

This email-conversation between artist and queer theorist Renate Lorenz, literary scholar Elizabeth Freeman, and myself addresses the question of how we come to terms with chronic circumstances – circumstances that persist for an indeterminate period of time – in the realm of art. Lorenz initiated the conversation as co-editor of the special issue “The Chronic” for the Austrian art journal *Springerin* (January 2014).

The *Springerin* issue – and our following conversation – looks to artistic practices that engage with the entanglement of politics and temporalities, or *chronopolitics*. In the editorial text of the special issue the focus is formulated in the following terms:

Nation-state, capitalist and heteronormative structures are determined primarily by linear timelines, rooted in the idea of progression, of forging ahead to something better. At the same time, this linear model of progress also forms the frame or backdrop for conceptualisation of the event-based, the topical and the urgent. In contrast, chronic modes of observation evolve out of what is latent, or protracted, or develop out of elements that cannot be simply shaken off within quotidian circumstances. Rather than examining, for example, the war in the Balkans or the AIDS crisis, the focus is instead on the “time afterwards” – although it is often not clear what exactly triggers these kinds of permanent states and whether these will draw to a close again. It is precisely this continuing indeterminacy that may possibly conceal surfeits that extend beyond what can currently be said and may perhaps contain the seeds of future developments.<sup>1</sup>

In this conversation we discuss the horizons and potentials of the chronic by following the figure across political and artistic territories.

1. “Editorial,” *Springerin*, Special issue on “The Chronic,” No. 1, 2014.

2. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 20.

3. The term “sexual labor” brings concepts of a performative, repeated production of gender and sexuality together with post-Marxist and sociological concepts of work and precarity. Sexual labor is “doubly productive,” as it produces embodied, engendered, and sexual subjectivity and products at the same time (see Pauline Boudry, Brigitta Kuster and Renate Lorenz, *Reproduktionskonten fälschen! Heterosexualität, Arbeit & Zuhause*. Berlin: b-books, 1999). Since the formulation of a doubled productivity cannot sufficiently address the arbitrariness of the subject and technologies of the self, I have been less concerned in my later work with the products of sexual labor than with the performative process of their production. I have thus shifted the focus of my attention away from the production of engendered and sexual products/subjects and toward the continual effort that is associated with sexual labor (Renate Lorenz, *Aufwändige Durchquerungen – Subjektivität als sexuelle Arbeit*. [Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009]).

4. Elizabeth Freeman’s lecture “Theorizing the Chronic” was delivered at the event “Touching Across Time” on Sept. 10, 2011, as part of the project *Chewing the Scenery*, curated by Andrea Thal in the Swiss Off-Site Pavilion at the 54. Venice Biennale. This event also included an introduction by Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, a performance by the participants in the PhD in Practice program (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna), and a lecture by Mathias Danbolt. For the published version, see Elizabeth Freeman, “Theorizing the Chronic,” *Chewing the Scenery*, ed. Andrea Thal (Zurich: Edition Fink, 2011).

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RL I have noticed that many art practices in my artistic community currently work against the dominant narrations of crises or catastrophes, and instead speak of the “time afterwards” and the long-lasting and seemingly permanent situations of stasis: for instance, the persistence of medical or bodily conditions, survival in post-war situations and life in “provisional” refugee camps that last for decades.

In the realm of medicine and disease, the term “chronic” usually describes conditions or situations that are less urgent than persistent. Situations that might not appear dramatic or life threatening but that are engraved in our daily routines, as when pain or other types of suffering have become normalized. Chronic situations can therefore be constitutive of our bodies and identities. If it doesn’t endanger our lives, it might determine it to some degree. In this way one might consider chronic suffering – and the vulnerability that accompanies it – as an example of what Judith Butler describes as being “ec-static”, in the sense that we are “transported beyond ourselves” by enduring scenes that decompose or “undo” our subjecthoods.<sup>2</sup> The “ec-static” scenes of chronicity might be the time and space where the “chronic” encounters “queerness.”

And yet, the fact that we are not always sure about the past and the future of chronic situations (where they come from and where they might lead us), might particularly open up the time of the chronic to neoliberal modes of self-government. Its indeterminacy might not be liberating, but probably requires agonizing forms of (sexual) labor,<sup>3</sup> connected with questions such as: Is my current predicament caused by bad self-care in the past? How can we influence the uncertain future?

I wonder if the temporality of “the chronic,” that you, Elizabeth, took up in your lecture “Theorizing the Chronic” during our event at the Venice Biennial in 2011,<sup>4</sup> would be an appropriate way to describe not only the less spectacular and often overlooked political conditions around us, but also interventions into normative temporal patterns of progress. Elizabeth, do you still consider the chronic to be a “promising temporality,” as you mentioned in your lecture?

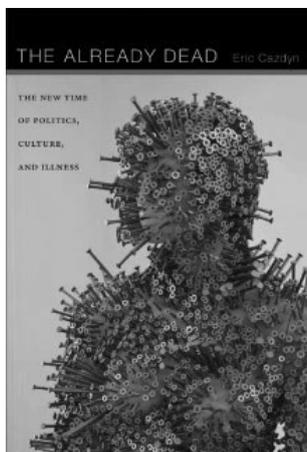


5. “Slow death” is Lauren Berlant’s term for the physical deterioration of a populace – their bodies and their numbers – who have been, in bio-political terms, allowed to die. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

6. For a discussion of the queerness of “growing sideways,” see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

7. Lauren Berlant uses the concept “crisis ordinariness” to address relations between subjectivity and the social that happens in rather undramatic ways. In contrast to terms such as trauma, it seeks to grasp the long-term problems of everyday life in capitalism and the work of getting through. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 10, 81-82.

8. Jasbir Puar’s deconstruction of the concepts of “capacity” and “debility” in relation to understandings of the body and its chrono-normative temporalities is relevant in this regard. See Puar, “Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* Vol. 19 No. 2 (2009), pp. 161-172.



9. Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

EF I think that in the ways you describe, the chronic absolutely has the capacity to intervene in the rhetoric of crisis, to describe conditions of being worn out, or merely making do rather than the states of emergency that are connected to calls for political action. I should say that I owe a lot to Lauren Berlant’s conception of “slow death” here.<sup>5</sup> What I love about the way Berlant formulates the concept is her framing of it as something that can intervene on the “novelistic” question of what counts as agency: The idea that we are the heroes of our own lives and they should constitute a series of triumphs or setbacks. The chronic is associated, too, with the habitual, with incremental or accretive movements that might not even go forward. (Kathryn Bond Stockton’s account of “sideways growth” is also useful here, though I am not sure that everything that accretes should be counted as “growth” in the progressive sense).<sup>6</sup>

Yet as you point out, Renate, it feels impossible to live in the time of the chronic without casting backward to faulty behavior or forward to the promise that if we do well, we might live in the time of, at least, remission. So I think we have to dwell in the chronic in which we are, in many ways, simply forced to live. That’s why in the lecture you refer to, I turn to a subcultural use of “the chronic,” a slang term for very potent marijuana. Whatever else can be said of pot, it enlarges the present, changes relations of scale, and makes pleasures out of the mundane. (Who, being stoned, has not gotten lost in contemplating, say, a paisley pattern or the interesting movement of a sponge doing dishes?). That version of the chronic suggests that, absent a secure origin or future, there may be promise in dilating the present – perhaps in occupying it hyperbolically, in the way that one has to do in moments that are technically not under our control, such as waiting for something, or being present to someone moving more slowly than we are.

**MD** In my work on aesthetic practices that engage with unfinished histories of injustice, I find that the figure of the chronic raises important questions on the political effects of temporal diagnostics: What are the consequences of shifting the conceptual framework from *crisis* to the *chronic*, from the *epidemic* to the *endemic*, from *progression* to lateral gestures of *ongoingness*? From an analytical point of view, thinking through the chronic might be a way to challenge the dominant economies of political attention that privilege happenings that conform to registers of the eventual – with the intensities of ruptures and clashes and immediate sense of change. Tuning into the temporal rhythms of the chronic might in short provide a possibility to hear other stories or other sides of stories that risk being overlooked by, forgotten within, or displaced through critical strategies oriented towards dramaturgies of sudden transformation or rupture.

Like Elizabeth, I have been drawn to versions of the chronic that aim to challenge chrono-normative frameworks of political agency, historical progression, and economic growth. And Lauren Berlant’s work has also been central to my interest in giving texture to living and feeling politically in relation to the “crisis ordinariness”<sup>7</sup> of endemic and interlocking problems such as HIV/AIDS; population racism; structural sexism and homo-, bi-, trans-phobias; global capitalist exploitation; material dispossession (and I could go on, as no “etc.” could stand in for the proliferating scenes of injustice towering up around us).

While the chronic can enable us to mine the presence of pasts that are not passé, “dilating the present” in Elizabeth’s formulation, I’m reluctant to posit the chronic as a queer figure *per se*. The chronic can surely be used in queer ways to open up alternative ways to inhabit the present and close-circuit binaries of life/death, activity/passivity, capacity/debility, and transgression/status quo.<sup>8</sup> But as Eric Cazdyn points out in his analyses of how forms of “chronic time” operate in different cultural-political realms in the book *The Already Dead* (2012), the chronic can also be taken up and used in ways that risk to naturalize and eternalize brutal logics of the present.<sup>9</sup> From current chronic modes in medicine that shifts focus on curing to forms of management and stabilization, to the chronic crisis in the economic systems of capitalism, that keeps producing endless series of preemptive rescue missions, Cazdyn’s criticism of “the new chronic” stands as an important reminder of the ways in which the chronic might colonize ideas of alternative futures. I’m thus quite interested in Cazdyn’s argument that this new chronic order suggests the importance of working on removing the distinction between life and death (which enables us to *queer* bio- and necropolitical structures and ideologies), while simultaneously working to retain a *relative* autonomy between life and death, to keep an opening for imagining radical change.

10. Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

11. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, pp. 13–14.



Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, *N.O. Body*. Installation with 16mm film/DVD (13 min.) and 47 photographs, 2008. Performer: Werner Hirsch. Courtesy of the artists.



Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in, Recognition of their Desperation*, Installation with Super 16mm film/HD (18 min.), 2013. Performers: Rachel Aggs, Peaches, Catriona Shaw, Verity Susman, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, William Wheeler. Courtesy of the artists.

12. Mathias Danbolt, *Touching History: Art, Performance, and Politics in Queer Times*. PhD dissertation (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2013), p. 282.

RL This means, in other words, that Cazdyn uses the concept of chronic as an analytical tool. From what you're describing, using the concept of the chronic this way seems useful not only to analyze economies of attention (and questions of how conditions stay the same because they are too subtle to be seen), but also new forms of (self)government, that stabilize the status quo.

In the introduction to her latest book *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011), Elizabeth Povinelli refers to Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973).<sup>10</sup> The story takes place in the city of Omelas – the "city of happiness" – where a child is kept trapped and harassed in a broom closet. The happiness and well-being of all the inhabitants of Omelas depend on the suffering of this single child. The inhabitants react in different ways to this "chronic" situation: Some live with the very vague knowledge of this condition but keep it to themselves, other visit the child from time to time, some think that the child is already too damaged to even think about uncaging and freeing it. Only a few inhabitants leave Omelas, but there is no knowledge or imagination to find another place to go. Povinelli's point is that chronic abjection, despair, impoverishment, and boredom represent quieter forms of misery, that due to their unspectacular character are not useful in producing an ethical impulse towards change. In her discussion she makes a useful differentiation between what she calls "quasi-events" and "events":

If events are things that we can say happened such that they have a certain objective being, then quasi-events never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place. They neither happen nor not happen. [...] Crises and catastrophes are kinds of events that seem to demand, as if authored from outside human agency, an ethical response. Not surprisingly then, these kinds of events become what inform the social science of suffering and thriving.<sup>11</sup>

If we pay attention to the forms of (self)governmentality of the inhabitants in Le Guin's story, rather than to the questions of distribution of attention, it gets clear how important the various narratives and accompanying affects are for the stabilization of the chronically poor living conditions (for the child).

Another aspect that really interests me is the extent to which the chronic is useful to determine the place of politics in certain artistic works. In our film installations Pauline Boudry and I usually work with loops, that is, short films that are edited in a way that they have no proper beginning and ending. The transition from the end to the start is subtle and often goes unnoticed. When looking again at our film installations it seems that these loops – without any direct intention from our part – address in an uncanny way artistic and activist political maintenance work. Sometimes it seems as if the figures in these films come back day and night to unrestingly perform their labor of working on change. In our film *N.O. Body* (2008) for instance, a drag performer works himself through the histories of othering or pathologizing images of cross-dressers, lesbians, fetishists or bearded ladies. In a later film, *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation* (2013), a bunch of musicians meet to perform a strange score, and after a few minutes they repeat their task. If I come back to the same exhibit after a few weeks, they are still, unfailingly, repeating their tasks on screen...

Mathias, in your PhD dissertation, *Touching History: Art, Performance, and Politics in Queer Times* (2013) you speak about artistic practices that engage with the "durational 'now'" in political protest, works that sidestep "a progressive concept of presentism that only values what is 'useful' in the here and now."<sup>12</sup> You center on artworks that take their starting point in "unmemorable 'nonevents,'" shaped around the habitual rehearsal of political agency. How do you see, despite your skepticism, the potential of artistic practices to make use of the chronic as a method or a perspective?

MD When I am reluctant to claim the chronic as an intrinsically queer figure, it is because I want to avoid fetishizing a temporal form that can be used in conservative and conservating ways, despite *also* being useful to queer criticism of chrono-normativities. It might therefore be important to try to distinguish between different ways of working with the figure of the chronic, not to differentiate between "good" from "bad" "chronicities," but rather to get a better sense of the different forms of work this figure performs in our cultural debates. Here it might be helpful, as you imply Renate, to distinguish between ways to use chronic as a *method*, and the use of the "chronic" as a diagnostic for particular states of existence.

In my project *Touching History*, I engage with feminist and queer visual art and performance practices that strategically deploy temporal forms and gestures – including figures of anachronism, simultaneity, and the more chronic-oriented



Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, London (detail), 2008. Multiple-slide-projection installation. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

13. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 248.

14. Cazdyn, *The Already Dead*, p. 5.

15. See Lauren Berlant's chapter "Slow Death: (Obesity, Sovereignty, Lateral Agency)," in *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 95-121.

figures of duration and repetition – to interrupt, confuse, or disturb historical narratives of progress in relation to unfinished histories of injustice. The project is in many ways fueled by a kind of chronopolitical separation anxiety, a stubborn refusal to automatically accept the mechanisms that separates the past from the present in relation to historical and political engagements with ongoing structural problems that often stand at risk of being prematurely historicized, and thus disarticulated, from the present.

I have been drawn to artworks that deploy chronic strategies, such as looping or other forms of endless repetitions, like the ones we find in the seamless editing of the lecture performance in your and Pauline Boudry's work *N.O. Body*, or, for instance, the use of carousel slide projectors in Sharon Hayes' installation of the work *In the Near Future* (2005-8). In Hayes' invocation of different unfinished histories of political activism and demonstrations, the carousel slide projectors show endless series of photographs of a lonely activist standing on the street. The single activist appears again and again and again in an endless cycle – here a use of repetition, or insistence (to invoke Elizabeth's reading of Gertrude Stein's chronicity in the lecture "Theorizing the Chronic") that highlights the temporal labor of repetition so central to activist and political work. The rhythmic and seemingly eternal appearance of these images not only underscores the ways in which political claims all too often must be raised over and over again to be heard, but it also gives evidence to how an encounter with the labor of repetition central in the history of political activism can generate feelings of *stuplimity*, to borrow Sianne Ngai's concept for describing the sense of being overwhelmingly excited *and* bored at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

In these brief examples of artistic engagements with strategies or looping and repetition, the chronic seems to be used to examine, give attention to, or expose what you, Renate, have described as chronically bad situations of life. Artistic "methods" of using chronicity can in short be productively used to disrupt or intervene in dominant economies of attention that prioritize political scenarios that trade on the eventual and spectacular. The chronic seem often to be deployed artistically to describe or intervene into the already chronic scenes of the "crisis ordinariness" of the unlivable lives of the "quasi-eventual" kind. Here artistic work can use chronic figurations or methods *to work against* chronic states of dispossession. Chronic "methods" can in short inspire us to resist or refuse our growing ability to bear the *unbearable* – as in states of "crisis ordinariness" – as they can make us see that the challenge might instead be to make the "bearable *unbearable*," as Cazdyn puts it.<sup>14</sup> Some artists can thus be seen to use chronic methods to alter those chronic states that we *do want to change*. After all, progress in itself isn't always bad, not if it refers to working to terminate structural endemics such as HIV/AIDS.

The problem is that the structural endemics often unfold in what might appear as "durational *nows*," that is, in repetitive scenes where violent inequalities happen not only *now*, but also *now* and *now* and *now*. The unending duration of such scenes might result in forms of "slow death," in Berlant's terms.<sup>15</sup> When artists use chronic "methods" in engaging with these political contexts, many struggle to find a balance between the desire to make such scenes of inequality history and an anxiety against participating in a premature historicization of these unfinished problems. Using loops and repetitions can in this sense force us to address important questions such as: when is history history? And who decides?

These ways of using the chronic as a method to try to describe and/or alter chronically bad political states surely differ from the uses of the chronic that Elizabeth talks about in relation to drug culture. Here the chronic seems to work as a strategy that slows down or seemingly stops flows of activity – a "dilating" of the present whose effects can be manifold but that might include a distortion of capitalist machineries of efficacy (or not). In short, I'm interested in the different work that uses of the chronic can perform, and here it seems necessary to follow the figure around in different contexts.

EF I think Mathias has laid out some crucial distinctions here: between the chronic as *diagnostic* and as *method*, and between the chronic as manifested by *repetition* and *looping* on the one hand, and by *dilating* on the other. I'll turn to the latter one only because he's done such a splendid job with the former. There is a version of the chronic that is not about repetition, that does not seem to be about movement either backward or forward; rather,



Art Orienté Objet, (Marion Laval-Jeantet/Benoît Mangin), *Que le cheval vive en moi (May the Horse Live in Me)* (2011) Photo: Miha Fras.

16. Leon J. Hilton, "The Horse in My Flesh: Transpecies Performance and Affective Athleticism," *GLQ*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2013, pp. 487-514.

it's about not having any kind of "break" within which to begin again, detour something, or mark openings and closures. The chronic can thus name the state of being what we call in the United States a "frog in boiling water," where the intensity of something increases so gradually that you do not notice, whereas if it began at the boiling level you would call it a trauma or a crisis. There is something horrifying about the adage that one can get used to anything, and I wonder what kind of artistic practice can foreground that process, whether to disrupt it or simply to call attention to the way we live now.

An article that we recently published in the journal *GLQ* – in Jennifer Doyle's special issue, "The Athletic Issue," – gets at something of what I am after here. In "The Horse in My Flesh: Transpecies Performance and Affective Athleticism," Leon J. Hilton takes up Art Orienté Objet's (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin) piece *Que le cheval vive en moi (May the Horse Live in Me)* (2011).<sup>16</sup> This performance piece involved Laval-Jeantet receiving transfusions of horse plasma, after having first received a series of injections of horse immunoglobulin to prepare her body and to keep it from rejecting the proteins in the horse blood. What strikes me about *Que le cheval* and this genre of art – I would describe it as "endurance art," extending that concept outward to the arena of sport in line with Hilton's argument – is that it recaptures and hyperbolizes this process of getting used to things, of literally incorporating what is unbearable to our well-being.

So rather than turning every time to avant-garde art to get at this version of the chronic, I might turn toward a very American spectacle: "Extreme" feats of endurance such as weight-lifting, tree-sitting, or even pie-eating. Most of these require long, slow regimes of preparation, processes of strengthening or stretching or modifying the body and its responses, and in this sense they seem just disciplinary in a not very interesting way. But when they spectacularize as a burst of intensity or a moment of sensory overload what has actually taken months or years to produce, they get at something of the chronic state I am trying to describe, in which we are shown as "crisis" or "event" something we have actually lived with for a very long time, have even naturalized as just life itself.

Like Mathias, I am loath to claim the chronic in and of itself as queer, but I do want to mark what seems queer about the version of chronic method that I see going on in endurance art. One aspect is temporal; when an endurance piece incorporates the slowness of preparation or performance into the event itself, it brings us back to labor, to the work necessary to make a body or a commodity, and in that sense reminds us that where we are now has a history; whereas when an endurance piece showcases a burst of intensity it can illuminate just exactly how painful are the ordinary conditions of our existence. The other aspect is corporeal: Endurance art is not just about the prowess of bodies, but about the ways bodies sometimes endure even when we don't want them to, when it would be easier to just jettison them. This is the aspect of "insistence" that makes the chronic, I'd argue, somewhat different than the repetitive.