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Q&A: Ivana Müller talks about her participatory works

Ivana Müller talks about her participatory works as part of the Crossing the Line Festival

By Gia Kourlas Thu Sep 18 2014

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Ivana Müller's "We Are Still Watching"
Photograph: Sanne Peper

The Crossing the Line Festival is back, and among this year's lineup of movement-based artists ([Trajal Harrell](#), [Xavier Le Roy](#)) is Croatia-born, Paris-based choreographer Ivana Müller. For the festival, Müller presents [two participatory works](#) at [New York Live Arts](#). In anticipation, she talks about why she chose to stir the audience: "I can tell you I'm very critical of participatory theater." That's a good sign.

If you think participatory works aren't for you, think again. As part of the Crossing the Line Festival, visionary choreographer Ivana Müller offers two: *We Are Still Watching*, which takes the form of a theatrical table reading—spectators create a community while reading a script together—and *Partituur*, her only piece created for children (seven and up, including adults); participants receive instructions through headphones and act—or not—accordingly. Armed with a lucid ability to shape a performative experience, step back and watch it unfold, Müller, who was born in Croatia and lives in Paris, takes on the idea of a spectacle: Suddenly, bad theater becomes good. Here, she talks about challenging the relationship between performer and spectator.

Why did you want to show these two works?

The choice came more from [Crossing the Line curators] Simon Dove and Lili Chopra because they saw

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a line running through both: the idea of participation. This is not very usual work for me. If we say that *While We Were Holding It Together* was a kind of "Müller's manifesto"—in the sense that it was the piece that has been shown the most and written about and also the most representative of my work—these are maybe the most incongruous pieces. They explore the idea of participation and that was something that I worked on in 2011 and 2012 a lot. It had to do with further inquiry about the relationship between performer and spectator—something that was always in the core of my work—but it also coincided with some changes in society, especially in the Netherlands, but also in Europe.

What are you referring to?

There has been a massive change of cultural policy and also about the thinking of the place of art and culture in society. And that's maybe why I was taking ideas about this relationship between performer and spectator to thoughts about what does it mean to be a spectator? And also, what does it mean to be a citizen in terms of engagement, and how can we have a voice and how can we be political outside of some kind of dominant routine ways of being civic, like voting? This is mostly in reference to *We Are Still Watching*, which I made with a group of colleagues: Andrea Bozic, a choreographer who is based in Amsterdam; David Weber-Krebs, an artist based in Brussels; and Jonas Rutgeerts, a dramaturge who lives in Belgium. We were talking, and I came up with a concept of this scripted piece.

In *We Are Still Watching*, the spectators are the only participants. Why was that idea intriguing?

Because they are performing and representing a community at the same time. It's a weird event; it creates something that is beyond representation. People really talk to each other in this. Apart from the script, there is no presence of an authority. The author is not present.

And there is no director?

No. There are no professional performers; there is no professional technician. It's people left alone. [Laughs] Okay, they have a script, but they also have to make a lot of decisions. On the other hand, it is a very scripted piece. That is to say, if you follow the script, you get a sense of a completed work. It's not that you have to improvise things and can do whatever you want. It plays somewhere in a very interesting line between something that is extremely fixed and something that is just terribly loose. It's just like any society.

What about *Partituur*?

It's the first-ever piece that I made for kids and probably it will be the only piece I ever make for kids. I immensely enjoyed working on it, and I like kids, but I always have a bit of trouble with children's theater or with any theater that is made for a specific community. I got this as a commission from a festival in Utrecht in the Netherlands. It's a good concept: They ask an artist who has nothing to do with children's theater to create a piece for kids or with kids. For many years they asked me to do it, and I couldn't—I didn't have time and maybe I was not so super interested, but then in this reflection, again, about the relationship between spectator and performer, I realized that I was always troubled by children's theater. When I was a child, I was annoyed by people onstage who wanted to infantilize me more than I needed, or sometimes as an adult I was really annoyed by colleagues that write text and then let kids speak that text as if it is theirs. As a spectator, I always had a problem—I could never be critical, and I don't like that. I *want* to be critical and not just empathic, saying, "Oh, they're cute, they're nice." I thought the best would be to work, again, in a kind of closed-circuit to create a performance system in which the kids would be spectators and performers for each other. So there is no outsider. *Actually in Partituur*, everybody has to participate. So if you have parents bringing their kids to do this, they also have to participate. They cannot watch. They are not guinea pigs that are doing experiments. Once they start watching them, they have a different status. Everybody has to be in it. Also because it's a kids' piece, I wanted to make a political piece, and I was thinking, how this could be possible? It was very interesting, because before we made the piece, we worked in schools and did a great deal of research. I didn't know anything about this culture.



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About kids or children's theater?

I didn't know anything about kids that are seven years old. I didn't know what they read, what they watch, what's cool, what's not cool. It was very interesting to study that.

What did you learn?

We did research in Utrecht mostly. I wanted to do this in different kinds of schools, so we did research in a bit more of a posh school in the center of the city and also in some suburban schools. The reactions were very different. For instance, for a long time we were asking ourselves whether the presence of adults was good or not. Should we do it only for kids, or can adults also participate? One of the questions [we asked the kids] was, "Would you prefer to do this piece on your own, or would you like your parents to be around?" At the posh schools, all the kids said, "Yeah, great, Mommy and Daddy—that's fine, that's super." [Laughs] Their relationship to anything that's artsy or cultural comes from their parents. And the kids from suburban schools were like, "No way are my parents going to come." Because the entrance to this comes from school, so they are emancipated from a different kind of background, culture, etc. This was very interesting. Also, let's say I was really surprised that kids today still listen to Michael Jackson. This is my generation. I thought they would listen to Lady Gaga and nothing else, but no. Also you can immediately see the kind of weird kids that listen to Bob Dylan. [Laughs] You see all these issues that you dealt with when you were a child, but also if you translate it to a larger scale of society, you come to some very surprising and inspiring conclusions.

What is the structure of the piece?

They have headphones and through them they get different questions, suggestions, things to think about and also to do—together or on their own. Also this question of rules: Do I behave like I've been told, or do I do something on my own? Or do I want to do it differently than the others around me or do I want to blend in? Curiously, the kids are really aware of that. Some are on a more rational or irrational level, but when you speak to them afterward, they are articulate. In the piece, they also have the possibility to vote about certain dramaturgical developments.

Like what?

There is a monster outside of their space. They can see the monster, but it's not with them. A monster being some kind of metaphor for the foreigner, of the other, of the unknown, of not the same as me. They can decide whether or not they want the monster to come inside of the same space. Things like that.

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Also what was important is that even when they perform they are aware that others are performing as well, so they're watching and performing at the same time. This kind of dualism is very interesting both in theater and in society. They're able to have a different kind of concentration on the moment.

Is there a certain age that this is most appropriate for?

It's from the age of seven, because they have to be able to read. There are some written instructions. But it can go from seven to 100 years old. It's just important that two thirds of the audience are kids.

For *We Are Still Watching*, you said that there are no professionals. But what happens when there actually are professionals in the audience? How does that shift the reading?

Most of the time, there are professionals, but nobody is employed to do something special. And the communities that read—it's amazing how this changes the whole piece. In the script, there are roles that have been written, so if there is a sentence—and this isn't from the piece—that goes, "I love power," and a theater director says it, it sounds very different from a when complete strangersays it. The interpretation and how this sentence performs is extremely different. So what is interesting in this piece is all these different attempts, first of all, to interpret. I was just performing in Italy and almost the whole community one evening were professionals— theater directors, actors, some critics. They all really tried to do it the best, and in some ways it was maybe less interesting than when people are really reading badly. They start to perform other things: They start to perform insecurity, the desire not to be good, but to be clear. What's great is that this piece is always performed badly. It always creates interesting questions, and in that sense this piece is always a success. This is also in the script, but it's a success because we only perform for ourselves. There is nobody else to judge it. I mean we all judge it of course, and when you come out of a show you like it or not—it's not about this—but in the moment when things are happening, it's interesting. You can watch everybody, those who read and those who watch.

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What were your concerns about writing the script?

It was really wild. I wanted to write it together—with Andrea, David and Jonas—because we had to have different voices. In thinking about the whole concept, it's real, it's mathematics, it's real choreography. It was complex to make a concept that would be so easy to do that nobody would have questions about how to do it. It's not very interesting when people say, "How should I read it?" Of course sometimes it happens and what's great is that people start talking to each other and say, "Well, I think you should read these lines like this..." At the end, everybody chants together. It's 60 people chanting, and if it works well, it's even a canon. If it doesn't, it's kind of a cacophony, which is great as well. But they have to make decisions; for instance, whether or not to use a metronome. It's interesting—when we performed it in Berlin, people were really not for a metronome. Maybe, culturally they're a little bit critical of a big group of people doing something to a metronome or a count, you know? With their history. It's really interesting how people react individually and as a community. We performed in Brussels, and suddenly people went off the script into some kind of personal conversation and eventually they came back to the script. It was like an inserted private moment where people really talked about issues. But they decided to go back to the script—because there is the end in the script, you know? *[Laughs]*

Do you ever become nervous that they might not make it to the end?

No! But for me, in the beginning it's awful. I work very precisely when I work with professional performers. Now I have to give this script to people that I know will massacre it with how they read it. *[Laughs]* This was a very difficult and brave decision. But I am always so happy when things are happening, and even if they go completely wrong, it's still fine, because what is more interesting are the moments of negotiation and how people find a way out—they always do. That's so exciting. People take responsibility in the craziest ways. They really constitute a community in five minutes. They have a common goal. They know they have to read this—I mean they don't have to, they could leave the space—but it doesn't happen very often because everybody is kind of in the same situation. I guess people don't feel annoyed or nervous about anything.

That is tricky to pull off with participatory works.

Yeah. Normally, I hate participatory pieces. That's even a sentence in the piece. Often in participatory theater, you have some kind of hierarchy. For instance, the worst thing that can happen ever is that you go to the theater, you sit in the audience, and suddenly somebody asks you to do something that has nothing to do with anything that you wanted to do there. So you're basically performing somebody else's agenda. And this is always terrible. I never do it. I'm always like, no way. The difference here is that everybody is absolutely in the same situation. Do you see what I mean? It's not that you will be the idiot that's being exposed. Everybody is an idiot and not an idiot at the same time. We made the text and also the context in which the four of us would feel good, and I can tell you I'm very critical of participatory theater. Also, the way the text is written makes people sound really intelligent, and there are people who become really funny all of a sudden by reading this text, so in general I think [the viewers] enjoy it quite a lot. It's funny: I change the text according to the context in which we perform. There are certain things that come up, which are culturally based and have to do with language. We performed it already in

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America—in Portland [Oregon]—last September, and there was a sentence: “In the next script, I would like to be rich” and somebody says, “In the next script, I would like to be Hamlet” and somebody says, “In the next script, I would like to be black.” They said, “You cannot say this. You should say African-American.”

Oh wow.

I realized, my God, it's really like this politically correct language in the States...this was a whole discussion. I said maybe we would say, “In the next script, I would like to be straight,” and they said, “That's even worse, we have a really huge gay and lesbian contingent here, and that's not possible.” Sometimes it's funny how things come up like that. In Italy, we were performing in a space that used to be a church. Now it's used for concerts and performances. There was an 80-year-old lady and in the text, there's a mention of nudity. But nobody's naked! It's just talking about it, and she walked out. She said, “We don't talk about such things in church.” [Laughs] I think it's really interesting. Every time it's different, and that's nice.

Are these the only two participatory pieces you've ever made?

Yes. These two are my participatory-theater contributions. I was talking to someone today about my new piece, and I said, “The only thing I know is they're not going to be participatory pieces.” I don't know how it is in the States, but in Europe, it's really fashionable now. Sometimes it's really great. But sometimes it's also a little bit...yeah.

Why is it so popular?

Because there is a huge reflection happening here. How do we continue living with each other? It has to do with the idea of collectivism, collectives, community. I think it is very much provoked by the whole sociopolitical situation here. In Europe, we are really going through a crisis, not only financial but a societal crisis. Things are kind of falling apart. It's quite complex, and it's not like people are killing each other yet; it's falling apart on a more philosophical level except that there is also an economic crisis and there is a lot of—this whole cleavage between rich and poor. For Europe, it's quite something because it's a part of the world where these things have been tamed for quite a long time.

What are you working on next?

I'm working more with the idea of marginal. Not marginal in the sense of immigrants or the unemployed—not in a social kind of way. For me, it's an interesting position as a way to be emancipated in some way. Think about some visual examples; if you see an image, and there is something happening on the margin, you kind of see it but you're not exactly looking at it, you're looking at what's happening in the center. You are conditioned to look more at what's happening in the center and in the same way, I think some way. Even if you don't see it. On the margin ideas. A movement there is a famous quote

of Jean-Luc Godard, who said, “It's the margin that keeps the page together.” So at the moment I'm researching around that issue and working toward a new piece that eventually is going to come out in 2015.

Ivana Müller is at [New York Live Arts](#) Sept 30–Oct 5.

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