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Radio Student, Ljubljana, 23. April 2014

## Concentric circles of freedom

*“Why do I always find plenty of reasons not to do something? Why do I always have my foot on the brake? I don't know. That's how I've been brought up [...] Equipped to be a socially useful being. Though I'm sick and tired of it all, I am still here. Still cruising from one institution to the next, trying to convince them that my brake functions faultlessly, and that I am a socially useful sissy. Even by doing something as radically useless as performance. Do you understand? Born of a pussy, raised to be one.”*

You have heard a part of the announcement of the performance we are to discuss here. So why is it that we often stop precisely when we would like to move on? Why do we cling to the safe haven of habit as opposed to embracing risk? Why do we think that what we have is more important to what we don't have? And aren't all these questions – albeit a consequence of our fear in the face of loss – in fact reducible to the question of *to have or to be?*

The minimalist solo performance *The Brake* thus circles around such complex, painful, provocative and finally also liberating insights. Enacted by **Rok Kravanja**, its author, it is conceptualized and directed by **Bojan Jablanovec** and produced by Via Negativa.

The performance is marked decisively by the form of the circle. The seated observers as much as the performer are all part of a big circle that sets clean, mathematical, almost Doric-like coordinates of the happening. The spectators seat motionlessly, rhythmically turning their heads while following the performer who makes circles in front of them and turns in infinite circular movements. The performer actually does his show on roller skates; roller skating is at once the core and the mise-en-scene of his story, for it is precisely the circular movements, the infinite shifts and the real possibility of crashing into the audience that all co-create its powerful potential. Such a whirlwind of emotions, thoughts passing into speech and bodily movements on the cusp between dance and sport, are only possible thanks to the spatial arrangement of the participants: despite being foremost observers rather than active collaborators in the performance, the “members” of the audience are almost organically connected with the performer who communicates with them both with his facial mimicry as well as spoken text, but above all with his entire body dynamics.

The announcement of this performance makes it clear that it emerged out of self-exploration, self-reflection of one's own position, the position of the artist in his or her environment where the ideal of freedom is more a saving illusion than a realizable life concept. The concentric circles that the performance enacts can be understood as circles of seeking, both of one's own identity as well as ways of surviving in an environment, which is not favourably disposed towards life. To turn in a circle, not getting anywhere; to always travel under a speed limit because of rules and laws – all of these are images for capitalist regulation which mandates whirlwinds of frivolous entertainment at the expense of whirlwinds of pleasure; which systematically disables real pleasure while putting up a show, control, spectacle and an all-round banalization of the sensual.

The performer grapples with these difficult issues precisely through spinning in concentric circles, thinking with his whole body rather than just the brain. The performer's accentuated physicality enacts the tremendous tension and the impossibility of the situation, yet at the same time giving

hope in the possibility of leaping across the prescribed borders. Anyone – an anxious activist, impoverished student, a dancer of contemporary dance, an erased person from Slovenia, anybody who is queer or a fired industrial worker – can see themselves in his semi-nudity. The repetitious circling can also be understood as a state of castration of most players in the field of contemporary art, those who cannot surpass the anti-political confines, as well as being trapped in the nexus of high productivity at the expense of critical research, and last but not least as an image of subservience, an outcome of existential insecurity.

Are not all these circles which are imposed on us in fact circles of bureaucracy? And is not our attempt to break through the uneventful circuit – even if with bad falls – in fact a retort to the state of entrapment in the bureaucratic shackles? The body possibly more so, and sooner than the head, tries to liberate itself from the enforced fetters, consequently willing to risk any challenge, injury, extreme strain, etc. The body thus caught in the prison house has no option but to enter the ecstasy of circling, a trance-like psychological state, a distance of sorts from his own self that allows him to break into the virtual space of liberation.

At the same time, this is not to forget that the body also has a social memory that allows him to socialize with other whirling individuals. This is suggested by the performance *The Break* at the point of including everyone present into its concentric circles. “Man hero” from the audience, who at the end, on his own back, carries the performer to the much desired better future, is in a way the key emancipatory element of the piece. Albeit theirs is at best a *virtual* liberation – in the meaning of being liberated within the confines of a stage act – it is, if only for a moment, also a *genuine* liberation. And with them we too, more or less active observers, are liberated. The performance thus holds out hope and at the same time fulfils the promise of liberation through contemporary art. In order to achieve this, it had to enter, at one point, into a critical dialogue with its capitalist premise, with its obsession with production and representation. This the performer achieved most effectively through reflecting on his own position in the dominant production system.

Every time the performer did not brake correctly and in time, Rok Kravanja fell, but also the other way around, when Rok did not brake, the performer fell to the ground. It was precisely these falls that brought home all the absurdity of the capitalist/personal situation, in which you are not allowed to fall nor go too fast. The moment of the fall is therefore the “moment of truth” of the body as a vulnerable machine with fascinating, though limited, capacities, but perhaps even more than this, it is a moment that possibly points to the obvious cracks in the system that suffocates, represses and exploits us. To liberate ourselves from our own brakes is thus primarily – if not above all – possible also within precisely those concentric circles, which we ourselves have drawn or are in any case imposed on us by the dominant social model. A closer encounter with the multilayered paradox of using the brake for the purpose of relaxing confining psychological brakes establishes momentary, invisible bonds between those of us co-protagonists of the performance *The Brake* sitting in the circle. This performance can also be understood as a contribution to the personal and political process of emancipation built on an excellent performative base.