



# HYPERALLERGIC

STREET

## Hybrid Dance Works That Get Intimate with the Audience

Kunstenfestivaldesarts, a launchpad for contemporary choreographers, seems to be making an effort to stretch its boundaries.

Chris Dupuis | 5 days ago



From Fabian Barba and Esteban Donoso's *slug's garden/cultivo de babosas* (© Koen Broos; all images courtesy of KDFA)

BRUSSELS — Founded in 1994, [Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#) (KDFA) is one of Europe's leading art events. Over three weeks each May, it features close to 40 works, many of them world premieres. Though the program includes film and visual art, it's primarily a festival of performance, specifically dance. This should be no surprise: While Belgium turns out plenty of painters, sculptors, fashion designers, and architects, the country (particularly the Flemish side) is known at least as well for choreographers as it is for chocolate and beer.

KDFA has always been a launching pad for contemporary choreographers and significant dance works. In recent years, the festival seems to be making an effort to stretch its own boundaries, offering a handful of exhibitions and interventions along with the standard dance fare. And within the dance program, more hybrid works are also being offered: projects that stand at the boundaries of dance, with one foot resting in installation or relational performance. Three such pieces this year came from Mette Edvardsen, Begüm Erciyas and Matthias Meppelink, and Fabián Barba and Esteban Donoso.



From Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (© Titanne Bregentzer)

Norwegian artist Mette Edvardsen is most often referred to as a choreographer, but many of her works, particularly in the last decade, haven't involved much dancing. Her piece for this year's KDFA, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, was inspired by Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, in which a group of people each memorize the contents of a book that is going to be burned. *Time* has 24 performers, each of whom has committed an entire book to memory.

When you arrive at the performance, you're greeted by a "librarian" who provides a list of available "books" (the performers are themselves referred to as "books" in the context of the work). Once you've made your selection, the performer is invited over to meet you. Together, you chose a spot in the room to sit, and they recite a specific section of the book. The texts on offer are in English, French, Dutch, German, Spanish, and a host of other languages, and include works as diverse as Goethe's *Faust*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*.



From Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (© Titanne Bregentzer)

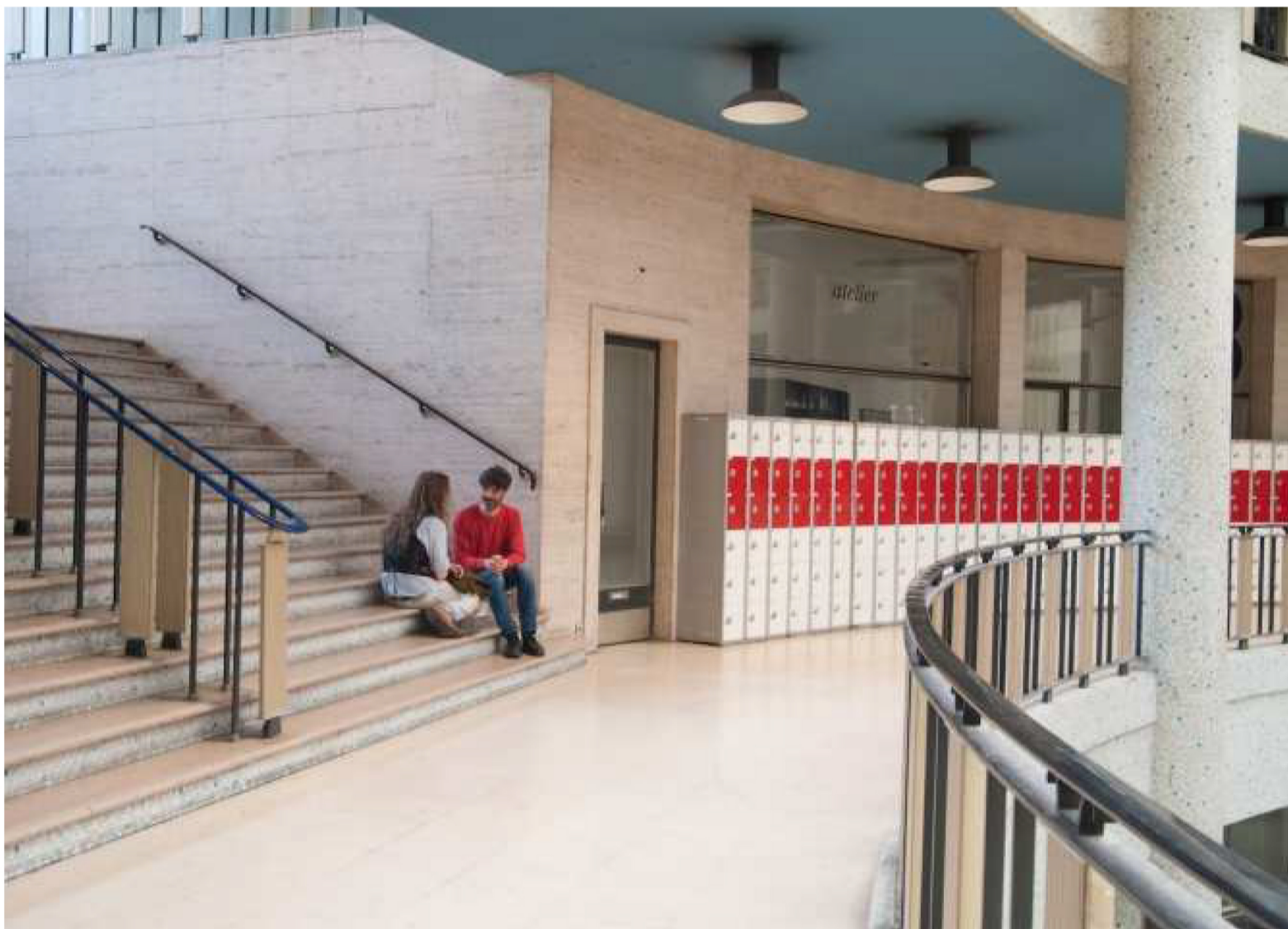
The show has been presented close to 40 times since 2010, primarily at dance festivals. For the 2017 incarnation, the performers have an added task: Over the course of each day of the performance, in between reciting the books to audience members, they are also going through a process of transcribing the memorized books to print by hand, producing new versions of existing works, rewritten through a process of learning and forgetting, incorporating all the mistakes and transformations that occur along the way into the final products.



From Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (© Titanne Bregentzer)

After perusing the available catalogue, I settle on J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, the 1973 novel about car-crash fetishists adapted for the screen in 1996 by David Cronenberg. I'm greeted by an amiable bespectacled British guy in his mid-30s. He shakes my hand and introduces himself ("Hi. My name's *Crash*.") We retire to one of the benches on the periphery of the room. He recites roughly 30 minutes of the book and then stops, announcing that we've reached the end of Chapter One.

He doesn't immediately dismiss me; instead, I hang out to ask him some questions. He's been working on the project for a few years and specifically selected this book (each performer gets their choice from the available texts). That choice, he says, is important. As you begin the memorization process, the book starts to live inside you. He'll find passages floating through his head in odd moments or catch himself reciting them under his breath. They even end up wafting through his dreams — a scary thought, considering how violent *Crash* is.



From Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (© Titanne Bregentzer)

The conversation gradually veers into our own lives: our taste in art, our jobs (he's the financial manager of a theater company in Birmingham), and our romantic entanglements. Like many relational works, the performance uses a specific format as a way to produce an open interaction. This could also be the argument for considering it to still have one foot in the dance field: Edvardsen has choreographed a series of interactions between performers and strangers by providing a score that creates intimacy between them. This in turn produces a space for a conversation between two people that would probably never have happened otherwise.

Like Edvardsen, Turkish artist Begüm Erciyas is sometimes referred to as a choreographer, though her oeuvre has nearly always been more expansive. Her current K DFA offering, *Voicing Pieces*, is also a performance for a single audience member. Unlike Edvardsen's show, the work has no additional performers. The audience member simultaneously creates and experiences the performance themselves.

The project began more than three years ago, with the idea of exploring intimacy in public. Erciyas and her collaborator, German sound artist and DJ Matthias Meppelink, first came up with the concept of creating a private space for a performance experience on the street. The result was a theatre so small it only had room for the head of a single audience member — literally a kind of tent. Fixated on the spatial concept, they began tossing around ideas for what could happen in such an environment. The answer was ultimately that each audience member would create the performance using their own voice.



From Begüm Erciyas's *Voicing Pieces* (© Begüm Erciyas)

The resulting work places the viewer into a kind of bubble sculpture on stilts, where they are invited to read a text into a microphone. As they read, their voice is captured and played back to them with a variety of live manipulations applied, scattering and swirling it like light refracted from a mirror ball. The explosion of auto-tune in pop music means that many of the voices we hear on a daily basis are somewhat if not highly modulated — a fact not lost on the creators of this piece. The project works with the subject's voice by modifying it in such a way that it becomes increasingly unrecognizable.

*Voicing Piece* confronts us with the sound of our own voice, something most people hate to hear. It also asks important questions about authorship. Co-implicated in the production of the work along with the two makers, we share in both its result and the responsibility for creation. The experience provides an opportunity for meditation on artistic judgement, collaborative creation, and the power of speech, ultimately offering a deeply intimate piece of performance, in the most literal sense.

Ecuador-born, Brussels-based duo Fabián Barba and Esteban Donoso trace their creative trajectories through dance and have a history of more conventional dance works. Their collaboration, [\*slugs' garden/cultivo de babosas\*](#), does involve performers moving in space, but the experience they offer the audience bears little relation to what we might expect of conventional choreography.

Upon arrival, you're led into a ramshackle-looking structure whose shape hints at a circus tent. Inside, you're greeted with a floor piled with fabrics in all different colors and textures, mingled with sheets of transparent plastic and numerous large pillows. You're invited to sit within the mess.

Among the audience members are a group of eight performers, laying with their eyes closed, slithering very slowly through the heaps of material, their movement suggestive of slugs. As you continue to sit, the performers may gradually move towards you, making slight contact or perhaps crawling over your legs. They move, for the most part, silently. However, when one of their bodies crosses some of the plastic that's mixed in with the fabric, it causes different sorts of crackling, translating their movement into sound.



From Fabián Barba and Esteban Donoso's *slug's garden/cultivo de babosas* (© Koen Broos)

It's a challenging piece to critique, because of both its simplicity and its hybrid nature. Could this work properly be considered dance? Is it relational performance? Is it a form of theatre? Is it bullshit? I encountered plenty of audience members after the fact who considered it a lazy, overly simplistic excuse for people to roll around on the floor and maybe touch a stranger. But I think the core issue the creators are hitting on — exploring the sensation of touch within an interactive performance model — may be something we see more of soon.



From Fabián Barba and Esteban Donoso's *slug's garden/cultivo de babosas* (© Koen Broos)

Around 10 years ago, the first inklings of what might be called “post-internet performance” — works of dance, theater, and performance art that sought to address and perhaps mend the growing distraction and divide that digital technologies and handheld devices were introducing — began to appear. Since then, artists have started to incorporate elements of both computing and networking, such as surfing the web or exploring their own hard drive while an image of their screen is projected for an audience. We’ve also seen an opposing approach of creating performances that address how technologies designed to bring us closer (Facebook, instant messaging, etc.) actually produce distance — interactive works that ask us to rethink what it means to be face-to-face with a person during a cultural moment when 95 percent of our interactions are mediated by technology.

It may be that the next step in the evolution of this specific line of inquiry is about sensation — physical, auditory, or tactile — as we’re beginning to see with artists like Christian Bakalov, who creates guided tracks where audience members are manipulated by the performers and experience a strange combination of visual and auditory inputs, and Peter De Cupere, who creates scent installations.

KFDA’s shift from being primarily a festival of dance to one featuring hybrid works may be partially a matter of the curatorial team’s own interests, but it also shows us something about where performance is going. As the concept of “genre” becomes more unreliable and less interesting to creators, we can expect more artists to nestle themselves in between different forms — not as an act of rebellion or critique, but simply because that’s the way we need to be confronted by art in the world today.

[Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#) *continues at various locations in Brussels through May 27.*

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