by capitalist relations, and is threaded through state and legal apparatuses that enable and reproduce these relations—most conspicuously, the labour contract.⁴ What to make of the work's simultaneous foregrounding of legal regulation and the emancipatory potential it would contain? And how to conceptualize this emancipatory potential when it is so clearly entangled with precisely those things that one would imagine we need emancipating from? These contradictions, which *Visitors* all but flaunts, strike me as especially fruitful and instructive for attempts to move beyond a simply and straightforwardly oppositional understanding of emancipation. One limitation of such an understanding is that it tends to become reductive and binary in equating political emancipation overly or exclusively with an antithetical attitude towards something one is either entirely for or against—with the former option supposedly signaling complicity, and the latter requiring critical distantiation and immunization. Another is that it may often not be so viable under the present conditions of neoliberal

1. In the Marxist critique of political economy, the definition of productive labour does not hinge on the quality, character, or content of the labour performed, but rather on the social relations it is embedded within. Roughly speaking, labour is considered productive when there is a more or less formalized relation between a seller and a buyer of labour (a worker and an employer), when surplus-value is created, and when that surplus-value is appropriated by the buyer of labour. I apply the term here, even though the situation staged in *Visitors* does not meet this last criterion. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 1041-1044.

2. My description and discussion of *Visitors* is based on my own experience with the work within the context of the group exhibition *In a Long Blink of an Eye* (HISK Gosset Site, Brussels, 17 December 2020 – 31 January 2021), which is where the work was first shown. It is important to mention, however, that Ev has enabled for up to 2000 “delegated enactments” of the work to take place. This means that anyone interested in (re-)staging the work can do so, on the condition that they sign a legal agreement developed by the artist and her lawyer. This agreement stipulates certain terms for the delegated enactments (including instructions relating to the exhibition space and the performance's set-up), so that these can take place without further direct involvement on the artist's behalf, and can be developed in a variety of ways as long as the agreement is respected. See: www.doingnothingwebsite/delegated-enactments.

3. “‘doing nothing,’” *Visitors of an Exhibition Space are Suggested to 'Do Nothing'*, accessed February 18, 2021, www.doingnothingwebsite/doing-nothing

4. This is also what, in my view at least, sets a work like Ev's apart from Jenny Odell's propositions for 'doing nothing' in her theory/self-help book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. While Odell is wary of romanticizing 'doing nothing' and, like *Visitors*, points to the many complications and challenges it entails, she nonetheless often ends up reproducing a sharp antithesis between participation in the neoliberal (and technologized) attention economy and resistance against it. Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn & London: Melville House, 2019).

5.
Anna Watkins Fisher, *The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2020), 16.

capitalism, where those committed to emancipation are inevitably part of and reliant on systems “whose conditions they have little or no ability to negotiate.”⁵ I therefore want to confront and engage the contradictions present in *Visitors* directly, in an effort at thinking how—if at all—claims to emancipation, such as the one staked by the work, might currently be furthered and achieved through artistic and aesthetic practice.



6.
“‘doing nothing.’”

I have asserted, but not yet demonstrated, that ‘doing nothing’ in *Visitors* is not just subject to, but also *enabled by* the legal framework and conditions advanced in and by the piece. Here, a look at the contract and the paratext accompanying the work is in order. Consider, for instance, this particularly glorious mobilization of the perverse poetic potential of legal-administrative language, on the webpage that explains the premises of the work: “In whichever way ‘doing nothing’ is enacted concretely, the contract signed by participants formally recognizes that what they are doing is what ‘nothing’ is.”⁶ The pragmatic solipsism of contractual and legal circumscription here substitutes for rather more lofty meditations on the ontology of ‘nothingness’. The performativity of legislative utterances is what makes the impossibility of ‘doing nothing’ appear as available and renders it practically realizable—but not really, as participants in *Visitors* will naturally experience first hand. In this context, it is worth recalling the example of the perception or experience of the absence of a friend in a café, which philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre uses in *Being and Nothingness* to demonstrate the dialectical entwinement of appearance and non-appearance, and ultimately of being and nothingness.⁷ Somewhat like Sartre’s absent friend, the contract and the discursive framing of *Visitors* affords a kind of perception of nothing(ness), and sets off a series of reflections on the paradoxical nature of such perception.

7.
“I have an appointment with Pierre at four o’clock. I arrive at the café a quarter of an hour late. Pierre is always punctual. Will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, ‘He is not here.’ Is there an intuition of Pierre’s absence, or does negation indeed enter in only with judgment? At first sight it seems absurd to speak here of intuition since to be exact there could not be an intuition of nothing, and since the absence of Pierre is this nothing.”
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Washington: Washington Square Press, 1993), 9.

But *Visitors* is also, and in ways that are perhaps more significant for my purposes here, reminiscent of feminist philosopher Cressida J. Heyes’s interest in a particular kind of liminal experience that she terms anaesthetic time in her book *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge*. The experience of anaesthetic time is liminal not only in that it mediates between different states, but also because it itself teeters on the edge of what can or cannot be accounted for as (having an) experience. Sleep, passing out, and the self-administration of anaesthetic drugs—both licit and illicit—are all phenomena that Heyes discusses at some length in this regard. But one example, discussed in the introduction to the book, seems particularly valuable in relation to *Visitors*. Here, Heyes describes an advertisement for a float tank—or sensory deprivation tank, where one floats in salted water in complete silence and darkness—that promises the possibility of experiencing nothing while also, quite ironically, stressing the productive dimension of the experience. Heyes mentions that while the promised benefits of the float tank fall “under the headings of relaxation and meditation, broadly construed,” the advertisement also insists that such relaxation and



meditation are beneficial for one's work performance: "Some people, we learn, have 'drafted whole portions of books while floating.'"⁸

For Heyes, the float tank demonstrates not only the possibility of withdrawing from experience, but also the ambiguous political import of such forms of withdrawal. It is clear that the float tank is not only a characteristic product of the so-called experience economy, but is also valued precisely to the extent that the experience of 'nothing' would enable productivity. At the same time, insofar as it offers some refuge or respite from what Heyes calls postdisciplinary time—characterized by an excess of stimuli, a proliferation of demands and tasks, and a general sense of temporal fragmentation—anaesthetic time for Heyes is supremely political. If withdrawal into anaesthetic time falls short of qualifying as emancipatory in any immediately recognizable sense, and is likely to be perceived instead as mere escapism, then this is because it troubles the conventional understanding of political agency as the exclusive domain of fully autonomous and self-sovereign individuals. Heyes, however, resists seeing the conscious or unconscious decision to detach from experience only in such terms. She wants to salvage the ambiguous emancipatory qualities of anaesthetic time, and to consider and propose it as a political tactic for the refusal—however flawed and problematic—of conditions which do not allow for escape or effective resistance. Anaesthetic time, for Heyes, presents a form of emancipation (albeit a temporary one) that does not rely so intensely or exclusively on opposition against or negation of its object.



In *Visitors*, 'doing nothing' is expressly valorized; it is claimed to possess an emancipatory potential, which would reside in its capacity to activate "an inner space in deep connection to the self." One can certainly be skeptical of this use of therapeutic-meditational rhetoric, or indeed of any appeal to the virtues of supposedly direct and unmediated corporeal experience. But then what is crucial is that this use and this appeal in *Visitors* are complicated by the explicitly avowed intrusion of political economy and the juridical system alike. The work seems to insist on having it both ways—emphasizing the positivity and fullness of the experience of 'doing nothing' while also indexing its imbrication with capital and law. Somewhat analogous to Heyes's treatment of the sensory deprivation tank and of the political valences of anaesthetic time more generally, then, it engages the political character of contemporary experience—including aesthetic experience—in its complex ambiguity.

As such, the work poses some pressing questions for critical cultural theory—which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, is often disproportionately driven by a 'paranoid' hermeneutics of suspicion and is therefore likely to be impatient with political compromise, complicity, and ambiguity, favouring instead strategies of critical distancing and determinate negation.⁹ Yes, the experience of 'doing nothing' here is compromised and contaminated by capitalist relations, as I have written,

8. Cressida J. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2020), 8.

9. Concomitantly, and importantly for my discussion of *Visitors*, what Sedgwick terms paranoid readings also tend to be especially reluctant to ascribe significance to (aesthetic) pleasures and the forms of betterment and relief they might offer. "Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure ('merely aesthetic') and because they are frankly ameliorative ('merely reformist'). What makes pleasure and amelioration so 'mere'?" Only the exclusiveness of paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure: only its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions)." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 144.

but does that automatically mean that one should disregard or dismiss its potential emancipatory yield? Should consciousness of the capitalist nature of ‘doing nothing’ be seen as necessarily foreclosing all politically desirable (side-)effects in advance? And if some visitors do experience something they want to describe as a deep connection to the self, then is this experience or its significance qualitatively lessened because of its subsumption by the juridical-economic complex? The knee-jerk response of the critical critic would be a resounding “yes”, but the wholly unironic certainty with which *Visitors* insists simultaneously on the beneficial nature of ‘doing nothing’ and its entanglement with both the market economy and the law is enough to make anyone think twice.



While I hope already to have shown how ‘doing nothing,’ in *Visitors*, is not at all tantamount to mere passivism or escapism and offers some distinct—if also thorny—political possibilities, objections might still be raised about the apparently individualistic nature of the experience the work affords. Considering that this experience is so explicitly personalized and premised on interiority and a depth model of subjecthood, one may well wonder about how, if at all, it could become communicable—how ‘doing nothing’ might provide common ground for politically significant activity or praxis. But while individual experiences with *Visitors* may all be unique, they are also likely to be considerably similar. It is ultimately rather improbable, for instance, that someone would *not* experience and make sense of the work as a more or less determinate and strategic retreat from what Heyes terms postdisciplinary time.

Recall, also, that this supposedly unique and intimate experience is both preceded and followed by an entirely standardized administrative procedure—the signing of the contract, receiving payment—and therefore emphatically conditioned by the impersonal mechanisms and procedures of both the juridical system and capitalism. It remains, at root, an economic transaction. Rather than subvert, transgress, or destabilize the legal and economic frameworks that increasingly regulate life, *Visitors* takes a work-to-rule approach. In so doing, it tests the limits of these frameworks, probes them for inconsistencies, and evaluates what emancipatory experiences are residually possible—or may indeed be newly available. In its affirmation of an outspokenly immanent form of emancipation, Ev’s work attests to an arguably less dualistic, but certainly more realistic, understanding of the ambiguous political valences of both artistic production and aesthetic experience at the present time—when compromise and contamination by law and capital cannot be phobically avoided, but need unfortunately to be recognized and reckoned with as the everyday normality for most of us, most of the time.

