

Antwerp Art Graduation Prize Exhibition 2025

Juli Bierich, Emma Mann

Brace, Brace, 2025

Set Design and Technical Direction: Isaac Martinez Studio CRTM,

Andre Schauer onosystems / Performers: Berivan Karaagac, Hannah Rettl

Music: Anatole Serret / Camera: Lara Fritz/ Photography: Hanno Dreyer

Special thanks: Neuworkshop, Suse Herrschmann, Elzbieta Majtyka

Torque (a force intended to produce rotation)

'Brace, Brace' is a performance and installation to be created by Juli Bierich Kobayashi and Emma Mann. Juli Bierich Kobayashi is an artist from Berlin, now based in Antwerp whose interest is rooted in the body and its presence in a room, where a big focus lies on working with costumes and fabrics. Emma Mann, based in Munich, is an interdisciplinary artist, researcher, and dancer specializing in movement direction. The two shared a communal upbringing in Berlin and have been collaborating for the first time in the previous year for their project Go Big or Go Home, exhibited in Antwerp, Belgium. In this performance, they explored the duality of competition and security in group dynamics and identities through improvisational movements guided by a set of rules, similar to sports games.

In 'Brace, Brace' they dive further into the topic of social movements and examine contemporary ways of dealing with today's uncertainty in relation to an increasingly individualized world with hardly any shared beliefs. In a fragmented reality shaped by algorithmically tailored experiences where it's hard to discern what's real or simulated.

This feeling of reality loss is universal and can be defined as "The great weirding", a term coined by the author Venkatesh Rao, describing an intensifying wave of unpredictability and complexity in the world. The unsettling period between 2015 and 2020, just before Donald Trump got elected to the cusp of the pandemic. The extremely unsettling and disrupting events led to a chain of events creating constant shock and disbelief, so quickly followed by yet another nightmare that it led to a societal numbing to the fearful events that seemed to shape the world into dystopian unlikelyness. "The Great Weirding" suggests that the world is becoming more uncertain, complex, and hard to navigate, and it's fundamentally altering our experience of reality. It's not just that things are changing, but they are changing in ways that are profoundly strange, in a sense that defies the logic of conventional expectations. We now live in a state of what he calls the "permaweird," where information has expanded, but personal agency has not kept pace, which leads to a weird acceptance of constant crisis.

In 'Welcome to Future Nauseous,' he refers to society's efforts to create a sense of stability, coherence, and normality in the midst of this unpredictable weirdness. It's the social or cultural process of imposing a sense of routine or "normal" behavior and expectations, even though the underlying circumstances might be far from stable or predictable. This manufactured sense of normalcy acts as a coping mechanism to deal with the discomfort of living in a world that seems increasingly strange and hard to make sense of. We're not just dealing with new circumstances, but with the rapid, overwhelming sense that we have no control over them.

In Venkatesh Rao's terms, airplanes are a manifestation of how we take a highly complex and potentially uncomfortable technological marvel (which could make us feel "nauseous" at the scale of its complexity or risk) and transform it into something we treat as entirely ordinary. The experience of air travel – the long waits in airports, the security checks, the cramped seats – have become so standard and routine that it's almost unnoticeable. Airplanes are part of the daily normalcy we've manufactured, despite the fact that air travel is inherently strange (and at times stressful or nausea-inducing) for many people.

Based on these observations of the permaweird, as the acceptance of constant crisis and a manufactured normalcy, as a coping mechanism to deal with the uncertainty the future holds, and is put in place to prevent a mass panic, Juli Bierich Kobayashi and Emma Mann use the example of air travel to visualize these phenomena further. The exhibition space is transformed into a simulation of an airport waiting room. Emma and Juli want to visualize today's weirdness and horror as a lingering uncertainty. Airports represent transitional spaces, also called liminal spaces, such as hallways, airplanes or staircases, that can create a feeling of being lost between coming and going with no clear vision about the goal.

The performance will include four performers in this liminal space, who will act out different safety instructions, to be followed by each other and the audience, creating a conversation between practice and performance in comparison to the reality of the fear that is felt and shared by artists, performers and audience. The described nausea, is presented in the video work 'Torque (a force intended to produce rotation),' in which the performers in different settings interact with technological objects and merge into puppet-like objects. The puppets called helicopter moms, symbolize the urge to gain control over a situation or fear while helplessly being stuck in a vicious cycle, unable to escape.

With the help of these typical safety instructions and measurements, they act out the coping mechanisms and rules people invented to prepare for an unnatural and uncomfortable situation such as flying in an enclosed tube in the open sky. The safety instructions in case of an emergency, performed in the space stand for the idea of the worst case scenario (of a plane crash) that is being normalized and tried to prepare for. This emotionless mimicking of life-saving measures seems absurdly calm and is a perfect example of the numbness to greater fear, or in other words, the permaweird. When the cabin crew calls out: "Brace! Brace!" It is the appeal given to the passengers on the aircraft, to take the protective position in case of an emergency landing. By analyzing these positions and experimenting with them in a performative context, Emma and Juli question our need for order and protective measures in comparison to the possibility of an actual safe reality and if we can fight against the collective numbing towards a dystopian vision for our future.

Emma Mann is an artist from Munich who works at the intersection of performance and narrative, combining text, video, and body in space. She explores the ambivalence of group dynamics and the potential of aesthetic spaces for political and social reflection. In addition to her artistic work, she is active as a dancer and singer, and involved in curatorial, cultural, and peer-led educational initiatives. Her recent focus lies in the collectivization of authorship and the performative staging of bodies in space.

Juli Bierich is a German-Japanese artist based in Antwerp. Her artistic performances explore the "In between" of public and personal spaces, using various mediums, with a focus on wearable pieces. The body is serving as a necessary component to her work and can be regarded as a tool, that leaves and is also left with, traces of these life actions, functioning as a documentary canvas.

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