

## Not so Fragile Bodies Performing Negotiated Identities

by Jennie Klein

*(Pas si) Fragile!* festival, a biennial performance festival based in Brussels that has been hosted by Studio Thor since 2020, has served as a platform for young artists interested in working in performance from visual arts schools in Wallonia-Brussels, including La Cambre, ESA Le 75, erg, ISAC-Arba-Esa, Académie des Beaux-Arts de Liège, Arts 2 in Mons and Académie de Tournai, all of which devote a portion of their curriculum to teaching performance art. In 2024, *(Pas si) Fragile! Festival* served as a platform for artists who were involved in *Performing Identity: performance art facing contemporary societal challenges*, a nomadic program of learning practices that took place over the academic years of 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.

There is a lack of educational opportunities in performance art in many parts of the world. This experimental educational program should serve as a model for subsequent programs that aims to educate students in performance art, developed from a collaboration between Marta Bosowska (PL), Áine Phillips (IE), Antoine Pickels (BE), Christophe Alix (BE), and Michela Sacchetto (BE/IT). *Performing Identity* accepted 20 students, all of whom had completed an undergraduate degree, and, in some cases, master's and doctoral degrees. The students were drawn from ENSAV-La Cambre and ESA Le 75 Brussels, Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts, Poznan (PL), and Burren College of Art in the West of Ireland/County Clare (IE).

*Performing Identity* offered a series of educational opportunities, including workshops and festivals connected with [Verão Azul - transdisciplinary Festival of Contemporary Arts](#) in Lagos (PT), [New Performance Turku Biennale](#) in Turku (FI) and *(Pas si) Fragile !* festival in Brussels (BE). Students took workshops with a roster of internationally famous artists including Monali Meher, Kira O'Reilly, Ana Borralho, Joao Galante, Day Magee, and Małgorzata Kaźmierczak. At the conclusion of the program, all of the participants were given the opportunity to present their work in *(Pas si) Fragile! Festival*, which had expanded in 2024 to include works by young artists from Greece, Ireland, Finland, Slovenia, and Poland as the result of *Performing Identity* and *Time for Live Art*, a festival cohort that, in addition to *New Performance Turku*, included *Trouble* (BE), *MIR Festival* (GR), and *Infinite Present* (SL). During the heyday of the *National Review of Live Art* and *Live Art Development Agency* under Lois Keidan, the most significant platform events happened in London and at the NRLA, often serving to jumpstart the careers of previously unknown artists. Between the NRLA closing shop after 30 years and LADA's precarity as the result of Brexit and the Covid pandemic, platform events became few and far between. Studio Thor, *Time for Live Art*, and *Performing Identity* have filled this lacuna, provided educational opportunities, access to international performance festivals, and, since 2020, the *(Pas si) Fragile* festival, an important and much needed platform for young artists to present their work.

One notable addition to the 2024 *(Pas si) Fragile!* festival was the creation of a [website](#) for *Performing Identity* by the team of Leah Crabé, Luna Descamps, Fanny Schaepelynck, and Louise Valin, current and former students of ESA Le 75, together with the Brussels-based graphic design collective *Luuse*. Schedules, videos, and documentation of the workshops are all included. Throughout the festival, the documentation could be experienced in a structure that was part tent, part yurt, and part sunken living room with cushions and carpeted surfaces courtesy of American interior design circa 1970. Post festival, the documentation can be experienced on the website. The attention to documentation and presentation separates *(Pas si) Fragile!* festival from earlier iterations of Platform Festivals. The students and professors of ESA Le 75 Brussels have made work and filmed that work fully cognizant that it will likely appear on social media. Rather than shy away from this battle, the students have chosen to embrace it, allowing their experiments and journaling to be posted on the website of *Performing Identity*, and making available two years of pedagogical performance art practices to anyone

with access to the internet. Crabé, Descamps, Schaepelynck, and Valin deserve commendation for their commitment to completing this task.

## The Performances

Joseph Gold Hendel *Some Questionable Revelations from the A.I. Neural Net as Presented by An Indeterminate Man*

Joseph Gold Hendel's performance, which took place on the stage at the basement level of Halles de Schaerbeek, was based on the hundreds of thousands of digital images that he created using what was then nascent A.I. technology to do so. The performance was a recreating IRL (in real life) of some of these images, in an attempt to convey what drove Hendel to obsess over these images - images which he ultimately stopped producing. The images that the performance was based upon emerged, according to Hendel, as a series of "QRs" - Questionable Revelations - made of pixels of lights that morphed the social code signifiers of this world into new signifying formations that are spat out at an astonishing speed.<sup>1</sup>

For the performance, Hendel curated five of these AI generated images of masculinity and reperformed them with his "indeterminately overdetermined signifying body, [a] questioning/questionable mind, [and] some tangible and intangible materials" that he had assembled to re-enact the images as they appeared to him. Against the background of the phantasmic and chimerical images of masculinity that had become an out-of-control infestation of possibilities and toxicities, Hendel reinserted a "signifying body" that was both generic and specific. Generic, in the sense that it was the body of a young, seemingly Caucasian male with a slim build and shoulder length hair that, chameleon-like, was able to change his appearance with costumes, make-up, and prosthetics. Specific, in the sense that, unlike the AI images that will forever remain what they were at the point of generation, Hendel's body is vulnerable, subject to change and decay. That vulnerability was made apparent through Hendel's inability to attain the seductive reality of the AI images, which were projected on a screen alongside Hendel's performance on the stage. For example, Hendel's interpretation of a gilded and deformed figure wearing a gold mask that resembles the Elephant Man rendered seductively abject becomes somehow less interesting when the long-limbed Hendel, wearing a mask modeled after the AI image, attempts to replicate the pose.

From a shirtless Vladimir Putin on horseback to Rambo Donald Trump wielding a bazooka, AI and proto AI generated imagery has increasingly played a role in early 21st century political imagery. Hendel's work, which also includes *Anti TED Talk* (2023), a critique of gendered rhetorical power dynamics and digital Capitalist Ideology and *hypermasculine thriftcore hangnail pixel art human hyperbolic outsider* (2023), in which Hendel asked fellow students to help him create AL Incel, Hendel has used AI to critique the constructions of masculinity by the political right. Hendel continued this inquiry into masculinity enhanced by the digital world with *Some Questionable Revelations from the A.I. Neural Net as Presented by An Indeterminate Man*, a performance that raises issues around what constitutes masculinity and masculine performance. For *Some Questionable Revelations from the A.I. Neural Net as Presented by An Indeterminate Man*, Hendel was less interested in "how masculinity shapes and is shaped by digital technology beyond the 'traditional hypermasculine/right wing' stuff but rather how it makes itself felt in much more familiar contexts like the liberal contexts where these discourses on gender are taking place."<sup>2</sup> Unlike his earlier work on hypermasculinity, the recreated images were much more ambiguous.

Martyna Przybyło *Czako*

Martyna Przybyło's *Czako* was a simple, almost minimalist, performance. Surrounded by bell-shaped cage structures that she had fabricated to suggest canary cages, Przybyło moved around the space interacting with these structures, touching the cages, lying prone on the floor, and then eventually pulling one of the cages over her head in order to cage herself. As Przybyło

moved around the space, she repeated the phrase “when the methane leaks, the canary dies” becoming louder and louder until finally she was shouting to the point that she was almost incoherent. The performance ended with Przybyło sinking to her knees while removing the “canary” cage, a structure that resembled both a minimalist sculpture and, somewhat bizarrely, a plant cloche utilized by gardeners to deter animals from eating the plants.

The title of the performance refers not to the cages, however, but to a type of helmet, the “czako” (a term borrowed from the Hungarians and pronounced sha-ko in Hungarian and cha-ko in Polish), refers to an archaic 19th century hat/helmet: a stiff, cylindrical military dress hat with a metal plate in front, a short visor, and a plume. In Poland, a czako can also refer to the headgear that is part of the uniform of the coal miners. As with the Hungarian czako, the Polish czako is both functional, in that it protects the head, and symbolic, in that it indicates the status of the miner through the addition of a colored plume. Przybyło’s father was a mining supervisor, who worked in the methane removal department, which monitored the presence of this flammable substance in the mine. In Poland, the rank of the miner was indicated by the color of the plume on the headgear. Przybyło’s father had a white plume on his helmet, signifying that his role was that of a supervisor.

By the time that Przybyło’s father would have been working in the mines, the technology for detecting methane gas or carbon monoxide had become so sophisticated that there was no need to bring a canary in a cage down the mineshaft. Toxic gasses could be detected more quickly and humanely through the use of a hand-held digital reader. Even before the canaries were replaced by machines, the miners had found a way to keep their beloved singing canaries, who they felt brought luck, alive. This was accomplished by a cleverly designed cage that quickly sealed the cage from the air in the mine, allowing the canary to breathe outside air through a vent.<sup>3</sup>

Przybyło’s reference to the canary and the czako was meant to be a metaphor for the circumstance of her father’s employment. Although the canary was no longer used to alert the miners to dangerous gasses, the job that her father did for many years was still extremely dangerous. According to Przybyło, the job of a miner remains very dangerous. Many of her father’s co-workers died because of methane leaks and other dangerous circumstances. Przybyło used the example of the canary and the prisoners to suggest that her father’s job, a job that he had to do in order to support his family, should not be an option. Przybyło used the canary as a metaphor for work that animals—and humans—should not be doing and should not have to do.

The canary reference also points to the history of mining in Oświęcim, Poland, where she grew up. During WWII and the Nazi occupation of Poland, Oświęcim was better known as Auschwitz, the notorious concentration camp and crematorium. The white plume on the czako worn by Przybyło’s father, harked back to the first part of the 20th century, when prisoners, rather than paid employees, were forced to work the mines. This practice continued in the mines near Oświęcim/Auschwitz during the German occupation. Jewish prisoners (replacing Russian prisoners) who were not immediately put to death in Auschwitz were forced to labor in Fürstengrube hard coal mine in the town of Wesoła (Wessolla), now part of the city of Mysłowice (Myslowitz), approximately 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) from Auschwitz.<sup>4</sup>

There is another level of meaning, however. Although Przybyło was born in Oświęcim, she lived in a town located near Oświęcim named Brzeszcze, where her father worked. During WWII there was a smaller camp located there that imprisoned both local Poles and Jews. Brzeszcze has a coal mine where Przybyło’s father worked and where Jewish and Polish prisoners were also forced to work. Even today, the coal mine is the largest employer in Brzeszcze. Those men that remain in Brzeszcze have no choice other than working in this mine.

Przybyło’s performance referenced both the recent experience of her father and the less recent—and inhumane—experience of the Jewish and Polish prisoners who were forced to work in the Brzeszcze mines during WWII. What initially seemed to be an anachronistic indictment of mining becomes a testimonial to the inhumane treatment of the Polish, Jewish/Polish, and Jewish people

who were transported to Auschwitz during the Nazi occupation. The deceptive simplicity of the performance belied its powerful message about the ease in which humans are suddenly classified as not humans. With minimal actions and staging, Przybyło laid bare the failures of humanity.

#### Erin Besch *A Walk in the Burren*

*A Walk in the Burren*, according to Erin Besch, was “a metaphorical journey of self-discovery and reconnection with heritage.”<sup>5</sup> In her statement, Besch talks about her affinity with the landscape and implies that she has roots in Ireland. Besch in fact holds a dual passport. Having completed two Bachelor degrees in arts and Science and a Master’s degree in Art from American institutions, Besch was channeling her Irish heritage by reviving an ancient Irish tradition of walking barefoot, a tradition that Besch likely encountered while pursuing a Master's of Fine Arts in Studio Art at the Burren College of Art in Ballyvaughan, Ireland.

If so, Besch selected a particularly difficult terrain on which to realize this performance. Burren, which comes from the Irish word Boireann, means a rocky place. The Burren, which covers about 360 square kilometers, is a karst landscape of bedrock incorporating a vast cracked pavement of glacial-era limestone, with cliffs and caves, fossils, rock formations and archaeological sites.<sup>6</sup> Photographs of the Burren, which has been designated a special area of conservation by the Irish government, reveal a stunningly beautiful, if somewhat inhospitable, landscape of glacier-shaped limestone with delicate grasses and flowers emerging from the crevices between the stoney table. The uneven terrain, fissured with dangerous cracks and sharp protuberances, is particularly inhospitable to a bare footed walk, conducted in real time so that the performance ended around the time of sunset in County Clare Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

Besch’s durational barefoot walk, streamed and projected in real time to Halles de Schaerbeek, Brussels, concluded while there was still daylight in County Clare, Ireland, but not in Brussels. Barefoot walks have a long tradition in Ireland and can be understood as an exercise of spiritual endurance or as an act of penance for one’s sins, particularly in the context of the Catholic religion. *A Walk in the Burren* was intended to explore themes of self-discovery, identity, and reconnection with the land, specifically the Burren in County Clare. The performance was experienced by the viewers in Halles de Schaerbeek as a projection on the floor that showed Besch’s naked and vulnerable feet navigating a beautiful but inhospitable landscape. In solidarity with Besch, many of the people involved with *Performing Identity* decided to walk along with her, traversing the space by placing their feet on Besch’s feet. The result was a powerful moment of connection across time and space that acknowledged the difficulty of Besch’s action.

#### Mathilde Chaize *Act As If There is No Tomorrow*

Mathilde Chaize’s *Act As If There is No Tomorrow* was fun to watch. Against a soundtrack that can only be characterized as Ultra-Baroque (that might or might not have originated in the 17th century), four figures with fantastic costumes, wigs, and make-up, emoted copiously while moving about the stage. Chaize and her performers Mélissa Tabourga, Eva Gay Obadia, and Zahra Elmadi mimed exaggerated emotions whose effects were exacerbated by the classical music that accompanied their actions. Everyone was crying. A box of kleenex magically slid across the stage, stopping next to the performer who seemed to have the most need for those kleenex. A mime, recalling the paintings of Jean-Antoine Watteau, was positioned on a walkway high above the action, wearing a striped costume and white-faced make-up. An older woman, dressed in purple tulle, consulted a very large book. Nothing happened, although the size and shape of the book, as well as the age of the woman, suggested it might be a book of spells. A younger woman, with a tall wig that rivaled the elaborate hairstyles of the French aristocracy just before the French Revolution, performatively poured water on her face so that she could appear to be crying. The elaborate hairstyles of the performers, particularly that of the wailing figure dressed in black who appeared to have two powdered cones protruding from the sides of her head, recalled the French hairstyles of the late 18th century when towering coiffures were created

using wire cages, pads, and other support structures. Just in case the audience didn't get the message in spite of the costumes, make-up, and hair, large close-ups of the performers performing sadness and distress were projected on the back wall of the space.

Chaize's descriptions of the performance, posted on the *(Pas si) Fragile!* festival website and the Les Halles de Schaerbeek website states that *Act As If There Is No Tomorrow* is an ode to excess, to crocodile tears, to real tears. *Act As If There Is No Tomorrow* is about overacting, about playing right and singing wrong, about a space of reality and fiction, of the living and the image. The piece celebrates reality TV and auteur films, in a relationship of coexistence.<sup>8</sup> The genius of *Act As If There is No Tomorrow* is not so much in its ability to channel the behavior of the aristocracy in 17th century France or in its ability to channel the bathetic excesses of American reality television, which was also an influence for this performance. Rather, it is in Chaize's ability to bring these two seemingly different presentations together in what proved to be a bizarre, but very entertaining, juxtaposition.

Kimia Nasirian *Hamhameh*

The title of Nasirian's performance, *Hamhameh*, is a Persian noun that means tumult, uproar, clamor, noise, murmur, and confusion, according to wictionary.org. *Hamhameh* can also mean, according to Nasirian's description of the performance, what happens when everyone talks at the same time. *Hamhameh* took place off site at the Hammam located in the *Lovina Spa*. A Hammam is a Turkish or Moorish bath that originated in ancient Arabia and is associated with the Islamic World. Hammam is both a spa and the technique of cleansing the body through the medium of water or steam. In addition to bathing and cleansing amenities, the *Lovina Spa's* Hamman includes a sauna, relaxation room, beauty center, massage center, and hairdressing center. Nasirian's hope was that the relaxing Hammam setting would facilitate *Hamhameh*, or everyone talking at the same time. Her description of the performance included the following sentences:

We find ourselves immersed in the vapours of words, the murmurs of voices, the whirlwind of stories.

We get lost in this whirlwind to find the stories. To find the best way to convey a story.

We take on new roles in the intimate/public space.<sup>9</sup>

Nasirian was ambitious when she devised *Hamhameh*. First, the performance was staged twice on the first night of the festival, with only 45 minutes between the end of the first iteration and the beginning of the second. Second, the space itself was not easily negotiated, which resulted in lost audience members arriving late and delaying the start of the performance.<sup>10</sup> Located in the former Royal Depot, a cavernous Neo-Gothic warehouse building used for long-term storage that had a rail line running the center, the *Lovina Spa* was not easy to locate, even though the restored Royal Depot is now the hub of the *Tour & Taxis* site. There was no signage for the performance outside the venue, whose rail line has been replaced by a walkway that eventually led to the entrance of the *Lovina Spa*. It was only after some diligent searching that the entrance to the spa was discovered.

*Hamhameh* began with everyone gathering in a locker room to change into swimsuits or strip down to their underwear. Having done so, the audience made their way down the stairs where they were divided into groups, given an object, and sent to various areas of the Hammam, including the cold bath, the sauna, the shower, and the steam room. Having arrived at their destination, some, or all of the participants could hear a faint conversation. Each group was sent to the Fortune Teller, who divided her time between advising the group and taking phone calls from other customers. The performance concluded with the reconvening of the entire group, who were asked to write down the stories that they had heard or discerned. Some of the audience members were able to do so. Others had no idea what to write, uncertain that they had heard "the murmurs and whirlwinds of stories."

In Iran, where Nasirian is from, the Hammam, a liminal and private space, is often the site where dangerous thoughts are secretly shared between women, who cannot safely express these sentiments in public, in a country where women suddenly became second class citizens with the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini in the seventies. Nasirian has explored the contradictions between the pronouncements of the Ayatollah and the lived experiences of oppressed women in performances such as *Body Chain* (2023), *Remember Your Name* (2023), and *Tisser La Lumiere* (2023).<sup>11</sup> The idea behind *Hamhameh* was really interesting. How do people who need to be very careful about what they do and say, foment rebellion? What is the role played by a liminal space such as the Hammam, where the various spaces, the nudity, and the steamy atmosphere creates a certain amount of invisibility and liminality for those people who use it.

Nasirian was very ambitious with this performance, likely due to the desire that as many people as possible could participate. The performance was not entirely successful as a result. Given that the last two years in Iran have involved a draconian crack-down on women and young men protesting the death of Mahsa Amini, who died in custody on September 16, 2022, after being arrested by Iran's morality police for not wearing her hijab correctly, the diversity of the audience for *Hamhameh*, while welcome, felt at odds with the meaning of the piece. There was a disconnect between liberal European/North American cultural values and the need to tell stories in a liminal space. Also, some guidance as to how those stories should be shaped, as well as giving a group a designated time and space to share the stories among themselves, would have helped to focus the meaning of this piece. At the same time, *Hamhameh* means tumult or babble, and there was a whirlwind of stories. Nasirian's previous work has been critical of the current regime in Iran. For *Hamhameh*, Nasirian used the spa as her stage to create a very different understanding of feminine Iranian politics, a politics that is carried out through whispers and innuendos. This performance has great potential.

Maria Strze and Marcjanna, *Lemonidas*

*Lemonidas* was a scavenger hunt for lemons, beginning with one or two that were difficult to find, and ending with a plethora of lemons that were somewhat difficult to carry.<sup>12</sup> The performance, which began and ended outside of La Balsamine, started late as the artists wanted to give people time to assemble. Although scheduled for a start at 18:00, it was closer to 18:40 before everyone finally assembled. Strze and Marcjanna quickly divided everyone into groups, gave the group the time to organize its own governance, and furnished the governing subject with a yellow clipboard, a pen, and some rather complicated instructions. According to the programme, *Lemonidas* was supposed to take participants a little over an hour. This was not the case for most of the groups, many of whom wandered off course. At least one lost group, having collected approximately a half bushel of lemons, wandered off course and found undiscovered lemons tied to a tree and intended for another group. Although the members of the lost group believed that the winner of the scavenger hunt would be the group with the most lemons, they elected to leave the lemons, worrying that the group for whom the lemons were intended would never make it back.

As it turned out, it didn't matter how many lemons anyone collected. Upon returning to La Balsamine, group members were asked to write a recipe for lemonade and to mix the lemons they collected into a glass of lemonade, made after their own recipe. There were specially designed t-shirts awarded to all the participants, as well as medals and large chocolate bars awarded to some of them. The medals seemed to have been awarded to those who provided the instruction for a lemonade recipe. The chocolate bars, while very welcome, were something of a mystery. Even more mysterious was that some of the participants didn't receive anything at all.

The description of the performance suggested that "all the usual roles were shaken up." The artists warned the participants that if they "decided to participate, you will be guided through a series of clues, hidden in the invisible cracks of the urban landscape." Promising an exciting climax, the artists warned their audience that "it's not all to be taken too

seriously.”<sup>13</sup> *Lemonidas*, in spite of not being very serious, did in fact address some rather interesting issues. First and foremost, the performance recalled the *dérive*, defined by Guy Debord as a “mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.”<sup>14</sup> A *dérive* was an unplanned journey through an urban landscape where the participants resist focusing on the quotidian circumstances of their lives and instead allow their thoughts to drift. The *dérive* could be done alone, but it was better accomplished in a small group, who could cross check each other's impressions. The structure of *Lemonidas* also recalled the theories of W.S. Bion, whose experiments with former British prisoners of war informed his book *Experiences in Groups*. According to Bion, an ideal group would contain eight people, each of whom would naturally assume a different role, including flight/flight, pairing off, and isolating.<sup>15</sup> *Lemonidas* was a performance of psychogeographical meanderings and alliances, forged by a search for lemons, and the route back to La Balsamine.

Barbara Stańko-Jurczyńska *Two Colors. Single-selection*

Of all of the performances that were part of (*Pas si*) *Fragile!* festival, that of Stańko-Jurczyńska was by far the most beautiful and compelling. The performance itself was radically simple. Stańko-Jurczyńska, a member of *FAK* (Feminist Creative Action) and *Basta*, an anti-Fascist collective, Stańko-Jurczyńska's *Two Colors. Single-election*, asked the audience to engage with what it means to be considered different, either because of your appearance, your gender, or your nationality. Stańko-Jurczyńska has a port-wine stain, a “birthmark” in which swollen blood vessels create a reddish-brown discoloration of the skin, over much of her body.<sup>16</sup> In order to create a canvas for the piece, Stańko-Jurczyńska slicked back her hair and wore no make-up and no clothing. Rather than paint herself, Stańko-Jurczyńska asked the audience to paint her. Two colors that matched the two colors of her skin were available. Deliberately passive, Stańko-Jurczyńska allowed the audience to construct her appearance while she remained passive on a table that was spotlighted.

*Two Colors. Single-selection* references both the enforced passivity of the female body and the Freakshow, which was popular in the late 19th and early 20th century. People who looked different from other people for a variety of reasons were labeled as “freaks.” In the heyday of the Freakshow, “freaks” had agency and recourse if they opted to perform in dimestore museums and freakshows, part of traveling carnivals that included a variety of human abnormalities. Freakshows invited people to look, and allowed those who were being looked at to be monetarily compensated. By allowing people to look and to touch, Stańko-Jurczyńska is challenging the normative gaze that both looks away from, and stares at, people with disabilities. Stańko-Jurczyńska characterized the performance as “a transfer of power into the hands of the audience,” but that is not entirely accurate. *Two Colors. Single-selection* was Stańko-Jurczyńska's performance. Her decisions, from the staging of the piece to allowing the audience to sit down as they painted her body, controlled the flow of the performance. What was most compelling about Stańko-Jurczyńska's performance is that she invokes both the stigma of disability, and, at the same time, allows people to stare at parts of her body as they painted on her. Stańko-Jurczyńska, as with everyone whose physical characteristics are viewed as outside the norm, has had to contend with some people trying not to stare at her and some people, particularly children, staring too much. Within the context of the performance the staring was replaced by an intent gaze as people painted fanciful snakes and plants using the port-wine color or painted out the port-wine birthmark with the skin color. Stańko-Jurczyńska's position on the table under the spotlight initially suggested the medical specimens that were displayed for doctors and the curious. The task of painting Stańko-Jurczyńska caused the medical gaze to yield to the look of absorption, as the audience tried carefully to beautify Stańko-Jurczyńska's body.

Aimé·es Rossi *Ungolding*

Aimé·es Rossi are a very interesting performer, whose work harks back to the embrace of sexuality and sexual pleasure that occurred during the AIDS pandemic but has also found valence in the recent trans panic amongst Authoritarian, right wing, neo-Fascist politicians, and their followers. For *Ungolding*, Rossi created a sort of grotto in La Balsamine, where they were lovingly gilded by fellow artists Juani Rossi, Selim Clérin, Nova Lov, Rose, and Esteph. The performance, according to the description provided by Rossi, was about the gut-wrenching movements of being outside, in the forest, and of having sex.

Why do we feel the same internal movements when we walk in the forest as when we fuck? The same gut-wrenching, temple-exploding life force. Fucking outside and fucking the outside. They let their bodies open up, let them be penetrated and traversed by brambles, minerals, other boys.<sup>17</sup>

The grotto, a place that is part nature and part human-enhanced, has long represented a hidden place of sexual desire and pleasure. Rossi played on that association, allowing themselves to be gilded and then engaging in an excess of masturbation by fucking themselves with a double-headed dildo in the cunt and the ass. Meanwhile, Rossi's spectacularly garbed performers moved out into the space of the audience, assuming statuesque and statue-like poses while creating what appeared to be a ring of living human sculptures around the grotto, where Rossi continued to perform sexual ecstasy and pleasure.

Rossi's performance recalls Zachary Drucker's *One Fist*, where a gilded Drucker is carefully unwrapped by a museum curator while the disembodied voices of a man and a woman condemns Trans\* women for being unnatural. In this performance, which can be viewed [here](#) on Drucker's website, the shimmering and elegant Zucker seems to negate what has been said about her. Rossi's glittering muscular body goes so far as to flip Drucker's performance, embracing raw sexuality and uncontrolled passion rather than the controlled ethereal beauty that Drucker employed to refute her critics. Whereas Drucker is a shimmering statue, Rossi is a satyr, with gelding that somehow looks as though it took place after Rossi had first rolled around in the dirt.

Rossi's performance was unfortunately overshadowed by everything else that was happening in La Balsamine, which was very busy. This performance has great potential, particularly if it could be restaged in a true grotto as the *only* performance that was happening. A performance that would have been very compelling in other contexts, such as that of a live sex show, was undermined by the claustrophobic space in which Rossi performed. Their fellow performers, gamely posing in the midst of a very crowded lobby/bar with people hurrying by to view other performances, went unnoticed as well. It would be interesting to see this piece performed in an actual grotto, a place that straddles the line between man-made and nature. Rossi's description of their performance suggests an affinity with ecosexuality, a term that has been redefined by the artistic duo Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, who have used the idea of ecosexuality to argue for environmental protection in a sexy and dirty manner.<sup>18</sup> Sprinkle and Stephens regularly host Ecosexual Symposia, which attract a number of performers from all over the world. Rossi wrote of their performance that their "trans body takes part in the cruising ecosystem." Rossi seems to want to go even further than Stephens and Sprinkle. It would be fantastic to see this work reprised at an Ecosexual Symposium, representing the next level of potentiality.

Phoebe Tohl *From There to Here*

At the end of her studies at the Burren College of Art and her participation in *Performing Identity*, Tohl was faced with a dilemma: should she attend her graduation, an event that her family was planning to attend? Or should she join her *Performing Identity* cohorts at (*Pas si*) *Fragile!* festival, which was happening at the same time? Tohl decided to do both. Immediately after her graduation ceremony, Tohl and her family journeyed to Brussels, using an iPhone to



capture the journey, and live streaming the documentation onto a widescreen television placed in Studio Thor's street front window. The performance ended when Tohl and her family arrived in Brussels.

There are some wonderful moments in *From Here to There* that remind the viewer that the sublime can reside within the quotidian. There is the breakfast scene that stars Ellen Pressman, Tohl's mother, and Jeffrey Tohl, Tohl's father, struggling to eat their breakfast while being filmed. There are Ellen Pressman's hairstyles, which seemed to decompensate as the long day of travel progressed, from a curated sideways ponytail to a sloppy bun in the airplane and then long hair that had been left alone by the time they finished their dinner in a local Turkish restaurant and begin the 10-minute walk to Studio Thor, departing over an hour before the scheduled arrival. Finally, there was Jeffrey Tohl, who forged ahead in spite of Phoebe's admonitions that they were too early for the scheduled arrival by more than an hour.

*From There to Here* was a whimsical performance that followed Phoebe and her parents on their journey by bus, train, and plane from Galway to Brussels. The livestream ended when Tohl arrived at Studio Thor a bit earlier than expected even though she and her parents walked around Brussels trying to kill time between 19:50 and 20:45-the designated time of arrival. Portions of the livestream documenting the Tohl's journey are still available on [pieces by phoebe](#) - Tohl's Instagram account. Beginning with breakfast and continuing with the airplane ride and the final walk through Brussels. A kin to a reality tv show, without the drama, *From There to Here* begins with breakfast in Ireland and the final walk through Brussels.

Raphäel Bauduin *Spit Out the Ghosts*

*Spit Out the Ghosts* was an unusual performance in that it took place in the communal showers in Studio Thor. Doing a performance where the audience might become drenched is not without risks, particularly a performance that is scheduled to happen four times in just over six hours. A lot could go wrong, but in the case of Raphael Bauduin's *Spit Out the Ghosts*, everything went right instead. The first two performances permitted partial nudity, with bathing suits allowed, while the second two performances, the last of which concluded at 00:30, permitted full nudity. In the end, it really didn't matter that much, because the water was not very warm, forcing people to stand next to the shower instead of under the shower. Thanks to the large fluffy white towels that Bauduin had generously provided his audience, no one was cold. In the spirit of the performance, most of the participants either stood under the shower for a short time, or at least stuck a foot or a hand into the water.

The shower, for Bauduin, is an important liminal space, a space where you are usually alone, and can "deliver the most powerful speeches,..phrase the most scathing retorts, ..dance the lively choreographies motionlessly, ..produce the wisest or most heartbreaking dialogues in the various films that we make of our lives..."<sup>19</sup> The shower is a place where you become your best and most together self, smite down the bullies and triumph over the bureaucracy. It is a place, in short, where you can star in your own life. Bauduin wanted to help everyone become their best selves, and, judging from comments of the audience as they exited the performance, he succeeded with everyone, and not just this author!

The audience were given chunky white spa sandals and towels, and then taken to the locker area next to the showers. After changing into a bathing suit or towel, the audience was given a green spa drink and asked to first select a nineties song and then decide on a word that could be inserted into the song's lyrics. In the time that it took for everyone to finish their green drink, a video projection of the selected songs with the new lyrics had been put together and the audience entered the shower for a Karaoke sing along that included a lot of dancing and hopping around in spite of the wet floor. No one was hurt, and everyone had a great time singing. In retrospect, it was a stroke of genius on Balduin's part to select popular songs from the nineties, which were still current so that people between the ages of 60+ to early 20s were already familiar with the lyrics.

Asia Urbańska *IDC*

*IDC*, the title of Urbańska's performance, is enigmatic. It could refer to the abbreviation used in texting for I don't care. *IDC* could also refer to seeing identity, or identity that is seen. Certainly, the presence of mirrors, video projections of Urbańska performing and Urbańska performing live for the mirrors and videos and not for the audience suggests that the title of performance might have referred to "I don't care" and "identity crisis," two common responses on the part of young women when confronted with the gaze and expectations of social media. In her description of the performance, Urbańska writes that she is searching for her identity as a young artist but wonders who this person might be. Is she an assemblage created by the expectations and prejudices of others? Is she just one person that is not connected to others? She wonders if she is part of the whole, and knows immediately that this is true, if rather frightening, probably because the whole is not some fantastical prelapsarian Eden, but a Frankenstein whole stitched together with social media and surveillance technologies. We are whole because we can't be anything else.

Urbańska's performance, which took place in the aptly named Salle Sapiens (room of the wise) was not simply about the evils of social media. It was also about finding oneself and making real connections with others while letting go of restrictive social expectations and unfolding naturally and spontaneously. Urbańska desires to let everything unfold naturally and spontaneously, dreaming of "achieving this and seeing in herself what she sees in others."<sup>20</sup> *IDC* was an introspective performance that used literalized Urbańska's different selves by shifting the action from Urbańska herself, to mirrors, videos and sound.

Fadwa Bouziane *Hyper-Visible Bodies*

For *Hyper-Visible Bodies*, Bouziane attached a long black braid to her hair that trailed behind her on the ground. Wearing a blindfold, she carefully walked down the staircase at Studio Thor, extending her feet gingerly so as not to fall. Bouziane's aim was to walk around the city block while remaining blindfolded and attached to her trailing braid. Earlier in the day, Bouziane had approached the people working in the shops to let them know what she planned to do. Most of the people with whom she spoke had ended their shifts, with the result that many people were surprised when she walked by, her right hand touching the building to guide her steps. The performance ended when Bouziane successfully returned to Studio Thor, entered the building, and cut off the braid.

Bouziane's performance, which involved little more than carefully walking a city block, was deceptively simple. In fact, Bouziane's performance was a tremendous act of endurance. As she walked around the block, she encountered obstacles that she couldn't see. At one point, she became separated from the wall, and moved towards the street but was stopped by a parked car. One of the audience members guided her back to the wall. At another point, the automatic doors of a *boucherie* almost closed on her hand. The braid was often caught and had to be tugged free.

This was not an easy piece to perform. Nor was it meant to be. Bouziane set out to do a performance that literalized the trauma that has been inflicted on black and brown bodies for centuries. Trauma is generational, manifesting itself in the bodies of those whose ancestors and parents have experienced violence. Bouziane's performance recalled Mona Hatoum's 1985 performance *Roadworks*, an hour-long performance documented on video during which Hatoum walked around barefoot with Doc Martin boots tied to her feet. Hatoum had been stranded in London when the Civil War broke out in Lebanon. The piece was a response to the social conditions in Brixton, which was plagued by police violence towards people of color. Bouziane's walking piece is also a response to violence towards people of color.

It is appalling and very sad that, almost 40 years later, Bouziane felt compelled to make an equally harrowing performance for similar reasons. She writes “what we see in social media, in schools, in political laws and in the streets; every act against racialized bodies affects us. We suffer and endure abuses in various spheres, which dehumanize us, infantilize us, and humiliate us. There is no other way out for us than to walk blindfolded.”<sup>21</sup>

#### Hongsuk Ahn *Intensive Becoming East Asian Course*

Hongsuk’s *Intensive Becoming East Asian Course* was billed as a course but structured like a game show. After introducing himself, Hongsuk told people that if they did not want to stay they had the opportunity to leave right away. No one left, and the “course” began. After explaining to the audience which countries were considered East Asian and which three countries (China, Korea, and Japan) would be the focus of the questions, Hongsuk explained how to pronounce his name, and then asked the audience to close their eyes while they answered the question. The first question was which pronunciation was correct—Han or Ahn. Given the number of people participating who likely have not studied an East Asian language and for whom English is not the first language, it was not surprising that quite a few people had trouble with that answer and were eliminated.

The questions became progressively harder. Which country is the smallest—China, Japan, or Korea resulted in a mass exodus? Eventually, there were six people left, who were asked to perform tasks such as spitting the furthest, using chopsticks, and pulling your eyes into a slanted position (those who resisted doing so won). The terms of the final contest between the remaining two contestants were a bit difficult to make out, but it seemed to be a call and response. Everyone who didn’t win received a beautifully patterned envelope and secret advice from Hongsuk.

#### Dawid Dzwonkowski *Livestock*

Dzwonkowski’s *Livestock* began with each member of the audience agreeing to have two magnets clipped onto their ears, similar to the tags that the cow wears so that their owner can be found when they wander away. The magnets were uncomfortable to wear. The discomfort increased upon entering the space, which was filled with manure and straw. Dzwonkowski, wearing a pair of magnet clips in his ears, was kneeling at the end of the manure pile, looking at no one in particular. For 60 minutes, Dzwonkowski “became” animal. Although the title of the piece, the painful magnet clips and the odor of the manure suggested cows, Dzwonkowski’s actions, his willingness to crawl and role in the manure, made the performance profoundly disturbing. Dzwonkowski had become animal, and in doing so, exposed our hypocrisy when it comes to farming and eating animals.

Dzwonkowski’s disturbing performance points to the potentialities of the post-human. The ontological structure of humanism, in place since the Renaissance, situates the white, male, and heterosexual “human” at the vanishing point of a horizon that includes the pre-human (animal, monster, and molecule) and the post-human (cyborg, object). However, the concept of the posthuman also has the potential to collapse these categories, which relegate animals and monsters to a lesser existence, while inhumanely excluding those people whose circumstances render them somehow more or less than human. As Patricia MacCormack suggests, the posthuman “is the moment of the in-between spatially and of the permanently mobile, not yet and never arrived becoming which occurs through the unnatural alliance formed through a repudiation of one’s nomenclature, sacred ‘thingness’.”<sup>22</sup> The posthuman is monstrous, bestial, and queer. It is also technological, fabricated, and artificial. It is the product of miscegeny – an unholy amalgamation of things and flesh.

The “animal turn” thus has the potential to disrupt traditional taxonomies based on class and identity. MacCormack has suggested that “our becoming animal is neither acting like nor pretending to be, but an entering into particular affects shared with animals that join us into hybrid formations. ...Animal rights should not be based on their similarity or equivalence to the

human, but our ability to become unhuman, unlike ourselves...”<sup>23</sup> Thus performance artists who engage with or invoke the animal do so in order to transform and de-territorialize the modernist subject. It is probably worth mentioning that this deterritorialization is very queer—and in fact functions to destabilize binaries much like the category of queer which continues to resist assimilation. Little wonder that performance artists, accustomed as they are to questioning the limits of the body and its tenuous and often disconnected relationship to identity, have been drawn to animals in their work.

## Conclusion

*(Pas si) Fragile!* festival was the culmination of the two-year program *Performing Identity: performance art facing contemporary societal challenges*. The work presented by the students who participated in *Performing Identity* was uniformly strong. What was particularly noteworthy was how many of the artists associated with *Performing Identity* took on very ambitious and unusual performances that forced artists and audiences to be way out of their comfort zone. In thinking about what Bosowska, Phillips, Pickels, Alix, and Sacchetto accomplished in two years and with very little money, one can't help but wonder if it is even possible or desirable to continue offering a thematically organized performance curriculum. Is it better to have an opportunity such as this happen every few years, or create a European performance version of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which, in spite of the amazing artists and writers who taught and studied there, was eventually forced to close due to lack of funds. There is nothing like this program in the Americas, and it is sorely needed. What will be interesting is to see how the artists who participated continue to develop. How will this opportunity that they were fortunate enough to receive influence the artist that they will become?

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Gold Hendel, description of *Some Questionable Revelations from the A.I. Neural Net as Presented by An Indeterminate Man*, josephhendel.com, accessed August 12, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Hendel, email correspondence to author. 25 August, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Kat Eschner; Updated by Sonja Anderson, “What Happened to the Canary in a Coal Mine? The Story of How a Real-Life Animal Helper Became Just a Metaphor,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (December 30, 2016, updated March 7, 2024), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/what-happened-canary-coal-mine-story-how-real-life-animal-helper-became-just-metaphor-180961570>, accessed 08/12/2024.

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, “Oświęcim,” *Oświęcim - Wikipedia*, accessed 13/08/2024.

<sup>5</sup> Erin Besch, *A Walk in the Burren*, (Pas si) Fragile! 2024, <https://www.thor.be/fr/performances/a-walk-in-the-burren>, accessed 14/08/2024.

<sup>6</sup> This description of the Burren was found via Google search, accessed 14/08/2024.

<sup>7</sup> Sunset in County Clare Ireland on April 24, 2024 was 20:52 Greenwich Mean Time and 20:53 Greenwich Mean Time +1 in Brussels.

<sup>8</sup> Mathilde Chaize, *Act as if there is no tomorrow*, (Pas si) Fragile! 2024 <https://www.halles.be/index.php/en/ap/1457-act-as-if-there-is-no-tomorrow> accessed 15/08/2024.

<sup>9</sup> Kimia Nasirian, *Hamhameh*, (Pas si) Fragile! <https://www.thor.be/fr/performances/hamhameh/> Accessed 19 August 2024.

<sup>10</sup> The *Lovina Spa* is part of the massive former industrial complex *Tour & Taxis*, named after the von Thurn and Taxis family, that was constructed on marshy land in the early 20th century as a multimodal freight transport system, integrating water, road and rail. “Tour & Taxis,” wikipedia.com, accessed 19 August 2024.

<sup>11</sup> These performances are documented on Nasirian's web site <https://kimianasirian.com/> Accessed 19/08/2024.

<sup>12</sup> The lemon in my group was supposed to be on a light in the park, but ended up crushed on the street probably because it had been run over by a car.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Strze and Marcjanna, description of *Lemonidas*, (Pas si) Fragile, Accessed 26 August 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Guy Debord “Definitions,” translated by Ken Knabb, *Internationale Situationniste* 1, (June 1958), cited in Wikipedia, “Dérive,” accessed 26 August 2024.

<sup>15</sup> See Jennie Klein, “Biospheria,” *New Art Examiner* (May 1, 2022), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Mount Sinai, “Port-wine Stain,” <https://www.mountsinai.org/health-library/diseases-conditions/port-wine-stain>, accessed 26 August 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Aimé-es Rossi, description of *Ungolding*, (Pas si) Fragile!, accessed 26 August 2024.

<sup>18</sup> See Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens with Jennie Klein, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position* (Minnesota, 2021).

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<sup>19</sup> Raphael Bauduin, description for *Spit Out the Ghosts*, (Pas si) Fragile!, accessed 27 August 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Asia Urbańska, description for *IDC*, (Pas si) Fragile! Accessed 27 August 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Fadwa Bouziane, description for *Hyper-visible Bodies*, (Pas si) Fragile!, accessed 27 August 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia McCormack, "Queer Posthumanism: Cyborgs, Animals, Monsters, Perverts, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory* in Noreen Gifney and Michal O'Roark, 116.

<sup>23</sup> McCormack, 123.