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Prescient Returns

Disidentificatory Performances from Elsewhen

Review of Kunstenfestivaldesarts, 2023 by Francesco Chiaro and Danja Burchard

In his 2009 book *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Cuban American academic José Esteban Muñoz describes queerness as «that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough», thus operating a rejection of «straight time» (the «here and now») and an insistence of the «then and there». According to Muñoz, oppressed communities exist in a different time structure and through their acts of transgression and creation from *elsewhen*, these minoritarian subjects are capable of articulating the truth about cultural hegemony. These actions, or «disidentificatory performances», represent a kind of resistance that can emerge from, as artistic duo Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme call it, «being in the negative, in the space that's broken».

Positioning themselves in this fragmented experience of a nonlinear time, the following performances offer, through various scenic and conceptual devices (which reveal, *en passant*, a generalised penchant for relaxed storytelling over canonical, histrionic acting), different forms of witnessing the (hetero)normative reality of today. Here, they disclose spacetimes of opportunity and re-subjectivation in which words, movements and silences echo ever so loudly against the crumbling, worn-out and yet still repressive low glass ceiling imposed on those who do not feel the «privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes and "rational" expectations».

By picking on the recent past and correlating it with the heart-breaking, toxic present, the various (female) performers cast a backward glance that enacts a future vision, mindful that the task at hand is not to refuse the *hic et nunc* altogether, but rather to manoeuvre from the present's vantage point at the crossroads of life *after* and simultaneously *before* the catastrophe.

Moreover, touching on some of today's open battlegrounds with the heteronormative, patriarchal and hegemonic status quo (motherhood, childhood, workplace, sexuality and self-exploitation), the performances mentioned in this article operate within a symbolic dimension that, upon exposing the capillary veins of oppression, «frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity». It is through these prescient returns, these reconciliations and reappropriations with a time past all the while flirting with the future's unimaginable potential, then, that we can try and enact «new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds».

Since it started back in 1994, Brussels' Kunstenfestivaldesarts has always encouraged diversity and debate within and without the national borders, and 2023's edition – created by the co-artistic direction of Daniel

Blanga Gubbay and Dries Douibi – is no different. With more than 30 performances up its sleeve, this year's festival focuses on the space of language, that gap between us and the languages we speak in which we can say "I": «this edition can be seen as an adventurous journey into the abyss of language, exploring its ability to define or transform the present».

And a linguistic journey is what Belgian artist, performer and author Sarah Vanhee's latest creation, **Mémé**, which premiered at Brussels' De Kriekelaar Flemish Community Centre, offers us.

Mémé by Sarah Vanhee

[from May 12 to May 16, 2023, De Kriekelaar – Brussels, Belgium]

«How does the world of today correlate with the forgotten women of the past, and to the land these women worked? And how do we see those women reflected in the forgotten women of today, whose labour continues to be exploited?» This is the main question posed by Sarah Vanhee's latest creation, **Mémé**, which premiered on the second day of Brussels' 2023 Kunstenfestivaldesarts, setting the pace for a packed three-week plunge in international contemporary theatre, dance, performance and visual arts.



Photo by Bea Borgers

Talking from a body that used to be someone else's (which is to say, speaking as a daughter, a granddaughter and, eventually, a mother, too), Vanhee probes into her family history in West Flanders, a land ravaged by both

trench warfare and agricultural exploitation, where the now silent bodies of her matriarchal ancestors used to live, labour – and mirror the soil. Indeed, just like the ground they used to walk on, women's corporeity got tilled, split, excavated and deprived of its oestrus, its fertility, for the comfort, pleasure and profit of men, sedulously «serving the mores of the time».

«**Mémé** is an ode to all invisible women, the earth, life itself, work and pleasure», the performance description warns. By navigating gently through the years, Vanhee quite literally unfurls the sails onto a multilingual, intergenerational geography of bodies at the constant service of someone – or something – else: the husband, the soil, the children, the house. With simple yet compelling words, our very own helmswoman weaves a course through the knotty waters of social, physical, reproductive and economic oppression, bringing unsung narratives and non-dominant voices (and languages) to the foreground. Assisted by her son and in collaboration with puppeteer and object designer Toztli Abril de Dios, sound designer Ibelisse Guardia Ferragutti, and choreographer Christine De Smedt, the Belgian performer thus takes on the role of a mediumistic storyteller linking the past and the present through suggestive, fetish-like materiality and playful, home-made rituals of repossession.

By opening up an intimate, downy space of affiliation with women from other generations, Vanhee then ponders on the preternatural perseverance of the self-immolating care forcibly incarnated by the female body over the ages, juxtaposing it to her (tender, close-knit, exploratory, limpid) maternal relationship with her own son and thus inviting – ever so softly – a reflection on the various degrees of emancipation that women have attained throughout the years with regard to their "homemaking" role within the family.

And so, when the hour-and-a-half-long circumnavigation of «all those things mothers can't be» comes to an end and the puppet manifestations of the artist's mama and nana are finally laid to rest once again in a more feminist, sanguine and gleefully unproductive terrain, one cannot help but wonder if today's womanhood and motherhood have actually managed to give the elbow to the utilitarian, patriarchal and capitalistic structures outlined in **Mémé**'s stroll down memory lane, or if modern, independent (white) women can only be so through the witting or unwitting exploitation of bell hooks' «silent majority», the racialised and marginalised, poorly paid (or straight out unpaid) caregivers, maids, in-home nurses, babysitters and cleaning ladies who took over the "homemaking" role – and the oppression therein.

La Grande Nymphe by Lara Barsacq

[from May 17 to May 19, 2023, La Raffinerie/Charleroi danse – Brussels, Belgium]

Masturbating fauns, sexually unfulfilled nymphs and centuries of heteronormative eroticism – this and more in Lara Barsacq's latest creation, an explosive investigation on the limits of male-depicted sexuality and female body's objectification that ends up nourishing even more the political and imaginative horizon of feminism in performing arts.





French society of the time due to its "filthy" and "indecent" movements – which included an overtly erotic subtext and ended with the faun masturbating onto the main nymph' fallen veils. In spite of the controversies stirred up by the premiere (which ended up involving the Russian ambassador, French politicians and even the President and Prime Minister in charge then), tickets to all shows were sold out and the piece came to be considered as one of the first examples of modern ballets, paving the way for the evolution of the genre.

More than a century later, French choreographer, dancer and actress Lara Barsacq comes back to the faun's debauchery, but only to focus on the heteronormative, omnipresent male gaze that limited, shackled and objectified the figure of the Nymph (and of women in general) throughout the history of dance – and art. By mixing autobiographical, feminist and queer elements, Barsacq's latest creation, **La Grande Nymphe** (which premiered on May 17 in Brussels' La Raffinerie/Charleroi danse) questions «the eroticisation of the body», enacting «a sensual battle with tradition, for a new erotic imagery» aimed at deconstructing a representation of female corporeity assembled by and for men.

Sharing the stage with electro artist Cate Hortl and performer Marta Capaccioli, the former Batsheva Company dancer unfolds an inclusive and horizontal process of diachronic confrontation with the past, floating across space and time with luminous, chiselled motions that produce a kind of intensity, a dissonance charged with novelty that makes the piece dense, and then voltaic, and then persuasive. By offering three different takes on the Prelude, the three women play with a motley crew of performative media and layers of substance, unclosing an interconnectedness of informality, which is not an absence of form, but that which *gives* form. Flanked by Léonore Frommlet's concert flute, Wanying Emilie Koang's cello and Alyssia Hondekijn's harp, the performance ranges from Federico Cervelli's painting *Jove under the guise of Diana and Callisto* to garrulous, flirtatious confessions between scenes, adding up to the reclaiming of not only the body, but also of the structure of art.

Set ablaze with risqué lace tights, orgasmic sound distortions and angular, bas-relief like embraces, **La Grande Nymphe**'s unapologetic core burns like a minor sun, obliterating the limits of amorous imagination in an attempt to «free oneself from a pre-existing idea of sexuality». And indeed, hardly any offspring of Terpsichore was ever so erogenous, arousing and liberating as Barsacq and Capaccioli's collisions between sex and sense: as their bodies tear each other to wholeness in a rhapsody of reciprocal pleasure hurled to the exhaustion of any objectification and idealisation, the man-made "woman" comes undone under the duo's unquantifiable effervescence of aliveness and the nymph – together with her naiad sisters and their mistreated and exploited cousins, the muses – is finally unbound.

MIKE by Dana Michel

[from May 19 to May 22, 2023, MAD Brussels - Brussels, Belgium]

Imbued in 1999, Office-Space-like aesthetics and vibes, Dana Michel's durational performance **MIKE** displaces significance, temporality and bodies with the same, caricatural flick of the wrist, repurposing objects and power dynamics in a continuous negotiation of relational structures that ebb and flow along with our existential vagrancies through this choreography of semantic crossroads.

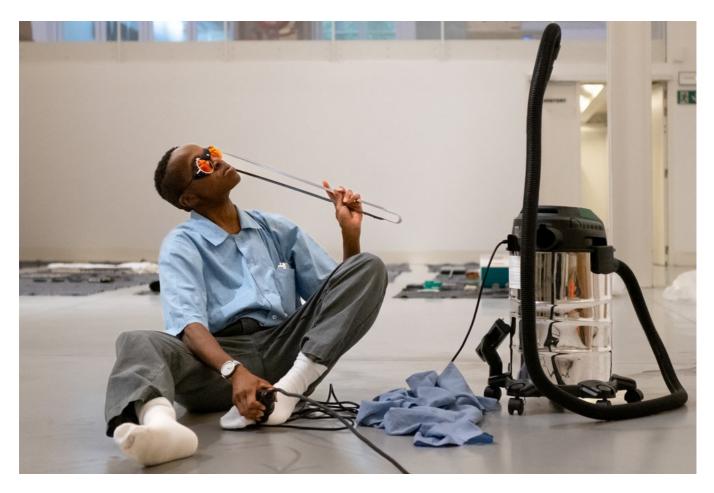


Photo by Françoise Robert

Picture this: a multistory, white-on-white museum landscape, unashamedly bare except for a jumble of material technicalities – a bunch of cables here, some spotlights there, a few orderly queues of window blinds further down, towards the corner, and dull office paraphernalia galore. As the audience tentatively takes up space in MAD Brussels' Centre for Fashion & Design, diligently identifying with its fly-on-the-wall role (made all the more cosy by the bounty of blankets offered at the entrance so as to make the three-hour-long durational performance slightly more tolerable – at least physically), a ground-crew-looking Dana Michel loiters in the lower area, apparently waiting for people to settle down. And when they do, she goes upstairs – and we dither.

Lost in these uncharted performative territories, this disidentificatory elsewhen, bystanders exchange awkward looks, unbalanced by the unannounced, monstrous agency they've just been bestowed with ("Is she coming back? Should I stay or should I go? Where should I direct my attention to? What if I miss

something?"), and in the aftermath of this realisation, suddenly any intrepid jaywalker turns into a remarkable spectacle worthy of careful scrutiny – and eventually imitation. Indeed, as the performer's displacements grow in number and length, the audience goes through a tangible transformation in which some never miss a breath, some budge only when curiosity gets the better of them and some just can't be bothered, apparently foreign to that desperate attempt at anchoring ourselves to some sort of shared, measurable meaning we call "understanding".

Premiering at Kunstenfestivaldesarts this May 19, **MIKE** «is a performative reflection on "work" culture. [...] If we cannot be ourselves at work, where we spend most of our lives – what kind of lives are we living? To find an answer, (Michel) creates a meditation on the work environment, transforming daily actions into choreographic experiments. Yet every action is interrupted, seemingly losing its fluidity, as if her body has become imprisoned by routine repetition». By favouring absurdity over provocation and humour over gravitas, the live artist from Ottawa, Canada (also Silver Lion for Innovation in Dance awardee at 2017 Venice Biennale, amongst other things), takes her sweet time to deconstruct normative behaviour, creating pockets of conceptual mishaps that onlookers inhabit with nervous laughter, proxemic malaise or simply highbrow sanctimoniousness. Through studiously pedestrian movements and jerky, elusive intents, Michel mulishly creates an opportunity «for a diversity of perspectives and ways of being and living» that challenges neoliberal, efficiency-based social behaviours in an attempt to open up less necrotic horizons.

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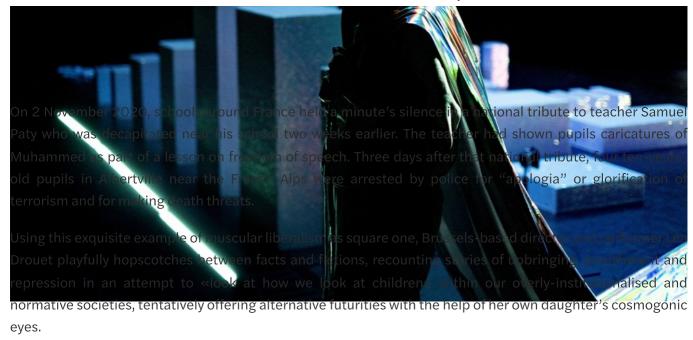
And when the clock strikes the third hour and the eight clothes rack on wheels find their way... somewhere else, the few spectators that are still there (most left after the umpteenth zip tie has been fastened onto unreasonableness, while some just still cannot for the life of them give up their seats overlooking inbetweenness) seem to resist the idea of having to leave, apparently preferring this suspended state of subjectivation over the administrative, ticktocky spacetime patiently waiting just outside.

J'ai une épée by Léa Drouet

[from May 18 to May 21, 2023, Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles – Brussels, Belgium]

«How are children considered and approached by the institutions responsible for protecting and educating them? What frameworks surround children, and how can we redefine these frameworks, adjusting them to fit the worlds that children invent for themselves in order to survive?». Director and performer Léa Drouet explores these and other questions in her latest creation, **J'ai une épée**, an ode to the revolutionary, imaginative potential of childhood in the age of normative societies.





Indeed, by giving substance and shimmer to a childhood drawing, **J'ai une épée** (I have a sword) makes for a moony storytelling experience about self-defence mechanisms and vanishing points in the age of policed multiculturalism – that is, the recognition and management of diversity through a security perspective. And what's more diverse from us than childhood?

Through infantile gestures and imaginative aesthetics, Drouet and dramaturge Camille Louis maintain «the tension that exists between the mechanisms of institutional violence and what children make up to deal with it, individually and collectively» in order to politicise the discourse around the language of surveillance, control and security within (and without) the education system. As a matter of fact, faced with the mutinous potential of unfettered little human beings who still did not buy into the various experiences of oppression and control we call "society", schools are the first public space in which the status quo openly defends itself by way of dogmatic impositions and categorisations, thus laying the basis for the structural subjugation to come.

Opting for a minimalistic and repetitive corporal performativity of dubious efficacy, Drouet then entrusts to orality the question of how to redefine these repressive frameworks, «adjusting them to fit the worlds that children invent for themselves in order to survive» instead of stifling them. In spite of its debatable formal restitution, **J'ai un épée** has the merit of inviting child's play into the action, thus opening a path for possible future (re)configurations of the big game that is life – after all, as Donna Haraway muses, «perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible».

She was a friend of someone else by Gosia Wdowik

[from May 20 to May 23, 2023, Beursschouwburg – Brussels, Belgium]

Prostrate under a rain of expectant eyes, the inert body of an activist landscapes a dimly lit, smoke-filled room where time stands still and a single question echoes feebly: «How to create both theatre and change from a place of exhaustion?». Premiering in Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Gosia Wdowik's **She was a friend of**

someone else speaks the language of a burned-out mind dreaming, hoping and despairing in a burned-out world.



Photo by Thomas Lenden

Since January 2021, Poland has had a near-total ban on abortion following an October 2020 ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal (TK) that outlawed the most common form of legal abortion. Previously, Poland had already had one of Europe's strictest abortion laws, with terminations allowed in only three circumstances: if the pregnancy threatened the mother's life or health, if it resulted from a criminal act (such as rape), or if the foetus was diagnosed with a serious birth defect. The TK ruling outlawed the third of those justifications, which had previously accounted for around 98% of all legal abortions in Poland. The tribunal – a body widely seen as being under the influence of the ruling conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party – found that such abortions violated the constitutional protection of the right to life.

In spite of the overwhelmingly negative reaction of the public, which got to the streets for the largest protest in Poland since the fall of communism, uniting hundreds of thousands of Poles (especially the young and women), the current parliamentary majority supports the ruling and talks for a referendum were quickly hushed by the PiS. And this is where "she" comes in – or rather, *stays in*. Indeed, **She was a friend of someone else** «is a story with too many beginnings, too few endings – and an exhausted narrator. With a powerful dramaturgy and a minimalist direction, Polish theatre-maker Gosia Wdowik explores the link between burnout and activism: the fear that rights are not guaranteed forever, and that the moment one stops paying attention, they can disappear».

By embracing the worn-out, depleted temporality of a listless mind, Wdowik invites us into a sluggish, dense and torpid world made of spilled glasses, heavy limbs and even heavier bedcovers in which everything is literally *fuming* with exhaustion (but not self-pity). Relying a lot on digital solutions and incursions in her work and intermixing the rarefied action on stage with a deluge of storytelling, the active member of GILDIA (Union of Polish Theatre Makers) defiantly inflames the audience's patience with a finely polished mirror held up to the unhinged time of despondency, thus managing to crystallise in front of our eyes the all-too-well-known lethargic, isolating feeling produced by our achievement-based society of self-exploitation – the epitome of toxicity in this «straight time» of ours.

As Polish writer Weronika Murek, invited by Wdowik to reflect on professional exhaustion, exquisitely purports, **She was a friend of someone else** is also «a tribute to the many women whose energy and labour has been going into resisting oppressive misogynist systems and the criminalisation of solidarity among women. So there we go: you're living your best life, you're living your childhood dream, and spending your time doing what inspires you and what you love. Then one day, you're not able to get out of bed. The work never starts, so it never finishes, right?». Not a success story, then, nor a failure one. Just a performance with empty frames, waiting for its protagonists to rest, recuperate and, eventually, rise against – again. Together.

The performances were played in various locations around Brussels, as mentioned above.

Kunstenfestivaldesarts presents

Mémé

concept, text and performance Sarah Vanhee

objects and scenography Toztli Abril de Dios sound Ibelisse Guardia Ferragutti outside eye Christine De Smedt technicians Babette Poncelet, Geeraard Respeel performance on screen Leander Polzer Vanhee with the valuable input from the Vanhee-Deseure family dedicated to Margaretha Ghyselen and Denise Desaever English translation Patrick Lennon French translation Isabelle Grynberg Dutch translation and surtitles Marika Ingels production CAMPO

coproduction Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Kaaitheater, Wiener Festwochen, BUDA, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, De Grote Post, Théâtre de la Bastille, Festival d'Automne à Paris and Perpodium

with the support of taxshelter of the Belgian Federal Government via uFund

residencies KWP Kunstenwerkplaats, Kaaitheater, BUDA

acknowledgements Leontien Allemeersch, Katia Castañeda, Wout Clarysse, Gabriela de Dios, Elena Gore, Claudine Grinwis, Flore Herman, Alfredo Méndez, Leonie Persyn, Manuel Reyes, Jochem van Tol

La Grande Nymphe

a project by Lara Barsacq

creation and performance Marta Capaccioli, Lara Barsacq, Cate Hortl, Léonore Frommlet, Wanying Emilie

Koang, Alyssia Hondekijn

original music Cate Hortl

set design and costumes Sofie Durnez

light design Estelle Gautier

artistic advice Gaël Santisteva

video Gaël Santisteva, Lara Barsacq

video animation Katia Lecomte Mirsky

music Claude Debussy

stage management Emma Laroche

sound engineer Sammy Bichon

administration and production Myriam Chekhemani

communication and distribution Quentin Legrand, Rue Branly

production Gilbert & Stock

coproduction Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Charleroi danse – Centre Chorégraphique de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Théâtre de Liège, Les Brigittines, CCN de Caen en Normandie, CCN2 – Centre Chorégraphique

National de Grenoble in the context of Accueil Studio

residencies Charleroi danse, Grand Studio, Les Brigittines, CCN de Caen en Normandie, CCN2 – Centre

Chorégraphique National de Grenoble

with the support of Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles - Service de la danse

performances in Brussels with the support of the French Institute and the French Embassy in Belgium, in the frame of EXTRA

with the kind participation of Mrs Coralie Cadène, responsible for the costume heritage of the Opéra national de Paris

acknowledgements Astrid Vansteenkiste, Soledad Ballvé, Marion Sage, Sue-Yeon Youn, Marceline Bosquillon, Ivan-Vincent Massey, Benoit Pelé, Heide Vanderieck, Stéphane Barsacq, Julien Fournier, Soline Poteau, Jules Fournier, Belinda Mathieu, Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Simon Thierrée, Fabienne Aucant, Daniel Blanga Gubbay, Frédéric Jamagne, Philippe de Lustrac, Erwan Hakyoon Larcher, Stanislav Dobak

MIKE

created and performed by Dana Michel

artistic activators Viva Delorme, Ellen Furey, Peter James, Heidi Louis, Tracy Maurice, Roscoe Michel, Karlyn Percil, Yoan Sorin

scenographic consultant and technical direction Romain Guillet

sound consultant David Drury

production SCORP CORPS/Viva Delorme, Dana Michel

distribution Key Performance/Anna Skonecka, Koen Vanhove

coproduction Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Arsenic – Centre d'art scénique contemporain, Centre national des Arts, Festival TransAmériques, Julidans, MDT, Montpellier Danse, Moving in November, Wexner Center for the Arts of the Ohio State University in Colombus

residencies Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Alkantara, ANTI Festival, Centre national des Arts, Kinosaki International Arts Center and Kyoto Experiment, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Montpellier Danse creative residency at L'Agora – cité internationale de la danse with the support of BNP Paribas Foundation, RIMI/IMIR SceneKunst, Shedhalle with the support of Tanzhaus Zürich and the Embassy of Canada to Switzerland, The Chocolate Factory

with the financial support of Canada Council for the Arts, Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec, Ministère des Relations internationales et de la Francophonie, Conseil des Arts de Montréal performances in Brussels with the support of the Québec Government Office in Brussels

J'ai une épée

by Léa Drouet

direction, text and performance Léa Drouet dramaturgy Camille Louis set design Élodie Dauguet music composition Èlg lights Nicolas Olivier costumes Eugénie Poste

technical and stage management François Bodeux/Vaisseau

direction assistant Marion Menan

technicians TNWB Pier Gallen (technical management), Jacques Perera (lighting), Stéphanie Denoiseux (stage), Jeison Pardo (sound)

production development and distribution France Morin, Anna Six/Ama Brussels creation Studio Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

production Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles, Vaisseau asbl | Coproduction: Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Printemps des Comédiens – Montpellier, Le Phénix — Scène Nationale de Valenciennes, NEXT Arts Festival, Théâtre de Liège, Le Maillon Théâtre de Strasbourg – Scène européenne, Mars-Mons – Arts de la scène, Centre Culturel André Malraux – Scène Nationale de Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy, La Coop asbl, Shelter Prod with the support of La Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Service Général de la Création Artistique – Direction du Théâtre, Kunstencentrum BUDA, La Bellone House of Performing Arts, Taxshelter.be, ING and the Tax Shelter of the Belgian federal government

She was a friend of someone else

by Gosia Wdowik

concept, text and direction Gosia Wdowik
dramaturgical support Maria Rössler
visuals and creative technology Jimmy Grima
set design Dominika Olszowy, Tomasz Mróz
light design Aleksandr Prowaliński
sound design, composer Jakub Ziołek
performed by Jaśmina Polak, Oneka von Schrader, Gosia Wdowik
work with/by Agnieszka, Dominika, Jaśmina, Ania, Urszula, Marta K., Justyna, Natalia, Julia, Martyna, Ola,
Małga, Krystyna, Marta, Zosia, Edka, Doris, Yulia, Agata, Kinga, Beata, Iza, Zuza, Ewa, Magda
production Nowy Teatr, CAMPO

coproduction Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Teatro Municipal do Porto, SPRING Performing Arts Festival, Frascati

Producties, HELLERAU – Europäisches Zentrum der Künste, SPIELART Festival, Dublin Theatre Festival, Beursschouwburg, Points communs – Nouvelle Scène nationale de Cergy-Pontoise/Val d'Oise special thanks to Jan Tomza-Osiecki, Marta Jalowska, Dorota Glac, Kamila Worobiej, Martyna Wawrzyniak, Marta Nawrot, Keerthi Basavarajaiah, Justin Schembri

She was a friend of someone else is part of a research based on *I'll just say it and see what happens* created by TERAZ POLIŻ (Marta Jalowska, Dorota Glac, Kamila Worobiej), Martyna Wawrzyniak and Gosia Wdowik, which premiered on 21.12.2021

Extractivism and Art