

# ARTWORKS

## FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

OEROL EDITION



Performance of The Beatzers at Café 't Zwaantje, West-Terschelling

Painting by Emma Krick @emmaquarel



FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

MOTUS MORI

---

HUIS G

---

ZOMBIE

---

QUEER MONSTERS

---

ROOTS OF THE PLANTATION

---

TOTOMBOTI

---

KRAK

---

ZUAM

---

SALT-LOVING COMMUNITY

# FROM THE TEACHERS

At Leiden University College we prepare our students to become **Global Citizens**; equipped with the knowledge, dispositions, and skills to take responsibility for and engage with the complex global challenges we face. **Searching for Sustainable Livelihoods: A Fieldcourse on Fieldwork** is one of several Global Citizenship courses offered. It is designed and taught by Dr. Caroline Archambault, an anthropologist working in International Development and the Global Citizenship Coordinator of LUC.

The theme of the field course this year is **Art Activism**; exploring how art works to build more sustainable livelihoods, that is to pursue lives we value without compromising others' (including other species) abilities to do so (now and in the future).

Following a 7-week preparatory course in The Hague, students undertake a 10-day fieldwork module on Terschelling in the Netherlands. This fieldwork module is coordinated and co-taught with Sebastiaan Grosscurt, an ecologist, environmental journalist, and Wadden sea nature guide.

The fieldwork runs during the entirety of the Oerol Festival ([www.oerol.nl](http://www.oerol.nl)), an art festival aimed at reflecting on sustainable development. Students are studying both the Art Activism of the festival and the sustainable livelihoods of islanders. This year we were honoured to have partnered with the Oerol festival and our students have studied 9 works selected by the Oerol committee. Through **multisensory immersion and creative interactive** approaches, students explore **The Art, The Artists,** and **The Audience**.

If you are interested to learn more about the course, LUC, or the ArtWorks project-using artworks to learn about and advocate for sustainable livelihoods, please reach out:

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[WWW.ARTWORKS4SUSTAINABILITY.COM](http://WWW.ARTWORKS4SUSTAINABILITY.COM)



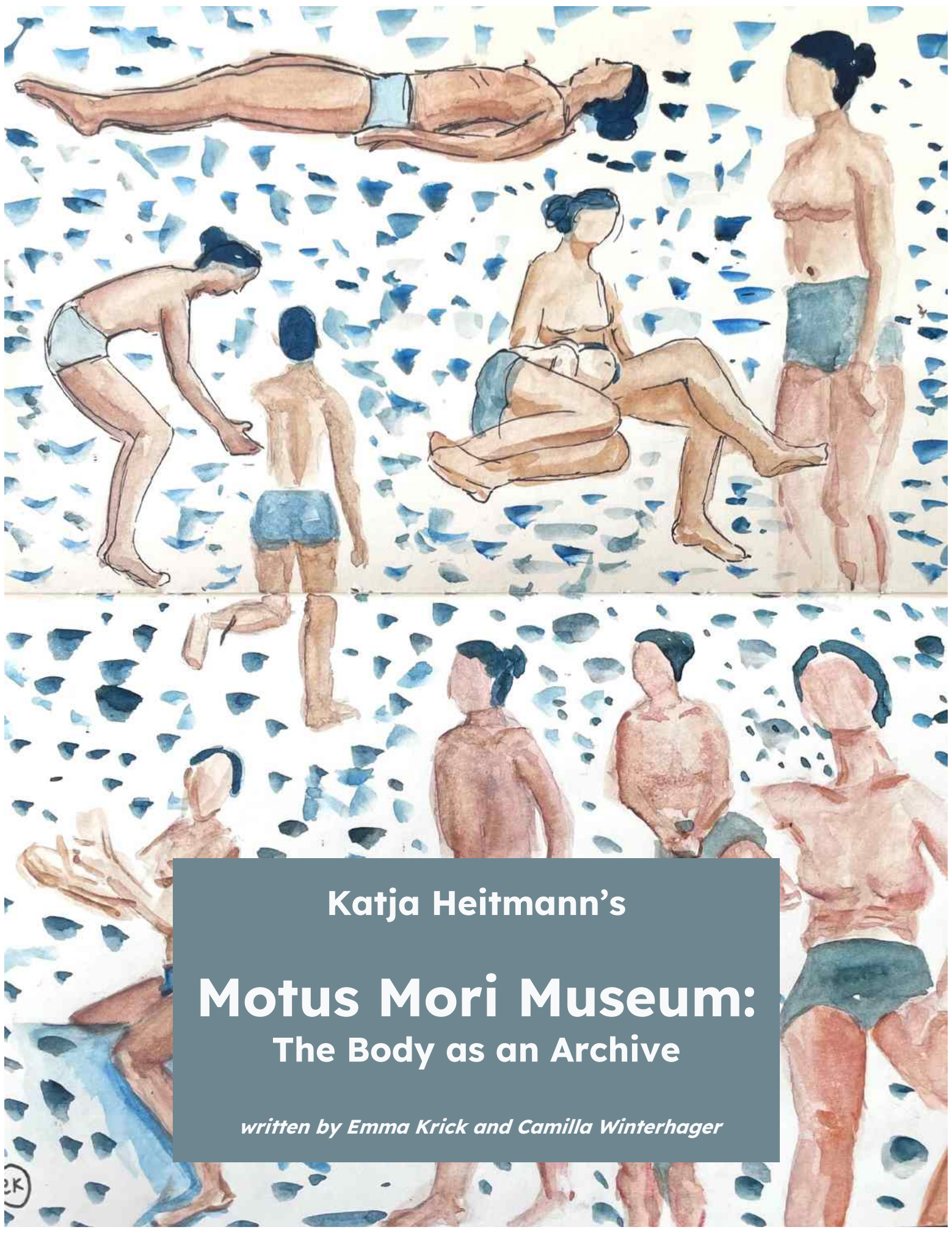
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A special thank you to Marin and Marloes (from the Oerol organizing committee) and their colleagues for giving our students the opportunity to contribute to this amazing festival.



Katja Heitmann's  
**Motus Mori Museum:**  
The Body as an Archive  
*written by Emma Krick and Camilla Winterhager*

PK

How do we want to remember our loved ones? What makes humans and their movement unique? How can we sustain lively memories of people by capturing the way they move? These questions are provoked in the *Motus Mori Museum*, an internationally traveling performance by choreographer Katja Heitmann and her company. Highlighting the beauty of mundane movements, it aims at building a living archive that stores human motion inside bodies. By slowing everything down, dancers emphasize the uniqueness of everyday movements. In June 2024, the performance was shown at the cultural festival *Oerol* on the Dutch island Terschelling. Based on conversations with the choreographer, the creative producer, two of the dancers, and twenty visitors, we explore *Motus Mori*: What is the artwork about? What are the artists trying to convey? And what does the audience take away from it?

## The Art

*Motus Mori*, Latin for “movement that is dying out,” is based on the idea that every person moves in their own distinct way. For example, the way you tilt your head when in doubt may appear mundane at first, but it makes you unique. Instead of storing memories in an one-sided way, in the form of words and “zeros and ones,” this archive preserves memories in an embodied, living and communal manner. Yet even in this archive, which stores movements that are normally transient, the motion eventually passes. The performance aims at making us look at each other in a new way, and it invites us to remember what is often overlooked. By conducting so-called “movement interviews,” the company collects people’s typical movements to build a repertoire, including for example how people breathe, nod, stand up, or think. [1] From this collection, a daily varying performance is created, drawing upon the movements donated by more than 1900 people of all ages. Most movement interviews were conducted in Germany and the Netherlands, where the company is based.

At the *Oerol* festival, the performance takes place in the *Meslânzer Kerk*, the church in the midst of the lively village of Midsland. The building, dating back to 1880, is surrounded by a graveyard. This type of remembering the dead, by engraving some information in stone, creates a clear and intentional contrast to the living memory of people captured in the dancers’ bodies inside the church.

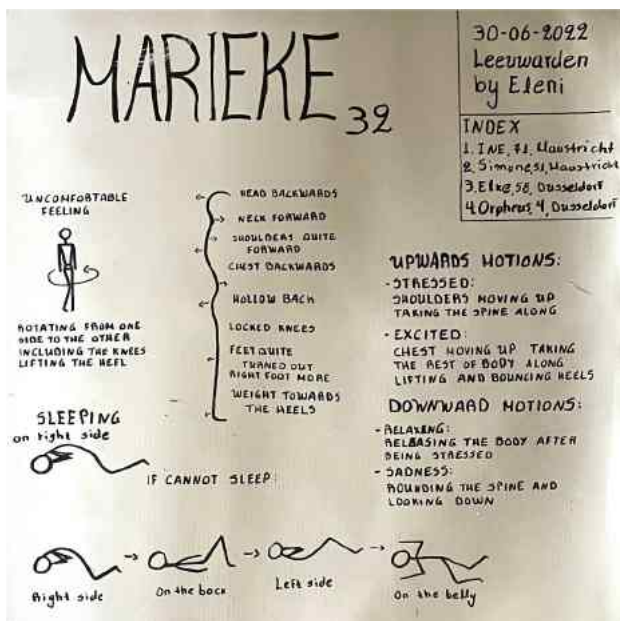


Top: Impression of *Motus Mori* by Emma Krick  
Bottom: *Meslânzer Kerk* and the surrounding graveyard  
Photo: *Camilla Winterhager*



## An Immersive Experience

While a stiff breeze drives the rain against the window, the atmosphere in the small church is calm and reverent. The dancers are performing at the center of the main room. Sometimes they move through the room, sometimes they sit, lie, stand, or kneel on the wooden floor or white cubic stools. New spectators enter the church every hour. They are first welcomed by Sander van der Schaaf, the creative producer, in a small entrance room. On the ground next to the stage and in the entrance room, posters illustrate selected movement interviews. One of these shows how Marieke, 32, rotates from one side to the other when she is uncomfortable. The audience members are free to walk around and on top of these posters that show how Marieke and all others who were interviewed, move in a unique way.

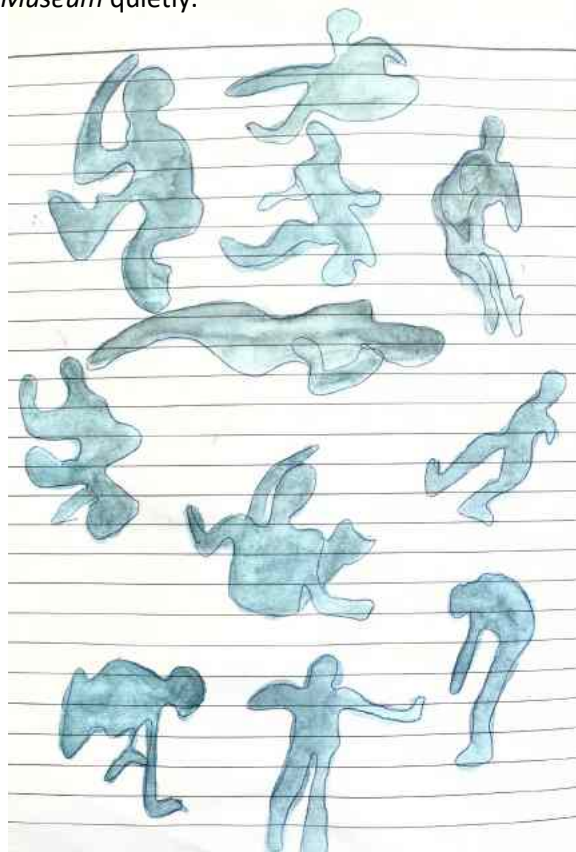


Illustrative Poster of a Movement Interview  
Photo: Camilla Winterhager

After hearing a short introduction and taking off their shoes, visitors enter the performance room. White boxes, from which soft light emerges, are set up for the audience on all sides around the dancers. This requires some visitors to cross the stage, which they do carefully.

Right: stylized drawing of selected movements by Camilla Winterhager

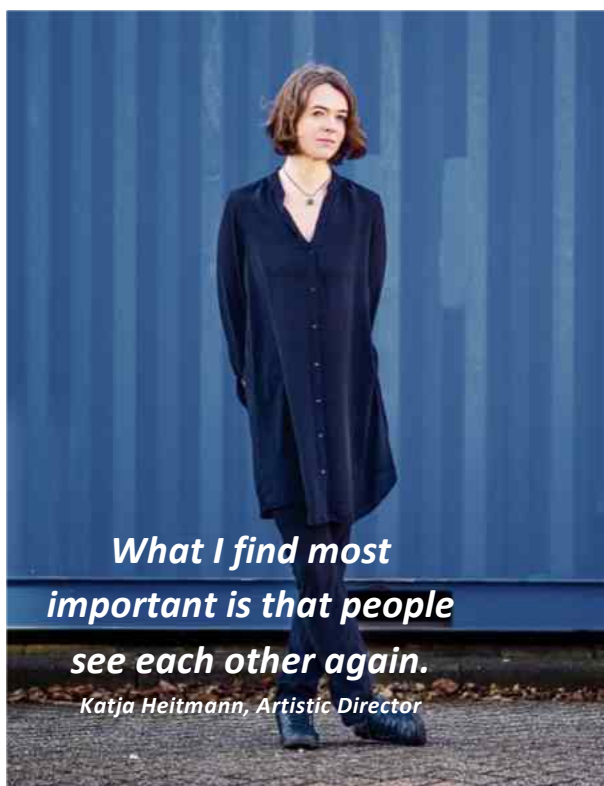
Once seated, the spectators are drawn into the dancers' performance: Weight on the front foot. Lifting the back leg and swinging it forward. Flexing the foot. Stretching the leg. Heel on the ground. Rolling over. Repeat. Seemingly simple actions, such as walking, are carefully deconstructed. Every fragment of the movement is put in the spotlight in the ever-growing archive of movement. It is kept in motion by six dancers for four hours a day, with electronic, pulse-like music. The performance follows a one hour long loop in the music, but randomization ensures that no two rounds are the same. While some parts of the choreography are coordinated and the dancers periodically perform synchronous movements, they draw much inspiration from their own archive independently. The dancers' appearance creates uniformity. With their hair tied back in a grey knot and being fully naked apart from grey shorts, every muscle contraction is revealed. This uniformity draws full attention to human anatomy and movements. Visitors are free to stay as long as they want and choose themselves when to leave the *Motus Mori* Museum quietly.





## The Artists

Katja Heitmann is the artistic director of *Motus Mori*. [2] Born in Germany in 1987, she studied dance and choreography at Fontys Dance Academy in Tilburg, Netherlands. Together with composer and musician Sander van der Schaaf, who produced the music for the performance, she developed the concept of the movement archive. The idea of preserving movement originated from a personal experience. When Heitmann's father died in 2018, he left no material belongings behind: no house, no photo albums, no letters. How could she keep his memory alive? Remembering the way he used to scratch his head or arch his back, *Motus Mori* is an attempt to preserve these memories before they fade away. The performance is also a reminder for the audience to closely observe their loved ones' special mannerisms.



Left: Katja Heitmann. Photo: Andreas Terlaak.

Right: Sander van der Schaaf. Photo: Hanneke Wetzter

Motus |  
Mori



Heitmann explains that she would like people to look beyond superficialities like clothing and focus on the often overlooked uniqueness of everyday movements. These ideas resonate with Oerol's mission to "provide new perspectives on societal developments." [4] As connecting through movement as a way to build community is one of the festival's central themes, Oerol is an ideal setting to perform *Motus Mori*.

Besides *Museum*, two other versions of *Motus Mori* exist, called *Reliquiem* and *Corpus*. [5] These have been performed in the Netherlands from Groningen to Maastricht, in Germany, Belgium, and France. The type of venue is different in every city, giving each project its distinct note.

While Heitmann determines the strategic and artistic direction of the company, the dancers play an essential role in bringing the archive to life. It is in their bodies that the data is stored, as there is no physical or digital documentation of the movement interviews, except for the illustrative posters. The company consists of 13 professional dancers, men and women from different countries, between 20 and 38 years old. [6] In an interview after the performance, two dancers explain to us how they conduct movement interviews and how this translates into the choreography. *Motus Mori* travels through Europe to perform and expand the archive. While spending a few weeks in each city, the dancers interview people of different age groups, with different backgrounds and experiences. Through constant repetition, the movement is stored in the dancers' muscle memory and becomes the archive.

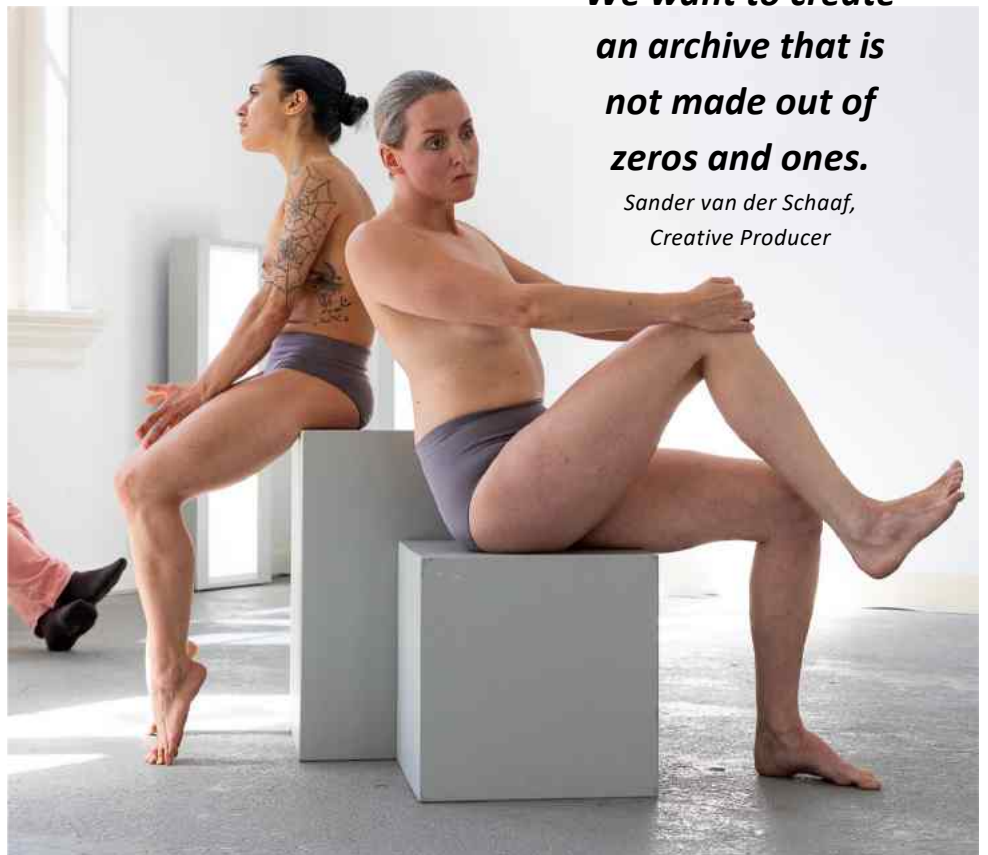
Through this process called "indexing," they develop a continuously growing repertoire from which they draw to create varying performances. While some movements quite literally represent clearly recognizable actions, such as smoking, others are more abstract and portray mainly the emotion the donor associates with the movement.

*Motus Mori Museum* in  
Kunstruimte H47,  
Leeuwarden.  
Photo: H47

***But what exactly makes these series of mundane movements so touching?*** One dancer illustrates this with an interview with a girl who described the stress of the moment she realized she had an eating disorder. The dancer tries to really work with her body to deeply convey the feelings behind this movement rather than simply copying the mechanics of a movement. Far from only representing people they can easily identify with, the dancers explain that some of their movements they enjoy the most contrast their own experiences. For example, a male dancer describes his representation of a pregnant woman lying on her back, supporting her belly, and a female family member, elegantly holding up a cigarette. Another example is a slender female dancer, often adopting the movements of a tall punk rock fan with a mohawk.

***We want to create an archive that is not made out of zeros and ones.***

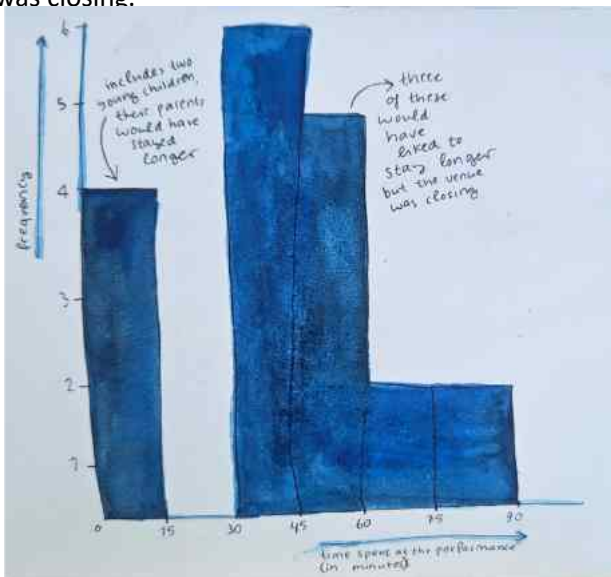
*Sander van der Schaaf,  
Creative Producer*



## The Audience

How do the visitors feel about this performance and what do they take away from it? Does their experience align with the artists' ideas? Spending two hours in front of the church allowed us to conduct 20 short interviews with people who had just seen the performance. During one of the few sunny moments of this exceptionally rainy edition of the Oerol festival, many people seemed glad to reflect upon their experiences with us.

As the visitors can choose when to leave the performance, we first wondered: **how long do people decide to stay?** Despite the seeming simplicity of the mundane movements, they involve something so mesmerizing and captivating that most visitors keep watching between 30 minutes up to one hour. They describe how the movements made time slow down and inspired them to appreciate every detail, from the wrinkling of the skin to the bone structures and the moving muscles underneath. This process of slowing down is considered highly valuable, because, as one visitor tells us, “while generally everything races past you nowadays, somehow, watching someone take a few steps keeps you completely fascinated for an hour.” Moreover, as we stayed at the church until the end of time slot, quite some people told us they had wished to stay longer but had to leave at some point, as the venue was closing.



**What other first impressions do people have?** One visitor describes how the performance acts as a mirror that incites recognition of oneself and others in the dancers' movements. The performance is considered “high quality,” with part of its strength being proven by the minimal design as all the performance requires. The shade of gray used in the uniform is perceived as “the color of death and silence, but in a quiet way.” Yet, while death and reminders of it are often connotated with sadness, this is not the case for *Motus Mori*. Instead, the living archive of movement and the way it reminds us of our own mortality is considered impressive, touching, and simply beautiful. Feelings of calmness, happiness, compassion, trust, and humbleness come up frequently. **But which of these movements are particularly touching?** This question prompted almost everyone to imitate the dancer's movement in front of us. We drew a quick sketch of our interpretation of the movement, and asked the interviewee to confirm if this represented the movement they had described. The rare moments of interaction between the dancers are then mentioned several times. One person explains how touched she was by the moment in which two dancers are sitting on a bench, with one of them facing the other direction and slowly lowering their upper body to lie down, until their head reaches the extended hand of the other dancer. For her, this motion showed complete trust and surrender.

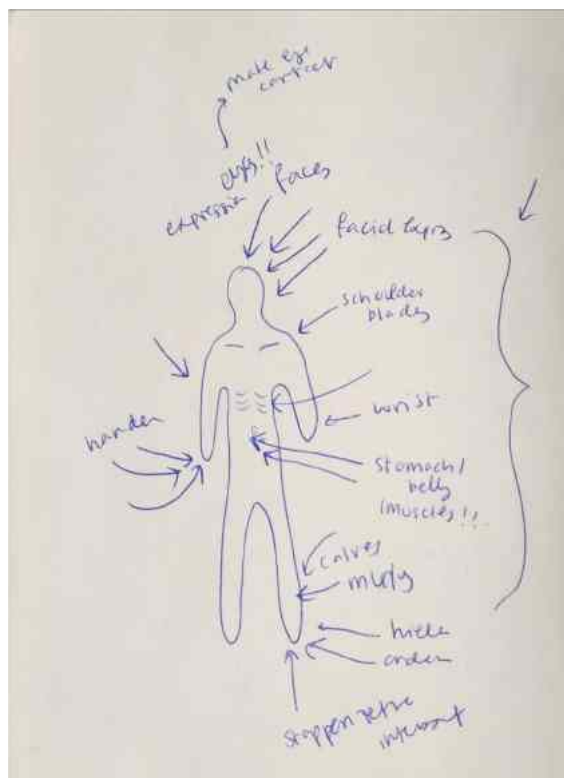
Left: Histogram of the time visitors spent at the performance. Photo and Graph: Emma Krick.

Right: Movements that the visitors found the most touching or remarkable. Photo and Drawings: Emma Krick

to another human being. This encouraged her to open up and show more vulnerability within her own life. Another visitor was also especially touched by the interactions between the dancers, because as a human being, "of course I like it when humans do things together."

However, in a world of social media and beauty standards where bodies are under constant scrutiny, even neutral nudity can feel vulnerable. **What happens when you are invited to look at bare bodies and their movements in detail?** To explore this, we mapped out what parts of the dancers' bodies the visitors looked at the most or felt most comfortable looking at. One person explains how the dancers' nudity made looking into their eyes feel uncomfortable for her, as this reinforced her impression of feeling like a voyeur. One person considers the female dancers' exposed breasts too confronting. Yet, in line with the artists' vision, most visitors perceive the nudity as essential for this piece, as it allows to see every muscle and puts full attention to the bodies and their movements. For Heitmann and the dancers, the bare bodies are crucial to maintain neutrality and unity, and covering the women's upper body would emphasize the breast even more. The uniformity is appreciated because it creates a slight separation between the dancers and the spectators. One visitor describes this as "intimate but distant:" while the setting feels vulnerable, the dancers never make eye contact. Others feel connected to the performance, but not to the individual dancers. Another person likens the dancers to living statues, with their stoic beauty and elegance.

**What does all of this then mean to the visitors?** While some find the performance hard to grasp, most describe significant takeaways. One of these is the awareness of the importance of these unique human movements, a concept that many people had never really thought about before. As we are all facing mortality, *Motus Mori* helps people to realise how memories of mundane movements can help keep a person alive. Inspired by this, one visitor told us she would now start paying much more attention to the way in which her elderly mother moves. This tendency of everyone having individual and unique ways of using their bodies then unites humanity, by prompting us to look out for another.



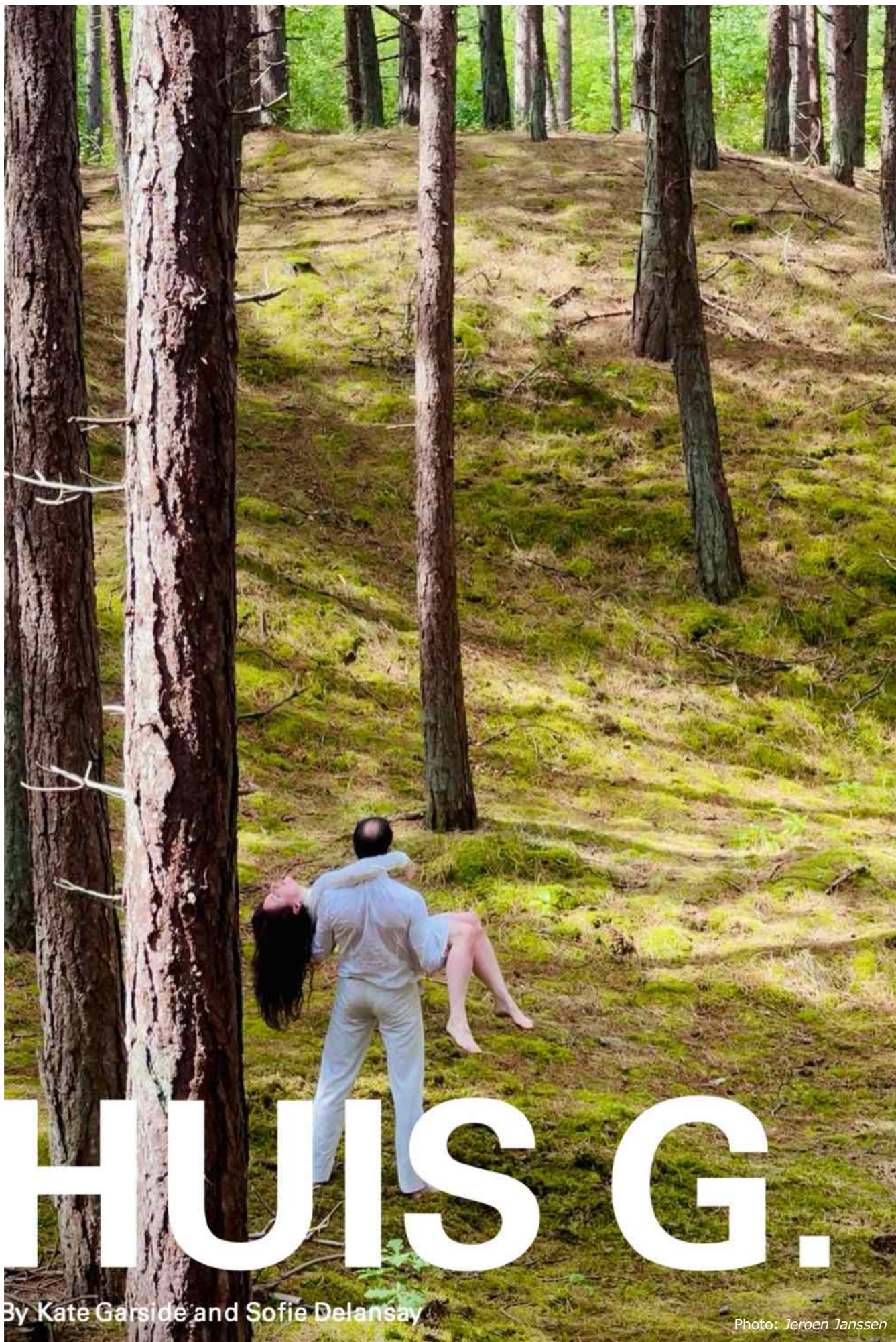
Map of which body parts people felt most comfortable looking at. Photo and drawing: Emma Krick

***We are all trying to collect things, but what we collect is not as valuable. We are collecting the wrong things, such as pictures, which causes us to miss the moment.***

*Visitor of the Motus Mori Museum*

Overall, the *Motus Mori Museum* provokes deep questions about memory and mortality, as well as human uniqueness and community. The living archive of human motion in the dancers' bodies emphasizes the beauty of everyday movements. Through this preservation of mundane gestures, the performance invites us to look at each other with much more attention. The performance leaves a lasting impact by challenging the audience to rethink what is worth remembering and inspiring a greater appreciation for the often-overlooked details of daily life.

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# HUIS G.

By Kate Garside and Sofie Delansay

Photo: Jeroen Janssen

# THE ART

## What is it?

*Huis G.* by Via Berlin is a breathtaking performance which seeks to expose the intricate dynamics of a relationship which blurs the lines between love and violence. When asked why it is called *Huis G.*, Dagmar Slagmolen, co-founder of Via Berlin and one of the main performers, explains that it is a reference to 'huiselijk geweld' which in English means 'domestic violence'. Moreover, she explains that it also refers to how people sometimes talk about their neighbors house, such as 'Flat A' or 'Flat C', or even how criminals are called out in the media while trying to keep some anonymity, so they shorten the last name to a singular letter. The performance itself is described by Slagmolen as an **"intense, sensual thriller that goes under your skin for days"**. The complex love story portrayed is experienced by each audience member in their own way based on what they have been exposed to in their life and the knowledge they already have on the topic. The story itself is conveyed through two performers, Dagmar Slagmolen and Laurent Delom de Mézerac, who wordlessly draw the audience in with their movements, expressions, and actions. This is simultaneously interwoven with the environment of the woods around them and live music which is improvised, save a few cues, by Remco Menting and Romain Blij. All together, this creates a strikingly moving piece on intimate partner violence (IPV) which incorporates contemporary dance, theatre, and music.



Figure 2: photo by Sofie Delansay.

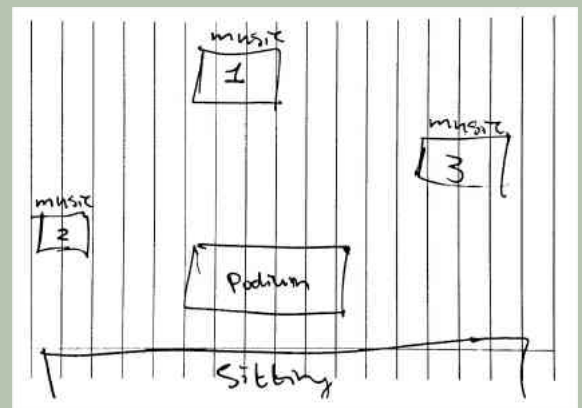


Figure 3: drawing by Sofie Delansay.

## The setting

The performance is set deep in the woods of Terschelling in an area near the lake Meertje van Hee that has many hills and is filled with high slender trees. To get to the location of the stage, the audience first has to walk approximately 15 minutes through the hilly woods (see Figure 2) while wearing headphones through which they can already hear the live music of the performance starting. When arriving at the location of the performance, the audience is directed to the seating area which is on an incline of a grassy hill. The stage is right in front of this, situated at the lowest point of the valley, as depicted in Figure 3. Overall, the performers use the entire area in front of the audience, though there is one main podium which takes the shape of a large wooden grey block and appears simple, but has many different moveable blocks on it which cover openings that are used by the performers to develop the storyline (see Figure 4). Behind the stage, on the once again inclining hill, there are three music stages that are evenly distributed over the width of the area at different heights on the hill.



Figure 4: photo by Sofie Delansay.



Figure 5: photo by *Sofie Delansay*.

Figure 6: photo by *Nichon Glerum*.



Throughout the performance, the man lures the woman back into the relationship repeatedly, and she feels herself getting drawn back in and getting trapped, unable to get away no matter the pain and violence she experiences. This is shown in a scene when the man plays around with a large box, balancing it on its edge and tumbling it over the stage, all the while the woman is inside (see Figure 7), trying to escape sometimes but fails as he pushes her back in. Another example of this violence occurs when the woman is standing in the middle of the podium, dressed fully in black just as the man had been already for a few scenes. The audience sees how the woman's head and later on her entire body is swung in all directions, seemingly being hit repeatedly. This is emphasized even more when the man comes up through the holes in the podium and slams down the pieces of wood that covered them, after which every time the woman's body is again swung in all directions. The performance ends with the man trapping her in a large see-through plastic tarp, the same as the one at the start, and suffocating her in this by twisting her body into it until she cannot move anymore. Finally, she lays wrapped in this plastic on his legs (see Figure 8), and he pushes her into one of the holes in the podium. The music that is heard through these phases varies, sounding happy and cheerful around the start and when there are moments of hope. However, this changes into fear inducing music with for example loud drums during the violent scenes.

### The different phases of the performance

The entirety of *Huis G.* lasts about 95 minutes, including the walk through the forest to the stage. During this walk at the start, the audience is silent whilst listening through headphones to eerie sounding music. This music includes a range of sounds from wind gusts, to static and slow elongated trumpet sounds, and distorted nature sounds, that constantly change in tempo from fast to really slow. The performance is split up into different phases which each intertwine aspects of love and violence, and with each consecutive phase the aggression and intensity between the two portrayed characters increases. At the start, Slagmolen is seen creeping onto the stage under a large see-through plastic tarp (see Figure 5) wearing nude-colored clothing, after which Delom de Mézerac comes up over the back of the hill wearing a white suit. Following this, the audience experiences the start of the character's relationship and infatuation for each other as they meet and make love, showing a side of the relationship that seems loving and hopeful (see Figure 6). However, the phases that follow are infused with clear power plays between the characters that are portrayed through intense moments of hesitancy, uncertainty, danger, and fear, almost as if walking on eggshells.

Figure 7: photo by *Nichon Glerum*.



Figure 8: photo by *Nichon Glerum*.

# THE ARTIST

## Who are the artists?

*Huis G.* is a piece created by the theatre company Via Berlin, founded in 2008 by Dagmar Slagmolen and Rosa Arnold [2]. With a background in dance, theatre and music, Slagmolen along with dancer Laurent Delom de Mézerac convey an evocative, moving performance which brings awareness to domestic violence [3]. *Huis G.* is also made possible through the essential music improvisation by Remco Menting and Romain Blij and work of choreographer Pim Vuelings [1].

## Why this issue and why this way?

In our interview with Slagmolen, she expressed her passion for using music and theatre to convey social messages. The name Via Berlin originated through Slagmolen and Arnold's creation of a plan in Berlin, Germany to deliver a unique form of musical theatre which combines classical theatre, music and self written text [2]. Following the formation of Via Berlin, Slagmolen founded the Via Berlin Academy, which focuses on arts based research, working to understand how differing perspectives on varying social issues can be effectively conveyed to a wider audience [2]. Working together with educational institutions, theatres and student scientists, these companies aim to



Figure 9: photo by Nichon Glerum.



Figure 10: photo by Kate Garside.

emphasise and investigate the connection between science, society and art [2]. *Huis G.* falls in line with this, being part of a larger research programme investigating the complicated relationships relating to intimate partner violence from the bystander perspective [3]. Slagmolen expressed to us how the issues of intimate terror, intimate partner violence, coercive abuse and femicide are not discussed enough in the Netherlands. She asks - "how can the performance be the starting point of the conversation?" Performing live, she stated, is much more



effective in evoking emotion and conveying a message to the audience than through providing something to read, or raising awareness through TV or radio. Via Berlin made the deliberate choice of a text-less performance. Text, Slagmolen noted, entails more cognitive action - it invites the audience to think, to wonder whether they agree or disagree to what is being said. Alternatively, music is better able to convey the emotional weight and atmosphere of the piece. **“Music is about emotion, and it going to your stomach”** Slagmolen told us. The decision to make the music improvised added an element of unpredictability, entailing

that the performers must constantly be aware and alert - **“you can’t go on automatic”** said Slagmolen. Not only does this represent the inherently unstable and uncertain dynamic of the relationship we saw as audience members, but also helped Slagmolen and Delom de Mézerac further embody the characters they were portraying. The musicians themselves are notably part of the performance. This is in part due to how their instruments are situated across the forest grounds, but also due to their engagement with their

instruments and the stage. Slagmolen expressed this to also be deliberate, as the music is a central element of the entire narrative.

### Why Oerol?

For Slagmolen, Oerol is not just a venue but a beloved space that amplifies the essence of *Huis G*. - **“It is amazing what an outside location can do, [...] you can create a completely different world”**. The natural space on Terschelling offers a unique and complementary backdrop for this performance. The forest setting provides a fairy tale atmosphere, both beautiful and charming, but also characterised by an underlying sense of danger. This mirrors the oscillation between love and violence conveyed by the performers. Natural elements like the sun, wind and rain enhance the story and emotional evocation, providing powerful visuals, which at times match and amplify the scene. The utilisation of the elevated hills and forest floor surrounding the stage helps immerse the audience in the performance, feeling as though they are witnessing an entire world created by the artists. When asked which performance space she prefers, Slagmolen expressed, **“if I had to choose, forever Oerol and nothing else”**.



Figure 11: photo by Nichon Glerum.



Figure 12: photo by Kate Garside.

# THE AUDIENCE

## Who attended?

*Huis G.* is a paid performance, attended by Oerol festival-goers who had purchased a ticket. Many in the audience expressed that Via Berlin is one of their favourite artists, having seen them multiple times over their many years of attending Oerol.

## Audience experiences

By conducting both in-person interviews and an online survey allowed us to gauge the audiences' experience of *Huis G.*

Prior to the performance, most of the audience was feeling calm and curious, or eagerly waiting in anticipation to see this year's piece by Via Berlin. Generally, after the performance, audience members were feeling moved, serious and felt that they needed time to process and reflect on what they had experienced during the performance.

Most of the audience perceived the performance to represent a violent relationship with elements of both love and hate, however some expressed more explicit themes present in the performance/goals of the performance. For example, one audience member highlighted the message of male suppression, another discussed the representation of narcissistic personalities, and one other explicitly mentioned domestic violence. Furthermore, some audience members expressed alternative interpretations, such as fighting for connection and a representation of humanity. Overall, they felt this was a realistic and convincing representation of intimate partner violence and the associated relationship dynamic.

Generally people understood the man as the main aggressor, however there was significant discussion surrounding notions of the characters loving and hating each other, as well as the interplay between attachment and withdrawal that they both contribute to. **"It is a dance between them"**, stated one audience member, and **"look how she's running into the fire every time again"** stated another. Conversely, one audience member expressed that to them **"it didn't feel [...] like aggression but like they are afraid to touch their own feelings"**. For them, the performance conveyed moreso a display of a relational dynamic as opposed to aggression.

Figure 13: photo by Kate Garside.



Figure 14: photo by Kate Garside.

Understandings of aggression, love and hate, were in part realised through the symbolism employed throughout the performance. For example, changing from white to black (both performers) symbolised the aggressors, or using drums in the music. Interestingly, one member identified the moment the performers were drawn to each other and kissed as a tipping point towards a dangerous relationship. Her “refusal of his advances” and pushing him from the podium also were identified as moves from love to violence. Besides that, audience members perceived the wooden panels that got slammed onto the podium as portraying violence, and the red lipstick the woman put on that got smeared over her face as blood, which also linked to the siren sounding music in that scene.

In relation to the bystander effect, we asked the audience the question - “did you feel like you wanted to intervene at any point of the performance?”. While some said no, others expressed they did feel the need to at particularly intense parts of the performance, for example towards the end where there were more explicit images of physical abuse. Another said that while they didn’t feel they needed to intervene in the performance, in real life they would definitely do so.

In terms of critiques of the performance, one audience member felt that due to the repeated interplay between aggressors, the overall tension was lost as she felt there was no evolution and she was no longer surprised. Additionally, one audience member personally felt that the facial expressions of the performers were too overwhelming in combination with the physical movements.

However, there was also an abundance of positivity about the performance, some even stating that it was “**the best show on Oerol**” or even “**the best [they’ve] ever seen**”. Furthermore, there was much positive feedback as well regarding the natural forest setting of the performance. “**Plus plus plus**” expressed one audience member, reflecting the general consensus that the performance integrated the natural environment seamlessly. The utilisation of the differing elevations of the forest ground by both the performers and musicians created different ambiances interconnecting with the related scenes. One audience member noted how “**the music sounded amazing in the forest**”, and another expressed they felt the musicians also used the forest as an inspiration for their music.



Figure 15: photo by Kate Garside.

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# ZOMBIE

Leo Farrell, Sterre Schimmel, Ferdinand Rocher

*Photo by Ferdinand*

Werkplaats van de  
Woestijne

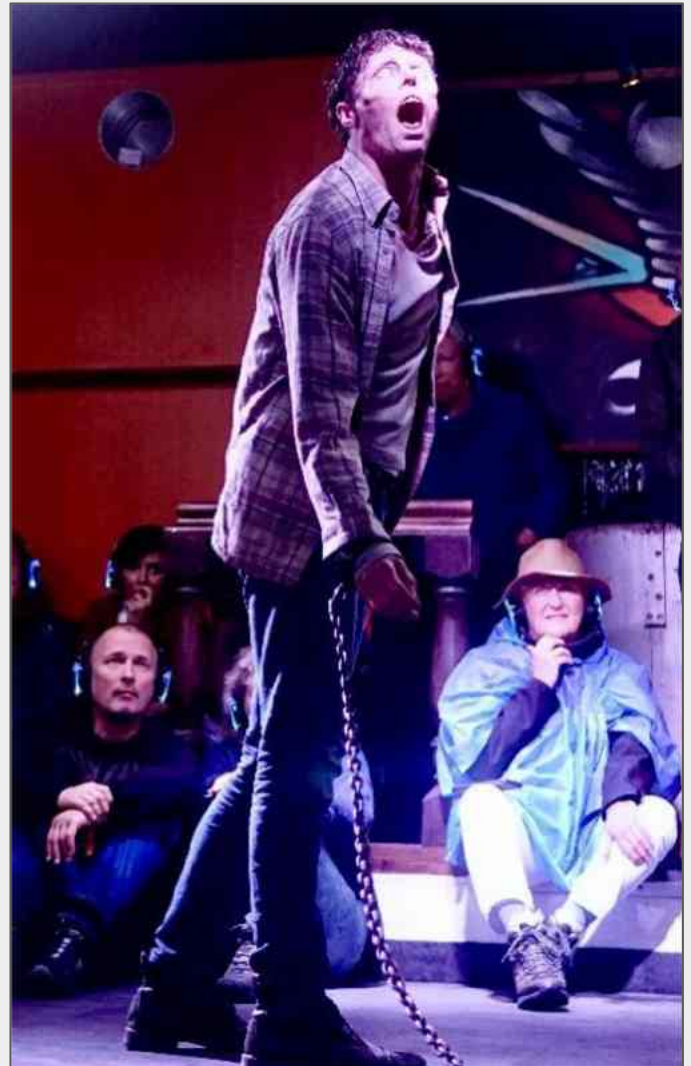
## Alive and chained :

### *An intense live street-performance of Zombie*

Photo by Ferdinand

Arriving on location we are immediately given a pair of wirelessly connected headphones which spills into our ears a ominous hum of music, seemingly straight out of a horror flick. It takes a few more seconds to notice the centerpiece, a man lying still, chained in the center of the scene, is he breathing ? Is he real ? It is difficult to distinctly see any facial features from where we are standing. The performer, dressed in an unassuming green shirt, checkered flannel, jeans, and shoes, initially appears as an ordinary man. If you look closely, however, his eyes are yellow, his teeth black and yellow, his vein popping. We see it better now, it is a Zombie chained to the ground. The crowd feels uneasy by the combination of music and odd looking man chained in front of them, the audience shifting nervously on their feet in anticipation.

This tension varies depending when and where this performance is performed. *Zombie* is generally performed in a open space, in a town square or in front of a village cemetery where a large crowd of a 100 or so audience members gather around the "dead man". In less forgiving weather however it may take place in a large room, in which case the closer proximity of audience members to the dead man adds to their unease. With the Brandaris standing tall behind us, seemingly touching the graying sky. Or outside the church in the middle of Midspan, with the looming presence of the graveyard behind you. Or inside the Stoep, while the rain is hurrying everyone inside for shelter. A solemn monologue suddenly begins to play. "I have chained myself in fear of what I will become" it says. "I hope you hear this" the monologue continues, as it mentions a longing for life "to breath and to smell", "I need to dance, I need your body against mine." The voice continues, speaking about loneliness and the need for warmth and human interaction, the tone is set. As soon as the monologue ends the man begins to twitch, followed by gradually increasing foul sounds coming from his mouth. A microphone attached close to the man's face is evidently connected to our headsets as we hear the sounds with uncomfortable clarity. The intensity of his movements start to increase as he turns to crawl towards the audience who can now better observe his sunken facial structures, bloodied face, decayed teeth and yellowed eyes.



The Zombie struggles to crawl around his environment, coming in arms reach of the audience members, he reminds us of a young child trying to make sense of his unfamiliar surroundings. As he clumsily pulls himself around with the strength of his arms, his uncoordinated legs follow. His chains continue to drag behind him as he hisses and growls at the onlookers. Nervous laughter begins to fill the crowd as some move away from the creatures grasp, others remain serious and concentrated, fearless. The Zombie suddenly stands up, struggling to balance himself he takes his first steps. His jaw wide open, he continues to hiss, twitch and lurch towards the audience members, barely managing to coordinate his body in a functional way, as his vision is not yet restored. The creature slowly becomes more aggressive as his growls, becomes louder and his movements turn desperate.

He begins to launch himself at the audience, only stopped by the chains holding him tethered to the center. Spit flies out of his mouth as he blindly tries and “grab” members of the crowd, now moving back to escape his reach. At the climax of his angered movements, a song begins to play, slowly driving his movements into a rhythmic dance. The Zombie begins to dance, his arms and legs clumsily moving along with the music. After a while the Zombie weakens, coughing and belching, his dancing slows to a halt. Falling to the ground, the dancing is replaced by horrid moans as he struggles against an invisible pain. A new monologue begins to play as the Zombie suddenly calms down to an eerie stillness, looking around as if in need of help. “I need you” the monologue begins to say, “come closer, come closer, come closer...”. The voice begs, pleading for human warmth and comfort. “Tell me it will all be okay”, “Tell me you will remember me” it adds. Some of the crowd hear the plead, joining the poor creature to hold him as he slowly dies, seizing at their feet as the rest of the audience look on with pity and empathy.

### **The specifics**

From an audience member's perspective, the performance is clearly structured into various stages that make up a total of 15 minutes. The first stage, with a more horror-like feel, sees the rise and development of the Zombie's behaviour. The second, more emotional, sees a humanisation of the Zombie as well as his “death”. The two monologues help set the tone and theme of the performance, as well as introducing it to the audience immersively.

But what is the performance really about? *Zombie* is advertised as a reflective performance. The performance presents the Zombie as a reflection of ourselves and the common thread that connects all beings, the desire to live. Through the idea of a live Zombie the artists attempted to create a performance which would indulge the audience in death and its meaning on a deeper level. Apart from a brief description online however, much of the performance is otherwise left to audience interpretation.



*Photo by Ferdinand*



*Photo by Ferdinand*

## The Artist

### *Delving into the question of life and death*

**Bart de Woestijne** is an artist and theatermaker from the Netherlands who delves into questions surrounding life's deeper subjects, namely the fear of death through physiological and confronting performances. Bart seeks to submerge his audience in these heavy topics through his work, which he likes to organize within societies themselves rather than the black box of a theater. His art goes under the name of his company, Werkplaats van de Woestijne which has organized many productions over the years at festivals such as Festival Cement, Over het IJ Festival and Oreol. The principal people behind *Zombie* were Baart de Woestijne and Maarten Bos, the creative minds behind the project, his husband Anton van der Sluis, the actor of the performance and Rebecca van Stam, the makeup artist behind the *Zombie*'s riveting facade who has previously worked on notable TV series. Creating *Zombie* in 2020 during covid, Bart quickly chose to collaborate with his husband Anton due to his specializations in physical performance in theater and dance. Bart and Maarten originally created *Zombie* through the idea of creating a live *Zombie*, as Baart described : "most projects start in my head, and then as others add to it, it grows into something much bigger". From the idea of a live *Zombie* the artists created a performance which would indulge the audience in death and its meaning on a deeper level whilst at the same time structured around a lot of improvisation on the part of the actor.: "We use checkpoints and audio cues to divide the sections " explained the actor. Street theater was chosen for confronting this subject as it brings people who might not attend conventional theater together around a performance set directly in society, thus tapping into spectators from all walks of life. Additionally, this enables audience members to have the option to walk away at any time, as *Zombie* is aimed towards fostering discomfort. ►

\* Top right photo : Interview of Artist and director, Bart de Woestijne. Bottom left : Bart de Woestijne and Anton van der Sluis, who performed as the *Zombie*.



Photo by Ferdinand



Photo by Ferdinand



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As for the *Zombie* itself, Bart judged it to be an attractive vessel to speak about death through death itself. The mystery of a *Zombie*, chained to the ground in the middle of a busy street is a method to lure the crowd in order to “hide or disguise the deeper meaning” as Bart put it. Furthermore, humanity and reconnection could be conveyed poetically through this monster, as the *Zombie* represents our fear of death, exemplifying what an empty shell seeking life would look like. The feverish growls and snarls made by the *Zombie* also add to this aspect as well as the unsettling and painful wails in the last parts of the show. In order to touch spectators as much as possible, the artists derived the *Zombie*’s expressions from real recordings of individuals in their final moments

The *Zombie*’s lack of speech, also is meant to open up more avenues for connection with the audience as the artist tries to play with meaning without conventional cues. The closing and opening monologues of the show were in the form of projected text in earlier renditions of *Zombie* but later Bart opted for a voiced version in order to direct the audience towards a more horror movie-like feel, adding to the sensations of death and sickness.

Bart admitted that his focus on death as a subject of discussion is tied to his own fear of death, as well as how much he feels the discussion of death is avoided within mainstream western society. He emphasized his frustration surrounding our avoidance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where he felt the discussion of death would have been logical and invited.

For Bart, Oreol is a place which holds special value as he has worked with the festival multiple times over his career. In 2016 he held *Voor we Slaap*, a work around imagining one’s own disappearance, on the island. In following years, he collaborated with Oreol for research and the multiple more renditions of his work as part of the festival. “Here the audience is willing to experience something” he explains, spectators at Oreol are there for art in all its forms and do not carry the same elitism and standards which can be displayed by other crowds, such as in Amsterdam where spectators sometimes emanate an “impress me” attitude. As Bart describes, the Oreol audience doesn’t have to be put in the right mindset to feel art, everyone here gets it and wants as much as they can get. ►



# Horror and humanity

## *How did the audience react?*

It is not fun to see a gurgling semi-dead man crawl toward you while maintaining strict eye contact, as the audience discovered during the many renditions of the performance. As a street performance located in easily accessible locations, the show was attended by a broad range of spectators. We found little girls hiding from the rain in the cafe, experienced Oerol goers travelling specifically for this performance, and innocent bystanders who got roped in by the loud music from the speakers. All had different experiences and takeaways from the performance. To understand the impact, we conducted a series of post-performance interviews. Additionally, we observed reactions and interactions during the performance.



*Drawing made by Emma Krick during the performance in Midsland*

### **Compassion**

Despite the grotesque appearance of the Zombie, coupled with the unsettling sounds emerging from him and the background track, the performance was fundamentally about compassion. The monologues begged for the audience's warmth, for them to come closer, urging them to step outside of their safe circle, to lend him a helping hand. A significant moment was when a woman stepped forward during the performance under the Brandaris, attempting to touch and comfort the Zombie. Although he backed away, this interaction highlighted the human desire to connect and to soothe his loneliness, even in the face of fear. This interaction also happened outside the graveyard in Midsland, where a woman kept yelling "*Stil maar, zachtjes, rustig maar,*" or "Hush, gently, be calm," illustrating her compassion toward a scary creature. This is also illustrated during the dancing part of the performance, as most people start dancing with him via head-bopping,

which abruptly stops as he starts throwing up. As a couple, who stumbled into the cafe with no preconceived notion of the play, described it, it left audience members "with feelings of pity and sadness towards the character."

### **Empathy**

To take action in relieving one's pain, one must first recognise the other to be in pain. Thus, not only, compassion, but also the necessity of empathy was the underlying message of "Zombie", even in the most horrifying circumstances. The performance asked, "Don't you hear his struggling breath? Don't you see his decay?" By the end, many audience members reached out to the performer, to the Zombie, speaking soothing words to him like "It will be okay, you can let go now," the words that boomed through the speakers, repeated by whoever felt compelled to say those out loud.

### **Challenging personal boundaries**

The performance also served as a challenge to personal boundaries and resilience. Audience members were confronted with the task of maintaining eye contact with the unsettling Zombie. To subdue this tension, some participants took to the avoidance tactic via a hat, or simply by looking away from the Zombie. One older lady noted that she could only look at him for a certain amount of time, after which she had to calm herself down by looking away. Others used laughter as a coping mechanism, especially during the first classic horror part where the Zombie is trying to break loose from the chains. One the audience members mentioned how the Zombie died at their feet at the end of the performance, describing it as "stomach-turning." Another participant shared their disgust as she felt his "slimy and oily," body. ►



Photos by Ferdinand

### Respect

During heavy plays such as this one, the line between the actor and the character they play can become blurred. This is showcased as one lady came up to the performer and spoke to him in a baby voice: "you are so sweet, yes, this is so soft" as she touched his shirt, losing sight of the real man behind the prosthetics. She later clarified that this was because of her job, a touch therapist, and that she wanted to touch his warm heart. On the other hand, some people felt the need to pay the performer by dropping loose coins into his pocket square, showing their respect by acknowledgement of the emotional labour and intensity of the performance.

### Interpretations

By creating an interpretive piece of art, one opens the floor to the creative comparisons the audience makes. It was made during covid, so loneliness was a big theme throughout the performance. One audience member interpreted this as the embodiment of the loneliness experienced in Russian prisons. The audience recognized the build of of the show and divided it into three main parts. Firstly, they described the intense pain of the Zombie, which in the second part became milder. In the third part, vulnerability was the main theme, though the pain never subsided. Sometimes, major themes can also get lost however, illustrated by one gentleman exclaiming "was he dead then?" when trying to explain the plot to him.

### Vulnerability and fear

The initial reactions of the audience were rooted in fear and unease. The appearance of the Zombie, all becoming real as he started moving, elicited strong physical responses from the audience. One little girl, in an anxiety-induced fit of laughter, threw off her headphones and hid behind her mom and dad, together with her older brother. The one word the 9-year-old little girl would use for this performance is *bijzonder*, special. She mostly compared it to her favorite movie: The Maze Runner, as she showed pictures of The Flare taking over these fictional personas. As she was asked about the deeper meaning of this performance, she noted the fear she saw, which she interpreted as a fear of losing himself. To her, the reason why the Zombie chained himself was fear of hurting others. In the end, she just saw his vulnerability and her desire to hug him, to comfort him. Vulnerability was a red thread for most audience members. One older foursome noted the repelling nature of the Zombie, but also the connection and love they saw in him. Jokingly, they finished the interview with:

“ now we're going to look for something light-hearted, you know! ”



Finally, because the set-up of the performance was the same each time, even in the different environments, certain patterns in the audience can be deduced. Around the Zombie located in the middle, three layers of the audience can be noted. In the closest layer, the audience sits silently, clearly scared. This is where the Zombie gets the most intimate, making direct eye contact with the audience members. These individuals experience the performance most intensely, fully immersed. The second layer consists of cautious spectator, mostly standing. They whisper to their neighbors, likely wearing headphones, fully engaged but maintaining a slight distance from the direct intensity of the front row. In the third layer, you find the headphoneless bystanders, usually confused and talking loudly, drawn into the performance without prior intentions. These different layers highlights the diverse impact *Zombie h* on its varied audience.

A photograph showing two individuals in costumes made of long, hanging strips of plastic. The person on the left has a costume made of grey and black strips, while the person on the right has a costume made of white and black strips. They are walking on a paved area in front of a wooden structure. Other people are visible in the background, some wearing rain gear. The sky is overcast.

# Queer Monsters

## Daan Colijn

By Ami Matsushima and Pradyumn Arora

# THE ART



Picture: Oerol

On the 8th of June, Oerol had the honor to welcome the first ever performance of Queer Monsters. Three Queer Monsters appeared one by one from next to the main stage, then roamed around the main festival area in search of connections with each other and with the audience members.

Queer Monsters is a street theater performance created and directed by Daan Colijn. The description on the Oerol website suggests that the performance explores different possible forms of intimacy in different settings. From our interview with the artists we also gathered their intention to bring queer identity to the forefront in certain spaces where the audience may be unfamiliar with queer identities such as Oerol, a festival that is traditionally not very queer and draws “older people” (Colijn et al., 2024).

***“Bringing queerness to a community or to people who are not necessarily getting close to that on a daily basis.”*** Daan Colijn

The performance itself lasts approximately 30 minutes and it features three ‘monsters’ that roam around their environment to showcase different types of interactions.

***“What I wanted to do with Queer Monsters is to create three life forms that are fluid, [...] that showcase the cuteness and the fun of being queer, but also showcasing sexuality”*** Daan Colijn

Indeed, the monsters are ambiguous in themselves as they are both “cute” and weird, while also showcasing rough sexual intercourse as well as intimate interactions between themselves. Additionally, the monsters interact with the audience members by approaching them and making sounds. The three performers are invisible and anonymous to the audience members since they are wearing large fabric costumes. Only their legs, which have bright spikes on them, are visible to the public.



Photography of two Queer Monsters facing each other  
Photo: Ami Matsushima

the show, they have allowed themselves to be free and be able to interact with each other, as well as with audience members in a different way. As such, the performance does not have one clear consistent message that it wants to convey. Each iteration largely varies from each other and may be interpreted in different ways. During Oerol, Queer Monsters took place in 3 different locations, from which we got to see 2. During the performance at the main festival area, *De Deining: de Valleij*, the audience interacted a lot with the monsters who were easily approaching festival-goers as they were having a drink or simply observing them as they were roaming around the area. In the drizzling rain, the three monsters continued their journey and exploration individually, until they all gathered and started to showcase some behaviors and noises alluding to sexual intercourse. Contrastingly, the performance in *Midsland*, which took place indoors due to bad weather conditions, offered a more restrictive environment for the monsters to interact with the audience members who were mostly sitting on the floor or standing still. As such, all performances had different dynamics and 'ending' which showcases the role played by improvisation.

All three monsters have different shapes. Two monsters seem to evoke human genitalia given their resemblance to a penis and a vulva, while the last one seems less easy to associate with a known genitalia. Yet, even the monsters that look like human genitalia at first sight, are not so easy to describe. Indeed, the monsters embody fluidity, thus they are not meant to be easily associated with known shapes. For example, the one monster that resembles the most a vulva is not so simple since it also has other features that may evoke a different genitalia. From our interview with Daan Colijn we gathered that such an outcome of having two monsters looking like identifiable human genitalia was not intentional. Indeed, their process of creating costumes for monsters that could keep some degree of fluidity and ambiguity, resulted in the creation of two monsters that look like human genitalia. The flexible structure of the performance allows for the three performers to adapt to different settings and situations. Indeed, there is an artistic decision not to have the performances fully scripted. Although they have some general idea about the direction of



Illustration of the three Queer Monsters Drawing: Ami Matsushima

# THE ARTISTS



From left to right: Pradyumn Arora, Daan Colijn, Roos Benjamins, Lana van der Burg and Ami Matsushima Photo: Oerol Volunteer

This project has been curated as an immersive street theater show by Daan Colijn, who is a queer theater artist from Amsterdam. In conversation with Daan, we learn that his projects, like that of Queer Monsters, try to create fictional “fantasy” like worlds that take elements from the real environment around us. Aside from being a theater director and performer, Daan runs an online blog with his partner to showcase the life of a queer couple and often tries to relate elements of queer life to his curations as well.

For this performance, Daan is joined by Lana van der Burg and Roos Benjamins. Lana is an artistic creator, choreographer and drag performer. She uses her art form to express themes of one’s identity and its relation to human society.

While doing so, she creates a platform for self-exploration and social habituation. Roos is also a theater maker and performer. Themes of queer love, connection and ecocentrism can be often seen in her work. She tries to create imaginary and sensory experiences with her work owing to her songwriting background. Roos and Lana, being queer performers and wanting to immerse themselves in street theater joined Daan for this project as it felt like a good avenue to express their artistic selves.

Back in 2009, when Daan had just started out in the world of theater, his first gig was at Oerol. During that period, subjects concerning the queer community did not really have a space considering the lack of audience and the social taboo surrounding those topics. Fast forward to the present times, there is much more queer art reflecting the growing acceptance of such subjects in society and the need for safe queer spaces.



Photography of two Queer Monsters interacting with each other during a performance at the beach Photo: Queer Monsters via Instagram



Photo: *Queer Monsters* screenshot via Instagram

Oerol as a festival has been getting more inclusive towards the queer community over the years. In fact, this year the program website had a specific filter called “queer and free” for performances dealing with subjects of concern to the queer community and were thus trying to cater towards the needs of the queer people visiting Oerol. Daan saw this new wave of queer art and Oerol’s push for more of such performances as a welcoming sign to have such a show at the festival. Aligning with these developments and his previous connection to Oerol, Daan decided that Terschelling was the best place to debut this immersive theater experience. Another factor that made Oerol as the ideal location to debut this artwork was the safety of it. Being in the setting a festival, the security cover assures the artists that their physical boundaries will not be violated.

Daan describes the queer monsters as a vision seen of the queer community itself. The monsters themselves are three life forms meant to be fluid, but the artist using the monsters tries to communicate the behavior of the members of the queer within itself and its interaction to the broader population.

***“The audience sees us as cute little monsters who do pride...its gay and fun, I wanted to showcase that it is cute, but things like rough sex also exist... that there are other sides.”*** Daan Colijn

This serves as the main message of the performance which is trying to show the different sides of being queer, and how sexuality and queerness can be explored. Daan further expresses his passion for this project by reflecting on the need to showcase the unseen side of the community as well.

It also reflects the way that the general population perceives the queer community and how they are often considered different from the normalcy. Showing the creatures as fluid monsters, therefore, showcases not only the freedom of living differently but also the risk of it and how often the community faces a certain amount of discrimination.

This issue was chosen to be communicated in this way because of the room it gives to the performers and the audience. The queer monsters are interactive beings, so it is natural for them to be roaming around and interacting with the audience in a street theater performance. Daan curated the concept of queer monsters in such a way so that it is interactive at its core and is at a safe festival location like that of Oerol. It gives the performers space to interact yet allows them to maintain their boundaries and at the same time exposes the audiences to this form of art and issue in a fun way.

# THE AUDIENCE

Our main audience findings come from the indoor performance at De Stroep in Midland. The audience at Midland and at the main festival area shared a few sentiments about the performance – it being confusing and funny. We encountered a lot of laughter, hooting and even some cat calling during the performance. Besides this, some not so sober or heavily involved individuals also tried to imitate the Queer Monsters.

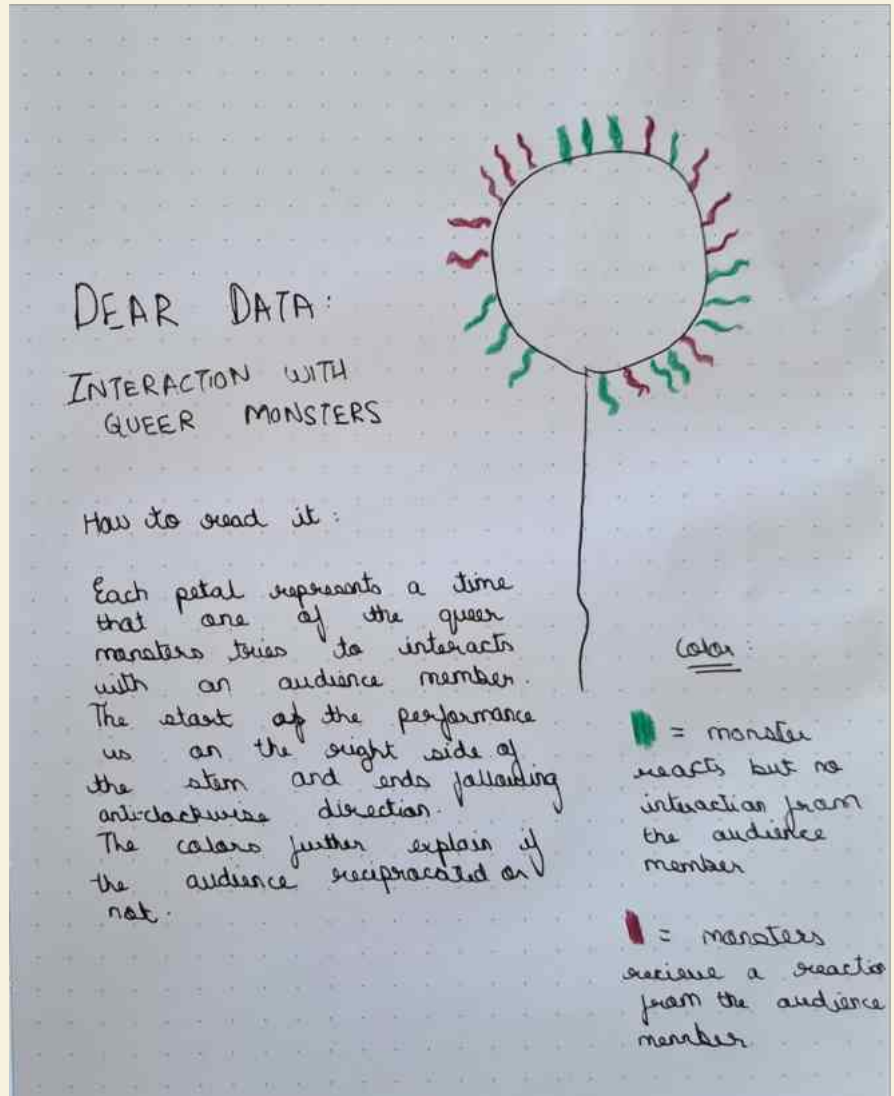
## What were the Queer Monsters doing?

As previously mentioned, the artists wanted this performance to be an interactive show, so they did reach out to the audience by gesturing, making swaying body moves or making high-pitched noises towards them. The Queer Monsters were behaving and acting in a way a cute animal would be approaching humans, trying to rub against them or offering their heads to be caressed.

## How did the audience members react?

We wanted to see how audience members react to these advances made by the performers. To do so,

we used the “Dear Data” method developed by Georgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec (2016). As shown in our drawing, we collected the amount of interactions between one of the Queer Monsters and the audience members at Midland. Our findings suggested that in the recorded 24 times that one of the monsters reached out to the audience members, they received a reaction 11 times and the rest were just blank faces or uninterested audience members. Before the performance, we were able to ask a few individuals about their intentions in regard to viewing this performance. They were mostly concerned about



Drawing of the interactions between the Queer Monsters and the audience members during the Midland performance Drawing: Pradyumn Arora inspired from Georgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec's Dear Data project

finding a place indoors to stay protected from the rain, but apart from that, they were excited to see and discover what Queer Monsters was about. After the performance, we asked several of the audience members to give us a one-word review of the performance. “Strange,” “Unique” and “Free” were words that came up more than once. These words were accompanied by similar words like absurd, amusing, surprising and unknown, while some other words resonated more with the message – sexuality, queer and sensual. All these words were assembled into a word cloud to showcase the review gathered from the audience members.





Word Cloud of the audience members being asked to describe the performance in one word Word Cloud: *Ami Matsushima and Pradyumn Arora*

The emotion that the performance was somewhat weird resonated amongst the crowds, that is why they came with the words strange and absurd. “It is confusing” said one of the audience members and they added this was due to the confusing appearance of the monsters. Another audience member said that they did not understand the performance and felt that the issue was not being communicated properly.

Upon further interviewing, many interviewers expressed how the queer monsters represented “having fun” or a sense of “freedom.” One audience member said that the performance was “meant to be weird as that is queerness, which needs to be normalized in the world.” These audience opinions conveyed a message that the viewpoint of the artist

on fluidity and sexuality reached the audience in some forms, but they did not get the subtler themes of relations within the queer community. We say this because none of the interviewed audience members tried to relate it more than its queerness or enjoyability. The general message that the audience received and conveyed to us was that one should express themselves freely and should not be afraid to be themselves. Adding to this notion of acceptance, an audience member said, **“it shows us that we should be open to other cultures and accept differences.”**

A female audience member did mention that one needed to be “open-minded” to get the issue trying to be conveyed the street theater performance. We believed that the lack of spoken word added to the confusion of the audience members viewing the performance, but it also gave room for different interpretations. For instance, the first at the main festival area reminded us of rough sex and the normalized gay hookup culture, which usually involves seeking partners only for sexual intimacy. The second performance did not remind us of that, but another audience member claimed that he got the message of marriage and relationships out of it.

Queer Monsters, therefore stands as a performance that is open to interpretation and is flexible in nature, aligning with the message of fluidity trying to be put through by the artists.



Photography of the performance of the Queer Monsters at Midland on the 10th of June 2024 Photo: *Ami Matsushima*



Photo: Madeleine Svae

## Getting to the Root of the Plantation

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Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de  
Plantation Congolaise (CATPC)



Photo: Madeleine Svae

Written and Researched by: Aoibheann Haugh, Emma van Bakel, Madeleine Svae

# THE ART

Getting to the root of the plantation was a sculpture installation found in the heart of the Formermer forest. The sculptures were placed in a small circular clearing encircled by imposing pine trees that towered over the art and distorted whatever light could reach it. The forest floor had bursts vivid greens from the freshly fallen foliage but became a drab barren brown once the pine needles decayed. Even when it stopped raining, the trees carefully collected raindrops so there was an ever present sensation of mist, accompanied by a rich earthy aroma and subtle scents of cacao.



Photos: Aoibheann Haugh

The exhibition area features two sculptures, positioned one behind the other, a few meters apart. They appear to be hand-moulded from a clay-like material and its chocolatey scent indicates the use of cacao as a key material.

## Racines

The first sculpture, titled *Racines (Roots)*, depicts a figure seemingly trapped beneath sprawling roots that conforms to the body's curves. The body appears to emerge from the ground, blurring the distinction between the human form and the land. The expression on the figure's face conveys a deep harrowing pain, as their expression contorts under the weight of the roots.



Photos: Madeleine Svae

## Crucifixion du Bailleur

The second sculpture, *Crucifixion du Bailleur* (translated as "Crucifixion of the Art Collector" or of "the Landholder") portrays a man dressed in a business suit crucified and tightly wrapped with vines. Despite the torment of the crucifixion, the man bears an almost serene expression of acceptance. At the base of the cross, the vines are secured with a lock. On the back of the cross, one can read the inscription "Roi du Monoculture" - the King of Monoculture.



Photos: Madeleine Svae

Upon first viewing the art, we were particularly taken by the significant difference in the expressions of the figures in the sculptures. There appears to be a divergence in terms of the internal experience of 'pain' described by *Racines* and the *Crucifixion du Bailleur*. This contrast is particularly apparent when you zero in on the figures' faces (as demonstrated in sketches below).

## How do the Artists Interpret the Art?

### Racines

The first sculpture was created by Irene Kanga of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League (CATPC) to represent the harm monoculture inflicts on all different facets of life. Mbuku Kimpala and Jean Kawata, the two artists who represented the CATPC at Oerol, cited an old Congolese saying as forming the core inspiration for the piece - **“if the roots of a tree are bad, the fruits will be bad”**. This phrase offers a powerful critique of monoculture which destroys the fertility of the soil, leading to low crop yields that cannot support local life (Castillo et al., 2022). This piece also speaks to the importance of our historical roots. An alternative interpretation of the art could thus be about recognising the powerful ways in which history shapes the present.



Impression of Racines by *Madeleine Svae*

### Crucifixion du Bailleur

The second sculpture, created by Ced'art Tamasala and Matthieu Kasiama, represents the **bailleur**—a recurring figure in their work symbolising **“those who profit from plantations”**. In this case, it represents William Lever, a founder of Unilever, who extracted palm oil from Congo (CATPC, n.d.).

In this piece, the bailleur has understood the pain he has caused through his monoculture plantations and is seeking “forgiveness” for his sins. He binds himself with lianas, woody vines, from the forest he himself helped destroy. There is a lock preventing the removal of the vines at the base of his feet. This lock can only be opened by the local community if they decide to pardon him.



Impression of Crucifixion du Bailleur by *Madeleine Svae*

Although the figure is specifically depicting William Lever, it also symbolises how the many who continue to profit off of monoculture today may need to bear certain costs if they seek redemption.

The use of the crucifix may also mirror the **theme of “resurrection”**. The artists hope they can resurrect the land and the people back home in Congo through the spread of polyculture.

# THE ARTISTS

## Who are they?

The “Congoese Plantation Workers Art League” (CATPC) is an art collective founded in 2014 in Lusanga, Congo (CATPC, n.d.).

We first had a conversation with Mbuku Kimpala, one of the nine founding members, who told us about her life in Lusanga before the collective. After the tragic passing of her father, Mbuku became the sole supporter of both her children and her studies. However, there are limited employment opportunities in Lusanga with an economy that has historically been dependent on plantation work. Plantation work continues to be a source of employment in Congo but provides little prospects with “men earning \$18 a month on average and women earning \$9”. Mbuku ultimately had to rely on “re-selling plantation crops like peanuts and cassava”. It wasn’t until she discovered “art” that her life was “**completely transformed**”. The transformative potential of art was something later echoed by her colleague, Jean Kawata. By applying their own “creativity” to the previously ‘low-value’ plantation crops, they could create and sell something much more valuable.



Photo: Madeleine Svae

The CATPC have also worked with the Dutch artist and founder of “Human Activities”, Renzo Martens from very early on in their engagement with the art world.



Photo: Aoibheann Haugh (From Left to Right: Mbuku Kimpala & Jeana Kawata)

Martens, who is critical of the inequalities reproduced by the art world, wanted to “not just decolonize museums” but support the “people living on the plantations to be able to decolonize themselves” (Human Activities, n.d.). As a result, he looked to collaborate with local artists like Mbuku and Jean.

## What are they trying to accomplish through their art?

Unfortunately, our discussions with Mbuku and Jean revealed that stories like Mbuku’s are not uncommon in Lusanga. The artists shared that Lusanga has a rich but blood-soaked history that its current inhabitants continue to pay the price for. The town was formerly known as “Leverville” as it was Unilever’s first plantation site in the Belgian Congo. The plantations destroyed the local environment through replacing hectares of land with “monoculture”. Additionally, the plantation economy exploited local workers, an injustice which continues on in contemporary Congo. A key goal of the CATPC has thus been to “**raise awareness of the deep pain that plantations have caused and continue to cause**” to the people in Congo.

Furthermore, Mbuku and Jean referred to the idea of the “**post-plantation**” which forms a key philosophy embodied by the CATPC’s work.

The post-plantation, as conceptualised by the CATPC, represents a new chapter where **“monoculture will never be used again”** and instead the **“land and its people will be resurrected through polyculture”**. The CATPC thus aim to use art in both ‘symbolically representing Congo’s dark history and the plight of modern plantation work’ AND in ‘materially transforming Congo’s plantation economy into a creative post-plantation economy’. Through the creation of artworks they raise money that they use to buy back the plantation land in Lusanga and restore it by introducing polyculture. This increases the biodiversity of the land making it more rich, profitable and liveable for the locals.

### Why this form of art?

The artists have both personally experienced the transformative power of art and therefore find it a powerful means to convey their message. They said: “we have such a long history and through art we can share it with the world.” The sculptures are made out of materials from Congolese plantations. This is particularly powerful given that the “higher-value labour” of processing the raw materials is usually done far away from where the plantation work is done. On that note, the artists added that **“if we add our emotions and creativity to the same materials they become way more profitable”**. This added value generated by local artistic ingenuity allows the collective to pursue their goals of buying back the plantation land and restoring it for the people. They hope to demonstrate the effects and pain plantations have brought and influence the knowledge, ideas and practices people who consume their art enact. Furthermore, they want to influence an additional dimensions by creating space to “forge new relations between people”.

### Why at Oerol?

CATPC is representing the Netherlands this year at the art festival Biennale in Venice together with Renzo Martens. Because of this the CATPC got invited to showcase part of their collection at Oerol. The artists themselves found Oerol to be a fitting place and setting to raise awareness about the damage caused by monoculture.



Photos: *Madeleine Svae*

# THE AUDIENCE

“Getting to the Roots of the Plantation” received an average of 400-600 visitors a day, each of whom had their own unique way of engaging with the art. Through one-on-one interviews, we explored new ways of relating to the art and patterns in the audience’s experience of the art. We also, unexpectedly, got to engage in larger discussion circles due to us being mistaken for Oerol volunteers on several occasions. Answering visitors’ questions often prompted others to listen or join in, leading to spontaneous conversations among the audience. These organic discussions were particularly interesting as the artists aimed to “start conversations” through their art to achieve change.

## Emotions

*Feelings of Fear and Anxiety:* A few audience members reported an initial feeling of “fear” upon seeing the sculptures. The artwork had a “strong foreboding” presence and visitors often had an intuitive sense that they were “being warned” of some hidden danger. Many cited the ‘crucifix’ as being particularly “ominous”. This may be due to the religious connotations of crucifixions which may lead to a perception of hidden moral perils.

*Recognition of Pain and Suffering:* Another common response was that the sculptures were trying to convey some “deep pain”. This was particularly true in the case of the “Racines” sculpture which one audience member described as “torturous” and there being “suffering engraved into every feature of the expression”. Another described the figure as “struggling to break free from these vines weighing them down”. A few visitors also spoke of pain in the “Crucifix du Bailleur”. Although there was a visceral reaction to the “cruel, very painful” nature of crucifixion, people did not tend to reference the figure on the cross actually experiencing pain. The audience thus seemed to intuitively sense it was a



Photo: Aoibheann Haugh

“punishment” intended to be painful but did not necessarily perceive an internal experience of pain from the sculpture.



Photos: Madeleine Svae

*Use of Unique Materials:* The audience also highlighted how the material of the sculptures stood out to them when forming their initial impressions. Through looking, touching, and smelling the art pieces, visitors discovered they were made of non-traditional materials like cacao. In contrast to the other themes, this stage of exploring the artworks was often associated with positive emotions – “amused”, “happy”, “pleasantly surprised”, etc.

## Meanings

*Critique of Plantation Work:* Every audience member said the art offered commentary on plantation work. One interviewee reflected the common sentiment that the “general feeling of anguish in the art tells the story of plantation workers”. However, visitors tended to solely reference historical plantations in their answers. Plantation work was thus often relegated to the era of colonialism and the slave trade. When asked about the art’s relation to modern plantations, most admitted they only knew about plantation work “in the historical sense” and had “no image of what modern plantations are”. However, this historicising of plantation work can hinder attempts to address exploitation in the modern plantation industry by relegating it as an issue of the past. While for some visitors the art increased awareness of today’s plantation work, for others it was assumed the art referenced historical atrocities only.

*Harm of Monoculture:* The art was also interpreted as a warning about the “harm we [humans] do to the world through monoculture”. Many cited the “crucifixion of the king of monoculture” as a moral condemnation of monoculture agriculture due to its religious connotation. People also perceived criticism of corporations like “Unilever” who “prioritise easy profits” at the “cost of nature”. Monoculture was also often tied to broader critiques of “global capitalist systems” which manifested in the Netherlands in forms like “large-scale intensive farming”.

*Experiencing the Consumption vs. Production of Plantation Products:* A conflict emerged between the childlike joy associated with chocolate and the painful story that underlies its production. Visitors would comment that they “couldn’t help but feel happy when they smelled chocolate” despite the darker subject material of the art. Another connected the art to a documentary that stated that those who worked on cacao plantations “don’t even know what chocolate tastes like”. There often seemed to be an uneasy sense among the audience



Photo: Madeleine Svae

about the perceived contrast between the innocent pleasure they derived from consuming chocolate and the distant reality of the cruelties of plantation work.

*Desire for Additional Context:* A few audience members admitted that they struggled to interpret deeper meanings from the art, stating they needed “more context” and “more of a story”.

Although there were some information pamphlets, we noticed visitors really seemed to absorb the most in terms of context for the art from engaging with us, Oerol visitors, or the artists. Visitors who felt they understood the story behind the art tended to report greater appreciation for the installation.

## Art Activism

*Importance of the Artist Identity:* Some visitors thought that who the artists were played an important role in how the art functioned. Several people found it meaningful that the art was “made by own experience” and thought the art’s message resonated more powerfully because “they use their own lives and stories to change things”. Speaking from one’s own experience also seemed to constitute a special type of knowledge with one interviewee stating that “for the Congolese artists, there’s a more layered significance than what a privileged other can understand”. The background of the artists thus appears to add an ‘authentic’ quality to the art which can transform how the audience engages with its meaning.

*The Oerol ‘Bubble’:* Whilst the audience largely agreed that the message of the art was important and that art could be a powerful medium for change, they expressed doubt over the “effectiveness” of this form of art activism. They described the audience at Oerol as a sort of “bubble” where everyone has similar beliefs and are “already progressive”. A common sentiment was that the message of the art would “not get to the right people” who are outside of this “bubble”. Many of our conversations revolved around how you can draw the conversations people within the “bubble” are having to outside audiences.



# Kanda Hanika / Liederen Verankeren



Photos: Oerol & Fiona Marie Reich

## Totomboti

Written and Researched by Ezra Steman, Fiona Marie Reich,  
Sofia Debernardi

# THE ARTISTS

Known to most people as a creature recognisable for its impressive beak and its unique drumming sounds, the woodpecker is home to forests all around the globe. But what is so special about this animal? In essence, the woodpecker serves as a symbol for the combination of oral storytelling and the traditional Saramaccan wood-making practices that **Totomboti** showcased on the island of Terschelling. Hence, the collective named itself after this symbolic bird in the Saramaccan language. This year, for the first time, **Totomboti** presented an installation at the Oerol Festival. Over the course of two days, we held conversations with the artists, experienced the installation *Kanda Hanka / Lieder en Verankeren* and interviewed several audience members. Here are the results!



Group picture of Totomboti and the field researchers  
Photo: Sofia Debernardi



The museum founded by two of the Totomboti artists in Pikin Slee  
Photo: Orange Travel Suriname



Photo from Pikin Slee  
Photo: Notes on Slow Travel

## The collective

**Totomboti** is an artistic collaboration between six Saramaccan artists (Edje Doekoe, Toya Saakie, Vinije Haabo, Abete Doekoe, Benschawa Amiamba and Lietje Pansa) from Pikin Slee, Suriname and Marjet Zwaans, a Dutch artist. Edje and Toya are founders of the “Saamaka Marron Museum” detailing the history and culture of the Saramaccan people in Pikin Slee.[1] Marjet’s art specialises in ecological economics and has been showcased all around the world.[2] The story of the collective began in 2018, when Marjet visited the museum founded by Edje and Toya. Progressively, they started working together more closely. Now, Marjet lives with the community for half of the year, has been taught their local language and has extensively studied their culture.

## Saramaccan Livelihood

The Saramaccans are a community descended from Black slaves who fled land inwards to escape colonialism and slavery and now call the rainforest of Suriname their home.[3] The Saramaccan culture is characterised by a strong connection to nature and a belief in the spirits of nature, such as water, tree or land spirits. Additionally, they believe that spirits can pronounce trees sacred and that such trees shall be treated as living entities. Recognising the power of nature, Saramaccans live in balance with their surroundings, eat solely vegetarian food and place emphasis on traditional rituals. Within Suriname, the Saramaccan people possess a certain degree of internal self-determination and closely collaborate with other peoples in the rainforest. However, the search for wood and gold is posing a severe risk to the livelihood of the Saramaccans. Although having won a historical land rights case in front of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2007, logging and mining concessions given to international companies continue to increase deforestation.[4] Despite the colonial past of Suriname, not many people abroad or in the Netherlands are aware of the unique culture and the challenges to the livelihood of the Saramaccan people. The installation **Kanda Hanka** therefore serves to present their identity to a new audience. It ties in with what scholar Giovanna Montenegro describes as the Saramaccan history of “cultural survival.”[5] A combination of traditional wood carvings, photography and filmography as well as a daily live performance are meant to illustrate just this.



Rain forest destruction in Suriname through mining activities.

Photo top: Climate Tracker Caribbean!

Photo bottom: Mongabay



2pm spoken word performance  
Photo: Sofia Debernardi

## Totomboti at Oerol

Having worked as a collective for multiple years now and having had two previous exhibitions in the Netherlands, this is the first time that **Totomboti** presented their art at the Oerol Festival. As the collective consists of six Saramaccan and one Dutch artist, they highly value learning and collaboration between these two countries and cultures. Marjet had already been in contact with the artistic director of the festival beforehand and had been asked to arrange an installation this year. Seeing as past and present experiences of the Saramaccan people have been affected by Dutch colonisation, confronting this history and presenting their culture to a Dutch audience is very valuable. For the collective, the specific location of their expedition in the Hoornse Bos was the only logical place as they have been guided by their forest spirits towards this stone ring in the forest. The forest and the trees made them think of Pikin Slee. Although the nature in the Surinamese rainforest is vastly different from the Netherlands, they perceive the general atmosphere on Terschelling as similar to that in the Saramaccan people’s homeland. Furthermore, because the location is surrounded by bunkers, it also added to the experience of a certain threat similar to the one the Saramaccan people felt in their forest from the white men. In some ways, Oerol was a new experience for the ever-evolving collective, as it is the first time **Totomboti** complemented their live performance with spoken word.

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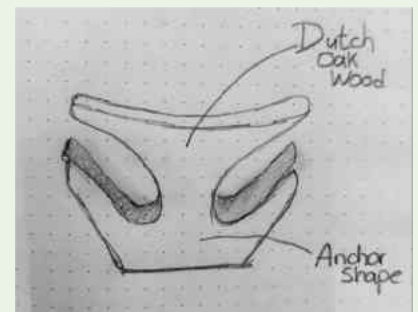
# THE ART

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In the forest of Hoorn, there lies a amphitheater where a collection of arts are displayed and performed. Here, two distinct, yet connected, cultures coincide: the Saramaccan and the Dutch culture. The Art Collective **Totomboti** has created a Saramaccan experience for the Dutch visitors that has rarely been shared outside their village of Pikin Slee, Suriname. With *Kanda Hanka / Liederan Verankeren*, the Saramaccan culture is the central point of attention with its oral traditions of song and dance. Together with the *Apunku* (the forest spirits) and the *apiniti* (a drum and communication device), **Totomboti** shares the lively stories and spiritual songs from their cultures in the Amazon and their relationship to the forest: A connection the Dutch have long lost.

## The Exhibition & Performance

The Oerol expedition can be divided in two features: the performance of the songs and dance and the exhibition of the wood carvings and tapestries. The impressive wood carvings (seats, bowls, and panels) and tapestries (maps, pictures, and embroidery) could be found all around the theater ground. The carvings were made from Dutch oak wood and Surinamese hardwood. Especially the seats were particularly interesting to the public. These seats, as can be seen to the right and below, are made of Dutch oak wood resembling an anchor. This ties in perfectly with the expedition's name: Anchoring Songs. **Totomboti** highlighted how there is still a connection between the two cultures and how they shape each other, eventually helping to anchor the Saramaccan culture in the Netherlands as well.



Drawing: Ezra Steman



Photo: Fiona Marie Reich



Photo: Ezra Steman

The wooden panels that were spread all through the forest resembled the surroundings of Pikin Slee: the rivers, creeks, and forest as can be seen in the picture to the left. These panels were made from hardwood and were handcrafted, same as the seats. The Saramaccan people connect a lot of their songs and traditions to locations due to their strong relationship with the area. Particularly water plays an important role in their culture since it is the purest element in the world. Locations bare the names of significant stories and events that happened in that place. A good example of this is one of the tapestries.

**“Water is one of the purest things in Saramaccan Culture.”**

Vinije Haabo

The tapestry (right) resembles The White Men's Creek. This creek holds an important story connected to Pikin Slee: When slaves were transported in Suriname, the white people had to pass this creek with the group. This was usually the only spot where white people would walk *behind* the black people to either drive black people away into the forest or to transport them to a different location, resembling a disruption in the common narrative. Due to these occurrences, the geographical location eventually started to bare this name. Marjet Zwaans, one of the artists of **Totomboti**, photographed the creek and created this two-layered tapestry piece to increase people's perception and relation to the location. The 3D effect that has been added to the tapestry made it is easier for the audience to place themselves in the location itself.



Photos: Fiona Marie Reich

As an addition to the exhibition, **Totomboti** also performed a ritual together consisting of dance and songs. It was the first time that such a ritual was performed in front of an audience and was only made possible by the presence and approval of two village elderly, Waawa and Abete. These rituals were different each day, connecting to a theme. When we were there, the ritual was performed for the birds and *Awandesa*, the bird in the forest that brings messages. Birds are holy animals due to their song and the power that resides in this song. They bring messages from the spirits and from the people. That is why members of **Totomboti** performed a *Seketi* dance, a bird dance. The *Seketi* dance was performed due to the mutual connection between Pikin Slee and Terschelling, which are both bird domains. Before this, an *Apunku* song was performed where Abete had a conversation with the apinti. The apinti (right) is a kind of drum that the Saramacca people used as a communication device between villages. That is why the next village in the proximity of Pikin Slee was always created an apiniti drum beat away. The apiniti was not only used for communication between villages, but also between the human world and the spirit world.



Drawing: Ezra Steman



Photo: Ezra Steman

**“Saramaccan is the most *digbo* language of Suriname.”**

Toya Saakie

The songs were all in the unique Saramaccan language. This language is a mixture of English, Dutch and Portuguese with a base in Kikongo. Sometimes, a word of Dutch or English can easily be heard when they were talking to each other. The language is a tonal language and is highly developed, making it possible to change modern words, such as Oerol, in to Saramaccan words as well, Ulolu. According to one member of **Totomboti**, the Saramaccan language is the most *digbo* language in Suriname, meaning sovereign and pure. It is used for poetry, songs, and stories, but also for regular communication between the Saramaccan people.

Vinije Habo mentioned that the songs and dances were performed due to a dream from one of the Saramaccan people in Pikin Slee. The village chief had fallen ill and someone dreamt that it was necessary to perform the Apunku dances, but also Apunku games. Usually, these performances are a secret to the outside world, since they contain secrets about escaping the white men which should not be shared. Additionally, it's a worship for the gods to thank and honour the relationship between them and the forest, only meant for their ears and eyes.



Photo: Marjet Zwaans via Instagram

**“Dutch people are way too much inside their own heads.”**

Vinije Haabo

### The Setting

The location's entrance was marked by an Azapou, a sacred gateway made of a kind of dried plants. These gateways keep the bad spirits out of this location. According to Vinije, this location would add to the experience of the audience. However, the first time **Totomboti** performed they did not start with an introduction but just performed the ritual. The Dutch people seemed confused, sad, and grumpy, because they didn't understand what was happening. This was the problem, according to **Totomboti**: the Dutch want to understand too much, they're too much inside their heads instead of experiencing their surroundings. **Kanda Hanka** was made to experience and indulge.



Drawing: Ezra Steman

# THE AUDIENCE

As an expedition set in a trees circle, **Kanda Hanka** attracted many and different people, mainly from the Netherlands, but also from Germany and China, for instance. Also people with physical impairments joined the site since the tree circle is flat and accessible by wheelchairs. Thus, the setting of the exhibition was also promoting inclusivity.

## Audience Experience

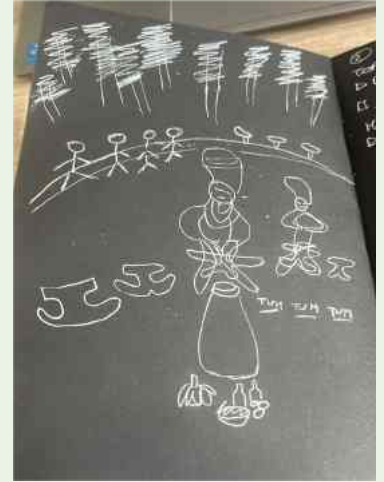
Visitors entered the exhibition puzzled and unsure about what the artists wanted to communicate. Some visitors were frustrated at first as they were unable to grasp a logical meaning behind the exhibition and this was a big obstacle for many in the audience. The attendees' mood improved when they saw the performance at 2 pm. Using colors and soothing music, the artists engaged the audience and connected with them, also thanks to a short explanation at the beginning of the performance. The artists did not always use this approach: the first time they performed, they did not provide any explanation about the meaning and value of what they were doing, as their goal was to involve the viewers emotionally rather than on a rational level. Nonetheless, this approach was not appreciated by the visitors, who required some additional information for the following live performances.

As field researchers, we wanted to know why people decided to visit this exhibition, consequently we held some interviews with the visitors. Most of the audience spoke in English with us, thus our conversations were brief but significant. Conversely, others spoke Dutch and so we had more in-depth conversations with them. After chatting with many different people, we can argue that the reasons to visit and explore the **Totomboti** collective and **Kanda Hanka** are several: for some interviewees it is just one of the many Oerol exhibitions, for others it is an opportunity to know more about this part of the Dutch colonial history. Many people admitted they did not know enough about it and were excited to finally broaden their horizons on the topics. The attraction to a new and unknown culture is strong among the people we interviewed. Someone even stated about the exhibition:

**"It's plural: (they offered) understanding of other cultures, how we need to value nature more, and how culture can be given to next generations."**

Therefore it is clear that people were fascinated by these new artworks and soon felt a connection with the art works. On the other hand, we acknowledged also some shyness and hesitation to discuss with us the colonial past of the Netherlands despite the fact that the exhibition and the performance were revolving around these harsh concepts. This approach might be linked to the lack of a structural post-colonial debate in The Netherlands, which is due to the recent slavery history that interested the country. [6] Doubtlessly, after visiting **Kanda Hanka** visitors have a renovated sensibility and new knowledge about Suriname and the colonial and slavery past of the Netherlands.

In order to understand the visitors' opinions and mood about **Kanda Hanka**, besides conducting some interviews, we also promoted a small Google Moduli survey that the visitors could fill in once they left the exhibition in order to gather more data about their thoughts and opinions after exploring the exhibition and the performance. In the poll, visitors were asked if their mood improved after exploring the exhibition. Thanks to the **Totomboti** collective's efforts, the average state of mind of the audience improved from 7/10 to 8,5/10. Overall, the installation was thus positively received by visitors.



*Drawing: Sofia Debernardi*



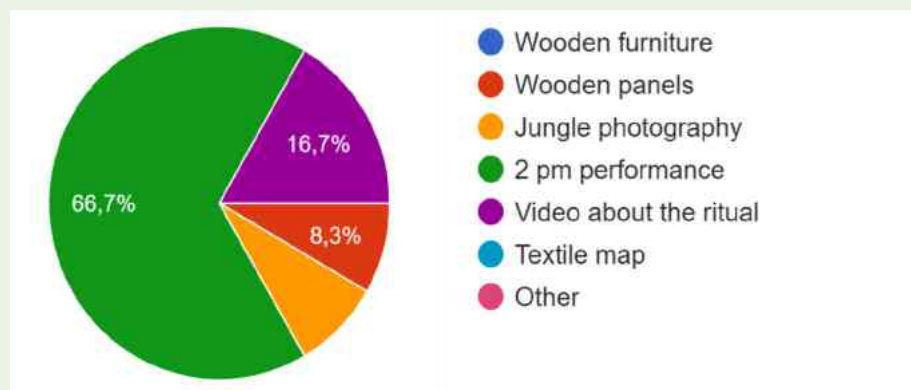
*Photo: Sofia Debernardi*



*Photo: Sofia Debernardi*

# THE AUDIENCE

Moreover, people were asked whether they had a chance to talk with the artists themselves. Unfortunately, the majority of the people who filled in the survey did not talk with the creators or did not feel the need to chat with them. Only two people out of the twelve respondents to the survey approached the artists. The visitors' reluctance to chat with the representatives can be linked to the fear of discussing Dutch colonial history or a lack of deep engagement with the content of the exhibition. Talking with the representative of the collective was really helpful and beneficial for us, thus direct contact with the artists could be encouraged more in future editions. Additionally, when asked about their favorite part of **Kanda Hanka**, people gave different answers that can be viewed in the pie chart below. This confirms some variety in people's interests regarding the exhibition.

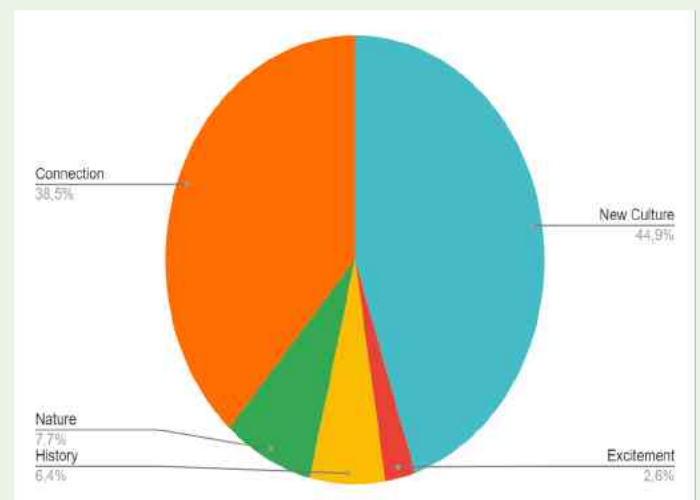


*Graph depicting the favourite part of the Totomboti Expedition according to the audience (N=12).*

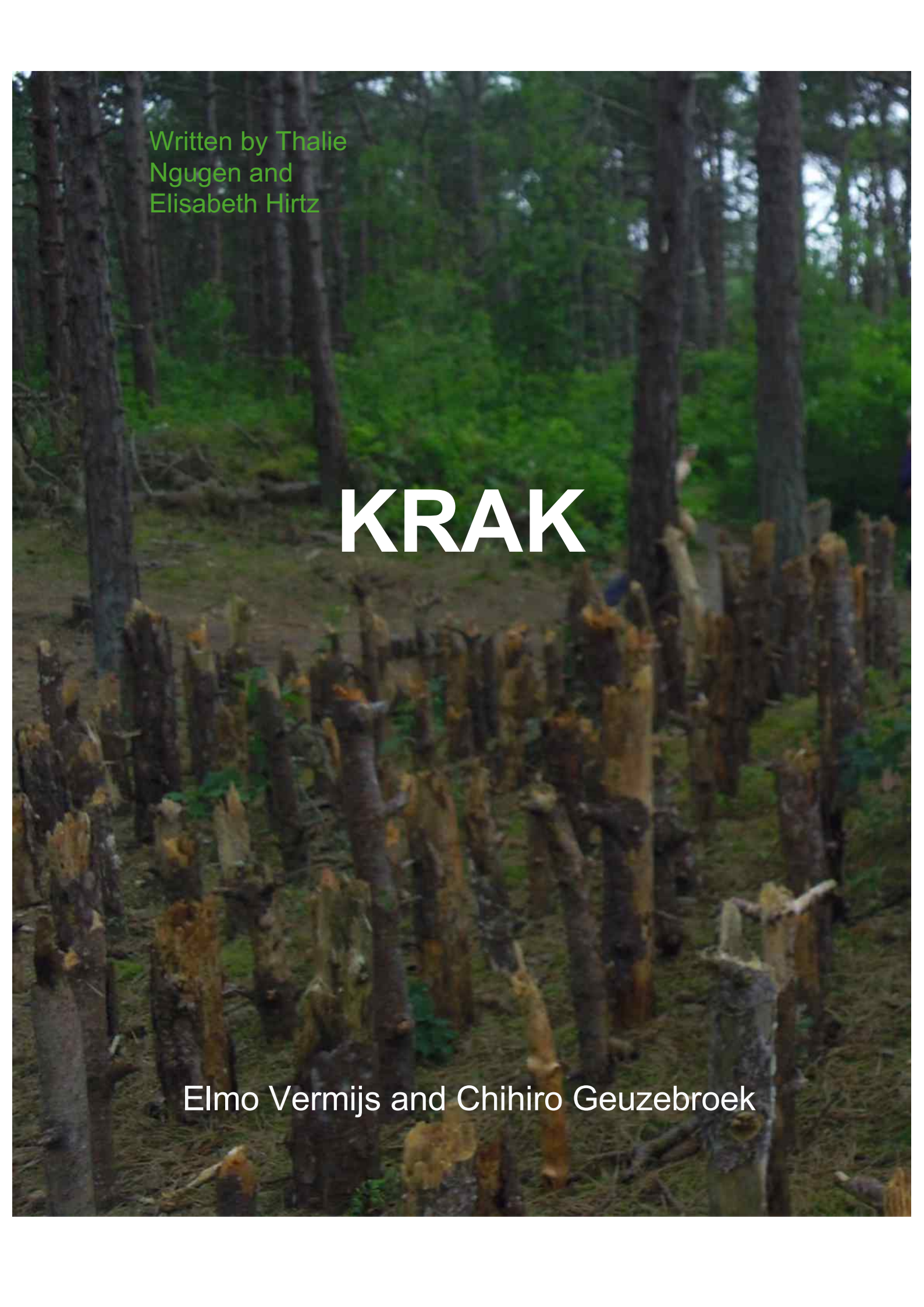
Finally, as researchers we asked the audience through the google moduli what they thought was the main goal of the whole exhibition. People were drawn to different parts of the art exposed, however, we tried to summarize the main findings in the pie chart on the right. For instance, people stressed the importance of discovering this post-colonial culture. Someone even focused on the connection that there could be between the **Totomboti** collective and the exhibition presented by some Ghanaian artists at the Oerol festival and who also attended one of the 2 pm performances.

Others were attracted by the possibility to bridge these two people and improving understanding and communion between them. Finally, a minority of the audience saw the relationship with nature as the biggest goal of the exhibition. One respondent cast some doubts about the link between the Saramaccan Gods and the forest since from the collective's presentation it was not clear who affected who. This interviewee was also skeptical of what can be called a forest if it is planted and arranged by humans.

Overall, people were inspired by the **Kanda Hanka** exhibition and left with a renewed sensibility about the Saramaccan people.



*Graph depicting the main goal of the exhibition according to the audience (N=12).*



Written by Thalie  
Ngugen and  
Elisabeth Hirtz

# KRAK

Elmo Vermijs and Chihiro Geuzebroek



# THE ART

## Krak exhibition

Through an installation (route) and guided forest experience, we explore with curiosity the lessons of decay and neglected relationships. In this installation, artist Elmo Vermijs collaborates with decolonial activist Chihiro Geuzebroek to examine what we can learn from decay, how it opens new possibilities, and what we can learn from decomposers; the fungi that break things down. Decay is the third stage of the research project StagingWood. A coalition of foresters, users, scientists, lawyers, activists, artists, writers, and a local sawmill are working on a new relationship between humans and forests where the life cycle is central.



In the middle of the forest of Formerum, lies a decaying plantation. It all starts with an audio tour that will guide you through your journey of decay. After you passed through the wooden gate you are taken on a path in the middle of the forest. You follow the voice of the Black Honey fungus that highlights how decay is all around you in the plantation and the role it takes on the island. Suddenly you arrive in a glade with decaying trees in the middle. Those trees seemed to form a circle uniting in their decay. The next stop is the dunes in the forest, for a moment the audio tour stops and you just listen to the cracks of the wood around you. after passing through a bridge of decaying wood. The entire exhibition is set in the plantation and last around 30 minutes. Furthermore Chihiro Geuzebroek is composing a song about the process "Losing Myself" reflecting on decay and how it can be quite disorienting and you feel like you are losing yourself.

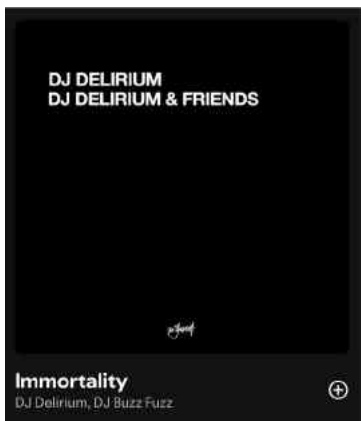
## Krak workshop:

The **messages** of the workshops are underlying questions: How do we live in healthier societies? Can we make more space to appreciate the values of decay and certain systems that are not sustainable? What is ripe for decay within you and your relationships? The workshop starts with a theatrical setup in decay. You are guided through a cracked relationship.



Chihiro Geuzebroek, Flora (camera woman) and Joanna Van der Hoek.. They did 6 workshops together and production during the 5 days.

**Behind the scenes:** The Dark honey fungus assist humans with tools to liberate themselves from the plantation and the song is here to shake it off. Organic players of breakdown to invite people to reflect on what is ready to break down. Decay is linked to core question of: how to decolonize earth and break down those systems. Politics and economies are still imprinted by colonial systems.



Song played during the workshop

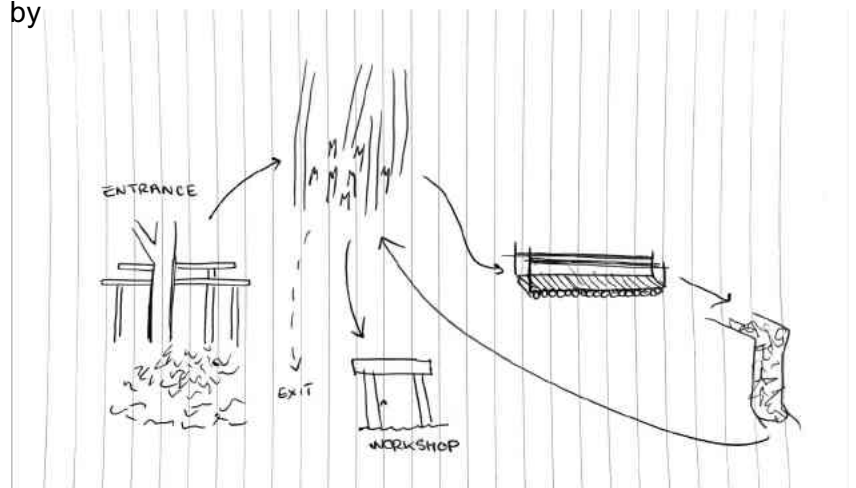


Picture of the workshop taken by Chihiro Geuzebroek. In this picture Anne Jesuina (in green) is closing the workshop. Chihiro and her did 19 workshops together during Oerol.

The **thought process** behind the workshop was going the next level of the audio tour. It is a reflexion on living in a country that has been manufactured, from agriculture monoculture to even forests. We are entangled with plantation and the workshops came from a desire for people to reflect on their entanglement with the plantations. There were two workshops throughout the week both with the aim to socialise and practice the breakdown of toxic hierarchies

**-First workshop:** About the posture and different roles in the plantation. "Being the chosen one" or the undesired life/ undesired guest. You have to break down those hierarchies because they have been toxic for society.

**-Second Workshop:** Looked at embodiment of certain social relationships and how hierarchies could melt.



Map of the installation

# THE ARTISTS

## Merging Artistic Visions

The KRAK installation and workshop is a collaboration between artists Elmo Vermijs and Chihiro Geuzebroek as part of the *StagingWood* project. This initiative seeks to redefine human relationships with the forest, particularly in Terschelling. This project's approach is rooted in the four stages of the life cycle: germination, growth, decay, and death, which serve as the foundation for research into circular production processes, installations, publications, public programs, and seminars.

Elmo and Chihiro's collaboration began when Elmo reached out to Chihiro two years ago for a small task within the *StagingWood* project. Recognizing the potential for a deeper partnership, they conducted a workshop in 2022 that was so successful that they decided to repeat it this year. Their partnership is driven by a shared mission to decolonize our understanding of nature and dismantle entrenched colonial systems that continue to shape politics and economies.

## Elmo Vermijs

As the creative force behind the shaping of the Krak installation tour, Elmo Vermijs delves into the intricate relationship between humans and their physical surroundings, often through spatial installations and regenerative processes. By leveraging diverse materials and crafting immersive experiences, his art offers novel perspectives on pressing societal issues, encouraging viewers to reconsider their connection to their environment.



## Chihiro Geuzebroek

Leading the workshop complementary to the Krak expedition tour, Chihiro Geuzebroek explores storytelling as a powerful tool for healing and understanding power dynamics. With a rich background in film, media, and culture, her work centers on climate justice and decolonization. In her workshops, participants are encouraged to confront discomfort and unease, especially around the taboo topic of decay. This embodiment work is particularly well-suited for a forest setting and aligns seamlessly with the festival's ethos of embodied enactment.



## Bringing the Conversation to Oerol

The decision to bring the KRAK installation and workshop to the Oerol Festival is no coincidence. Oerol, known for transforming Terschelling into a vibrant stage for art and performance, offers a unique platform to engage with the public in an immersive, nature-centric environment. With its emphasis on site-specific art and performance, this festival provides the perfect backdrop for exploring the interconnected themes of decay and decolonization.



The connection to Oerol Festival and Terschelling is profound, particularly evident in the island's forest—a fitting setting for the KRAK installation. This forest, predominantly populated with pine trees planted decades ago, now shows visible signs of decay, embodying the project's themes of life cycles and regeneration. Previous iterations of Elmo and Chihiro's work at Oerol have explored other stages of the life cycle—such as germination and growth—within the island's forests.

The festival's commitment to site-specific works that directly engage with the landscape aligns perfectly with the project's goals, deepening their engagement with the island and its unique environmental challenges each year.



By situating their work within the context of Oerol, they leverage the festival's ability to attract a diverse audience, fostering a collective exploration of how to decolonize our relationship with the earth. The workshops, focusing on the embodiment of social relationships and the breakdown of toxic hierarchies, resonate deeply within the festival's ambitions, offering participants a transformative experience that aligns with the broader themes of KRAK and the mission of Oerol Festival.



# THE AUDIENCE

Under the rain, under the sun, fighting the wind, we went to the exhibition all throughout the week... and we were not the only ones! Most of the workshops got sold out and even during the worst meteorological conditions the audience still showed up. Protected by the branches of the trees people from all age came to the installation. Oerol festival IS mostly composed of people from the older generation but families also came with kids and young adults seemed also eager to participate. One thing that came out of those interviews is how intergenerational this art was. One of the interviewees felt that “the young generation was at the same time screaming to her to act but also whispering about the nature.”



For many, it was truly a unique experience: being able to first walk around a decaying first and hear from a fungus? Never done before! The interviews were conducted after the visitors went through the entire path. Even if for some their first impression of the exhibition was confusing, their thoughts went around their mind for a bit and then would understand different perspectives of monoculture. After this exhibition they felt joy and peace. But also a darker side as they experienced the guilt of being part of the monoculture and the fear of the upcoming decay of nature and themselves.

## Life-Cycle Stages: Audience Perspectives

Conversations with participants concluding the KRAK expedition and/or workshop delved into personal reflections, leading to a final question aimed at exploring their deeper connection to the theme of decay:

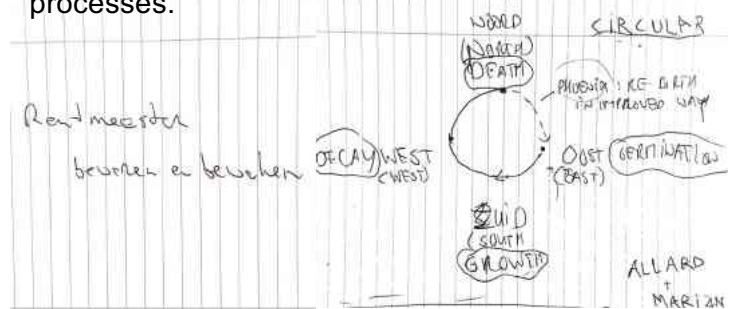
*How do you perceive the interconnections among the four phases of a life cycle?*

Drawing onto their personal understanding of to the work, the participating members presented drawings to best schematically or artistically present their thoughts. The varied responses highlighted the diverse perspectives and personal engagements with these fundamental stages of life.

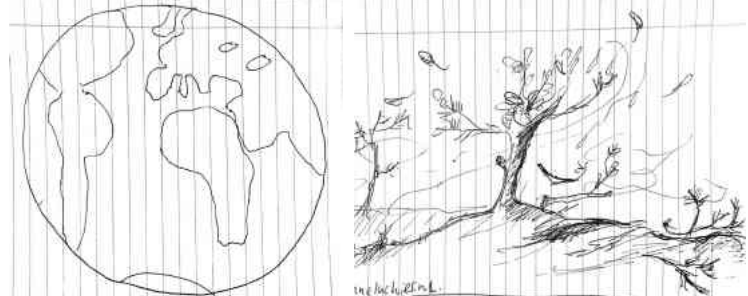


A first Oerol visitor, who identifies as Christian, found it challenging to draw the connections between the life cycle stages, so he preferred to express his thoughts through writing. His text emphasized the idea of guardianship rather than ownership over nature. In line with his religious beliefs, he views decay not as an end, but as a phase that challenges the finality of death, implying a continuous process of renewal. This guardianship perspective implies a responsibility to nurture and protect nature through all stages—germination, growth, decay, and death—reflecting a stewardship that transcends mere use and exploitation.

A pair of participants shared a similar perspective on death as a phase preceding of “rebirth.” Specifically, they specified viewing decay and death as phases that seamlessly leads to rebirth and regeneration. This cyclical view underscores the inevitability and natural integration of decay within the broader ecosystem, emphasizing sustainability and the balance of natural processes.



Other visitors presented complementary holistic and artistic perspectives on decay. They drew a planet and a landscape with both decaying and thriving trees to illustrate decay as a unifying force affecting both nature and humans. Both suggested that decay is a fundamental process integrating various elements of the ecosystem, fostering interconnectedness and natural synergy. By highlighting decay’s universal impact, they emphasized its role in maintaining the balance and continuity of life on Earth, viewing it not merely as an end but as a vital component contributing to the dynamic equilibrium of nature.



The varied representations and interpretations of decay among the participants underscore its multifaceted nature within the life cycle. Whether viewed through religious, ecological, planetary, or artistic lenses, decay is recognized as an integral part of the ongoing process of life.

*Written by CJ & Marente*

# THE FUTURISTS

# ZUAM

*Photo: Nichon Glerum via instagram*

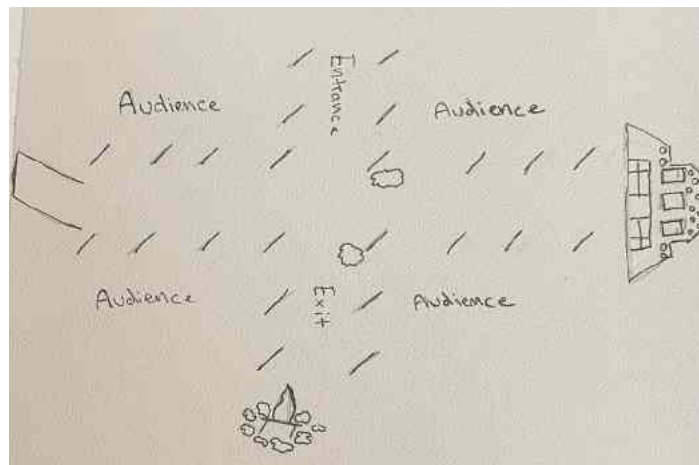
# THE ART

Before the performance starts, dancer Pawel Moleda introduces the waiting audience to the ritual we will soon be entering, speaking fully in sign language. He announces it as a meditative experience, starting with a short walk to reach the area of the ritual. We are also each given large painted stones, to whom we are meant to form a personal connection during the walk, before they inevitably become a part of the ritual as well. The walk starts off with some chatter and uneasy giggling, but as we are shushed by the people leading us, an intense background drumming sound starts to surround us and the day gives way to night, the mood changes. It is now hard to tell what is real and what is imagined. This is a sacred affair we are entering, a serious business between us and our rocks.



*Pawel Moleda performing on top of the altar of sound during ZUAM  
Photo: Nichon Glerum via instagram*

Arriving at the ritual site immediately solidifies this feeling. We sit down on imaginative X-shaped plywood chairs arranged around a central circular space, with paths leading between the chairs to two enormous monolith-like structures, one made of speakers and one of LED-screens. The grandiosity of it all, amplified by the pure intensity and volume of the music, are meant to show the audience that the full force of the gods is at play here, and it is impressively effective. Reminding of the ancient druids of stonehenge, although paradoxically decked out in shiny futuristic gear, the dancer and three accompanying opera singers move between and on top of the monoliths in a captivating ritual dance. Here the central premise of ZUAM comes to life: an old futurist tribe living in a world floating between prehistoric and the far future, performing a ritual in which they attempt to call language forth from the nature surrounding them.



*A map of the ritual grounds upon which the performance took place*





The ritual itself draws us in through a use of a variety of mediums, from large fluorescent tubes pulsing with different colours of light corresponding to the phase of the ritual, to the huge boulders of sound and screen. Central also is the singing of the three opera singers, who produce sounds rooted in a non-language based vocal field - Ursprache - reminiscent of the traditional music styles of the Inuit, Sioux, Zulu and Balinese cultures. Their harmonies are goosebump-inducing and deeply unsettling at times, conveying the deep emotions of the ritual as it progresses and a connection is established with the deities.

*Performance of ZUAM showing the contrast of the columns of light and the dark sky and forest Photo: Nichon Glerum via instagram*

This contact seems to be mainly controlled through the main dancer, who confidently leads the singers in their increasingly intense chanting, until the gods seem to interfere and forcefully take control of the ritual from him. As the singers slowly turn on him, the dancer struggles to regain the control in a powerful and erratic dance that drains him fully leaving him collapsed on the ground. This causes the singers to have to revive him using the sounds and odd thunderous vibrations of three large copper sheets. Once fully recovered, the dancer finally sheds his ritualistic garb and seems to express to the audience that all is well now. Or, this is at least how we perceived it. The performance has a clear internal dramaturgical story that is strictly followed by the dancer and singers night after night and allows for little improvisation, but simultaneously remains purposefully abstract to grant the audience the opportunity to interpret freely and interact with the performance in whatever way they desire.



*The three opera singers using sound to revive the fallen dancer Photo: Nichon Glerum via instagram*

# THE ARTIST(S)

The Futurists, an art foundation established in 2018 by Netherlands-based Polish composer, performer, and director Jerzy Bielski, strive to present narratives deeply rooted in contemporary reality. They explore these through innovative and immersive artistic expressions. In 2020, visual artist and filmmaker Thomas Brand joined the collective, enhancing their interdisciplinary work that blends a wide array of artistic forms and new technology positioning them as innovators in the contemporary Dutch art scene. Through their innovative use of sign language, The Futurists have revolutionized the Dutch art scene by enhancing accessibility and engagement in theatre for artists and audiences. The foundation has crafted a unique artistic language that takes inspiration from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century futurism movement as well as other theatrical traditions such as Arnaud's theory of the Theatre of Cruelty, which breaks with traditions to fully engage and immerse the audiences. This joins the love of technology and modernity with a focus on primal humanities, as well as ritual and culture, creating an artistic



Advertisement for ZUAM on the Futurists website  
Photo: Thomas Brand via futurists.nl

They want to reconsider the theatre experience by truly immersing the audience in a collective ritual that transcends language. Through this complete immersion and overwhelming of the senses it is possible to truly feel and experience without trying to rationalize what you witness. This approach makes the performance accessible as the emotions and intensity is presented visually, audibly and - through the inclusion of the rocks - tactile as well. The rocks allow the audience to bear witness to a ritual of ascension and sacrifice taking place in front of them. Everyone's rocks form a tribute at the altar of their strange god, so we are all part of their practice.

Their work explores the “collective ritualization of the emergence of language” considering the ingrained rituals and traditions that we are engaging in and the power that language holds to bring people together and tear them apart. The foundation considers this in relation to both the past and the future in a way that is closely linked to reality but is also entirely different. The performance presents a spiral view of history with pillars of sound and light that resemble Celtic stones and altars but also reflect our spiritual devotion to technology, linking ancient cultures to our everyday ritualistic realities. Drawing on 20th-century theories like Ursprache and the Theatre of Cruelty, they reject traditional narrative structures and spoken word. Instead, they use rhythm, ritual, sounds, and movements to convey their message, allowing the audience to create their own meaning and based on what they witness. By breaking the norms of genre, theater and even language they engage with the audience on a deep emotional level creating a truly overwhelming experience that appeals to all the senses.



*Image of previous performance by The Futurists*

*Photo: [futurists.nl/about](http://futurists.nl/about)*

This is the foundations first time performing at Oerol and they were tremendously excited to work in this space, naming Oerol as *the* place for site-specific theatre in the Netherlands. Their passion for this immersive form of theatre is a direct response to and rejection of the confines of traditional Black Box theatre. Additionally, the core concept of Oerol creating art in harmony with nature as one of the foundations mission statements is to work as sustainable as possible, for example by powering their massive light installations through solar energy.

They also enjoy the challenge of continuously adapting to a new environment as it creates a grandiose and unique spectacle every time. The performance piece is a living entity, constantly evolving to harmonize with its surroundings. Nestled in the heart of the forest in West-Terschelling, the performance space dictates the setup and the silent walk that marks the beginning of the piece, as it follows along the forest path. The specifics of the performance are fluid, changing with each rendition. For instance, when the piece premiered at the O festival in Rotterdam a few weeks prior, the ensemble was slightly different. In its earliest form, it was a solo performance. This adaptability adds a layer of dynamism, making each performance a unique interpretation of the piece.

# THE AUDIENCE

The performance was held 9 times at Oerol for 120 people each night, and was sold out most of the time, despite its late start time at 10pm. Most audience members were in their 50s and 60s, Dutch and have a long history of coming to Oerol. We wanted to get as much information from the audience as possible, but due to the hour of the performance - finishing just before midnight - we knew our window of opportunity to ask people in person would be quite limited as everyone wanted to get home. Due to this, we decided to employ a two-pronged approach. During the 10-minute walk back from the performance, we split up and talked to a few audience members, mainly asking them about their overall experiences and if they could tell us their interpretation of the meaning of the performance. Additionally, we handed out around 30 QR-codes to an online survey available in both English and Dutch, which 11 audience members participated in. However, while the survey results are useful to understand individual interpretations of audience members, we have to consider that it might not be representative of overall trends of audience, opinions as there is a strong response bias present and about half the people who completed the survey had intense negative emotions.



Photo: Nichon Glerum via Instagram

Audience during ZUAM performance at Oerol 2024

During our conversations with audience members, we had already slowly discovered a theme of absolute befuddlement, sometimes to the point of frustration. This continued in the survey, where audience members described having trouble engaging with the piece, naming a difficulty to grasp both the central story and the takeaways. A majority of the participants of our survey did not experience the performance as meditative, nor did they feel as if the overwhelmingness of the sounds and visuals helped them open up to the experience as a whole. In fact, people reported feeling overall more alienated and annoyed than overwhelmed. To a great extent, this discontent seems to stem from not having a clear idea of what the overarching storyline of the performance was, as well as confusion and a general dislike of the used mediums. However despite audience members claiming not to have understood anything at all, when asked the overarching themes and emotions did shine through. To some it was a story of attempting to find community at all costs and destroying oneself in the process. To others the story is one of false prophets and fallen angels. To others it is one of hell being a place of sensory overload.

In line with the intention of the artists to purposefully include a degree of abstraction to allow for interpretation, people saw the ritual as a struggle between conflict and forgiveness or life and death, or as having to carry around a heavy burden of some kind. Perhaps this last interpretation can be related to the stones, which were brought into the performance to help the audience feel more connected to the ritual and allow for low-stakes audience participation. Already before the start of the performance, the connection of people to their stones became clear from the way they first purposefully choose the one that to them stood out as the prettiest or biggest and then carried them carefully, shielding them from the rain and even going as far as to actively pet the rock (or put it on their head).

Some audience members really enjoyed the interactive elements of the performance, and one couple in their mid thirties mentioned how nice the meditative aspect of the silent walk was. The woman further expanded on her positive experience of telling her rock about her recent apartment issues. By sharing with the rock she was able to make some peace with the stress of daily life and felt supported by the weight of the rock knowing that she would be letting it go soon after. That same couple also made their own meaning of the performance and its narrative. They saw the dancer as a false prophet who is attempting to convince the singers of his ideas and dies throughout the process.

Another audience member, a woman in her 60s who did not enjoy the performance much, as she saw it as too overwhelming without any moments to rest, did have insightful ideas about the story of the show. She believes that it is a reflection of society and the darkest sides of the world. She viewed the dancer as someone who tries to persuade others to reach the dark side by looking like an angel and portraying a sense of authority. She saw the entire performance as being set “constantly in hell.” So while she did not have a great time at the performance, her interpretation and feedback does engage with the artists goals for this piece, she experienced overwhelm and despite saying that it was too much she still found space to consider her own meaning of what she experienced.

The strongest immediate reaction was uttered by a woman in her 40s who when asked if she has any opinions on the performance she just witnessed said: “I have an opinion, I fucking hated it!” She then expanded on it by saying that she “felt hit by a car” and wished she could have left but felt unsafe to go back out into the dark forest alone. Around 10 people did walk out and braved the walk through the dark forest at the performance on tuesday night. Some of them rather violently, as one woman in her 70s stood up from her spot in the center of the first row throwing her hands into the air in such a manner it almost resembled the erratic thrashing of the performance. But, no, she was not enamored by the ritual instead she left taking a group of other women back out into the dark forest.

For better or for worse, this was a performance that evoked strong emotional responses. In our survey we gave a list of 13 emotions asking them to select any that they related to in response to the performance. Depicted here is a word web of the answers we received, with commonly chosen words appearing bigger and in bolder colours.



So, while upon first consideration audience members were somewhat critical of the art and its intended meaning, it did lead people to think differently and be truly engaged with what is happening. They felt uneasy at watching such at witnessing such an intense experience unlike anything they had seen before, They felt confused as to there not being a clear meaning and resolution. They felt alienated at trying to understand but not being able to rely on spoken language as their tool for comprehension. Instead to experience ZUAM you need to be open to be overwhelmed and irritated. This is not a performance to check your phone or dose of in the middle, instead it is a ritual of epic proportions displayed with grandiosity in visuals, sounds and lights.

In the end, this performance was meant to provoke strong responses and emotions from the audience and while some originally denied it, everyone we talked to created their own meaning and narrative based on what they witnessed. And we believe that just like us they will be thinking about ZUAM many more times in the future.

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Photo: *Ola Bieleń*

# **MEET THE SALT- LOVING COMMUNITY**



**Beatrice Matassino, Mila  
Fazi, Ola Bieleń**

# THE ART

The **"Meet the Salt-loving Community"** exhibition embraces the notion that humans are integral to the aquatic ecosystem, exploring interactions between saltwater and freshwater cycles and urging adaptation to this ever-evolving landscape. Although there was not one core predefined message, this artwork aims to showcase the intricate link between marine ecosystems, everyday livelihoods and our bodies, encapsulating the theme of adaptation to an evolving saline environment.



Photo: *Ola Bieleń*

Rosanne, one of the artists, “[encourages] everyone to see themselves as living in this “new” aquatic ecosystem outside the dyke.” This exhibition aims to challenge the historical and institutionalised notion in the Netherlands that the dyke is synonymous with survival. It seeks to reimagine the concept of welcoming the sea and rebuilding a symbiotic relationship of coexistence with salty environments, both physically and biologically. However, rising sea levels and environmental salinization is increasingly impacting our lives and this artwork explores the possibilities for humans to adapt to saltier habitats and landscapes.



Photo: *Mila Fazi*



Photo: *Mila Fazi*

“Meet the Salt-Loving Community” is part of **"Sweet-Sweat,"** an eight-year project aimed at deepening and exploring our connection with the sea and its ecosystems. This movement aims to underscore the fundamental role of salt as a building block for humans, plants and animals. Its core considerations include: **to what extent can we develop a more harmonious relationship with water that extends beyond the dyke? And how can we learn to adapt to the climate challenges of our time?**

This exhibition combined art and science to convey a crucial message about the stress faced by sponges and their gradual deterioration over time. Overall, the artwork strategically incorporates familiar household items throughout its composition, transforming everyday objects into symbols of marine life's pervasive influence and inviting viewers to recognize and value this influence in their daily surroundings. By embedding these elements, the piece fosters a sense of familiarity and relatability, encouraging the audience to perceive their daily environments through a new lens.

This approach not only makes the art accessible and engaging but also serves as a potent reminder of the deep interconnectedness between our daily lives and marine ecosystems. The goal is to create a recognizable and intimate setting that underscores the significance and omnipresence of marine life in our homes and surroundings, emphasising the need for environmental awareness and adaptation.

This exhibition took place at the beach and consists of three intertwined main areas that seamlessly build upon one another. The first section of the exhibition is designed to awaken the audience's senses and immerse them in the installation.

At the entrance, visitors can choose between a sweet freshwater and salt path. Along these routes, visitors can find washing stations with soaps made from the island's natural elements. They are encouraged to mix these soaps with sand, a natural scrub specifically designed to cleanse and open your pores as you wash your hands. Over the sinks, mirrors are placed to allow the visitor to see their reflection, as well as notice a video of someone exploring the aquatic environment, which plays behind them.

According to Rosanne, **this setup is intended to help the audience envision themselves as part of this new environment**, merging their reflection with the video as a way to see themselves in this future.

There are multiple sculptures of sponges and seashells crafted from chalk to resemble the calcium present in both sponges and corals, their whiter tones symbolising coral bleaching.

The tap and drying rack, made from the same material as household tubing, is shaped into a spiral to symbolise evolution. This design highlights theories suggesting that humans evolved from sponges, emphasising our **deep-rooted connection to these ancient organisms**.



Photo: Ola Bielerń

The second section of the exhibition featured a film installation, taking viewers on a journey into the underwater world of coral reefs and sponges. The film ran on a loop with no clear beginning or end, allowing audience members to join at any moment. In front of the screen, colourful cushions designed to resemble sponges were placed for seating. All the fabrics used, including the cushion covers and towels for drying hands, were second-hand pieces, upcycled by Rosanne and bleached to reflect coral bleaching.



Photo: Ola Bielerń



Photo: Beatrice Matassino

In the film, marine biologist **Lisa Becking** discussed the fascinating nature of sponges and the dire issue of coral bleaching. She emphasised **how our bodies, skin and even our households are all intertwined with these simple yet remarkable organisms**, highlighting our deep evolutionary connection and noting how **"we descend from sponges."** There are over 8000 species of sponges, which act as "huge vacuums" of the sea, pumping up to **50 times their own volume of seawater**, filtering bacteria and cleaning the ocean.



Photo: Ola Bielerń



Lisa emphasised the interdependence, cooperation and interconnectedness of these species and marine environments, underscoring the critical need to protect their biodiversity and, consequently, coral reef ecosystems. Lisa also addressed the concept of “**shifting baseline syndrome**,” where changes in the environment are measured against baselines that themselves have shifted, leading to a gradual acceptance of environmental degradation in younger generations. The film also used a variety of methods to convey **human-nature connections**. Full of vibrant and colourful shots, the film drew on the colours of sponges and integrated them into the city setting, highlighting the similarity between the two.



Photo: Mila Fazi

Moreover, intercutting was used to depict both human impacts and dependence on the marine ecosystem, alternating shots of everyday activities such as washing dishes with depictions of water and bleaching coral reefs.



Photo: Mila Fazi

Lastly, in the third section near the exit, there is a collection of sculptures depicting various marine species, including sponges and starfishes, and illustrating their interactions. These sculptures, crafted from chalk to once again symbolise their calcium composition, were accompanied by wooden sticks featuring varying coloured stripes, inspired by instruments used to identify different species based on their distinctive hues.

## THE ARTISTS

De Onkruidenier is a Dutch art collective consisting of three artists: **Jonmar van Vlijmen, Rosanne van Wijk, and Ronald Boer**. The group first came together in 2013 during their postgraduate programme in Maastricht and has been collaborating ever since, officially becoming a collective in 2018. Ronald mentions: “**A lot of things were buzzing and bubbling [between us during the programme].**” The “Sweet-Sweat” project was their first, where they connected over a wish to create a performative piece which included a storytelling element. Through their art and performances, the collective aims to explore nature and its historical, cultural, and future transformations and how the human species can evolve with it. Their work is based on collaboration with experts to better understand species, their characteristics and histories, as well as with other artists to create cooperative and inclusive pieces and performance.



Photo: [Onkruidenier.nl](https://onkruidenier.nl) - from the left Rosanne van Wijk, Jonmar van Vlijmen and Ronald Boer

The artists reiterated the beauty and power in being a collective, by not only dividing tasks and leveraging each other's skills but continuously inspiring one another “**by doing and creating new ways of thinking and acting.**”

For this project, they collaborated with **Lisa Becking**, with whom they had previously worked, to provide scientific insights. They also teamed up with other artists to create pieces for the performance, including the “**spiral of evolution**” drying rack and tap made from copper domestic water tubes. Additionally, they worked with a filmmaker, with whom they had also previously collaborated, and intend to complete the entire film series with.

The collective likes to call themselves “**ecosystem futurists.**” With this role, they aim to “rethink and reshape” the relationship between humans and aquatic environments, above and below sea level. They wish to challenge existing systems and “**try to envision different forms of cohabiting living environments,**” Ronald highlights. Generally in their projects, they want to “**create a different sensitivity [to issues regarding our relationship with the environment].**” Their curiosity in nature, ecology, and meeting kindred spirits “**opens fascination**” and is born from a realisation that there is still much we do not know and need to explore. De Onkruidenier aims to do this through their art.



Photo: *Onkruidenier.nl*

For this piece, the collective decided to focus on sponges due to the environmental pressures currently experienced by coral reefs, important habitats for the species, coupled by Lisa’s availability to work together. Inspired by the concept of natural cycles, the project was designed as an immersive process to be experienced through various steps, employing different mediums to fully submerge the audience. A film, shown on a continuous loop during the exhibition hours, was deemed best to communicate informative, speculative and artistic impressions. Roseanne noted “**you can show so many [different] worlds, all at the same time and move on very easily [from one to the other], can go to many places.**” This looping format allows the audience to access the exhibition at any time and still be able to understand and grasp its essence, as there is no fixed beginning or end to it.



Photo: *Mila Fazi* - from the left Beatrice Matassino, Rosanne van Wijk, Ola Bielerń and Mila Fazi

The film featured in the exhibition is part of an evolving film project for which they intend to create eleven additional films in the next two years, totaling to twelve, symbolising the twelve hours of a clock. With these films, they not only want to raise awareness and spread knowledge about the current crisis but also wish to create “**a wave of collective engagement**” (Roseanne). Indeed, the idea of creating a “Salt-Loving Community” was inspired by wanting to create a continuously growing space where people “**create moments and happenings they won’t forget**” (Ronald).

They were first invited to Oerol in 2018, the year the collective was officially formed. Since then, they have enjoyed being invited by the festival, believing it will allow them to reach a larger audience and more widely disseminate their art and messages. Their deep interest in our relationship with nature makes Oerol’s setting and attendees ideal for further exploration and conversation. With this in mind, many of the exhibition prompts, particularly the soaps, were crafted using natural elements from the island. Finally, the idea of life *beyond the dyke* is amplified in Terschelling’s geo-engineered environment and life *inside the dyke*.

# THE AUDIENCE

The exhibition was visited both by people who planned to see it beforehand, and those simply passing by. The predominantly Dutch audience was often determined to get to the root of the installation's message. The visitors were mostly adults, a few brought their kids to the exhibition. Some visitors either worked in the environmental sector themselves, or reported having a friend or loved one who did.

Audience impressions were assessed through a combination of methods. First, the emotional impact of the exhibition was evaluated by asking the visitors for one word describing their mood upon entering the exhibition, and then again when leaving it. The choice of following either the sweet or the salty route was also recorded.



Photo: Ola Bielerń

Interviews were conducted to explore the interpretation and impact of the exhibition. A semi-structured approach was chosen due to its flexibility and freedom to explore individual perspectives of the participants, whilst also allowing the acquisition of a baseline of information about the exhibition [1]. The interviewees were asked to **explain the main message of the exhibition, whether they noticed its connection to the household, what was their personal takeaway, and whether they exhibited a rather hopeful or pessimistic outlook on the future.** Prompted by one of the artists, the audience was asked about **shifting baseline syndrome**. The visitors also drew or wrote down something they are taking with them towards the future [2].

It was found that around 40% chose the saltwater path, and 60% the sweetwater one (possibly due to its proximity to the installation entrance), with some following a new path on the way back.

Frequently, the audience did not initially pay close attention to the path they were taking, as it was the very first part of the exhibition.

The exhibition brought about varying emotions. Upon entering, the audience predominantly experienced curiosity, but also reported feelings of calmness and relaxation, and sometimes stress or anxiety. When leaving the installation, different emotions emerged. Feelings of shame, worry, and sadness were reported more frequently. Oftentimes, the people were left full of thoughts and questions, with one audience member saying they were **filled with information "like a sponge."** Some visitors emerged feeling relaxed or meditative and attributed these emotions to the exhibition. One audience member said they felt "controversial" because the "materials did not feel natural." Another said that the exhibition made them feel "nostalgic" because it reminded them of playing in the sand as a kid on summer holiday.



Photo: Ola Bielerń

The audience paid attention to different aspects of the exhibition, reporting the importance of the film in its understanding. The audience members saw the educational messages the artists wanted to convey, getting to know sponges and sea life more closely. **"I didn't know there were such colours in nature. Almost chemical,"** said one of the visitors. Another visitor stated that the exhibition facilitates consciousness of 'invisible' sea life because it "lifts it out" of the water for us to see, as the artists intended. An interviewee also stated learning about environmental impacts, learning that **"humans are killing nature"** and that **"sponges are having a hard time."** Moreover, a message of responsibility was reported, both for environmental degradation and for acting upon it. Through drawing connections between the marine environment and our everyday, this is also in line with the artists' intentions. **"We have to believe what's going on in the sea and all the changes – everyone is responsible,"** argued a visitor.

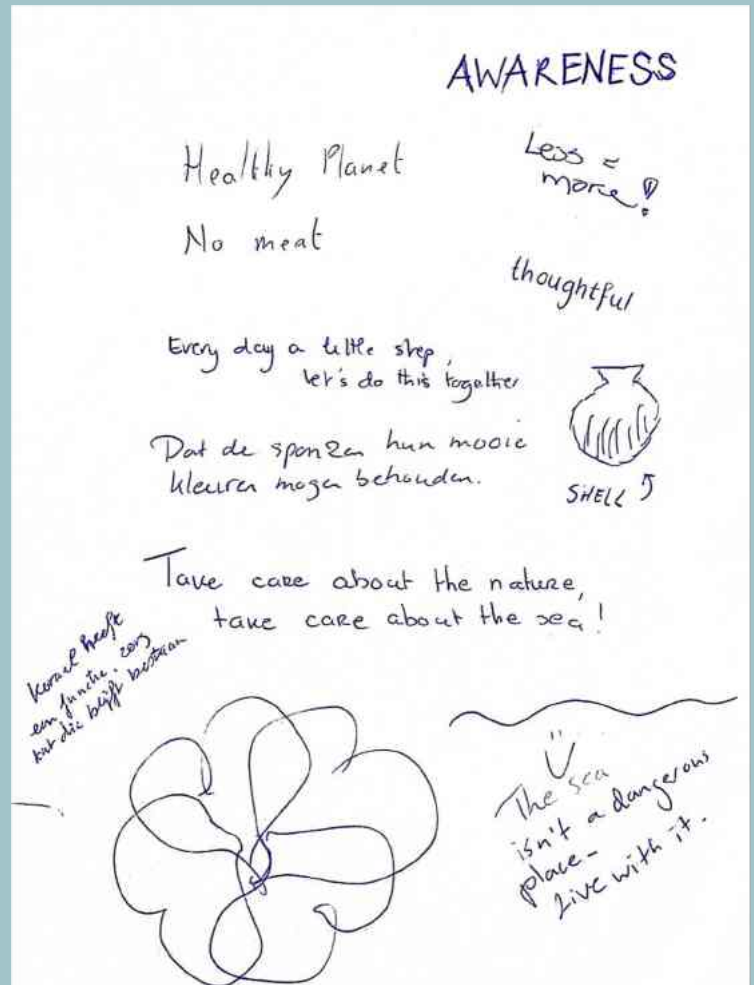
However, the most frequently reported message was that of care, appreciation, and connection to the environment which was, indeed, the central message of the installation. One of the visitors said that **“through the smell and the senses, the exhibition invites you to feel as a sponge,”** which fosters understanding and appreciation of the environment we are dependent on. **“We don’t live in harmony with nature, and if we want to exist, we need harmony,”** another visitor said. Hence, the exhibition was said to warn us about the exploitation of natural resources.

Many, but not all audience members noticed how the art connected to the household. They found it most apparent through the acts of hand washing, cleaning dishes, and the use of water in our everyday life. A vast majority of the audience understood ‘shifting baseline syndrome’ well, although not all remembered the exact term. Some reported being familiar with the term prior to the exhibition, and some said that they have implicitly noticed its effects throughout their lives. To illustrate this, they brought in anecdotes of environmental change. **“My child doesn’t understand what it is like to be playing in the garden and there are butterflies flying around,”** said a visitor.

The audience had unique personal takeaways, and their drawings and notes can be seen below. Some audience members stated the exhibition was mostly educational, for example through teaching them about the intense colours of sponges underwater or shifting baseline syndrome. Others reported that the exhibition reaffirmed their existing beliefs about the state of the environment, while some said it pushed them to action. **“What’s within my circle?”** asked a visitor, directing attention toward individual actions.

Some visitors took home a heightened appreciation of their environment, saying that **“Earth is so well-made, it is very special to live here on this planet.”** Similarly, some noticed our proximity to the natural environment and stated that **“nature is much closer to you than you think”** and **“humans are connected to other organisms and elements through our bodies”** One person asked **“What if we turned things around? We would adapt instead of making the Earth adapt.”**

**“I want to be optimistic but it’s hard. But I keep fighting because, what else can I do?”**



The visitors emerged with a mixed sentiment toward the future. Although pessimistic statements, such as **“if you want to change anything, it has to be through politics, but they don’t take it seriously,”** were made, more hopeful beliefs, such as **“people are intelligent and will find solutions”** were also expressed. A vast majority of the visitors were neither entirely hopeful, nor entirely pessimistic. A visitor said they are **“not hopeful but not too discouraged either,”** as the documentary showed both the problems and the resilience of sponges. Feelings of fear and powerlessness were also reported. One visitor described their sentiment as: **“I want to be optimistic but it’s hard. But I keep fighting because, what else can I do?”**

Overall, the exhibition evoked different interpretations, exhibited an emotional impact and left audiences with a mixture of pessimism and hope looking toward the future. This thought-provoking artwork provided the visitors not only with education, but also prompted them to reflect upon their own proximity to the natural environment.

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