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Valletta Contemporary

Curator Interview: Ann Laenen & Stefan Kolgen

Interviewed by Ann Dingli
March 2023

Ann Laenen is Dean of Sint Lucas Antwerpen-School of Arts. She studied Arts and Theatre Science at KU Leuven and reached PhD level at the University of Leeds in 2007 on Audience Development. Stefan Kolgen is an artist, curator, and social worker. He earned his Bachelors degree in audio-visual arts at the RITCS in Brussels and his Masters degree in visual arts in a social-political context at Sint Lucas Antwerpen-School of Arts. Together they curate Valletta Contemporary (VC)'s newest collective show, *Rituals of Passage*, a visual story of six artists, from six different backgrounds with six different views on the definition and significance of rituals. Here Laenen and Kolgen speak to Ann Dingli about the importance of rituals in a post-Covid world, the transcendent power of rituals, and the ways in

which the exhibition pieces engage with audience's understanding of rituals through their relationship with the gallery space.

Ann Dingli (AD): I'm interested in rituals as they relate to space – how space and architectures can shape or change social, physical and collective rituals. In this sense, it is intriguing that your curation focuses on the relationship between the works included and the gallery itself, which is a relationship that could easily have been left untreated. Can you elaborate on that decision?

Ann Laegen (AL): Rituals are always connected to space and depend on context, circumstances, background, and time, though one can say that rituals are embodied, happen in a spatial setting, and most often entail a repetitive action; being sequences of activities involving gestures, actions, objects and sound. Rituals are embodied interactions with the audience, performed in a specific way and possibly taking the performer and the audience from one stage to another physically or mentally. Thus, finding a place for healing, ease of mind and comfort.

Valletta Contemporary, because of the multiplicity of architectural spaces, seemed a perfect fit for this show's theme, which emerged from the preparatory discussions with the artists. Once each artist knew what they wanted to create, the perfect spot for each of the works was defined. The works are placed in such a way that they question or interact with each other. For instance, the Creative Votives of a womb by Alexandra Fraser placed in the Zen Garden confront the torso of the Homunculus by Mladen Hadžić. Mladen's work questions masculinity and what is expected from it. Another example is the placing of Materia Prima by Yasmine Akondo and To measure and bind (the soul) by Stefan Kolgen. While the first installation deals with the aspect of life and time, the second one deals with death and finding rest for the soul. Visually the two installations are connected through their shadows by delicately taking care of the light design. As such, finding a place in the world becomes interconnected in this space.

Installation view of *Creative Votives* by Alexandra Fraser

AD: In your curatorial statement you talk about the challenge or intrusion of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's sense of 'being-in-the-world'. Can you explain what that intrusion constitutes and how the exhibition addresses it?

AL & SK: During Covid-19 we lost connection with the world around us. We could not go out. It was difficult to meet people in person. There was a social disconnection. To get us through the day, to stay mentally sane, we started to put new routines into place. It also questioned our thought processes because nothing was evident anymore. We also did not know whether and when things would become normal again.

Now post-Covid, we like to talk more about the new normal rather than the normal. Some rituals presented in show especially illustrate this line of thinking. Take for example Aaron Bezzina's *Hamsa* and *Qrun* which questions the ritual of the handshake and physical contact, which is not that evident anymore. Or Ryan Falzon's *Watering of the Plants* series, that deals with the cyclic effect of repetitive actions to find a personal rhythm to get through the day. Both works are opposite each other in the same space. One is a new ritual to find ease in stressful times, the other developed a different meaning after the pandemic.

But it is not just about a new normal. Now, post-Covid, one notices that the pandemic had a big impact on our wellbeing and our mental health. Society forces us to pick up where we left off before Covid, but that is a challenge. There is a lot of pressure, a lot of intrusion on our 'being-in-the-world'. This exhibition wants to address this challenge in an artistic way by reshaping rituals.

All rituals presented are very personal. Alexandra Fraser's *Chthonic Incubation* is a material symbol of humanity's dominance over nature. In human arrogance, we strive to control our rituals of passage and our fates. From within this colossal symbol of femininity, she sleeps. In birth, death, and sleep we exist, but how can we exist unconsciously? The installation is accompanied by a sound installation made from fragments of the artist sleep talking, words she never said yet spoken by her voice.

Mladen Hadžić's *Homunculus* was a personal quest, in which he tried to dig through these monumental elements of culture in search of material for a better self. On this search he found techniques for self-authorship and the joy of simple physical labour. In its occult form, the work is related to the concept of the homunculus found in alchemical texts, as well as an interpretation of the sigils of chaos magic. In terms of masculinity, the model of the work is an obvious gesture, but it was the tactility and physicality of the processes that became a kind of ritual or meditation in their own right. Making mould after mould after mould made the masculinity fade so that only the essence remained.

Ryan Falzon's series of paintings, *Rituals as aids against ruminations* embodies the rituals explored by Falzon as ones automated by the brain in the form of intrusive thoughts and escapist behaviour. Rituals are routines of control and safety, where one can allow just a hint of unpredictability. Ruminations of the mind are a safe way to deal with unpleasant experiences, lost opportunities, and also a defence mechanism for future encounters. In this body of work, these automated rituals are visualised and transferred into a visual language of marks, colours, text and selected imagery. Here the artist is exploring the tranquillity and safety associated with routine gardening, rituals of seduction and divination as extension of the human psyche.

Cycles I and II by Aaron Bezzina emphasise the notion of repetition. Repetition could also be a means to alter, to elongate time and possibly matter – to stretch. This latter point will be reflected in another work where everything is static, however, the cycle and movement occurs in one's head. Yasmine Akondo's installation is an ode to Ula Pupaya. She is the embodiment as well as the protector of life (ka/qui), and of time. In her mythology, she was born from ancient waters. She later chose to be reborn in human form in order to experience the concept of life as we do. But as life itself, she was curious and eager to learn. Soon she began to transcend time and space to become one again with a greater understanding of herself. She is merely a symbol to signify the essence of life.

Installation view of work by Mladen Hadžić

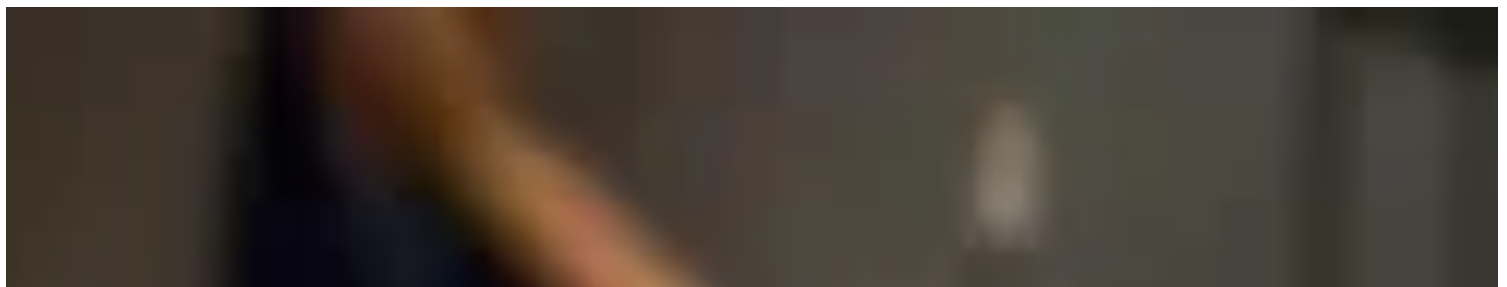
AL: The performance accompanying the installation will be an appropriation of a time-transcending ritual, performed in ancient times to get closer to your own 'qui' and to understand time and space as one moment inside you. And Possibility of Silence is the account of the recurring ritual of visiting the Mirila memorial sites in the Velebit Mountains of Croatia. The video encapsulates Stefan Kolgen's quest to make the noise of the past in his head bearable and, perhaps, briefly muffle it. A Mirila is a grave for the soul of the deceased. The meaning of the word is 'to measure'. The body is measured by putting the corpse on the soil, facing sunrise, and placing a headstone and footstone. After the burial the soul separates from the body and finds its way back due to its measurement and permanently binds itself to the monument due to the glue-like capacities of the limestones used. The interactive installation To measure and bind (the soul) entails the sonified measurement of the artist's body, floating halfway and made out of Belgian limestone, in order to invoke the ritual of briefly touching death without stepping away from life and thus trying to find a way to being-at-home rather than being-in-the-world.

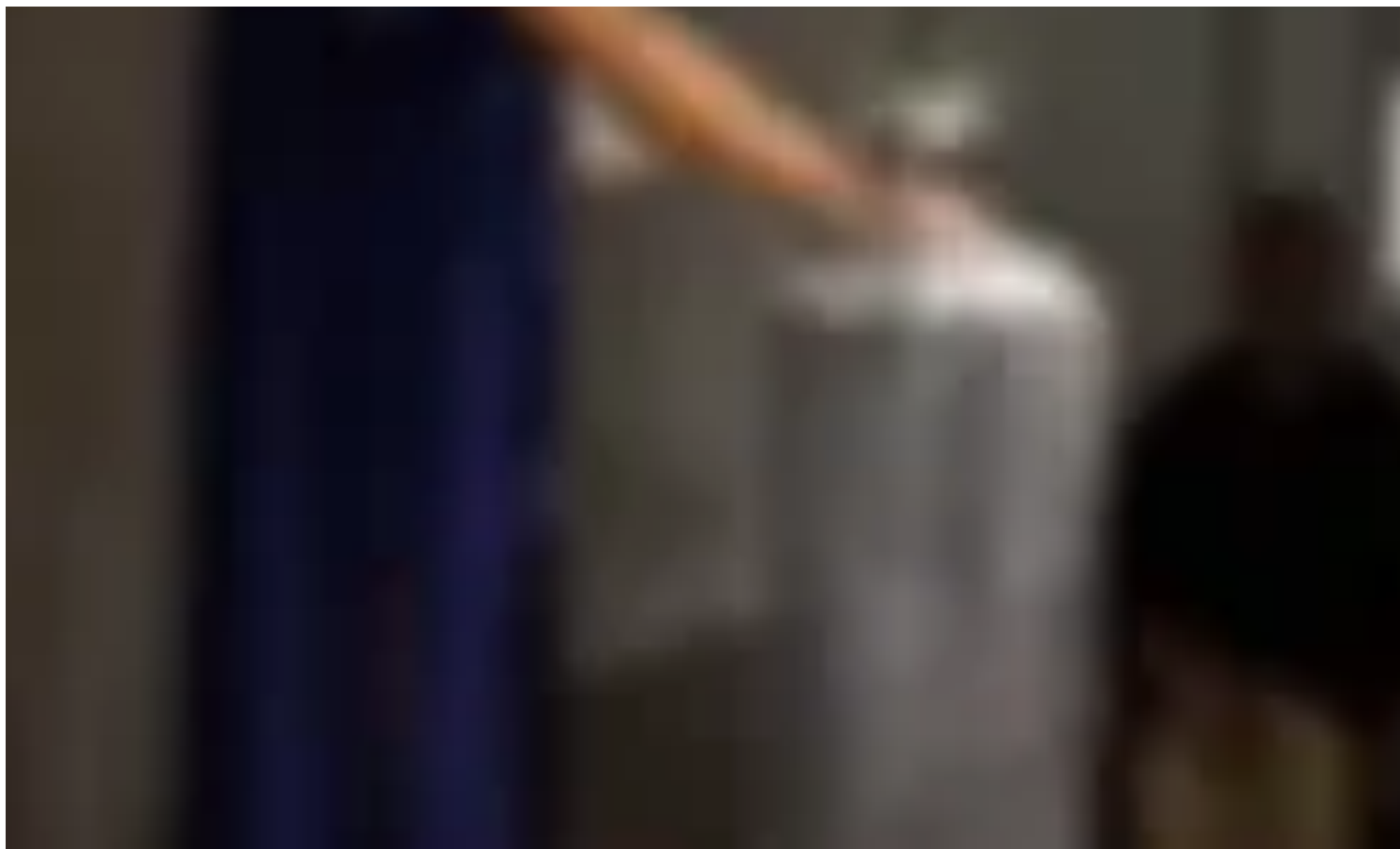
AD: The mix of artists and works in the show contributes to the term 'rituals' being unpacked in dimensional ways. Can you talk about rituals you believe are universal, or indeed the universality of ritualistic behaviour itself? Did you have discussions about commonality versus unique rituals in your curatorial process?

AL & SK: Yes, we did indeed. The first discussions were mainly used to level with each other and to find a common theme. Whilst listening to each other and whilst challenging each other's ideas, it occurred to us that all were intrigued to work around rituals. Rituals that help us keep balance with a changing and demanding society. So this is the visual story of six artists, with six different backgrounds and six contemporary views on rituals. As diverse as rituals can be according to type, ritual, cultural background and religion. Though for the artists and curators involved it became clear that most rituals have a repetitive aspect. Being sequences of activities involving gestures, actions, objects and sound. Embodied interactions with the audience. Performed in a specific way.

Rituals are part of our everyday life. During times of distress, they give comfort. They can also reshape over time. Post-Covid rituals can help us find balance in a disrupted society where attention for mental health and wellbeing have become important. Rituals can help make us name and discuss these issues.

Whilst discussing what to present in the exhibition it became clear that all projects have a link with some kind of passage. Going from one stage to another physically or mentally. Thus finding a place for healing, ease of mind and comfort. But also questioning rituals such as the handshake and rituals within the circle of life. Therefore, Rituals of Passage was chosen as title of the exhibition.





Yasmine Akondo's performance piece during the opening of RITUALS OF PASSAGE. (Image by Michaele Zammit)

AD: You describe the curation process as a collaborative one. Can you talk through what that collaboration entailed – how you communicated and what your own rituals of preparation were?

AL & SK: There was not really a ritual for preparation, but we met every six weeks in a hybrid way. The artists and curators worked in a co-creative way. So, no sole decisions by the curators on theme and works, but a group work. Even the staging of the exhibition was a collaborative decision.

The groundwork for this exhibition started at the beginning of 2022 and happened mostly online since it brought Maltese and Belgian-based artists together. During that period artists got to know each other and each other's work so that they could see how they could complement each other. This then led to defining the team, brainstorming about possible works, and reflecting on the title of the exhibition. In the meantime, the curators had discussions with Valletta Contemporary in order to discuss dates and possibilities. At the end of August, the whole team worked physically together in Antwerp at Sint Lucas Antwerpen – School of Arts. These days were used to finalise the concept and experiment with materials and test ideas together. Here the first discussions about the placement of the works happened. The final staging of course happened when building-up at Valletta Contemporary.

Aaron Bezzina in front of his work *Cycles I* (Image by Michaele Zammit)

AD: Many of the works in the show seem to comment on time and its relationship with habitual behaviors. Rituals in fact often transcend time, carrying their power through generations with minimal alteration. Does the show comment on this permanence?

AL: Rituals of Passage does embrace this permanence by the contemporary interpretation of the rituals shown. As explained earlier all works are very personal to the artists. As such, they question time and space. The artists visualise their view on what the ritual entails for them, but they also offer room for the viewer to immerse in the work and take away their story from it. You can see that in Stefan Kolgen's video *Possibility of Silence* and in Yasmine Akondo's *Ula Pupaya*, but also in Aaron Bezzina's *Cycles I* and *II* as well as in Ryan Falzon's *Old Flames never Die*. They all comment on time and transcend it through the way the works reflect on perpetuation and persistence.



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