Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

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Les Urbaines

07–09 December 2018

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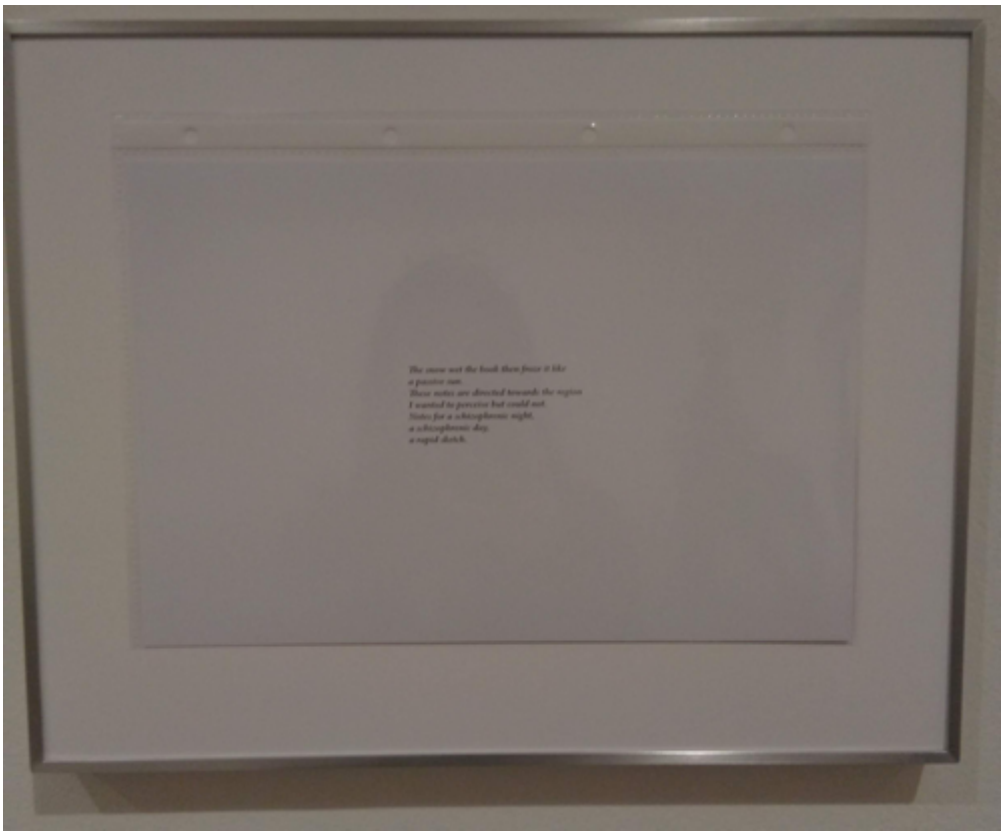
Imagine a biennial or other kind of art festival featuring just a single work. Unthinkable? Curator and critic Julia Moritz flexes your thinking muscles in her «Pick a Piece [b-n-l/group/pick-a-piece]» series of experimental reviews by attempting to capture a large-scale group exhibition through the lens of only one of its artworks – not necessarily the ‹best› one, mind you, but the work best suited for pointing towards the overall aim of the overarching context. For this third review, the project that structurally and repeatedly overwhelms viewers (in all the best ways) and that Moritz seeks to unpack through subjective selectivity is this year’s edition of Les Urbaines, the annual performance art festival in Lausanne.





Les Urbaines 2018, photo: Nelly Rodriguez

Comprehending the full range of a festival through one of the contributions is one challenge, while looking at it through the prism of performance art is yet another. Lausanne’s Les Urbaines is both an annual weekend-long festival and a performance art catalyst. Let’s take it easy then, take a step back, and start at the beginning. It’s 7pm in wintry, windy Lausanne and the opening is packed. A cool crowd of remarkably mixed age and color, white wine in hand, browsing, performing, preparing to perform or just always performing, chatting, smoking – you’ve been there, or, more precisely, I have: it’s my fourth year at the festival, and i confess: I’m a fan. The Espace Arlaud exhibition venue is nestled in the very center of a somewhat Blade-Runner-esque cityscape replete with illuminated escalators, concrete walkways, sudden lookouts offering views deep down onto the street you just crossed (or at least you think you did), brutalist overpasses, foggy lakesides somewhere in the far distance. It’s Art Brut City, home to the pioneering outsider art collection of Jean Dubuffet, art of the mentally ill. And it’s where Switzerland’s avid design elites of tomorrow are bred (even though the Ecole cantonale d'art de Lausanne is actually in neighboring Renens). It sure is an enigmatic place of many urban, cultural, and demographic faces.



The exhibition that is opening is the art section that kicks off each edition of The Urbans, as the Les Urbaines label themselves. It's the start of roughly seventy hours of almost non-stop performances, workshops, concerts, DJ sets, and the aforesaid art exhibition which each year is curated by a new guest curator (or curatorial team) and made up mainly of new productions by rather young local and international practitioners. Alors, dump that wine, end the chat, fight your way into the first room on the first floor, the beginning of this beginning. But where does this first work actually begin!? *Towards a Philosophy of Jet Lag* by Zurich-based artist and curator Mohamed Almusibli is a sequence of text fragments (modestly printed on letter-size sheets of paper, discreetly framed, and unspectacularly hung at eye level, accompanied by a sound component of monotonous airplane noise on loop) that neatly introduces a certain disorientation, physical frenzy, and reference-ridden thoughtfulness, all of which seems to be at the heart of this context, the performance festival.

Yet although you yourself perform the text because of the randompoint at which you begin, the visual modesty and conceptual rigor of the piece amount to a beautiful antidote to Les Urbaines rather than to its quintessence. So I mention this en passant, as the crowds trod on to the Arsenic, a cutting-edge theater during the year, and festival hub for the weekend. This is where, in three spacious studios, most performances and workshops take place and where, in a vibrant café, networking lunches are held, participant packages are handed out, program booklets are stacked, browsed, marked and forgotten, and tickets are hunted for and traded (seating, while free of charge, is limited), all accompanied by expert tips, anticipation, excitement.

Did I write color? Did I read color? «Because although the artistic world can be a locus of contestation and open-mindedness, it can also be complicit in discriminatory patterns linked to gender, origin or sexual orientation. This year's program redistributes the gender balance, is decisively queer-leaning

and aims to decolonise the arts,» the foreword to the program booklet reads – a booklet that always stands out for is fancy graphic design; this year like a carnival of pixels resembling the festive season's flicker of neon lights in the freezing drizzle (the festival is always held in December).



Maria Metsalu: Mademoiselle x, image/filter: Les Urbaines program booklet.

And so, at 23:45, towards the end of day one's program, we enter Mademoiselle x. The scene is brightly lit with cold white spots, vaguely obscured by swaths of machine-generatedfog. Two sparsely dressed tall figures kneel on towels opposite each other, motionless. In the center, on a large wool carpet (by Merike Estna) covered in bloody stains, is a knee-high rectangular tub filled with a cold, blood-like liquid that is pumped through a spiraling fountain (by SPARK Makerlab). Minimal music (by Rodrigo Sobarzo de Larraechea) and abstract drawings (by Annina Machaz) high up on the walls rounds off the overly atmospheric setting. Kneeling down on the floor myself, I just realize that the girls, rather than bravely performing stasis, are actually inanimate, wigged mannequins with artfully distorted faces and fingernails, when movement occurs in the pool. A disembodied rubber hand is holding on to the pool's rim, then slowly stretching and clenching its fingers. An actual girl, attractive, bare-breasted, half submerged in the menstrual substance, is breathing through a tube, goosebumps all over. Maria Metsalu. Two words apparently tattooed across each of the performer's kneecaps show when she crawls out of the tank, across the floor, into the crowd, in front of the first Mad Max(ine)-style mannequin, breathing what's left of her own character's life into the burnt mouth of the doll. Then, as she whacks herself through the audience, follows the awakening of the second puppet who erupts into vomiting artificial (let's hope) blood into a transparent container, and will continue to do so for the next hour or so of spectacle. And spectacle there's plenty: when the girl thrusts lit candles into her cut-open sneakers, mouth and cunt, haunts the viewers, makes dry ice evaporate into the tub of blood, forensically takes a polaroid picture of the scene – and starts all over again. In the meantime, the sound shifts into tougher techno, then black metal riffs, and

back to ambient tunes and raw piano. Exhilarated, we step out into the night (that is, the night program of concerts).



Maria Metsalu: Mademoiselle x, photo: Flurin Bertschinger

Three moves of this performance are worth singling out, as I believe they are representative of the festival as a whole: decolonization, inscription, repetition. This time, let's start in the middle.

Inscription

Maria Metsalu. Estonian performance artist. Said to be concerned with autopoiesis in the light of social transformation. She graduated from the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam two years ago and is one of the founding members of the Young Boy Dancing Group, a dance collective known (all over Instagram) for its post-porn performances with an alternating cast (currently organized by Manuel Scheiwiller). Its name seems to amiably mock the Young Girl Reading Group initiated by Dorota Gaw?da and Egl? Kulbokait? in 2013 (a year earlier than YBDG) who took their title from the first book they read, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* by the French activists and writers collective Tiqqun (Gaw?da and Kulbokait? are also included in this year's festival exhibition with a photo, fragrance and sweater piece titled *Each letter of each word is composed of a long tall grass that springs into the surface and fills your mouth*, 2018). Quite juicy a layer cake of inscriptions into modes of criticality towards «production, digital culture, originality and institutionalisation», with work «ranging from videos, fashion, sculptures, and live performances ... influenced by post-apocalyptic scenery, acrobatics, posthumanism and the unconscious,» as YBDG's mission statement reads. You get the picture – a picture and overall visuality and discourse quite meticulously conjured up by Les Urbaines (the institution) as it developed over the years, yet invariably fractured by the cunningly contorted reflections of its contributions (the intuition).



Maria Metsalu: Mademoiselle x, photo: Alan Proosa

Decolonization

«For *Mademoiselle x*, she embodies a zombie-woman in a state of in-between, convinced that she is dead when she is in fact alive,» the festival programmers (headed by Samuel Antoine and Ysaline Rochat) explain in the booklet. And in fact, the zombie references are quite obvious in this performance – at least to those of us who spent their teenage years behind closed curtains with splatter movies and make-up. Having attended this and that seminar as we grew older, we now know that the zombie is not just a horror fantasy character but a figure that originated in Haitian voodoo culture that went from the horror of slave plantations further on into the culture industry (from Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie*, 1943, to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, 1983) and eventually feeding back into various versions of African-diasporic and/or adolescent disobedience. And, most recently, as *Mademoiselle x* convincingly shows, it has developed into a more general symbol of alienation: in the guise of utmost creativity, cognitive capitalism has us work, eat, fuck like we're dead, or undead for that matter. Therefore, the resistance posited by the decolonizing appeal of Maria Metsalu's nameless mademoiselle – even though the author/performer's actual skin color (and that of her congenially animated sculptural companions) could hardly be any whiter – is as credible as some cis males' feminism: very. Les Urbaines, the urbanites as much as the namesake festival, stands precisely for such an anti-essentialist politics. Not merely toying around with random references, as one might, perhaps, suspect at first, it digs deep into the graves of iconicity, with an unquenchable thirst for the affect unearthed.



Maria Metsalu: Mademoiselle x, photo: Alan Proosa

Repetition

Affect, however, is cutting into our alienated bodies and unsafe souls like a two-sided sword. What appears as the thrill of transgressing the conventional boundaries between performer and spectator by means as conventional as special effects and shock, may at the same time be experienced as the violence of participation. I, too, found myself hiding behind other bystanders' backs when that blood color-smeared freak raged towards me – others endured her wet hug rather stoically for seemingly endless minutes. And yet, remarkably, this particular performance managed to counter its own spectacle of voyeurism vis-à-vis violence through the work's own primary structural principle: repetition. In repeating the entire process three times in the course of a single performance, Metsalu uses an almost Brechtian method of alienation to first and foremost undermine her own affective capacity, I think: I really am just acting, and by now you should know I come running into you, so how do *you* choose to act!? At the same time, she imbues the zombie image with its traditionally ritualistic aura. Thirdly, in terms of the artist's as well as the festival's overall aims, this type of repetition signals an engagement with the technological, with the machinic or, at least, mechanic workings of much of contemporaneity, suggesting a future dystopia. «History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce,» as old Marx had it, pointing precisely to the primitive exploitation at the very base of imperial capitalism: the necessity to accumulate through colonization, be it territorial or cognitive, just as the figure of the zombie reminds us by infinitely resurrecting (in) our imaginary. And from there it is not a great leap really to zombified spectatorship/consumerism/bulimia in recurring large-scale events. Which leaves us with the final, inevitable paradox: Rarely have I looked more forward to the upcoming Les Urbaines.

EMBED
[https://player.vimeo.com/video/308861493]

Maria Metsalu: Mademoiselle x, photo/video: Julia Moritz.

JULIA MORITZ

Julia Moritz is a curator, art mediator and critic currently working at Berlin’s Gropius Bau and prior to that at Kunsthalle Zürich. Previously, she served as head of the Maybe Education and Public Programs for dOCUMENTA (13).

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930196