

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

'Brace, Brace' is a performance and installation presented 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 the room. 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 at Het Bos Antwerp and the Academy master show. 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 uncertainty of an increasingly fragmented reality shaped by algorithmically tailored experiences. The feeling of reality loss is universal and can be defined as "The great weirding", a term coined by the author and philosopher Venkatesh Rao, describing an intensifying wave of unpredictability and complexity in the world. A chain of extremely unsettling and disrupting events creating constant shock and disbelief, resulting in the societal numbing towards fearful events that shape the world into dystopian unlikeliness. "The Great Weirding" suggests that the world is becoming more uncertain and harder to navigate by the day, so that it is fundamentally altering our experience and behavior in reality. In 'Welcome to Future Nauseous', Rao refers to society's efforts to create a sense of stability and coherence in the midst of this unpredictable weirdness. 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. It's the social process of imposing a sense of routine or "normal" behavior, 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. 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 standard and routine. Airplanes are part of the daily normalcy we've manufactured, despite the fact that air travel as an invention is inherently strange.

Based on these observations of the permaweird culture, Juli Bierich Kobayashi and Emma Mann use the example of air travel to explore this phenomena further. The exhibition space is transformed into a simulation of an airport waiting room, where Emma and Juli visualize today's weirdness and horror as the lingering uncertainty of an airports liminal space.

The described nausea, is presented in the video work 'Torque' (a force intended to produce rotation), in which performers interact with different objects. The performers are called Helicopter Moms, symbolizing the urge to gain control over a situation or fear while helplessly being stuck in a vicious cycle, unable to escape.

In the space itself, four performers act out different safety instructions, to be followed by each other and the audience. Copying these safety instruction of the cabin crew, we confront ourselves with the worst case scenario of a plane crash and how we have become oblivious towards this risk, through repetitive preparations. This emotionless mimicking of life saving measures seems absurdly calm and is a perfect example of the numbness to greater fear.

When the cabin crew calls out: "Brace! Brace!" The passengers are called on to imitate the protective position where the upper body is folded forward and the head lies on the knees, in case of an emergency landing. By analyzing these protective choreographies and experimenting with them in a performative context, Emma and Juli question our need for order and protection and if we can fight against the collective numbing towards a dystopian vision for our future.

Emma Mann is an artist 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 Kobayashi's practice explores 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.

The Antwerp Art Graduation Prize Exhibition was made possible with the generous support of the players of the National Lottery, daskULTURforum Antwerp, and M HKA. This presentation is part of the 11th Antwerp Art Weekend (29.05-01.06.2025), shown on M HKA's 6th floor.