Through the Pas (si) Fragile !

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The programme of this year's edition of the festival *(Pas si) Fragile!* was built from three components: "The Belgian Platform", a representative group chosen by organisations belonging to the Time for Live Art cooperation network, and participants of the "Performing Identity – Performance Art Facing Contemporary Societal Challenges" project. The first group comprised eight projects selected through an open call addressed to individuals who had graduated from art schools in Brussels and Wallonia in the past three years. The second group consisted of seven emerging artists from Slovenia, Finland, Greece, and Belgium. The third component included fourteen performances by participants in the two-year "Performing Identity" educational project funded by the EU, for whom the presentation in Brussels was its finale. The festival is dedicated to the work of individuals at the beginning of their artistic careers, so a common denominator of the performances was the young age of the performers. For some, this was their first presentation in front of a wide audience at a professional festival providing full production and institutional support. The artists, along with the organisers, worked on the production of the proposed activities from September 2023. Seven months to prepare the presentation is a very comfortable time frame compared to other festival situations I know of. The fundamental concept of the festival was based on showcasing the work of young creators from various countries, educated in institutions with various approaches to performance education. This diversity was evident in the form of the presented works and was an undeniable asset of the festival's concept.

Over the course of three days, about 30 artists performed, still studying ones or graduates, with works mainly presented in the spaces of Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Studio Thor, and La Balsamine. The programme was extremely intensive, making it impossible to attend all the presentations. This unfortunately resulted in a fragmented perception of some works.

The works I managed to see were very diverse in terms of theme and form of presentation, from which one could create several completely different narratives about the festival. Some works stood out with their powerful message and exceptional form, deserving separate discussions. In this diversity, in my opinion, fairly clear common elements emerged, allowing one to look at the festival from a broader perspective than just as a review of individual performances.

What Does the Young Generation of Artists (Not) Think About?

Every review of young artists' work ignites in me a desire for the "new", stemming from a curiosity to understand the interests of debuting creative individuals, their priorities, and their language for describing the world. The curatorial concept of bringing together a group of creative people from diverse artistic environments scattered across Europe provided an opportunity for a cross-sectional view – albeit on a micro-festival scale – of the current state of young art and performance as an art form as such. From this perspective, it was worth attempting to ask some fundamental questions about what those just entering the professional art stream are thinking. What is their art like in times of the migration crisis, deepening humanitarian crises, and climate catastrophe? What is their stance on the wars in Ukraine and Palestine? How do they view themselves and the world after experiencing the pandemic and its associated economic upheavals and social separation? Given the increasing social polarisation and the growing popularity of populist

movements in Europe, has the language of performance, which reacts to reality in real time, also become radicalised? And finally, how understandable and relatable will the presented aesthetics be for someone born in the mid-1980s?

These questions swirled in my mind during the journey to the festival in Brussels – the heart of Europe – and gained particular significance. It seemed to me that these "burning" topics, already present in media, social, and political spaces, and long present in art, would resonate particularly strongly in the festival's space. In my work, I often participate in cultural events that evoke feelings of guilt, besiege emotionally using accusatory language, closing the door to self-defence. I admit that I expected a similar form of expression at the festival. Nothing could be further from the truth. "The Next Performance Art Generation" is somewhere else, unfamiliar with the language of shock or usurping the viewer's personal space. References to the aforementioned contemporary issues at the (Pas si) Fragile! festival were, paradoxically, placed in the most basic tools of the performer – in a focus on the body, which – like it or not – first defines our identity and social status, and in autobiographical threads. Some works were entirely outside the orbit of these issues, focusing more on form rather than theme.

Me, Myself, and I

If we were to speculate on what young performers think about, based on the events of the (Pas si) Fragile! festival, one might hazard a guess: "mainly about themselves". Within this (simplified) statement lies a whole array of important and fundamental humanistic categories that emerged in the presented works.

These were very personal narratives, focused on explaining the creative individuals' own experiences (Zoe Hagen), sometimes introspective and thus inaccessible (Marie Bertrand), distancing viewers or placing them in the position of voyeurs intruding into the intimate world of the creative process (Aimé.es Rossi). However, these were not therapeutic actions – the layers built upon the performers' experiences referred to a variety of topics such as identity, community building, relationship seeking, responsibility, oppression, and the social body. Through art, focusing attention on the artist's own ego acquires a more universal dimension.

One of the first performances to place personal experiences and individual history at the centre was presented by Matilde Gazeau Frade & Sara Pasternacki (PO/BE). These Portuguese artists, living in Belgium, crafted a sentimental story about memory and longing (?) for household objects, scents, and tastes evoking their homeland. The performance took place in a beautifully restored house, now functioning as an art gallery, with its original fabric well-preserved. Family history was also the starting point for Martyna Przybyło's (PL) work. The artist evoked her father – a miner whose profession carried the risk of losing his own life and those of his coworkers due to methane poisoning. She transformed objects clearly associated with mining (a miner's helmet and a canary cage) into a single artistic object, which she multiplied and arranged in a dimly lit space. By inviting viewers to interact with the object, she invited them into a fragile world, full of uncertainty and tension. Zoé Hagen (BE) shared – literally and metaphorically – her story of fighting for her life. In the guise of a superstar of a stage genre yet to be created, they delivered a witty and engaging talent show-style performance about living with borderline personality disorder, their childhood, suicide attempts, and the role of art studies in their healing process. The performance was a kind of coming out, the culmination (though it's unclear for how long) of a long therapeutic process, in the form of a debut one-piece concert that captivated the audience. Similarly, Olga Spyropoulou (GR/FI) adopted a TED-like style for

her performance. Starting from a classical still life with flowers and giving (almost) logical cause-and-effect relationships to her multifaceted story, she demonstrated with (almost) mathematical precision that, in the grand scheme of things, there is more love in the world than trauma.

Through the lens of identity, rooted in one's country of origin and its socio-political situation, one could interpret the performances of Kimia Nasirian and Hongsuk Ahn. Nasirian hails from Iran, while Hongsuk is from Korea, both currently residing in Brussels. Kimia Nasirian's performance took place in the baths of a Brussels spa. The audience was divided into several groups, each tasked with learning as much as possible about the history of a person chosen by the artist based on snippets of information/gossip heard from women-performers hired by Kimia in the baths. These stories recounted authentic tales of individuals politically repressed or entangled in conflicts with the state. In my group's case, the story concerned a journalist sentenced to several years in prison in Tehran for reporting on the death of Mahsa Amini, brutally murdered by the so-called morality police for wearing an "improper" hijab. During conversations amidst thick steam, no names or specific information were mentioned – just fragments, half-truths, various versions. The bathhouse, one of the few, if not the only public spaces in Islamic culture where a woman can free her body and meet other women, exchange information, gossip, contrasted starkly with the weight of the performance's subject matter – both striking and profoundly real. Hongsuk Ahn organised a kind of absurd contest in the atmosphere of a low-budget game show. The winner, chosen from the audience, received the title of Honorary East Asian, a cash prize, a medal, and a photo session. The discomfort of participating in this pseudo-quiz, full of stereotypical thinking, grew with each question and task testing the "eastern-ness" of the participants. Those who answered incorrectly had to leave the room immediately, receiving a photo of the artist with a black eye and the whispered message, "Get out of here and go back to your safe country". Through analysing stereotypes about Asians, likely heard in European countries, Hongsuk pointed out that cultural belonging stigmatises and shapes one's image in a foreign country, which is hard to break. He referenced often humiliating bureaucratic procedures for legalising a foreigner's presence in a given country, prevalent in many nations. More broadly, he highlighted the issue of migration policies, and the categorisation of people based on racial characteristics.

The (Un)present Body

In addition to the "autobiographical" performances, the festival programme included a group of works in which the body and corporeality were the central focus. The body, alongside time and space, is one of the three fundamental tools of a performer. Highlighted and interpreted by the artists, it signifies the changes occurring in social, political, and cultural spheres. Working with one's image, objectifying the body, and subjecting it to scrutiny or placing it in the hands of the audience are not new in performance art. However, the individualisation of these acts contributes to the authenticity and expressive power of each piece.

Asia Urbańska (PL), in her several-hour-long performance, focused on her own image and its analysis in continuous motion, using numerous mirrors and video recordings in which she was the main character. The artist used mirror reflections and recordings to conduct a sort of game or silent correspondence with herself. Beyond the obvious question of the identity of the woman – person – artist, there was a certain kind of narcissistic, uncritical self-admiration in this action. This impression was heightened by the artist's way of moving, clearly "presenting" her body in the best possible way, and her complete focus on herself, isolating her from the audience despite their close proximity. Suvi Tuominen's (FI)

performance was situated somewhere between the question of representation of the image on the internet and the analysis of dance itself. Throughout the performance, she persistently repeated short movement sequences in front of her phone's camera, as if for Facebook Reels or TikTok. The fragmentary nature of the chosen sequences was accentuated by the soundtrack made of simple beats, looped motifs, and interrupted sounds, resembling more a sequence of errors than a coherent whole. Marion Dégardin (BE) based the entirety of her performance on interacting with her own body, humorously exposing the physical characteristics of her spine through movement and sound. The artist wore a special costume embedded with plastic bottles, which produced distinctive sounds as she moved. As a result, the festival space was occasionally disrupted by a sound imitating cracking intervertebral joints, which sometimes interacted with other works.

Barbara Stańko-Jurczyńska (PL) and the NAVOSKI (BE) handed their bodies over to the audience. These performances took place simultaneously in different spaces, strongly corresponding with each other. The first, feminine and intimate, utilised the artist's skin condition, leaving the audience the choice to either mask or highlight the spots on her body using perfectly matched shades of paint. The artist's beautiful body, presented on a table in a separate space like a canvas, in an atmosphere of concentration, encouraged thoughtful decisions from the audience. Most interventions on Stańko-Jurczyńska's body were decorative "enhancements", with the performance tending towards the empowerment of the artist. Meanwhile, on the floor below, NAVOSKI experimented with a situation of objectification. The centrepiece of the gloomy room, where the performance took place, was the artist's exposed, immobilised body, serving as a blank canvas for the audience's golden thoughts. The inability to make eye contact with either the artist or the tattoo artist encouraged the audience to test the situation from the shadows surrounding the central scene. The responsibility of conveying a message to the artist through the tattoo artist was much greater than in Stańko-Jurczyńska's case – because it was permanent. In both cases, the artistic body became a mirror for us, viewers, representing a specific society and its motivations. I also wondered whether the public's reaction to the naked body was influenced by its gender identity – the male body was easily uglified, even though the tattoo artist did not ink all the messages on the immobilised artist's skin.

Fadwa Bouziane (CA/IE) took her performance from the gallery into the urban space. With her eyes covered and a long artificial braid attached to her hair, she followed the building's wall, looping around the gallery. The audience assisted her in this slow walk, helping her overcome obstacles and supporting her hair. By stepping out of the gallery and reacting to the local residents who observed the performance with interest, we could learn about the social background of the neighbourhood. It turned out that it was predominantly inhabited by Turkish and Moroccan communities, which gave the artist's work additional significance in the context of the female body as a tool of social and political control.

A powerful highlight exploring the body in society was Aimé.es Rossi's (BE) transgressive performance titled "Ungolding", which invited several queer individuals. The work was a complex narrative consisting of successive stages taking place either in the intimate space Rossi created, serving more as a set for the actions inside, or in the open gallery space among the audience. The participants formed a queer micro-community, creating a safe framework for Rossi's intimate scenes. Their presence was also a kind of manifestation of reclaiming space. Personally, I felt like an unwelcome participant in this rite of passage, unable to enter the created world. The trans artist's body was the focal point, subjected to stages: anointing (using gold paint), liberation in dance, experiencing pleasure in a sexual act, and finally being "cleansed" in a golden shower of urine from the co-creators of the performance.

On the opposite end was Raphaël Bauduin's (BE) performance, where the element of cleansing took on a completely different, collective dimension. The artist invited the audience to join him in a bathing room in a playful atmosphere, leaving the question of nudity/clothing open. The bathing was accompanied by collective karaoke singing and drinks, allowing even the shyest individuals to feel safe, confront themselves, and open up to others. "SPIT OUT THE GHOSTS": get rid of fears, sing them out during collective karaoke therapy. Bauduin's performance largely concerned building relationships and a micro-community, even on the scale of a small shower room, where, "Gombrowicz-like", everyone is equal, stripped of stereotypes and social roles. The collective body, undergoing a cleansing ritual, was a means to create a comfort zone allowing for the formation of human relationships.

The Dancing Body

The festival programme featured several performances where dance was the main form of expression. Despina Sanida Crezia (GR), accompanied by another performer, crafted a vibrant musical and dance narrative that evoked the atmosphere of an unspecified urban space reminiscent of housing estates or suburbs. The artist drew on music genres and dance styles born out of urban subcultures, such as hip-hop and rap. The performers, immersed in energetic dance and equipped with baseball bats (inseparable props of urban gang culture), moved through thick smoke amidst concrete blocks covered in graffiti. The escalating tempo of the performance, intensified by red and strobe lighting, and the performers' close proximity, as they moved freely in a quasi-punk frenzy, created a sense of mild unease. The artists highlighted the significant role of street-born dance, often rooted in protest, solidarity, self-defence, and serving as a form of expression of a particular stance and social belonging. Dance, functioning as a ritual of passage and transformation, was presented in a performative act by Moriane Richard. Accompanied by an archetypal figure moving oddly across the stage and a DJ creating live music, the performer danced a ceremony of transition, or a kind of trance-like transformation set to contemporary rhythms. This action, closer in form to a theatrical performance, incorporated numerous components reminiscent of ritual, the elements, and ancient beliefs.

Art Is Also About Entertainment

Raphaël Bauduin's performance was one of the final acts of the festival, taking place late in the evening and leaving the participants in high spirits. Humour and a light, unpretentious approach characterised other performances as well, such as those by Mathilde Chaize (BE) and Maria Strze & Marcjanna (PL). These works, embodying the spirit of *l'art pour l'art*, reminded us that art can also be enjoyable entertainment in the best possible way. Chaize created a piece that blended elements of a soap opera, stripped of content and reduced to its essence – emotions, laughter, and tears. This was complemented by a video well integrated into the space and corresponding to the stage action, quasi-Baroque costumes, and a set featuring a bathtub/coffin as well as by a large object that turned out to be a giant box of tissues. After a heavily off-key rendition of the "Flower Duet" from Léo Delibes' opera "Lakmé" performed fragmentarily by one of the artists, I was strongly reminded of Katarzyna Kozyra's series "In Art Dreams Come True" (2003-2006). Chaize immersed the audience in a world of artificiality and parody, finely tuned absurdity, and humour devoid of unnecessary words. Participating in it was an incredibly liberating experience.

Maria Strze & Marcjanna demonstrated that art need not always be serious. Their participatory performance took the form of a city game involving the audience. We were divided into several operational groups, each given a map and instructions. Our task was to

solve various challenges and collect as many lemons as possible hidden around La Balsamine, with a prize awaiting the winners. Not only did I have fun, but I also met several new people through group activity and had the chance to break free from the festival's constant stream and look around. In fact, by solving the tasks and asking local residents "is there a lemon tree around here?", we became the creators of the act. Our attention was subtly directed towards places and people we might not have noticed amidst the festival's hustle and bustle.

Joseph Gold Hendel's (IR) performance was marked by humour and detachment. The artist invited the audience to an interactive game in which he tried to recreate a series of AI-generated images. His performance consisted of several "scenes", where he attempted to reproduce these digital "creations" as realistically as possible while trying to imbue them with a deeper, even aesthetic meaning. In doing so, he reversed the roles – a human being became the executor, or rather the tool, for an artificial entity, not the other way around. This, of course, was done with a grain of salt, but it raised a melancholic question about the future of AI and the conspiracy theory of its takeover. Well, even if a war between AI creations and humans were to occur, in the artistic realm, they wouldn't stand a chance against Joe Hendel.

Beyond the Frames

One of the final performances I saw at the festival, which effectively framed the entire event and, in fact, addressed nearly all the issues and themes discussed earlier, was the work by Dawid Dzwonkowski (PL). His performance can be interpreted on multiple levels, and I believe each participant took away something different. For me, the most striking aspect was the way he broke the anthropocentric thematic dominance, turning instead to the non-human. Ironically, he placed his own hypnotic presence at the centre of the performance space. Upon entry, each "head" of participant was marked, much like cattle, reducing us to representatives of a single species devoid of individual traits, merely living inventory. The audience was enclosed in a spacious, dark room, with a large amount of cow feces at its centre. The pungent smell filled the air, inescapable and overwhelming. Kneeling and supporting himself on clenched fists, Dzwonkowski smeared the dung across the room with his body, gradually restricting the audience's movement without the risk of stepping into the cow manure. The artist's silent, quasi-animal stance and his prolonged, unsettling eye contact with the intruders in his space, combined with the ambiguous progression of the performance, created a sense of his complete control over the situation. This simple image, free of unnecessary narratives and words, was dominated by the strong, mute presence of the artist.

Dzwonkowski's performance was a powerful conclusion to the festival, but also a summation of it. It included elements that were less overtly present in other performances, such as oppression, uncertainty, subjugation, and manipulation, but without employing the language of violence or self-abuse, or abusing the audience. Instead, it utilised the language of sensitivity and tenderness, turning inward, introspection, a non-disruptive dialogue with the audience, and the search for community. Perhaps these are the responses of young creatives to functioning in times of crisis.

An essential part of the festival, alongside the artistic programme, was the meetings with professionals – curators, educators, practitioners, and cultural creators from across Europe for whom performance is a crucial element of cultural creation, often located on the peripheries. Some of them recommended the artists participating in the festival, thereby having a real influence on the festival's programme. The questions I brought to the

festival resonated clearly in this group during workshops, working meetings, and discussions between events. Questions about the economy and ecology of art and the directions for future action were asked with genuine concern. These could be addressed through networking, exchange, co-creation, and mutual support. This parallel stream of the festival (Pas si) Fragile! added additional meaning to it and personally helped me to determine the direction for my future actions.

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Text written and published in Summer 2024