

# It's not about that

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- A degree project by Julia Christoffersson and  
Mira Buus Rasmussen

written by Julia Christoffersson

*Stockholm university of the Arts*

Bachelor's degree, 5 hp

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This page usually no one reads

## Acknowledgements

If you, or anyone close to you, is a victim of violence or need support, call:

Kvinnofridslinjen	020 50 50 50
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1. This text aspires to be One00 pages long. It wants to be a short story with a long prologue. The short story is about the performance of our degree project, which I made together with Mira Buus Rasmussen during autumn 2024 in Stockholm university of the Arts. This text is written *about* and *from* dance, performance and choreography. It is meant to entertain? provoke? follow a narrative? as well as retelling the performance and process of our degree project. The text, pictures and gaps are reaching for further choreography, depth, understanding and development within the topics, themes, scores and movement materials of our work.
1. I am a part of a “white” institution, which will be elaborated on in the chapter Self-critique.
1. The short story has a long prologue *about* the work. If you would like to go directly to the short story, this is found on page 404.
1. Special Thanks to Simon Dahlgren, Linn Dahlgren, Kalle Thyselius, Olle Axén, Vincent Jonsson, Karin Hauptmann och Ingela Stefaniak Öhman.
1. Expect nothing new. Everything is old, past, borrowed, simplified, twisted or inspired by.

*about*

## Prologue

Early in the process Mira and I had a conversation around our current interests and desires in dance, choreography, performance, and what we imagined our degree project to be. At this point we had no clue of how to relate, compose, or create meaning around our several and different ideas. Topics and themes that came up during our first conversation and later on evolved during the weeks of our project, will be listed and elaborated on below.

- 1. The Cube
- 1. Irreversible actions
- 1. Anger & Violence
- 1. Carving
- 1. Self critique

### ***1. The Cube***

I cannot recall where this idea came from, I simply just knew that I wanted it in my degree project; A big, room size, plastic cube filled with smoke. This was the first idea we both agreed on. Shortly after, we had a workshop with Sonya Lindfors (personal communication, 2024) where we got to try collective dreaming, posing open questions and imagery into the room. From here on, Mira and I used this method to benefit our process, and decided that we would every week devote time to that imagery. It resulted in a shared imagination bubble that we both inhabited, which sometimes gave us answers before any question was verbalized. Within the first week we also included and worked with our sound designer Simon Dahlgren, which increased the sense of our creation. The more senses we could fit into the bubble, the more vivid our performance became.

### ***1. Irreversible actions***

Another idea that caught our interest early on was what I referred to as *irreversible actions*. But after several conversations with our classmates we came to the conclusion that no action is reversible. I had to specify what I wanted to investigate and it became clearer exploring with Mira in the studio. We realized that I was curious about:

- 1. actions that can only (within the rules of the game) happen once; for example, slap the other person

2. actions that are memorable as *that one time* that change, or create a situation; the slap will probably evoke emotions, leaving both of you in a vacuum of milliseconds before the next action follows, so
3. How do we handle the situation that has appeared?

The *one time action* is for me also about wanting to practice presence and performativity. In the score *Once: irreversible actions* one could only drink a glass of water once, break a stick, turn off the lamp, poke a hole in the balloon once. This created an interest to take such actions into set movement material. We used another score called *Choreo-one-ophy* as a method for creating set movement material. The rules were to create 10 movements each day where you decide where a movement begins and where it ends. The movements had to relate to the following characters:

- the contemporary female dancer (western canon)
- the hysterical woman
- the bodybuilder
- the violence/anger
- the randomness

In 10 days we would reach our goal of One00 movements and those had to be taught, learned, and danced in a way that every movement has to be **the one**: no jumping ahead - fully present in every movement.

### *1. Anger and Violence*

During our conversations in the beginning of the project we talked a lot about violence towards women, at this point referring to female friends, coworkers, women in our near community and our own

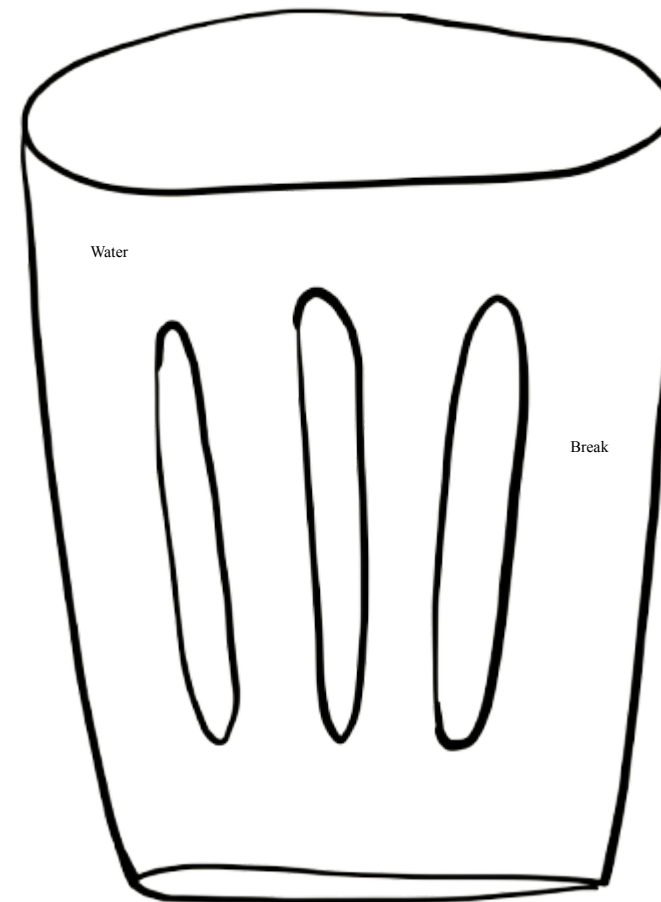
experiences of male violence towards women. Physical and psychological. We also touched upon women's violence towards each other, toxic femininity and internalized values of gender norms and how these are consumed with ease, similarly to drinking a glass of water, in our everyday life. We related these topics to the feeling of anger. So how harmful, angry and violent can gender norms become?

According to Anja Hirdman (UR play, 2017) female bodies are considered a public domain, accessible for everyone to assess and judge, while the male body is considered private. And the fact that women historically didn't have the right to own land, property, nor their own body is nothing new, but what really should not strike me, but it does, is how deeply rooted gender norms **still** lie within western culture. Hirdman (UR play, 2017) continues with western gender norms praises a skinny, pleasant, caring and beautiful woman - preferably a mother, that aims to please others. Female gendered bodies are also treated as more emotional than the male gendered body, which **historically** has resulted in a distinction between body and mind (UR play, 2017). Now, NOTE: To mention how something is **still** present or **historically** connected to our western society could arguably be even more problematic and frustrating than gender norms itself. Western society and perhaps Scandinavians like to over and over insist on thinking about how "modern" society we live in. (And I'm writing "we" and "ours", because I consider myself, and possibly also you who are reading this, belonging to that society). The western wealth and "modern" society has and still is feeding capitalistic and colonial structures that don't belong to the past. In

the same way gender norms don't stop to exist just because it's the year 2025. Hence, if we look at today's female gender norms they are, NOT surprisingly! influenced by how it was 300 years ago. The beautiful woman and a caring mother that acts from emotions rather than sense. The “modern” western society isn't as pro-liberating as it would like to paint itself in the history books.

Our conversation around anger and violence led us back to a workshop based on consensual work with Eroca Nicols (personal communication, 2022). One exercise was to drink water. But before swallowing you, for yourself, should decide on if you really wanted to swallow the water. Otherwise you could spit it out. Perhaps this sounds easy.

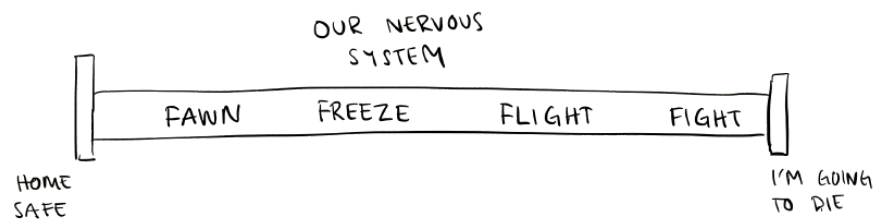
I now encourage you to take a break from reading this text and try this exercise.





Another exercise was sparring. In the sparring I did a koala move on Mira, where I placed my belly towards hers, hugging her tightly with both arms and legs. No matter what she did she couldn't shake me off. I was the koala and she was my tree. A claustrophobic experience she told me afterwards. The sparring's duration was only 1 minute and either one could **tap out** at any time. None of us did. But during those 1 minute sparrings, a fascination of being able to recognize, act upon, listen to our limits and be able to practise how to turn on or off your anger, as well as your violent physical skills, has stayed with me and tickled my nerves ever since.

During this workshop we also learnt more about how our nervous system operates and how to recognize the different indications.



Most people are used to talking about fight or flight as defense mechanisms. But what I learnt was that there are two more; freeze and fawn. To be able to recognize if you're in danger, or perhaps be able to read someone else's body language, you have to reflect upon these four instead of two, to be able to get a reasonable grasp of the situation. What is really dangerous and what is just discomfort? What does violent body language look like?

1 year later we had another workshop with Eroca. This time we spoke of safe spaces and how there is none. The question of access to safety is directly connected to the topics of intersectionality. And the question of what safety is, and for whom, in which spaces, was something we wanted to include in our performance when it came to the audience experience. We found that gaslighting the audience is an extremely effective performative tool. The word gaslighting traces back to the play *Gaslight* (Hamilton, 1938), which is a form of manipulation where information is distorted, twisted or omitted. It aims to make its victim doubt their own perception and senses. Hence, we wanted the audience members to feel conflicted emotions. Perhaps emotionally hysterical. Why are they doing this? What is the purpose? Don't come any closer. Am I the only one who doesn't feel comfortable? Is this supposed to be funny? Haha what?

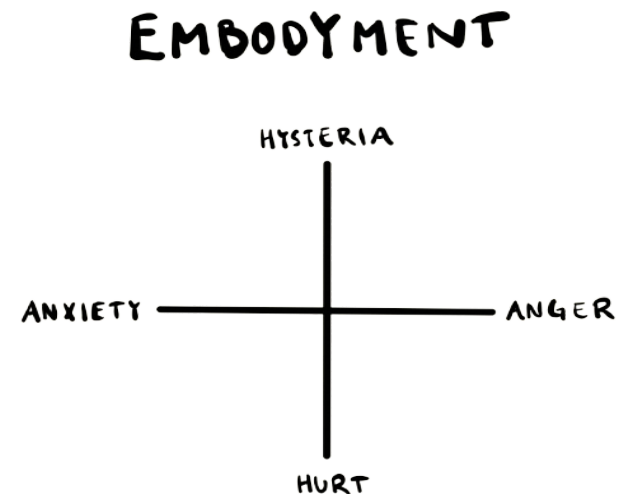
Perhaps we could evoke loneliness within an audience member, even though they would sit in a room together with 120 people. We wanted the audience to laugh at absurdness while in the next moment question why they laughed at a situation that is not funny at all, actually. Perhaps we could manage to provoke some audience members, or let just a few feel chosen, accused or uncomfortable in their chair. No one sits safe in their spot. And it is us, as performers, that have agency and power in the situation. There were specifically two times where this idea got centered. The first is when Mira is performing a (duo)monologue, talking to me but foremost to the audience. She's directing her fast-switching feelings towards different audience members and the overall body language that appeared in them was stiffening up, slowly pressing their backs

towards the back of the chair. The second time is towards the end of the performance where we invite only three people, hand picked by us, that would come with us into the cube. What they didn't know was that they would be asked to do a set of actions to us, of which will remain secret to the rest of the audience. Some audience members perhaps felt that it's unfair that not everyone got to go inside the mysterious cube. But others told me afterwards that they didn't want to go inside, because of the uncomfot and distrust that was established up to this point. This was our intention all along and it felt that we succeeded with the task of pointing out that no spaces are safe spaces.

Another perspective that came up was about our perception of how anger is or isn't socially accepted in Scandinavian society. Anger is usually a feeling that should be controlled, rationalized, dealt with and stored in an emotional private box - perhaps a cube. We talked about how anger easily transforms into other feelings such as anxiety, hurt and **hysteria**.

The word hysteria and its historical connection to western societal norms reminded us of a lecture led by Andrew Hardwidge (personal communication, 2022). We continued to research and found that women historically were prescribed as hysterical *if they acted from a place of anger* and often were confined or medicated due to their behaviour (TED-ed, 2024). We quickly realized that hysteria was something we wanted to explore further, because we were drawn to the expressive possibilities and the unpredictability that comes with the meaning, history and practice of hysteria - hysterical funny,

hysterical anger, hysterical laughter, hysterical movements and hysterical women. In our practice based exploration, we found ourselves in a theatrical roller coaster which we wanted to incorporate in the final performance but also throughout the process.





Jean-Martin Charcot demonstrating hysteria in a patient, 1887.

### ***1. Carving***

One of my most practiced hobbies is woodworking. For the last 3 years carving has been a specific interest because of the kinesthetic empathy that appears when I carve. And I strongly believe that dancing together with others has increased that kinesthetic connection to different materials. During the first semester of my Bachelor in Dance Performance education I started to carve a sculpture of a woman's torso. The more realistic shapes it got, the more I could relate to the body being carved. It went to the extent that I couldn't finish the project, due to my discomfort in having a knife toward a sculpture portraying a body like my own. It wasn't until the degree projects, that I came back to the sculpture and my curiosity for how I could merge performance, kinesthetic empathy, and carving. Partly, I wanted to explore the performativity of crafting on stage and partly to make visible the time-consuming process of crafting, dancing or making something.

In the woodworking community, carving is often referred to as taking away material in order to create something “beautiful” which implies certain values around beauty. After a seminar with Rolando Vazquez Melken (personal communication, 2024) I would argue that this viewpoint on beauty and nature is grounded in capitalism and colonial modernity, where pieces of nature have to be processed by the human hand in order to gain worthy status. And what is interesting about this is how closely the idea of colonial modernity lies within gender norms and ideals. Later on in the process we started to explore the shape of the sculpture and how we kinesthetically can relate to the female body being sculpted into an

ideal body. We created a score where we on a philosophical level try to embody a tree that is chopped down with an axe, divided into smaller pieces with a saw and carved with a knife; a rather harmful action if you imagine the tree as a living organism. Furthermore, the sculpture is a female coded body portraying reproductive ability. No head, no arms or legs. Again, this is speaking something about values of a female body. A constrained body focused on reproductive ability - over thinking, creating or going places -

We ended up adding another torso to our scenography.

This version was full size, skinny and made in transparent plastic. For us the plastic represents a rather toxic process of reproducing a premolded ideal. It was placed as displayed in a museum; something precious and beautiful on a pedestal. A body as a commodity. On one side of the stage stood a female torso in wood – the result of a violent process of carving a female body – and on the other side, a plastic female torso produced from toxicity. No matter in which direction the audience would look - norms of how to be, look or act as a woman are there, in one or several shapes.

### ***1. Self-Critique***

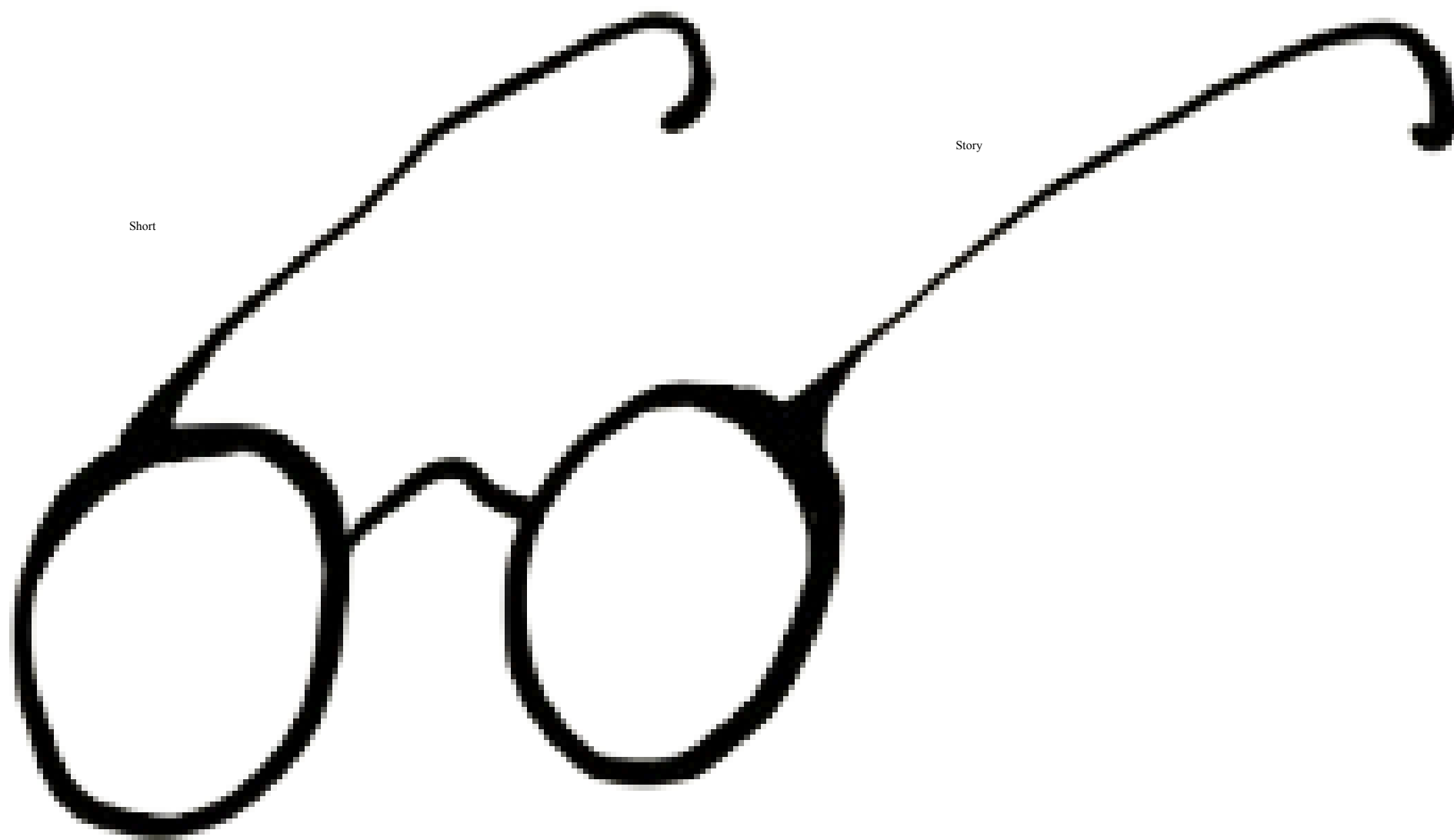
During my three years on SKH several lectures and teachers have said that the school is very “white”. Me and Mira talked about how to navigate the topic of violence towards women in relation to that knowledge and how to position ourselves from an intersectional perspective. From one of the workshops with Eroca Nicols (personal communication, 2024) it became very clear to me that in a violent situation, police brutality at a demonstration for instance, I, as a

woman, is most likely not to get hurt, because of my privileges. But the contradictory aspect appears if one looks at which type of victims are put forward and is given a place in pop-culture and mainstream media; The white woman. The perspectives on violence towards black women, for instance, is not as present in the conversation. Hence, the body - our bodies - are political and cannot stay unacknowledged when making a performance. It matters who's doing what, when, where and how. So, what are Mira and I entitled to embody and put on stage? Two white cis-female able-bodied heterosexual young women born and raised in the middle-class in Scandinavia to well educated parents who have supported us in pursuing our interests in studying art. The lived experience of violence that we have is after all, from the black woman's perspective.

After listening to Oda-Kange Midvåge Diallo (personal communication, 2024) on a seminar hosted by Future Brown Space, facilitated by Jean Peaul Zaccarini, Midvåge Diallo pointed out that there's nothing more exhausting than to listen to professors, lecturers and academics, especially white men, talking about their *expertise* in black theory. It's not their expertise to own since there's a lack of embodied knowledge. Again it strikes me. Which themes can I represent on stage? And by doing so, what or who is not getting that space? Violence towards black women is real and is not to dispatch that Mira and I have embodied experiences of that. But the problem appears when it comes to taking up space, such as making a performance that could potentially spread into the art scene. One of our supervisors gave feedback around the work as something that

has the aesthetics and topics that are shown in school environments. This made me think. I don't believe that the piece, as it was shown at the point in time of the performance, is representative enough for being shown in a school context, because of the risk that only white students would feel included, reproducing the white woman as the victim. However, Jean Paul Zaccarini writes "Whiteness is not the same thing as white people. Just as white feminism does not account for all feminists who happen to be assigned white. Whiteness, for FBS is a colonial fiction we will not be bringing with us into the future"(Zaccarini, 2024, p. 5). The distinction between the white and the whiteness is crucial, because our performance may be performed by white people. But it is the whiteness we want to avoid. Additionally, Zaccarini's way of writing, ironically - on a black and white paper - resonates upon the fact of how deeply rooted the presence of whiteness, really is. Therefore, I've used this method throughout my own text to cast a slight reminder of the "colonial fiction" that Zaccarini writes about.

In conclusion, I am contributing to a white institution just by being in this education. And if we would have more time, nowadays, to rework our performance, probably we would have brought in more nuances to the piece. But the question for me still remains; How do I take space and which gaps are filled and/or remain? For sure, on a personal level I feel pure joy in dancing and creating, but seriously, do the "white" institutions need yet another of these performances?



Short

Story

They bought the apartment years ago, when they were silly in love with each other and life. They had dreams of starting a family, the traditional way, and having a boat by the sea which they would sail every Midsummer. But when she found the dead mouse under that slightly darker wooden plank in the hallway, her golden hair suddenly lost its shine, her skin was not as porcelain pale as before and her whole being started to decay. No matter how many old housemaid hacks she tried with - the smell of decomposition under the hallway floor never really left.

**S**he laid on the sofa when suddenly waking up from her dream. Sweaty and panting. He was in the kitchen making tea.

- Nightmares again? he asked.
- Yes, she answered.

He gives her a cup of herbal tea.

- For your nerves darling. Now, tell me about the performance you saw yesterday.

She took a sip of the tea, instantly burning her tongue.

- Well. When I first got there I thought I was late, but there were many people outside the stage, so I found my way through the crowd. I wanted to be in one of the front seats. The moment I entered the stage I felt excited because the first thing I saw was some sort of plastic room filled with smoke that was seeping out from the corners. And together with the cold white lights from the ceiling, it looked like an

ice cube that was just taken out from the fridge. When having a closer look I saw female silhouettes inside it. Like fossils. Thereafter, I directed my skull nodules towards the black floor to watch my steps, so I wouldn't fall over some cords. I saw shoe prints that weren't my own. Size 43 I think. As secretly I could I ran a little bit towards a seat in the front, so that no one else would take it. You know how I am with having good seating in performances.

He straightens up his back, strikes his fingers through his thick brown hair, smiles and nods.

She continues.

- The chairs didn't have any numbers, but I think it was the 7th from the left. I sat down and immediately felt my sit bones resting on the soft seat. On the stage in front of me there was a black chair with a microphone stand on the left of the cube, and a plastic torso to the right. Everything was included in my peripheral gaze. You should have seen the transparent torso. I wish I had a body like that, she said and stroked one of his curls away from his forehead and continued.
- Before they came out of the cube my mind was already trying to predict the coming scenes; A monologue from a person sitting in the chair, the cube rising up in the ceiling like a dish being revealed under a cloche and dancers snuggling in an almost sensual way. You know, the ordinary stuff.

He smiles and pushes the tea cup closer to her. She takes a sip, feeling the burn on her tongue while adding.

- There was sound when entering the stage, but it was like it got slightly louder every minute. From this point onwards the performance was in motion, headed towards the end. It had started, and there was no going back. The sound from the speakers went directly towards my heart. Pounding harder and harder. It was like they were battling in which could beat the loudest. It was so strange because at one point they cut each other's hair, like they were in a hair salon. And some sort of sadistic slapping game. I wonder if it hurts because their cheeks went slightly more pink afterwards. Like a cute pretty rogue. I glanced at my watch at 18.42 when the music got louder, more intense and intimidating. I somehow wanted to predict if we were at the dramatic climax or not.

- Okay, but what was it about?, he said.

She stopped for a while to think, then continued.

- I suppose it wasn't mainly about cutting someone's hair. Maybe it was about intransparency. Opacity. Or a broken piece of glass. But not any type of glass. The crafted glass, that is blown and shaped by hand. The type of glass that changes the perception of shape depending on where you stand. Glass that you cut your finger on just by touching a splinter.
- Yes I know, he said. The type of glass that is in our display cabinet, he said and pointed towards the cabinet where they store red wine glasses.

- Exactly! she almost screamed of excitement and clapped her hands because the picture became so clear.

He calmly reached for the newspaper and opened it while saying

- I think you should have some more rest before my business dinner tonight.
- You're right, I'll just prepare a few more of the grey helium balloons, she said and went into the home office.



he's sleeping on the blue sofa in the living room. The tea boiler is screaming from the stove and the steam seems to fill the whole kitchen. She wakes up and rubs her eyes to get a clearer sight. She sees him in the kitchen. He has his back towards her. Does he have a tail? She sits up and rubs her eyes again.

- Tea or tail, he says.
- What?, she said.
- Tell me, he repeats, continuing with the tea.

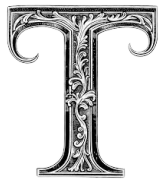
She wrinkles her forehead, not sure if she's still dreaming.

- How come you didn't go to the performance yesterday? he says.
- I.. guess I forgot the ticket, she says confused. But I swear..
- Here's your tea, he gives her the IKEA tea cup made of glass.
- Thank you darling, she says but in the same moment she burns her hand on the glass. She manages to save it from falling to the ground and places the cup on the coffee table.



- I washed your hat and it accidentally became a bit smaller.
- Which one?, she said nervously.
- The furr..
- Nah No! Not my mink fur!??, she bursted out. She could have sworn she' d been telling him about One00 times before..
- Now, calm down, you don't have to be hysterical about it, he said and walked out of the room.

She throws herself back into the sofa with a big sigh and with arms crossed. 7 seconds later her eyes widened. And from lying comfortably on the sofa, she reaches with her left foot as far as she can. With her little toe she manages to reach the tea cup and slowly, like a cat playing tricks, pushes it off the table.



he next time she will wake up on the sofa, she will lay in his “white” shirt. It is oversized on her. The room will be filled with smoke and she will not be able to see her hands in front of her. She will start to cough and fumble around to find the hallway door. She will accidentally knock over the cup of tea. And the tea will leave a stain on the “white” carpet. A turquoise one because of rat poison.

\* Short story written **about** the performance *It's not about that*, though an exercise about ekphrasis I got to practise during a workshop with Mette Edvardsen, during Within Practise

2024. (personal communication, , 2024) and can be found in similar ways in the book Movement research, chapter “The moment before” by Mette Edvardssen.

## Epilogue

The performance we made was named **It's not about that**. Because it's about many things. Layered. The whole purpose of not being specific about what the performance is about is to continuously ask the observer what should and should not be (perhaps) placed on stage. The title plays with your imagination of what could and what could not be (perhaps) placed on stage. And (perhaps) that is provoking to you. I really do hope it is, because whatever you think that is about - it's not.

*from*

# *Vocab      dictio ulary      nary*

\* my understanding, meaning-making and knowledge around words that I've  
gotten acquainted with during the project.  
Followed by a correct description of the word according to Collins English  
Dictionary (2005).

# ephemeral

Lasting for a short period of time, a blink of an eye. It was there and it was indescribable.

**Eng. Dictionary:** short-lived or fleeting

# dance

Practicing presence through movement.

**Eng. Dictionary:** move the feet and body rhythmically in time to music; perform (a particular dance); skip or leap; move rhythmically, social meeting arranged for dancing

# gaslighting

Får en annan person att tvivla på dennes verklighetsuppfattning. Manipulation och vilseledande. Film: Bergman. The perfect performative tool.

**Eng. Dictionary:** To manipulate someone into doubting their own reality or belief

# hamam

Washing ritual

something with the tactile touch, kinesthetic empathy, cognitive dissonance

**Eng. Dictionary:** Turkish Bath

# intransparent

See-through, but not fully. Plastic. Dimmig. Hazy.

**Eng. Dictionary:** not allowing light to pass through; Not clear or easily understood; lacking openness.

# hYsteria

**Eng Dictionary:** state of uncontrolled excitement, anger or panic; attack of hysteria ; uncontrollable laughter

### *Micro fiction 300*



nce upon a time there were two main characters in this story. It could have been about him and her, but there is a *-two sides of a coin-* character. Perhaps there's one two-sided main character. Like Anders Morgenthaler's Katjakaj and Bentebent they were different heights. One skinny tall and one short chubby. But the legs are the same height, so it's mostly the torso length that differs them apart - heightwise. They have the same sex torso though. Her torso. A 3D female one, but two - in numbers. Similarly to Katjakaj and Bentebent they wore the same shirt. A white long sleeved organized oversized one. Looking a bit cute and fun and sexy. Just like every woman in the world when running to the bathroom to pee after sex. I sense the smell of iron. Y.



### ONCE: UPON A TIME

Read a once upon a time story to each other, then write your own once upon a time story.

A: Perform your story.

B: Tell person A, the story you saw.

Switch roles.



## WARM-UP SCORE: ONCE

Make one action. Repeat this action 100 times.

Make a second action. Repeat this action 10 times.

Make a third action once.

## ONCE: IRREVERSABLE ACTIONS

Turn on the lamp 💡

Drink a glass of water 💧

Choose one branch & break it 🌳

Hit a nail with a hammer 🔨

Make a hole in a balloon 🎈

Scream 🗣️

Start an intention to say something without saying any words 🗣️

Turn off the lamp 💡



## Material: Being worked

Part A { A: Work with the material for 10 minutes.  
B: Observe person A working with the material.

Part B { B: Embody the material being worked.  
A: Observe person B.



## Choreo-one-ophy

Learn a choreography containing movements that only appear once.

Perform it together in front of an audience.

# *Gall ery*



Photographer: Kalle Thyselius





\* Photographer: Kalle Thyselius

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