

Behaving

Franziska Aigner, one of the core collaborators in the artist Anne Imhof's celebrated work *Faust*, discusses how the installation performance requires a rhythm and a contour of nothingness. Interview by Meadhbh McNutt, photography by Nadine Fraczkowski



Franziska Aigner in Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia. Photography © Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy German Pavilion 2017 and the artist

Franziska Aigner has spent the last month performing at this year's Venice Biennale to the tune of yapping Dobermans in artist Anne Imhof's Golden-Lion-winning *Faust*. Staged in the bleached and clinical German pavilion, Imhof's operatic investigation into the dynamics of power and value has sparked fervent discussion. Aigner is a core collaborator in Imhof's tight-knit group – the ambivalent, conspiring gestures of which are familiar from the recent *Angst* series (2016) installed at Kunsthalle Basel, Hamburger Bahnhof and Biennale de Montréal. After a period of working on her PhD in philosophy at Kingston University and reviewing the recent English translation of the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon's *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Aigner will return to Venice to perform *Faust* until November.

Meadhbh McNutt When we first met in Catherine Malabou's class on Kant's aesthetics, I had no idea that you also came from an art background!

Franziska Aigner I worked on performance projects all throughout my MA, way more than I do now actually.

MM I always
artist's practi

TANK Magazine

now that an

TV ON TV OFF

performance and philosophy work comfortably together or were they completely separate practices for you?

FA I don't connect them strongly. It's obviously me, the same person doing both, but they require a different time, a different attention and focus. In art, you're trying to produce an enigmatic space that is almost discursively inaccessible but carries a discursive promise nonetheless. When I'm writing, I can't do that; I'm trying to produce fiery, lucid thoughts that aim at clarity. In terms of what they ask of me and what I want them to be, they're different. It would be different if I were to write about art, but I don't.

MM It might even help that you don't. Sometimes when both practices become too intertwined, one stagnates.

FA I don't want to make art that is just an importation of concepts into practice, or an application of certain ideas because I feel that normally makes for boring art. Maybe I do connect them but I never present it as, "I'm doing a PhD in philosophy and also making art."

MM How was your experience of the Biennale? Exhausting?

FA Yes, it was pretty overwhelming. I really love performing but it was also a lot of work to get everything ready. There is this core group who has collaborated on [the artist] Anne's [Imhof] performance work since her graduation piece. We all have a lot of different functions, not just performing. So there was a long rehearsal and preparation period immediately followed by a 50-hour performance week. It was exhausting but once the show is up and running, the rhythm changes and I'm just doing one thing. I have five hours where people may look at me, but they can't disturb me or ask anything of me. So performing in fact was weirdly calming in relation to the crazy circus around us.



Billy Bultheel in Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia. Photography © Nadine Fraczkowski.
Courtesy German Pavilion 2017 and the artist

MM Despite the hype surrounding the work, the atmosphere inside is ominous yet oddly calming.

FA It was a lot calmer by the time that you got there. You were part of the "normal" crowd but before that, there were some tense people. On opening week, there were some people who might have never queued in their life and felt outraged that someone would make them wait. It was good when it opened to a more general public because there were more people like you and me, reacting with general curiosity and kindness. I felt that I shared more of a social code with them whereas I didn't feel that with some of the others before. I couldn't really predict their reactions to certain things. When either started to cry, or they hated it and made a spectacle of their disappro-

things. They

TANK Magazine

MM *Faust* played on the stereotype of the lazy young artist as a figure who hangs out – masturbates, draws things on the walls, et cetera. There's this big question mark over the value of the work that the performers almost provoke or gesture towards. It must have been an interesting dynamic to have all of these collectors gathering around, in that sense.

FA We are of course self-conscious of the general absurdity of the situation. I find that the work is strongest when we don't really do anything, when we're "hanging out" as you call it, I call it "behaving", and gesture toward the creation of value. So I personally prefer that fewer things happen in the performance. We can't do nothing; you have to find the minimum of things to do to sustain the situation. Then, there is this kind of vampirism on life that shows itself, which is when I think the work is in its most condensed and best form.



Stine Omar in Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia. Photography © Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy German Pavilion 2017 and the artist

MM Endurance is a prevailing theme in durational performance. Even though you performed for 50 hours in total and there were moments of discomfort, it never felt like endurance, or pleasure, were the central point of focus. There was a sense of ambivalence overpowering these themes.

FA It's a tricky balance act to sustain a situation where nothing ever happens but at every moment, it feels like something could. I don't want to make the audience feel like nothing will ever happen. I need to feed curiosity, I need to deal with attention spans, changing space – to find a rhythm that never cashes in the situation with anything concrete or spectacular, anything beyond the pure superficiality of what is going on. You have to sustain a sense of nothingness but it can't be a dismissive nothingness. It needs to retain a kind of contour.

MM There were moments where you alluded to violence, standing on the other performers' hands or back. How do you come to make these decisions?

FA It's all a bit unspoken. There is a lot of unspoken history which makes it interesting, but that also makes it difficult for new people to join the performance. This act of standing on someone happened during last summer, in Berlin. During a show, Eliza held out her hand and I stood on it. In a way, she offered her hand but I definitely mistreated it and exposed that mistreatment to others. This act of standing on each other grew in *Faust*. Other people took up the motif and developed it. The installation evolved alongside discussions of verticality and ideas of hierarchy so it felt natural

You know [Reiner Werner] Fassbinder's [film] *American Soldier*? In the final scene, Ricky gets shot; his lover catches him in slow motion and they roll on the floor. It's unclear whether they're making love, whether he is suffocating Ricky, or if Ricky is already dead. The scene plays with the minute details of tenderness which, when you apply a little more pressure, can become suffocating – or maybe it's tenderness itself that hurts. It's interesting especially in these constellations of people, to work on those grey areas where it's never *just* violent, never *just* tender or loving.



Left, Lea Welsch, and right, Mickey Mahar in Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia. Photography © Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy German Pavilion 2017 and the artist

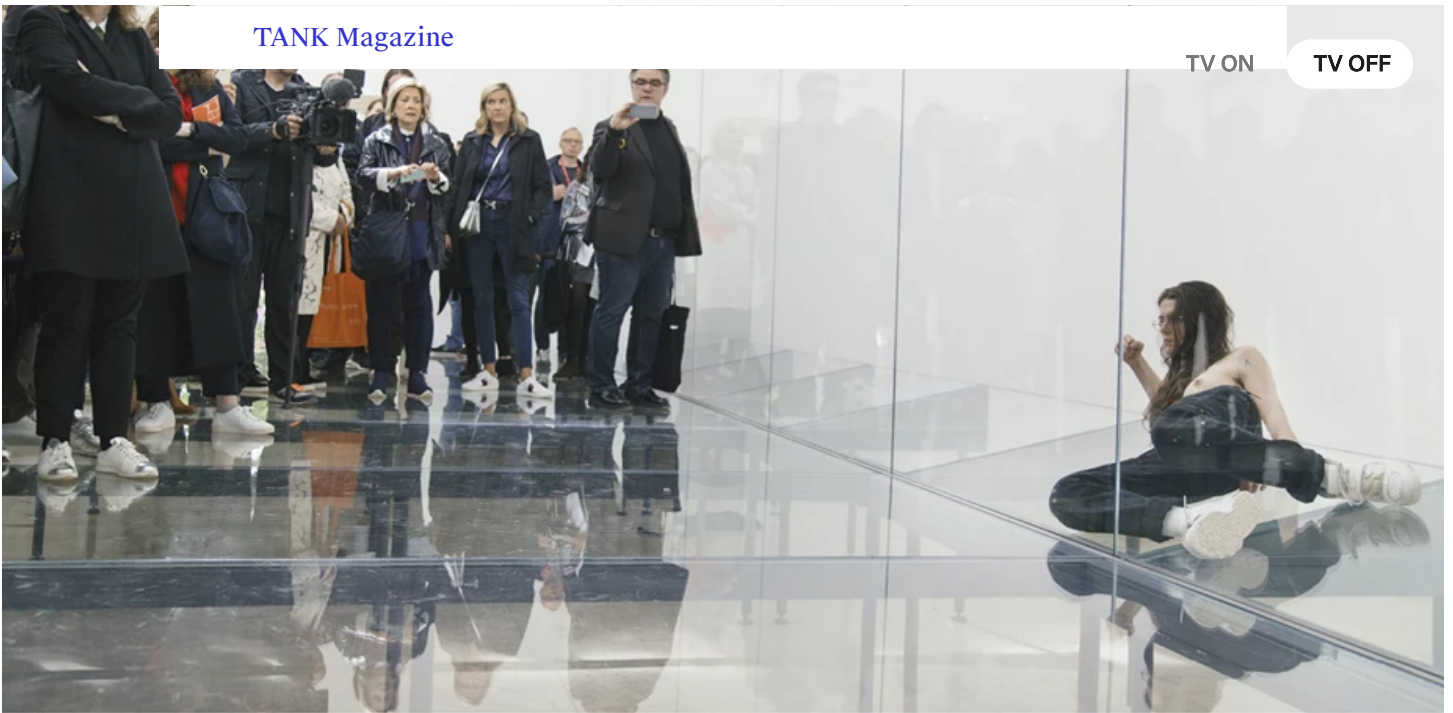
MM The discreet references to subcultures – branded clothing, head banging – added to this overall image consciousness of the work but alongside religious imagery, also gave the impression of people trying to understand themselves as a group and figure out a way of being together in a heavily surveilled space. There were almost utopian moments where you break away from familiar modes of expression into something more unexpected.

FA People started to talk about the fact that the work is so photographable. The way Anne [Imhof] dealt with this response, which was more of a critique really, was to own it. You know how [the artist] Mike Kelley first insisted that his work had nothing to do with abuse, despite what everyone else said. Then eventually he started making work about abuse, because who are you to decide what your work is about? So Anne's way of dealing with the photographable quality of the work, without feeling totally disempowered, was to equally own the situation. Now, some of the new people in the group are actual models from an agency.

We started doing these photo shoots with Nadine Fraczkowski, who does the photography for Anne. Since institutions need press material before there is any work, the photo shoots often take place before there is any performance. So we document a performance before it has happened. We develop the motives and perspectives that emerge during the shoots in the actual performances; the documentation becomes part of the piece. It's a strange reversal of how one would normally think of documentation and production.

In response to the branding, It's a conglomerate of different things. Some of my best friends are in the group and we have known each other for a long time. So we just wear what we wear, sharing an appreciation for certain brands or clothing. But then, there are also some more straight-forward things about the clothing that Anne is looking for and insists on. For example, I wear these Bayern München shorts in the show. Bayern München is known for its history of defiance of and resistance to Nazi Germany, and its merchandise is sometimes used to signal anti-fascist sentiment. So there is also this symbolic and outspoken aspect to our clothing. Since [the artist] Eliza [Douglas who also performs in *Faust*, and who is Imhof's partner] has joined the team, she takes care of a lot of the clothing-related tasks; she likes to think about it, and has a wardrobe of a million people.





Eliza Douglas in Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia. Photography © Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy German Pavilion 2017 and the artist

MM The clothing recalled an art school aesthetic for me...

FA We did this performance in Hamburger Bahnhof called *Forever Rage* in 2015. In the beginning there were lots of people in the room and then after three hours, the people that stayed in that room looked like they could potentially be in the show themselves. It was mainly people from the art world who stayed behind, and we were all in our own clothes. You couldn't tell us apart. §



Emma Daniel, Mickey Mahar, Lea Welsch, Billy Bultheel and Franziska Aigner in Anne Imhof, *Faust*, 2017, German Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia. Photography © Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy German Pavilion 2017 and the artist

[\[x\] Back](#)

CONTINUE READING:

[REVIEW | Faust](#) | An exclusive premiere stream of Anne Imhof's industrial opera. Text by Meadhbh McNutt

[REVIEW | Libidinal and unproductive](#) | On Anne Imhof's *Sex*, Ottessa Mofengh and the dark euphoria of the present. By Sanja Grozdanic

[Rooms with views](#) | In Florence and Venice Meadhbh McNutt rests her head and roams among the artworks.

[CONVERSATION | Melissa Malkin and Yasha Beharman | Brooklyn](#) | Ahead of *Waning Delicacy*, Under Ether, this

