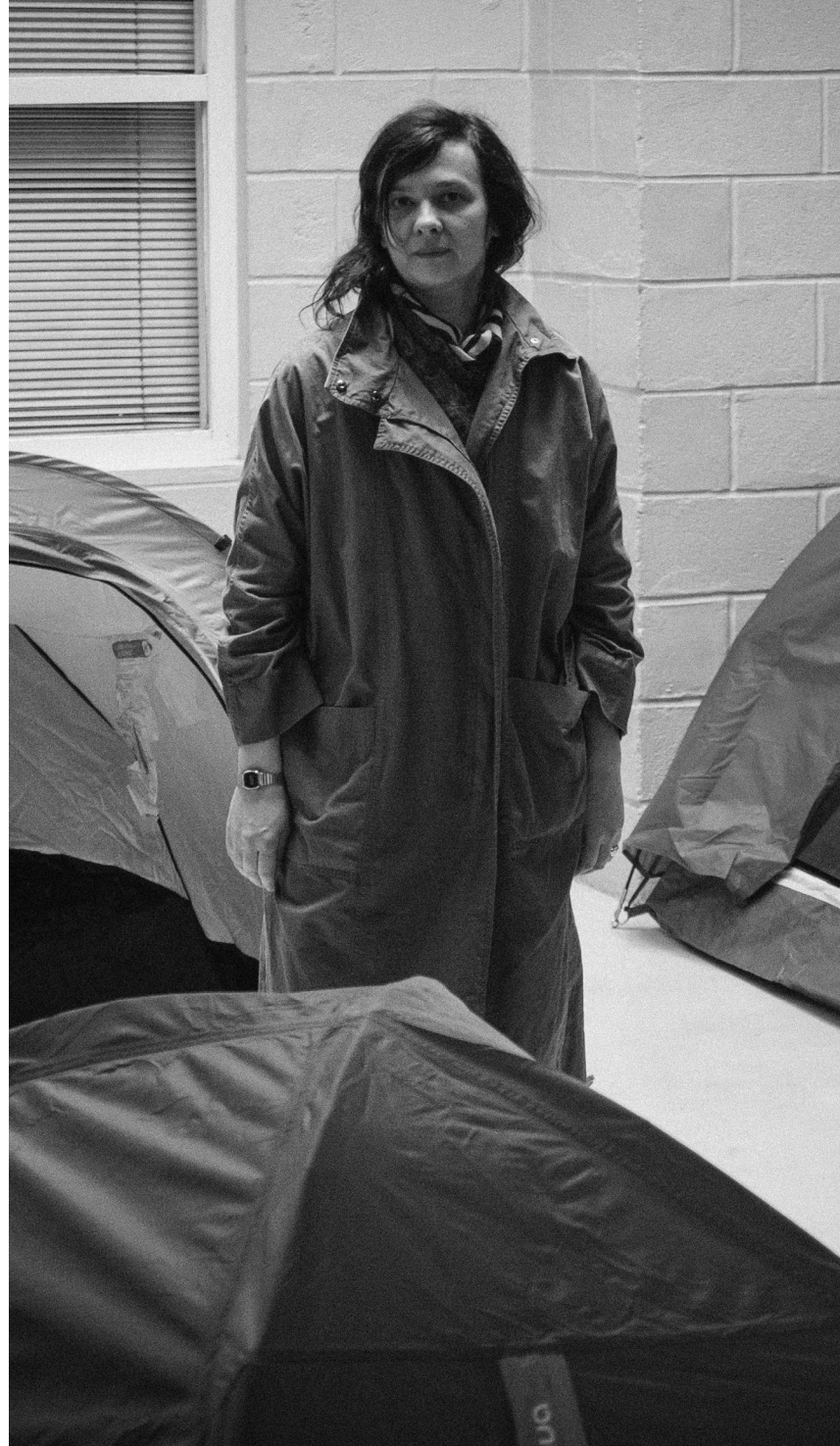


*A conversation with
Ivana Müller*

Elin Amundsen Grinaker

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In this interview, Ivana Müller reflects upon her artistic practice and the topics that she works with: collectiveness, participatory art, nature vs. human, and sustainability. The conversation was done by email between Elin Amundsen Grinaker and Ivana Müller.

Ivana Müller is a Paris-based choreographer, artist and author. Through her choreographic and theater work, she re-thinks the politics of spectacle and spectacular, re-visits the place of imaginary and imagination, questions the notion of ‘participation’, investigates the idea of value and its representation, and keeps on getting inspired by the relationship between performer and spectator.

Her pieces – among others *How Heavy Are My Thoughts* (2003), *Under My Skin* (2005), *While We Were Holding It Together* (2006), *Playing Ensemble Again And Again* (2008), *Working Titles* (2010), *60 Minutes of Opportunism* (2010), *Partituur* (2011), *In Common* (2012), *We Are Still Watching* (2012–2015), *Positions* (2013), *Edges* (2016) – have been produced and presented at some of the major theater festivals and venues in Europe, USA and Asia. This fall, Ivana Müller will present *Hors-Champ* at Black Box teater.

Photo: Gerco de Vroeg.

EAG *I read somewhere that you said regarding Conversations out of place (that will be presented in June 2021 at Black Box teater): “The attempt to collectively slow down time is the most political part of the piece”. Reading this made me curious about the feeling and experience of time, both how time is experienced in everyday life, in connection to art, and also how you have experienced time in the situation with isolation and Covid-19?*

IM One of the rare privileges that we have in the theater is that we can propose different ideas of temporality and share it with the spectators in the immediate, physical environment. The basic engagement of each spectator includes the willingness to spend time together with the others, immersing her/himself in the experience of “spectating”, which can have direct consequences on her/his ways of being. The basic engagement of the artists is to propose forms of collective experiences, which allow seeing, feeling or thinking about the world, or some of its aspects, differently.

We live in times in which the paradigm of “going faster”, which is a dominant paradigm since the 50’s and which was for a long time related to the idea of “progress”, have produced a lot of damage, have exhausted the resources (natural, human, social) and has produced a living situation(s) that is dangerous for everybody, us and the planet in general. When we go fast, we “burn” the time, we

“use” it, we “spend” it, we “consume” it. When we go fast, we cannot see the world around us in a very precise and engaged way. We are probably even not so concerned with the world around us but more with our “performance”, with how fast we go. Like, for example, when you are on a fast running train, you can maybe see some trees outside, but you don’t really see them; you probably just register them as a part of a fast sliding landscape “outside” of your immediate environment. The chances that you really see a tree are much higher if you walk next to it. Then the tree makes part of your immediate world. You can touch it. You can feel it. It is in the same time zone.

Slowing down the time fundamentally, like we do in *Conversations Out of Place*, is an attempt to create a new frame for watching, listening, reflecting, participating. And gradually this shared time opens up spaces for interesting questions on how we live together (with humans but also with all that is living).

The period of the lockdown related to the pandemic was very extreme in its scale and obviously also proposed new relations to time: the rhythm of the days changed, the time spent travelling, learning, being social also changed. This period offered, to most of us, more time to be with people we care about. And unfortunately, it forced some to spend more time with those who became

threatening and dangerous for them. It basically gave us time to think about what is fundamentally important in our lives.

EAG *What would you like to see us bringing with us/ keep after this period of crisis?*

IM The period of the Covid-19 crisis opened up very interesting and important questions on how we share this world, how we deal with the idea of interdependency, how we cope with notions of care and trust. It was also a very rare moment in which we could hear silence again, even in a city as big as Paris, the time in which we left spaces for other species to grow, time in which the air got better and the madness of excessive planetary movement got suspended for a while.

This period also brought some new perspectives on how fast we are able to organize ourselves globally in order to change the way we live. This huge collective effort maybe opened some utopian and optimistic ideas on the possibilities of producing radical changes in the world we live in, a possibility to make it more equitable, more ecological, more intelligent; to break with paradigms that are killing us. Unfortunately, instead of bringing new ways of organizing the communities, slowing down the rhythm of exchange of information and frenetic flow of communication, changing the relationship towards consuming and production

... very fast, within a couple of months, we all participated in the creation of the world that became even more a place of surveillance, of digital isolation, of structural work-exhaustion, a world based on distance, packaged narratives, doubt and disposable products; produced far away, used once and then thrown away, for sanitary reasons.

But what is maybe the most interesting to observe, especially for those of us working in the realm of live art and theater, is how fast we accepted new forms of visual representation being established and becoming part of our daily conventions through digital platforms; first as vehicles of communication and then as tools of working and sharing. How the frames (and here I mean it literally) in which we were talking to each other and which “allowed” us to be “together” were defined and decided through programs and algorithms. You know for sure this situation: you are in a middle of a very important conversation with a group of people and suddenly one of the persons disappears. No explanations, no warning, just gone... And you accept it, because the computer tells you: bad connection. And you carry on as if nothing happened. Imagine that suddenly, in the physical world, in a middle of a conversation a person that you are speaking to disappears. You would find it shocking, right? Today, more than ever, I want to defend the idea of humanity based on physical humans; humans that are analogical,

that touch each other, sentient creatures that can develop their collective intelligence through senses, even if that makes them fragile. Theater, and art in general, is one of the good places to develop this type of humanity. Here is where the idea of intimacy, as a way to develop communities and establish the place of “common”, can become very interesting.

EAG *With different pieces, you have been working on scripted dialogues – dialogues acted out by the participants. No director, no author, only the participants with scripts and decisions to be made. By giving the participants the task of actually acting out your pieces, how do you see your position as a creator of the work? I guess this means you give away a lot of the control over your works. What are your thoughts behind this?*

IM All of ‘my’ participatory, script based pieces, are made collectively; that is to say that I wrote them together with colleagues or friends. The idea of plurality of voices/authors was there from the beginning.

The idea behind these scripted conversations is not to “act out my pieces”. It is, in some sense, a proposition to spectators/participants for a “collaboration”. The text(s) that are proposed for reading changes their meaning and their potential during each performance because they are interpreted

specifically by those spectators. There is no “right” way to do it. If I had an idea about the “right way”, I would have asked trained performers to do it. Sometimes certain spectators refuse to read a text. That is always an option, and an interesting one because it questions the idea of participation in itself. Sometimes certain participants propose to their co-participants to get “out” of the text... That is why the duration of every performance is different, because there is a text and there are all sorts of negotiations around it. And this varies every time, depending on the community that performs the piece.

The fact that there is no authority in the room (except for the text) gives an opportunity for all sorts of interesting problems to arise. Without the voices of the spectators, those texts don’t really exist. Since a long time, I have been interested in the idea of “voice”: how it determines the identity, its sensuality, its authority, its “invisibility”. A voice is like a digital print. There are no two same voices in the world. In theater, the voices we hear are often controlled, trained, “professional”. They have a “good diction” and often speak unusually loud. By proposing to spectators to read with and to each other I was hoping to set a space for listening... listening to the voices that are maybe not very well articulated, voices that are not often heard in public spaces, voices you need to make efforts to hear.

In general, I always much more preferred theater that whispers than theater that shouts.

EAG *In Hors-Champ (presented in September 2020 at Black Box teater), the participants, placed in tents, have to be active, and there is no spectator per say?*

IM The participants are in fact performers and spectators at the same. There is no central “arena” where the show happens ‘in the open’. However, the intimate spaces of the tents, where participants meet two by two and where they read scripted conversations together, are in a way organized as small stages. They frame an event: first of all the event of meeting each other, the event of listening the voices of each other, the event of sharing stories, thoughts and questions together (even if they are scripted). And during this event, there is a sensation of taking part in a game; a game in which one can represent oneself but can also be “someone else”. There is the text, but there is also a lot of things that are being said in the tent which are not scripted. That sense of game is maybe what comes close to the idea of theater.

EAG *How do you think this affects the whole idea of collectiveness?*

IM There are ten tents that are being visited during the performance. In each of them there is a different conversation. For every tent, one chooses a

new reading partner, so the experience of reading is not only related to the conversation proposed in the text, but also to the encounter with a new person. It all works a bit like in a couple-dance evening: the music is the same for everybody, everybody knows the steps, but the dance changes, depending on whom you dance with.

While two people read the text in their tent, nine other couples are reading in the tents next to them at the same time. This gives the sense of a collective experience. After those different couples finish reading their conversation, in their own time, while waiting for the new tent and for the new partner, they often talk amongst themselves between the tents, creating an instantaneous agora in which they share their individual experiences.

EAG *Many people are afraid of suddenly participating in a piece where they felt safe being “only” the spectator. How do you approach the care for the participants and their well-being in your pieces?*

IM In none of the participatory pieces I have proposed, the spectator was “suddenly” asked to leave her/his usual place of a “spectator”. The form and the protocol of the pieces are always extremely transparent and clear from the beginning, in any communication given about the work, starting with the program book and followed by the introduction before the show begins (so those who

were not aware of the specific format can always leave if they want). This form of participation is not a trap. Spectators make a consensual decision to take part in it.

It is an open and direct invitation to participate in an artistic and social experience in which the text becomes the common ground for the readers. It protects them from needing to be “themselves”, and at the same time, it opens potential imaginary and social spaces.

EAG *Can you talk about the different entry points of Hors-Champ? Where did the idea of looking at nature and roots in resonance with resistance come from?*

IM In 2017, I was in residency in Parc de la Villette in Paris, and I had a chance to have talks with their principal gardener, Nicolas Boehm, every morning. So, together with my colleagues Anne Lenglet and Julien Lacroix, we would meet with Nicolas in the permacultural garden that he cultivates, and I would ask him questions that are related to some phenomena, or some principles that exist in nature and that was adopted in the socio-political contexts, first as metaphors and later as working principles. We talked about rooting, implanting, parasites, symbiosis, “desired” and “undesired” plants. We talked a lot about trees as well, and about the movements of the plants. Some of the

content of *Hors-Champ* is inspired by those conversations.

The format of the piece came up as a way to work with the notion of intimacy in public places. The first “pilot” version was performed during the “carte blanche” evening at the Ménagerie de Verre, in Paris, where I was an associated artist at the time. I have proposed that those conversations take place in tents because tents contain interesting “tensions” in our collective consciences and imagination. On one hand, we relate them with the idea of open air, “freedom”, the relation to nature, holidays and leisure, fun and friends. On the other hand, and especially in cities like Paris, they are the places of survival and precarity, the ephemeral urban spaces where people hide and take shelter. So far, in all the different versions of *Hors-Champ*, we always used the tents that are ready made, those fast assembling light-weight tents that everybody recognize and which we would borrow from the people in the places where we performed.

In the Oslo version of the piece, due to the sanitary reasons related to the Covid-19 pandemic, we will create alternative “tents” in which readers will have the possibility to be intimate but not too close ☺. This, in itself, will change some of the issues that will be addressed in the conversations.

EAG *The relationship between nature and humans is central in your work. Has the current situation opened up new thoughts regarding this relationship?*

IM The reflection on the relationship between humans and nature came as a consequence of thinking about the world in general. It is curious how humans are on one hand part of nature, and at the same time want to dominate it. In an artificial environment such as theater, or any art space for that matter, we can propose different ideas on how to use principles from nature as inspirational forces in order to understand us humans differently.

EAG *Sustainability is important in your work; How do you think sustainability in a process? On what levels during a process does this challenge you to think in new ways, and how do you concretely work with sustainability in your works?*

IM My artistic work is a practice, an ongoing process that started something like 20 years ago; there are different collaborators that I met on the way, different ideas pertinently nourished it, different organizations supported it. There in itself is the idea of sustainability. I never had the impression that in my practice I produce “pieces”. The shows are just points of visibility, condensed or formalized points of reflection, moments that we share with spectators. But the practice obviously

keeps on going, even when it is “invisible” to the public. In that sense, I can see the practice as a tree that develops and changes shapes, and goes through seasons, and welcomes different inhabitants. There is a visible part of the tree, its trunk, its branches, its canopy, and the invisible part of the tree, its roots, its mushrooms etc. So, I am, together with my colleagues and collaborators trying to sustain the good conditions for the tree to grow...

And if we do it well, the tree gives fruits. Sometimes, the fruits are beautiful and juicy, other times they are a bit bitter and smallish, but they keep on coming. And we try to respect the times when the tree is in rest, and we accept that the tree can have a bad year... But since it is a living organism it has the intelligence to repair itself and to grow further. In that sense, for me the artistic practice is never a fixed projection, a career plan, or a designated road one has to follow. It is an ever-changing, growing, wonderfully living thing, influenced by the ecosystem it lives in, by the weather, by its inhabitants, by those watching it grow. And we apply these ideas, these active metaphors that often come from observing nature, in the organization of our collaborative working practices in the company. The way we rehearse, the way we travel or transport sets, the way we value each other's work and give credit for it, the way we address the audience...