MOVING ← BACKWARDS

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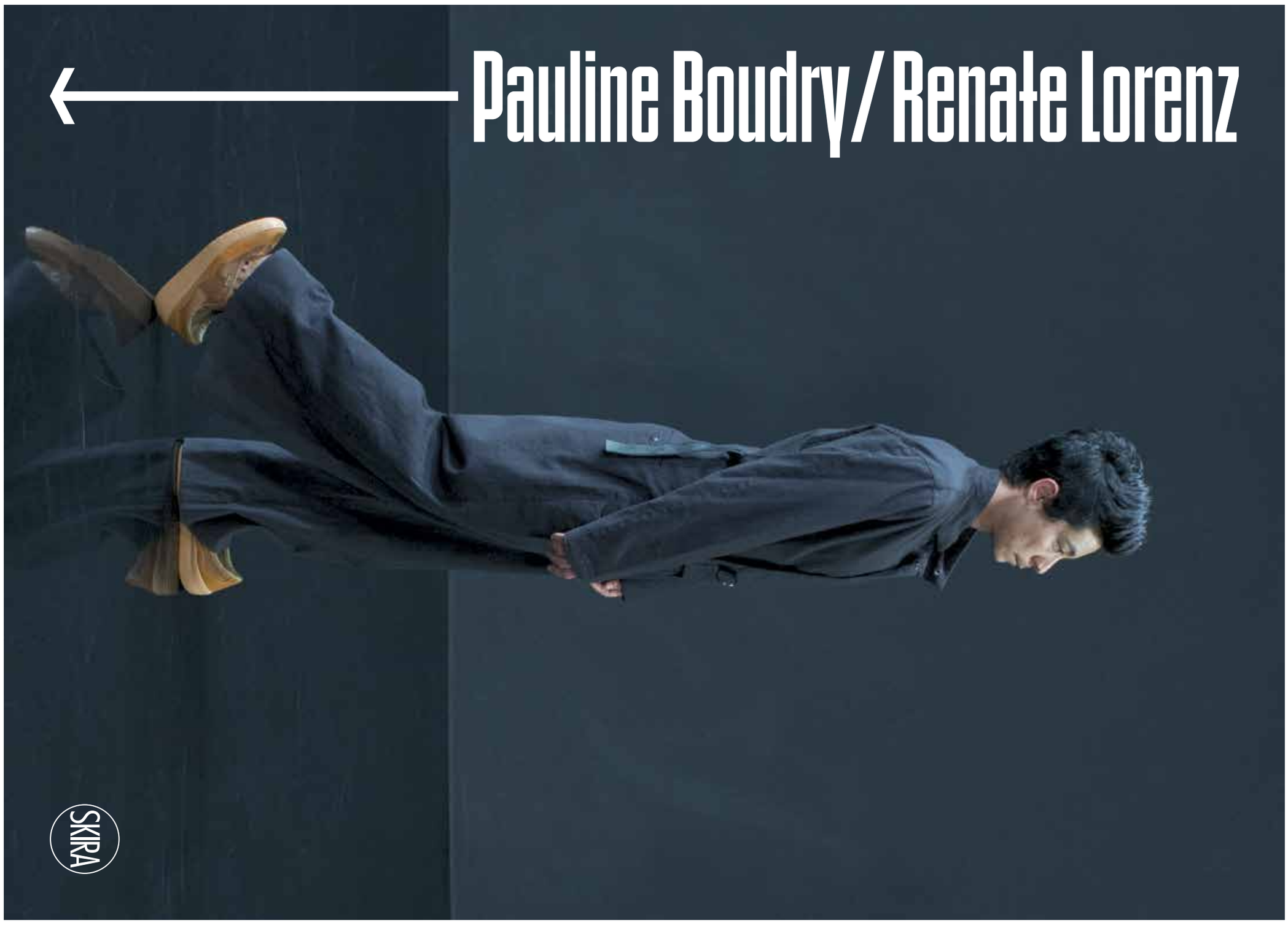
← MOVING BACKWARDS ← Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz



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The Art of Enabling Empathy

Charlotte Laubard

Act 1. Staging

The first surprise awaits us at the entrance to the Swiss Pavilion: the whole front of this elegant edifice, which was designed in 1952 to showcase the art of its day, is covered with a long warehouse-style wall of sheet metal. The metal sheets, exactly the same height as the pavilion's concrete portico, show traces of wear and tear as though they'd always been there. Queueing at a standard industrial door to enter the building, we can hear the muffled beats of rhythm music wafting intermittently from inside. There are no signs telling us what this place is, just a plain blue neon stripe over the entrance. Crossing the threshold, we enter a long black corridor. After the curve, it takes a few seconds to get used to the darkness. The corridor opens out onto a long black platform along which is a glistening sequin curtain, whose glints of silvery blue light are reflected by the glossy black vinyl floor. Our sense of "going on stage" is reinforced when the floor starts to creak under our hesitant footsteps. The walls around us are all painted black, even the skylights have been darkened. Only the iron girders under the ceiling have been left white, suggesting a hastily converted space. The surface of the wall facing the stage is illuminated by a video projection, which, in turn, shows nothing but a long black wall and glistening black floor identical to those of the surrounding space..

Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz are known for the performances they film and stage in the form of installations, which have grown in size over the years: their latest, *Moving Backwards,* designed for the Swiss Pavilion in Venice, is the largest installation the duo have produced so far. This significant change of scale attests to the artists' increasing attentiveness to the context in which people move while experiencing their works. Inspired by the insight in the social sciences that all forms of cognition are situated, i.e. that our knowledge is tied to its spatial, cultural and historical contexts, they have set about literally staging the space around the projection of their film. For their Venetian project, they have crossed a black box cinema with a stage and nightclub. Their combined darkness constitutes a space in which to project desire, the promise of an intense experience that bends the boundaries of time and space. And above all the promise of self-abandonment, letting go of the self by accessing an "elsewhere" and an "otherwise", immersing oneself in the film and theatrical performance and giving oneself up bodily to the music. The projection room and stage provide a setting which, though holding out a promise of unexpected encounters, builds up and focuses our attention, while that of the club dissipates out attention with its audio-visual and physical stimuli. Additionally to these apparatus, there is also the exhibition's framework. Through the interaction with artifacts and artistic gestures, its function is to reflexively engage the subjectivity of the beholders' point of view.

Act 2. Unsettling

One by one, various people dressed in black enter the frame of the projected film. Like us, they are on a stage—as a mirrored image of our situation. Each of them begins moving cautiously amid such complete silence that we can distinctly hear the rustling of clothes of those around us and the squeaking of their shoes on the floor. Everything suggests that this is an artistic performance. The performers carry microphones on stage, and yet abstain from using them: instead of "taking the floor" to speak, they begin to make slight marching and dancing movements, one at a time, still in silence. Each performer's movements are radically unlike the others', evoking very different dance styles. Their movements grow louder as they synchronize. Then the music comes up as they begin walking backwards together, holding out their hands to one another. From the beginning, the camera follows the performers in a slow tracking shot from left to right and back again. Certain movements are obviously executed backwards, raising doubts in our minds as to whether the others are actually moving backwards or forwards. Some are shown in such very slow motion that we can't help wondering whether it's the movement or the film that has been slowed down. The slow tracking shots from right to left reinforce the impression of ceaseless backwards motion. We can't stop wondering why some of the performers are wearing their brown sneakers backwards. The importance of the shoes is underlined at some point when one character keeps on a leash a shiny black shoe whose high heel is mounted upside down.

Boudry / Lorenz have prioritized performance since the beginning of their collaboration. Their research explores the constructed and performative dimension of identity, on the "various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification" (Judith Butler), which necessitate a continual staging of the self, its values and beliefs, in interaction with others. Using the medium of film to produce an emphatic mise en abyme of these existential mises-en-scène, they theatrically stage and film gestures, then frame and edit the resulting footage for presentation "on the stage" of an installation.

Moving Backwards is Boudry / Lorenz's third film about dance. The artists are interested in the expressiveness of body movements, their ability to communicate on a pre-verbal level and to generate a collective imagination and action. For this opus, choreographers Julie Cunningham, Werner Hirsch, Latifa Laâbissi, Marbles Jumbo Radio and Nach were asked to perform backward movements, some of which are readily identifiable references to post-modern dance, krump, hip hop, butoh, moonwalk or techno. Other intriguing and equally expressive movements such as marches open up to different interpretations. Performed backwards or forwards but with reversed shoes, their symbolic meaning oscillates: is this the demonstration of a lost sense of belonging? An act of survival? Of resistance? And where do these weird brown sneakers come from? All these walks and choreographies tell a story of dissent: to undermine the straitjacket of dance's discipline, to oppose the dominating culture, to distrust or to escape. The gestures play with a number of inversions specific to these dances that are amplified by the camera movements to the point that we no longer know if they are filmed backwards or forwards.

Act 3. Blurring

We see a figure in strange turquoise double-vamp boots, concealed behind long hair and a tunic of large black sequins. The only way to tell which way it's moving is by the position of the hands, whose crooked fingers suggest a tense body and evoke a distant culture's style of dance. Some of the performers change outfits between appearances, replacing dark working clothes—blazer, overalls, slickers, beanies, sneakers, sweatshirt—with, or combining them with, shiny leggings, sequined tank tops and stiletto heels, more suitable attire for a party. These gender-hybrid assemblies of clothing, of soberly opaque and loud, shiny fabrics, challenge our desire to categorize. The codes of gender and ethnicity are continually shaken up and reshuffled by suggestive hip-swinging and conspicuous hand gestures, by the camera's close-up on bodies, and by the extravagant wigs worn on shoulders and chests like strange armor—all against a background of deep house music. Our mesmerized bewilderment comes to a climax when some of the garments and wigs seem to move in the opposite direction to the dancing bodies. But just when we feel carried away by the catchy beats and the performers' liberated and infectious joy of dancing, a clapperboard suddenly appears on the screen—reminding us that we've just taken part in the creation of a performance.

From the outset of their collaboration, Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz stated that they were interested in "drag" performance. Instead of understanding "drag" in contrast to a supposed nature of the body, their concept of drag calls attention to the composite, constructed and shifting nature of sexual, social and cultural identities: witness the dissimulations, reversals and hybridization of various gendered elements and gestures in *Moving Backwards.* Drag enables the artists to highlight and at the same time reject the determinisms of gender, status and nature that inform intersubjective relationships. "What becomes visible in this drag is not people, individuals, subjects or identities," writes Renate Lorenz, "but rather assemblages: indeed those that do not work at 'doing gender / sexuality / race', but instead at an 'undoing' of these categories."[1] The deep house music to which the performers end up dancing together, a well-known remix of a composition by Terre Thaemlitz alias DJ Sprinkles, makes the night club setting for this Venice Biennale project explicit. Thaemlitz recalls house music's early days of obscurity in queer and trans clubs before becoming a global phenomenon: "Sexual and gender crisis, transgender sex work, black market hormones, drug and alcohol addiction, loneliness, racism, HIV, ACT-UP, Tompkins Square Park, police brutality, queer-bashing, underpayment, unemployment and censorship—all at 120 beats per minute."[2] This is the anthem of a community operating from the margin. Both its refuge and its embassy.

Act 4. Affecting

Exactly halfway through the film, when a curtain of blue sequins is drawn to signal the end of a sequence, we are surprised to see the same curtain moving towards us from the back of the platform we're standing on. It advances steadily at first, then haltingly, in jerks that make its folds sway gracefully. The curtain stops short in the middle of the projected image, which it now partially blocks; the other film curtain is still completely drawn. Silence falls, filling the space once again. We're waiting for the curtain to keep going, but it takes its time. Seconds pass. What is it going to do? We try to anticipate its movements, but it defies our expectations by unfolding on both sides instead. Upon reaching both sides of the stage, it suddenly shines brightly, reflecting a row of lights. We are left astonished. Then the curtain slides back to the side, into the darkness, and the film resumes.

After the final tail slate, the house music comes on again and our eyes are drawn to the ceiling by bars of bright white light suddenly flashing to the beat of the music. The audio and visual stimuli fill the whole space: now we are on stage, surrounded by entities which, in turn, perform their presence as if participating in the choreography of the bodies and the camera movements. Like each of the performers, each of these elements performs its own solo, each has an energy and a style, an agency of its own. Like the backwards-dancing wigs and clothes, these objects assert themselves as protagonists of the action.

Male and female, front and back, forwards and backwards, opacities and reflections, voices absent or unintelligible replaced by body language—the confusion climaxes as various objects join in the dance. What ties these unusual assemblages of objects and bodies together, and what makes us relate to them, is the dance. Recent advances in neuroscience demonstrate how dancing, which is based on synchronized body movements, is a powerful mean of communicating emotion. By firing mirror neurons and simulating motor neurons, dancing triggers an empathetic mechanism within us by which another dancer's physical expression automatically triggers a corresponding emotional state in us. By focusing on the cognitive faculty of embodiment, whereby the body learns and produces knowledge and actions on a pre-conscious level, the artists choose to test the agency of movements and gestures that are capable of generating shared emotions. *Moving Backwards* is a magnificent tribute to the power of dance to generate belonging. The choice of musical excerpts corroborates this interpretation: each track means something to our collective memory, whether it be a national anthem played backwards, the hit pop song "Billie Jean", which popularized the moonwalk all over the globe, or deep house, the sound of rave communities. There is something profoundly optimistic and elegiac about Boudry / Lorenz's film, for it celebrates the subtle ability of bodies to transcend our differences in order to build a collective acknowledgment through the performing of a shared action.

Act 5. Uncovering

As the looped projection starts up again, we walk down the steps from the platform, then down a second corridor. Emerging from the building at the end of the corridor, we're blinded by the daylight of a warm afternoon, and it takes us a few seconds to comprehend the new environment we find ourselves in now. This outdoor tranquility starkly contrasts with the barrage of sensory stimuli we've just experienced inside. Gradually coming to our senses, we see a long structure of wooden panels and crosspieces at mid-body height blocking our way to the rest of the large room that opens out onto the grounds outside. Walking around it, we realize it's a bar and that we have been in the position of a bar-keeper, with people sitting around on stools or leaning on the counter. But no drinks are served. The sides of the bar, made of various materials painted in *trompe-l'œil,* reinforce the impression of a hybrid between decoration and artifact. Hanging on the walls behind it are two large rectangles made of hair that has been cut in precise rectilinear overlaps. Are these paintings? The locks of hair stir slightly in the breeze, suggesting an evanescent physical presence. Opposite them we see the sneakers, upside-down stiletto heels and double-vamp boots featured in the film now hanging on chains from the ceiling. The bar extends under the outer portico of the courtyard. The layout of the garden with its plants and benches adds to our confusion about the function of this space, somewhere between an artistic installation, an open-air club bar, and a stage set.

A new journey, a new environment, a new reversal. For clubbers who've lost all sense of time, emerging into daylight is often experienced as a moment of suddenly and intensely regaining self-awareness. Hence the attraction of the outdoor areas of techno clubs, which calm the clubbers' adrenaline rush while heightening their sensitivity and attentiveness to what is going on around them. Accessing this area from behind a make-believe bar reminds us that we're still at a performance. Just as we entered from behind the stage, the reversal produced by the artists drives home our consciousness of the active role of our subjectivity in interpreting what we see.

We find the artificial hair and the shoes from the film, but displayed quite differently here. The wigs have become pictures hanging on a wall, and the shoes suspended sculptures. But their transmutation into artworks does not diminish their fascinating, unsettling uncanniness, though it does change the nature of their agency: animism has become aura, and the fetishistic impulse has become speculative sublimation. "Desire travels in images," say the artists, quoting queer theorist Elspeth Probyn, "a desire that doesn't belong to somebody or something but that connects people, events, and objects [...]. It connects the psychic and the social world."[3] The bar, with its *trompe-l'œil* panels that reproduce the surfaces of various queer bars and clubs in Berlin, encapsulates in itself this relational power, summoning up memories of places and their associated affects.

Act 6. Enabling

Pleased to find a place to sit down at a biennial sorely lacking in available seating, we reach for one of the newspapers lying on the benches with the title *Moving Backwards* written extra-large on the cover—and the word "BACKWARDS" printed reversed. The reading matter within comprises a series of letters: "Dear visitor, during the massacre of the leftists in early '80s Iran, 'moonwalking' became a thing. . .". "Dear visitor, the concept of time as a linear thing that unfolds in a sequence, marching away from past points in time towards the horizon of the future, has always been a concept of invasion, of violence, for indigenous people. . ." Each letter is a reflection addressed to us on the concept of moving backwards. In their introducing letter, Boudry / Lorenz tell the story of the Kurdish women fighters wearing their shoes backwards in order to mislead their enemy, thus unraveling the provenance of the weird brownish sneakers. Depending on the other authors' respective cultural horizons, we see the concept of backwardness variously and paradoxically regarded either as regression, as an act of survival and resistance, as a rejection of the oppressive view of progress imposed by the West, or as a necessary means of finding other perspectives that admit of greater equality. Some of the letters play on the semantic and formal reversals suggested by the idea of backwards movement, while others adopt the tone of political manifesto or tell an intimate story, and some are poems. We are struck by the powerful effect of this return to written language after a purely sensory experience. We leave the pavilion with a polyphony of different, dissident voices resounding in our minds as we pass all the people patiently queueing to experience Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz's club.

Moving Backwards is the first "speechless" film by Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz. One scene points up this renunciation of the spoken word as several performers decline to use the microphones they brought with them on stage. Given the connotations of political, social and cultural regression in the expression "moving backwards", the artists have chosen to approach the problem of withdrawal by experimenting with ways of coming together and putting up resistance through physical expression. For while victory in the battle of words seems increasingly elusive in the face of the reductive and outrageous invective of hate speech, we may stand a chance on the political level of affect. How can aversion be reversed by desire? "How can we live with loved, but also unloved, others?" the artists ask in their letter. By activating empathy, that sense of understanding others' mental states by adopting their point of view. Empathy is essential, as cognitive scientists tell us, because it helps us assess situations with a view to safeguarding our own survival. Aesthetic experience, like empathy, depends on understanding the difference between our own and others' experiences. The affective rapport we feel with works of art derives from the same basic empathy as our rapport with other beings. We can understand Boudry / Lorenz's project from this perspective: it is not confined to making other "types of bodies" visible,[4] but seeks to generate new connections through desire-driven assemblages of things, places and beings, in order to "produce difference and equality at the same time".[5]

1 Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory,* transcript Verlag, Bielefeld (Germany), 2014, p. 21.
2 DJ Sprinkles, voice-over on the first track ("Intro") of their album *Midtown 120 Blues,* Mule Musiq, 2008, Japan.
3 Renate Lorenz, email interview with the author, March 6, 2019.
4 Pauline Boudry, "Letter to Andrea" (July 2009), in *Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz, Aftershow,* Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe – Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013, n.p.
5 Renate Lorenz, op. cit., p. 33.

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Sound: Johanna Wienert
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Lights and stage: Riccardo Clementi, Pieter Jurriaanse
Assistants: Lore Rinsoz, Neige Sanchez, Am Ertl
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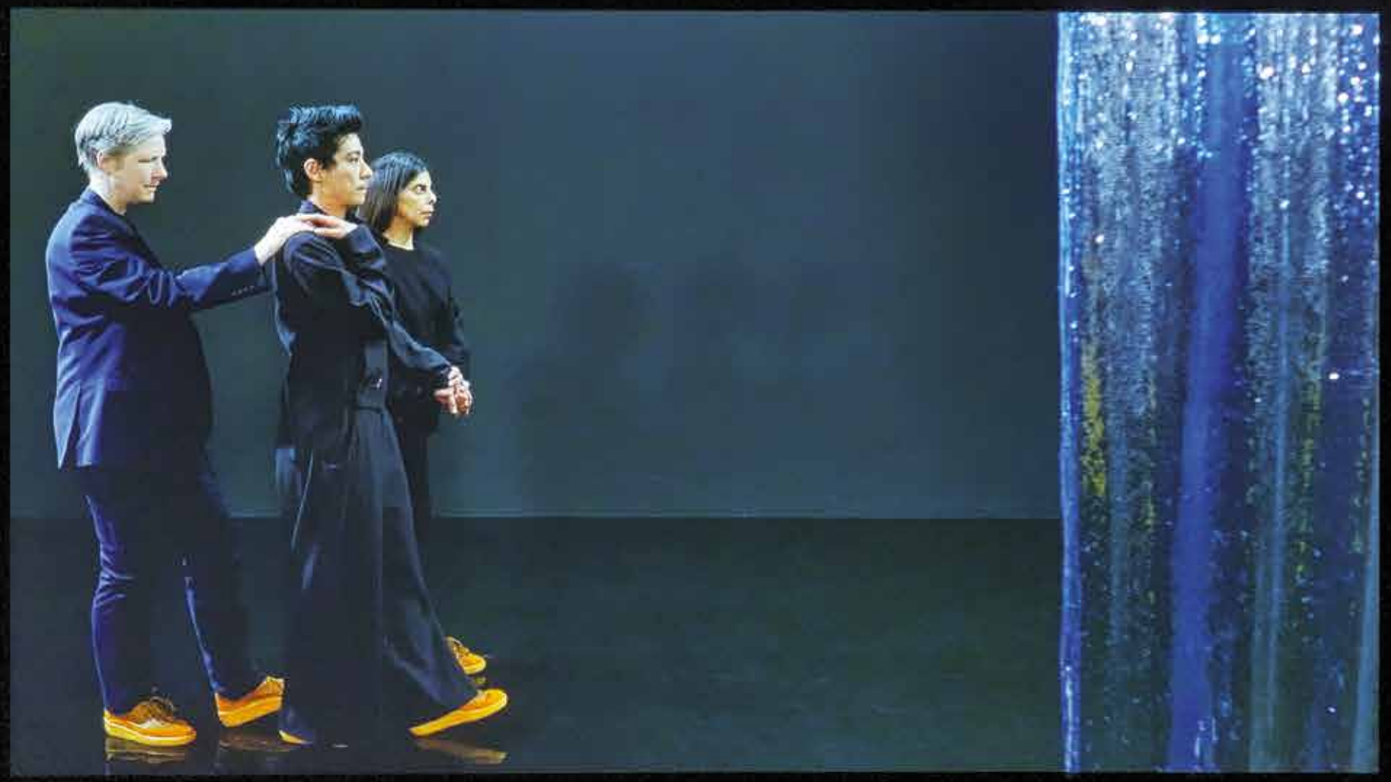

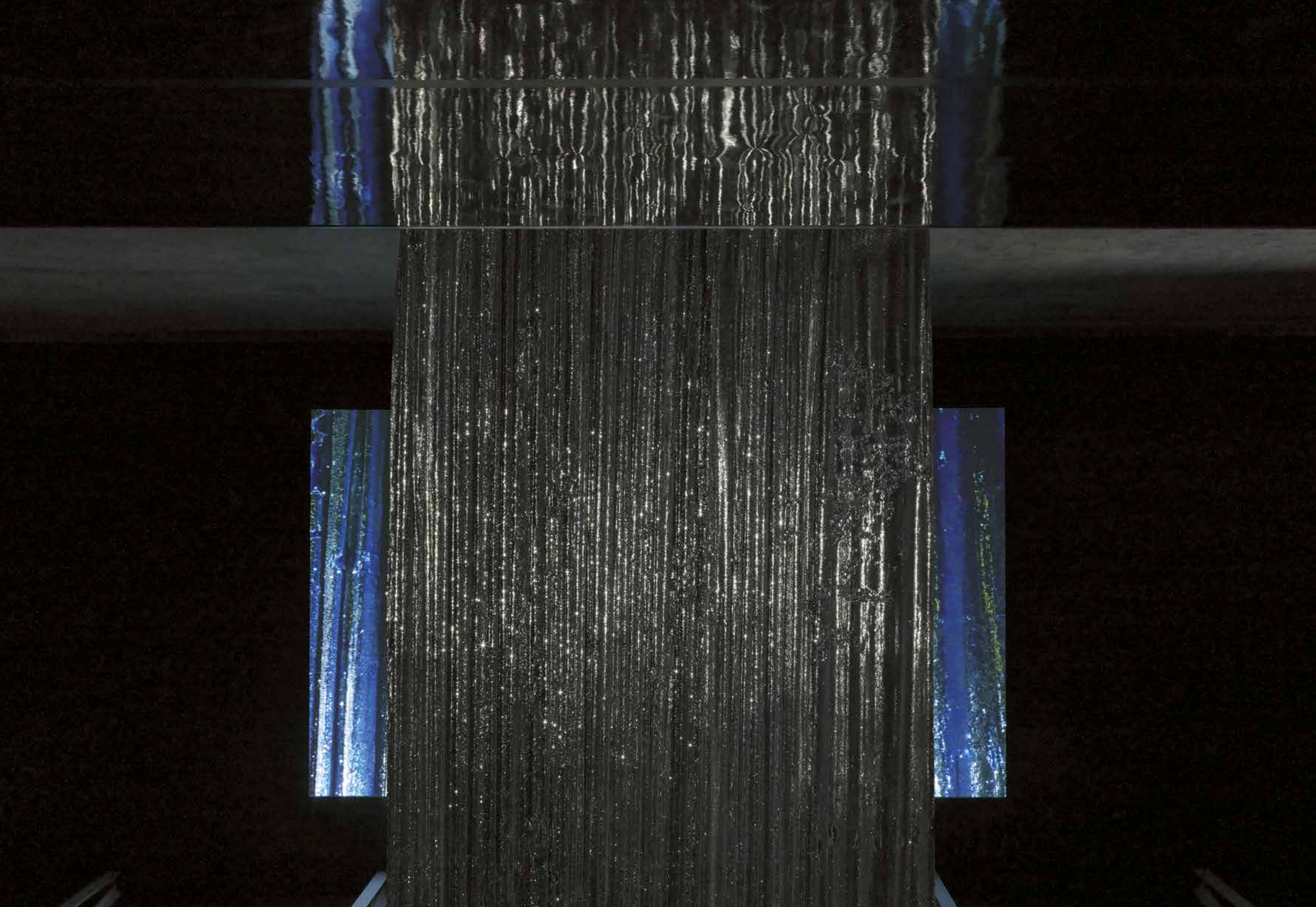


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