

Young Girl Reading Group

ARTIST

Dorota Gawęda: We're an artist duo, we started working together in 2013 and we work in a variety of media, but performance is the core of our practice. Eglė Kulbokaitė: Performance and text. We work a lot with our extended project Young Girl Reading Group that started as a reading group in Berlin in 2013 and continued as a casual reading group, but then growing into more performative settings, installations, etc. We work a lot like in collaborative ways, like from the ... it's the core of our practice I guess, since there's two of us. So, I think like we're interested in kind of blurring this kind of authorship, as like a solo artist notion. Yeah. And then like we share a lot of responsibilities with people that we work with. And then they influence the work a lot. I think the people that are part of it, that are performing our pieces. (D.G.): Yes, our performances are based on that very loose kind of scripting. They don't have a defined choreography but there is like a ... somehow they develop more within a workshop structure, so all the people, that become the readers, they also somehow become the choreographers too, because they somehow together, within this group dynamic, invent the movement and how the performance will develop from iteration to iteration, it varies and differs. It somehow ... I guess, it's more interesting for us to ... to think of a work that is not so rigid within its frame. It's more moldable and it can change also through time. (E.K.): Yeah, so we call it like reading group, so it's a group or a community of people that like share the ideas. And this group is constantly growing, like year by year we feel. In its origins, Young Girl Reading Group was a reading group. So, we started it in Berlin and we ran it on a weekly basis from our home. We would meet every Sunday and then kind of select texts that would be read each week. In the same time, we tried to promote it as an event. Something maybe quite attractive seemingly, but in the end, it was a very casual meeting that was open to anyone who was interested in a given text in a kind of a nonacademic way of sharing that text. And I guess, it's just kind of started developing from there, like both, in the location of the reading which was at the time Berlin, and then also online, where we always kind of post what we were going to read, so we shared the texts. And that kind of opened a conversation as well. We met at the ... in London, at Royal College of Art, like we were doing our masters, both of us. I did masters in curating, but you did it in Visual Communications. And I guess like it's coming a bit like - or maybe I'm coming more from theoretical kind of background anyways. So, maybe that influenced like the interest in text, I guess. (D.G.): Yeah, I guess, but it's also just like the experience of the university, like art education, it had an influence on us, setting up Young Girl Reading Group in the first place, because it just felt, like we need to make our own space to share certain texts that were not covered, I think. I guess, we really felt that something was lacking in the education that we really needed to relearn. That's why like kind of self-educate a bit afterwards. So, that's why we started this reading group.

ARTWORK

Here at Schimmel, we showed the eighth iteration of this particular strand of performances. They base on the same text which is read, and it's the center of the choreography in the somehow core of the whole piece. But somehow, they vary in the objects used and the site specificity of the installation. Also, it is always performed by different people, so it's always the group dynamic that influences each iteration of the performance. From the beginning we used Facebook a lot as a ... like a group and sharing, like just a location of the reading. Because the reading group was quite nomadic at the beginning and we wanted everyone to be able to follow and to kind of ... from distance or like to attend them on location. And also share the text between everyone, like to make it easily accessible or so. So, we would upload like PDFs and like so people could read it in distance. Yeah, and then we used Instagram a lot, but this is more like, when image making became like more significant for us, I guess. And the aesthetics of this reading group. (D.G.): A lot of our performances are shared online and when we do it,

we kind of decide to do it, to share the documentation from the perspective of the performers. So somehow give the people who are inside the piece agency and how they want to represent themselves and which images they want to share, and when also. So, it's not only the audience documenting from the outside but the performers documenting themselves and also the setting, the audience, the— yeah, the whole environment they're in. And it is also another way of opening up the performance space and just sharing it further with the people that are not present in the space. I guess Agatha Valkyrie Ice is our earlier project. We started with this project kind of in parallel to Young Girl Reading Group. And this was a network of people that like agreed to contribute to creating a virtual character. For us I guess, it was like interesting to think about gender on the internet, like online basically and how it is like controlled and, if there is possibility of being this like genderless character online. Like multiple and genderless. We were reading a lot of about this post gender theory, like Shulamite Firestone and Thedger and I think this has inspired us to kind of experiment with that. So, there was a lot of people, involved throughout doing a variety of projects like exhibitions, like music, curated shows ... we ran a project space in Basel in Switzerland under the name of Agatha Valkyrie Ice. So, somehow it was a very nice experiment, like to this kind of collective authorship in some way. (D.G.): And it somehow ... the protect originated in text, in language also, so, it was somehow really important for us, to kind of ... it was a bit of a role play for many people who just deciding to contribute to the project ... they also decided to use and kind of propagate this language, this way of expression, which didn't distinguish between the genders and it also didn't distinguish between singular and plural, so, that was somehow kind of a statement within the art context that really blurred the boundaries between who is the artist, who is the curator, who have you kind of ... I don't know built something within cultural production without defining maybe yourself and others as such. So, it really kind of flattened in a way ... the experience in the communication also, which was especially interesting when we were running a project space, to kind of stop distinguishing between yeah the space, the curators of the space, the artist that contribute and then the overall kind of outcome of that experiment. I guess for us it's ... we're kind of interested in these forms that are open. So, with our work, especially the performative work, we kind of never really defined its like start point and endpoint. We kind of really want to have like room for growth with each project. That's why we're not very rigid with the scripting of the choreography, the way we use elements, sets, objects, that we make. (E.K.): Yeah, and I guess it's like ... we never consider it finished, because it can always change and it is like a nature of Young Girl Reading Group and Agatha also: everything can be rewritten, like, restaged or like modulated in some way. I guess, it's a lot like research project, cause like we're still continue doing reading so, like reading is a core, like we read a lot of theory and of course like your ideas change throughout, through learning, so like you don't want to maybe like make a commitment to the ideas that you had a few years ago. And this theory changes ideas, every new, so somehow like we're like the project to change with it. I guess, it is a little bit of an accumulative process there because they mimic each other in some way, so like they mimic people from the previous performances so, like these poses are suggestions of like what other people kind of like proposed to us. We also like look a lot at painting, also like, masters etc. So, more like ... old material. (D.G.): Yeah, we looked a lot at representations of saints actually, from like this international gothic period which is like this ... I don't know, just for us like viral images of people in a way. So, just to kind of think about the image and the representation of the self and the attributes of a person and ... so, it's a lot of, a lot of the poses are taken from those paintings, I think. (E.K.): Yeah, but I guess, a lot like from social media also, like the main kind of thread that goes through this performance, is this awkward poses that like ... poses that you like wouldn't maybe take for reading and how it changes your voice and how it changes the reading and how much like text is related to the body also, like in perception of text is related to the body, this kind of connection. So, there is lot of sort from fashion in some ways, like also yes - (D.G.): Yes, the references are multiple.

PRODUCTION

I guess our research is very continuous. So, like it's hard to define the beginning of the research for a project, because it's just from the beginning of 2013. Like we kind of go through all this material for a specific line of work. And then, I guess like, yeah it comes like the text in parallel with the objects, like we kind of define what's significant to us at this particular moment, I guess, like with a political or social situation and like, we want to speak about. So, develop material part the same time as a conceptual part, we always kind of take, I don't know, our inspiration let's say from the reading group. And somehow it's like the projects they a little bit like narrow down the discussion or something. Like, they narrow down the topic of our interest and then the aesthetics and the objects and everything comes together around this text, that we start putting together from various references. Just looking into very diverse, I think, kind of sources, no. Yes, and then I guess, we kind of think a lot about the making of the space for this particular reading. So, kind of thinking of like architectures nearly. So, what it means to kind of make a space for this text in a given gallery or setting and then what it needs. So, we really think about the needs of the readers and the audience for and understanding of this topic. And then, how the objects that we select, how do they influence this understanding as well. We find the performers in- within our group most of the time. So, they're people that we worked with before, people that followed the group or like people that can embody this text, that is read. I think that is really interesting for us, to have this like, they are not necessarily professional performers as such but are interested in specific like topics or like this feminist and queer theory. But also interested like in self-representation and movement. So... And then we work in a workshop setting with the performers, so that we test out the movements within the space like through a few days and then I guess it comes to the presentation, the final presentation. It's always the case with performance that you cannot fully control all the elements, because it is a live and time-based work. But I guess we also kind of always want to make it like very sight specific, so we always rehearse within the installation, before it is opened to the audience. Then we change certain things within the choreography, within the text sometimes even, like depending on the specifics of this installation. And then finally, we also with- record a lot of video material during the rehearsals, that it is somehow- most often, it is used within the exhibition setting as well, so we kind of we really want to have this interaction, like really present in- on many different levels aside from the time of the- just this short time of when the space is activated by the performers.

MATERIAL

We work a lot with texts, or like reading is the core of performance. But there is a lot of like movement, research involved, like staging this performance. But we work with installation, with a variety of materials, I guess, whatever like we feel that can like illustrate or kind of- maybe not illustrate, but kind of create a situation for this text, so it'll create this intimate kind of environment, suggestive of a text or like the ideas that we kind of translated from the text. (D.G.): Yeah, we also want to make environments that are somehow like moldable and modifiable, I think. So, we kind of bring together different elements that can interact somehow and be interacted with. So, I guess, that's kind of really important with each work. (E.K.): Mhm, and I guess image making and documentation is very important to us, too. Like staging this documentation for the camera but also in the variety of different ways. Like, we produced a fragrance also as like a documentation of a performance. (D.G.): Yes, so it's kind of like thinking about the, like this imprint of- or whatever is left after this kind of sensual experiencing of a performance. And I guess, it's really like – the fragrance is a really good example because there we kind of tried to think of a choreography that would make the performance smell in a certain way. So we divided the piece into six different acts and each act was somehow a creation of a certain smell that was later captured. So, it's somehow like this final outcome which is a fragrance- like a fine fragrance in a traditional sense, something that could be worn on the body that smells attractive. That was like in a way a starting point for the performance in the movement and- yeah, the choreography, the objects, the props, that were used. So, it's

somewhat thinking about these molecules that like contribute to the space, before you kind of make the space nearly. And similarly, we worked similarly often with images also, we think about the image, when we kind of make the work, too. (E.K.): And I guess, like another material, I guess, you can call this collaboration, like people that you work with and then these Ideas, like the new Ideas that come in. Because this fragrance, we developed like with a perfume company, international flavors and fragrances, I guess they make not only fragrance but flavors also, but like they have all the skills, scientific skills, to produce like new fragrance material. So they helped us in this technical way to capture the smell of the space and then synthetically reproduced it. In their lab, which was very interesting and maybe like not possible for us on our own to make it, you know. Like the variety of skills, I guess (D.G.): I guess, for this particular performance, we were interested in imprints of environments on the body. So, that's why we chose like white as a color for the costume. I guess, just to show that the traces are visible somehow on the costume. The traces of this clay installation. And the first editions had a costume made by us, but now we are thinking that like it's nice to kind of like collaborate with someone and to get new ideas into this costume making. Like in kind of in conversation with them. The costume is ... yes so it's always made in relation to what the setting is. So, the pieces are also made from terrycloth, so they somehow pick up a lot of this environment, they move it elsewhere with the movements of the bodies, of the performers, they leave stains on the walls around this space and similarly the- kind of the basic setting really takes all the imprints. So, it's just somehow about like this mutual change of the environment and the performers.

MEDIUM

We work with a variety of media I guess. Like, we don't consider any particular media more important than another. We would like to make more video work. I guess, now, in the future, but we will see where it goes. (D.G.): Yeah, because we are really interested in documentation of the performance actually. So, it kind of like naturally leads to video and then maybe even like making of like longer Filmworks I think. (D.G.): So, we have performance, photography also, video. And we also kind of like to make sculpture installations as well. So, all of those things somehow combined. (D.G.): Smell also we consider a medium, I think (laughs). It's something, that we used several times already in different projects and also want to expand on that.

PROCESS

So, there is always a lot of reading involved (laughs). We read a lot, that's why we call ourselves Young Girl Reading Group. And I think, when we reach like the point of that like we feel, there is like something specific that we want to say, like in relation to this reading and like the current environment, I guess, current issues, then like we compose like a text of our own, like from quotes and references. So, there is a lot of appropriation in our work, like by different writers but a lot of our writing, too. This is kind of like an idea that like all the knowledge is shared and nothing is like your own or like there is nothing original, like within artist or within like a person. Everything is like kind of shared within the society, I guess, especially knowledge as such. Like accumulated. (D.G.): Yeah, and a text in itself is also a reflection of this like non linearity of reading that somehow was- is part of the way that we retreat in Young Girl Reading Group. So, yes it's a bit of a fragmented kind of approach. And then somehow that's how we come about with a script for a given performance. Like, the text that is the core. In a way I guess, yes, simultaneously we start to think about the setting, the environment that needs to be created for it. And then the movement and kind of image references and yeah. (E.K.): And I guess since that we're two, it is a lot about conversation, like where we have to kind of like exchange ideas and somehow like be interested in like a similar direction also. In this point, a lot of conversation, what's important right now. I guess it's- in a really nice way It's challenging, because you have to like make someone excited about the thing and (laughs) like a lot of convincing in some way, like in a nice way.

PRESENTATION

I guess, like as we were talking before, there is this kind of real-life presentation and also this mediated staging on the internet and this documentation for the future. And we really try to play with it. A lot of our like performance documentation is kind of pre-staged like so- doing rehearsal etc. So, like we really play with like what is live and what's experience and what is mediated, I guess. And then, yeah how it translates into the future also. But I guess, it's like very current like, I guess, people are really aware of the image making these days, no? We use a variety of media in some way for this documentation. So, we use like- like different filming methods, like- let's say we use 360-degree documentation and like, we use a phone documentation, we use like a professional camera documentation. So, like, we're just interested, how these images perceive differently. Like, how- because of the media, I guess, that you choose. And like, we're interested in these distorted images also. Like in glitches, like that appear like when you use like livestreaming etc. I guess livestreaming was interesting for us, because it shows exactly how like the performance from the performers' point of view. And I guess this is like, when we spoke about agency, like of people representing themselves, like speaking for themselves. Rather than having this kind of like documentation from the outside. Like this gaze that comes on to them. A lot of the performances from this Reading with a Single Hand strand have been livestreamed before. This is the first one maybe that hasn't. But we kind of really wanted of keep the gaze within this space. We kind of wanted to play more with this idea of really like this really contained, really intensive experience for the audience. We also kind of use the mirrors a lot. And I feel like this, I don't know, this avoiding of looking at the audience, like eye contact between the performer and the audience but somehow very intensive connection between the three of them, was really important for us in this iteration. It's also because of how they worked together and how kind of close they became during this piece, I think. From the beginning it was interesting for us, to like explore these dichotomies, like we started- like we're interested in gender like in this dichotomy like of male, female, nature, culture and public, private and like we're kind of interested, how to like recreate this intimacy within a public space, I guess. And this livestreaming helps them in some way. It helps them not to be here, somehow present, it helps them to be like distance, like this kind of- like a gaze from the audience also. But in the same time, we're really here kind of in this togetherness and this somehow-, I don't know, this narrative, that they are co-creating as well, I think. Which this- because they share, they always take turns with the documentation, they share the device that does the livestream, they pass it to each other. So, it's always like kind of also negotiating the power within the group. And always they are giving, you know, handing over the responsibility or the agency to the next person.

METHOD

I guess, it's a collaborative method- I don't know, what else to call it. I mean it really starts in conversation, like whatever we do, it's a conversation between us. We love to work together and with others. We like working with people. And like seeing, what new comes out of this also. (D.G.): Yeah, we just want to be- I guess open in our process, I guess. Like, not to define things too soon, just kind of see how a project can develop. I guess "Preciado, Paul B. (2013). Gender, Sexuality, and the Biopolitics of Architecture: From the Secret Museum to Playboy. Part of the performance YGRG14X: reading with a single hand VIII, 11.09 – 22.09.2019, Schimmel Projects – Art Centre Dresden" references a lot Paul B. Preciado's thesis on gender, sexuality and the biopolitics of space and somehow like drawing on this, like kind of specific analyses of historical period like of 1800 and like the relation between like architecture and sexuality, like in especially- boudoir as a space, like where female sexuality and like reading developed in like relation to one another. And the title is somehow taken from the French- the Reading with a Single Hand is taken from the French phrase or saying le- d'une seule main that refers to the specific period in transformation- let's say like societal change. (D.G.): So, it's just- we just found it an interesting text that brings together these two things, that like are really important for us. So, the relation of text and to the body and to

the architecture also. So, I guess this like co-dependency of these- these three elements, how it developed historically and then how we can kind of use it, as a base structure for creating of our performances. Yeah. (E.K.): And I guess, in the texts, there is a lot of like quotes from other writers that are dealing with architecture and gender in specifically. Also, a lot of like self-representation. So, it's like, we had this kind of semi manifesto in the beginning, so, like a lot of this like is a representation of Young Girl Reading Group, of what it is. So, mixed together within this piece. And we do write together also. Which is a really interesting method, like, how like you allow yourself kind of to be written over, like this kind of also vulnerability, that like you let other people change like your thoughts also. So, there is a lot of trust, I guess, involved in this. Like, giving away like what you wrote and they can decide, what they can change.

ART

I guess this for us is like continuous practice of thought also, of like investigation into like surrounding text, into relations between like language material and further like people's like sociality, I guess. And on the ways of like performing, like your- I don't know, profession even. (D.G.): Yeah, so, it's also a space of like speculation, I guess. Like, where we can combine different elements and somehow see, what comes out of this. This kind of like, I don't know, place to experiment with things. (E.K.): Yes, in this like the way to speak also to others.

INTENTION

I guess, like everyone sees that like the world needs a lot of change and one can only speculate what that could be. I think our work has an intention in this speculation I guess, of potential change and potential future. Because it doesn't seem perfect as it is. (D.G.): Yeah, I guess so. It's also, for us, working together is something like a- I don't know, something really important in art making. Also, just kind of recognizing the possibility of a kind of- I don't know, multiple voice, that is not a singular voice but one that is like somehow negotiated between many people. Like a more complex kind of standpoint as an artist that's just like one individual defined position. I guess like this- on a personal level, is like learning more about the world and like finding different ways to share knowledge and be with people. On the level of our work, like, we wanna speak, I guess, to the audience about like these things that we think it's important and also like share the research, that we kind of do with this reading. Like in continuous reading sessions. Just have a conversation with also like everyone, like, a lot about dialog, I guess. (D.G.): Yeah, and we want to maybe- what I was trying to say earlier is, that we want to speak through a voice that is a collectively composed voice. And not as an individual artist but somehow like a different kind of position that is built in a different way, I guess, maybe (E.K.): Yeah, I guess, to think of alternate ways of making art also, like more collectively.

BIO

Dorota Gawęda (PL) and Eglė Kulbokaitė (LT) are an artist duo based in Basel (CH). Both are 2012 graduates of the Royal College of Art in London. Their work spans performance, sculpture, painting, photography, fragrance and video. Gawęda and Kulbokaitė are the recipients of the Swiss Performance Art Award 2021 and the Collide Residency Award. In 2022 they will be on residency at CERN in Geneva/Hangar in Barcelona and EPFL, Lausanne. They are also the founders of YOUNG GIRL READING GROUP (2013– 2021).

Credits

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