



Flyer for the exhibition. Design: Nicole Bachmann

## **Interview with Nicole Bachmann by Dimitrina Sevova**

*in the context of her personal exhibition at Corner College, I say, 05 November – 01 December 2017. Interview held on 29 September 2017.*

**Dimitrina:** Tell me how you came up with your new piece, *I say*. How did you construct it?

**Nicole:** *I say* is a continuation from my last piece, a performance called *I don't want your whispers* which was shown at Helmhaus in September.<sup>1</sup> When I started working with Anna, I was looking for someone who's got a big potential with the voice, with all this variation. And I think when she speaks in my pieces it really becomes sculptural, occupies the room in a specific way. It's very physical. I was interested in working with her and a dancer and exploring the relationship between language, the voice that almost becomes physical, while at the same time having a physical body in the space as well, and seeing the relationship of how they come together, or the relationship between them.

<sup>1</sup> Performance *I don't want your whispers* by Nicole Bachmann at Helmhaus, Zurich, as part of the group exhibition *Eine Ausstellung für Dich*, 28 September 2017. Performer: Anna Tierney und Patricia Langa. Dance choreography: Patricia Langa.

**Dimitrina:** You mean the relation between language and gestures, the moving bodies, and the sound produced before becoming articulated language? It was impressive to me to hear how the actors first produced all these noises, in order to form and construct their speech.

**Nicole:** The reason I wanted to work with a dancer is that Anna's voice is so three-dimensional, to me it's sculptural. A body occupies the space in a different way. Her voice is like a thing when it comes out of her mouth.

**Dimitrina:** You mean a materiality of the voice that can be sensed in the space by the audience. A materiality that can be touched, and touches.

**Nicole:** Yes. I started working on *I don't want your whispers* last year. I was reading Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark*. It's a book about activism, how a lot of times it's underground, at a local level, and suddenly it erupts, speaking about who's got a voice, who is being listened to, how can you find a voice in a community, in groups. I started working on the piece around the time Trump was elected. I was interested in these ideas around the voice and its agency. And I was thinking of how being part of a minority group, even as a woman, you are less likely to be listened to. That was the starting idea.

Working with the actor and the dancer, they both would find their voice in their own respective way, the dancer by moving, and the actor by speaking, but at the same time it was important to me that the dancer use her voice as well. It's not only the actor speaking and the dancer interpreting what she is saying. They have their own agency, in their own ways. In the case of Patricia, the dancer, we speak about embodied vocabulary. It was much more experimental, but the idea was to create meaning and construct sense by moving and dancing and using your voice. And at the same time Anna, with her voice, is finding the sounds, finding meaning, constructing meaning, and also they overlap in and out. The idea was of a kind of journey, developing your own voice, and keeping the other voices at bay.

**Dimitrina:** When you say, trying to find a voice, is there also a reference to kids learning to speak, the moment when a child leaving the Imaginary stage starts confronting the signifying aspects of language?

**Nicole:** Not really. As we were experimenting, she would do sounds like da, da, da. I try to stay away from these sounds, because to me, they are linked closely to children, babies. I didn't want to have it as an obvious reference. There is a kind of reference there, but I tried not to link it too closely. Because if it is, it becomes something else as well. And yet, it is about the entry of language, so that would be a two-years-old, right.

**Dimitrina:** This dramatic, changing moment when the signifier comes in...

**Nicole:** That's something I've always been interested in. When I read Giorgio Agamben, the way in philosophy, you can explain everything, I ask myself where experience is, or how you can have knowledge production in experience, even though you maybe can't quite put words to it. Agamben says that we live in this knowledge, in pure experience, until the moment we acquire language, because that's when you start using words, which cannot signify everything. It is something I've always been drawn to in my work, to think about the extent to which you can have knowledge production in experiential moments, or happenings, where you can't quite put language to it. Is there still knowledge production there? Thinking of René Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*, whatever I can think, exists, and if I cannot say it, if I cannot think it, it doesn't exist, these really strict rules. This is why I play with the voice, use different ways of saying things. It is a construction of meaning even though maybe she doesn't say a word. There is a lot of meaning and a lot of things the audience understands, even though she maybe only says sa-se-si-so-sooh. The whole piece could be just that, but there is a massive amount of construction of meaning, and feelings, but also...

**Dimitrina:** And also emotions. Even in written text, language transports emotions, beyond meaning. In spoken language it's even more affective. The differences are so subtle in the live voice, and a recorded voice carries differences, too. Every little change in the pitch makes a big difference, and you can feel it. In the white cube setting of Helmhaus, it was very impressive. I think the performance was really well set up there, in this



Nicole Bachmann, *I say*, 2017. Video still.

isolated, laboratory, clean environment in which the power of the voice can come to bear in such an expressive way. For the audience to be taken away by the voice, and be lost somewhere in one's own feelings.

**Nicole:** The piece is not very loose. It's quite clear. But in making it, it's not like I'm telling you what you have to feel. I tried to leave space for the audience to have their own interpretation of things.

**Dimitrina:** How did you start working with language as an artistic means?

**Nicole:** I come from the image, photography, video. I could not express what I wanted to with just images. I got a bit frustrated, and started to play around. The first audio piece I did... I just started writing. I think it was a process of working a long time with images, and then realizing I'm not quite happy with the way the work turns out. I couldn't quite do what I wanted and started to write. Then, I went to Goldsmiths where Maria Fusco was head of the MA Art Writing at the time. It was the beginning of the course, and Fusco turned out to be really influential not only for me but also for the text-based scene in London in general. We were allowed to follow her seminars. So it was quite fluid.

She became my main tutor. In art school one rarely talks about how a text is written – unless it's a theoretical text. She would look at the text and say, oh, why is this part at the beginning, couldn't it be at the end? Really looking at how you write, and how you structure the text. Basically, teaching you how to write, or how to write in a different way. It was important to find your own way of writing, learn more writing skills, and be more confident in your writing. I think it's an ongoing process, to find out what the end product is. For the Helmhaus show I printed posters with my text.

I'm interested in how different texts ask for different forms. If you print a poster it needs to have a different text to the one Anna reads out aloud. I don't print the scripts of my performances. Well, maybe one day. But I think the scripts of my performances have to be spoken, and the audiences have to encounter them through the spoken word. It could be an audio installation or a live performance, but it needs to be articulated. Whereas maybe other shorter texts might work well printed.

**Dimitrina:** You mean also the visual aspects of the text. To me, what you did with the posters is a kind of concrete poetry. They are so visual. It's not only about the text, but they are pictorial in a way. A very strong image is produced.

**Nicole:** One aspect of concrete poetry which I don't do is a layout in a form related to the content of the text, like a poem about a bird that draws the outline of a bird with the characters. These posters are, in a way, part of the script of the performance, or linked to the performance script. To me it's almost as if you put on paper what happens during the performance, how the words are spoken spatially, with repetition. Suddenly the word comes apart, and she puts it back together, or there's a rhythm. This is what I was thinking about when I did the posters, a kind of visual experience, a visual translation of the text that is in the performance.

**Dimitrina:** They also stay as an independent installation in the exhibition space before and after the performance. You also work a lot with print media, with zines. What kind of medium is the zine, the edition, in your practices?

**Nicole:** I started with *Me and My Friends*, which I suppose should be *My Friends and I*. Initially I thought I'd publish content related to my research. I then realized I wanted to publish any works I liked. In the beginning it was quite visual. Then it became more poetry and text-based. That's what I'm passionate about. It's a way to connect with people, also people you don't know, connect to their work in a different way. I suppose it's the moment of surprise and discovery when you ask someone to contribute, and they can do whatever they want, and then see what comes out. It starts a dialog with the other person. In the beginning, a few fanzines were of my texts. It was an experimentation in how to work with the format of the fanzine, how to include the text. Now it's quite funny, when I look back at the older ones. It's kind of like making the process of your work public. Now these texts are printed, and exist in the world. Six or seven years later I would write them differently. It's kind of a testing ground. The fanzine in itself is interesting because it's cheap and easy to make. I'm not so interested in table-top books, these big books with beautiful images, but rather in small things that can be easily produced, that you can give away. They have their own life.

**Dimitrina:** How does the fanzine relate to your practice in art writing, or text-based work? For me it's interesting how art writing can be contextualized in the field of art. It's a rather new discipline at Goldsmiths. And there is still some reservation, it seems to me, in the broader art scene, even towards conceptual art and art movements working with text from the 1970s. When it comes to art writing today, there seems to be a discrepancy between their visibility in exhibition spaces, and art book fairs, where you can see a lot of production by artists in the form of zines and artists' self-published books or other printed text-based art works, all the way to text-oriented performances and jam sessions. In Europe it seems to be rather a British thing. In the art scene there is a kind of lack of attention.

**Nicole:** I'm not sure I do art writing. I use writing in my practice. The art writing course was ambiguous. It wasn't clear whether it was art writing in the sense of being an artist and using writing, or being a writer and using it in an artistic way, or even about writing reviews, critical texts. It wasn't quite clear whether you'd be a journalist, writing about art, or an artist writing art. Most of those involved used it as an art form, and have become writers that position themselves within the writing community and at the same time within the art community, at the border, publishing stuff but also doing installations and spoken-word performances. At the Royal College they have a course now that I don't think they call art writing. It's more about writing not as an art practice, but critical creative writing around art. The UK has a very big scene of people who work with text. There's a lot of performance. It's very ingrained. I'm doing a collaborative project with Ruth Beale, called *Performance as Publishing*.<sup>2</sup> It starts with the idea that we work with other artists and put on events to which we invite artists who use text in their practice, that is, text-based performance. And artists who do sculptures based on text. We've done a few events and exhibitions, not as curators, but as artists instigating the project but then inviting other artists to take part. We started in 2010. With Maria Fusco starting the art writing course in 2008, that's when events around language and text-based performance were starting to pop up everywhere. Now it already seems normal. At the time it felt that something new was happening. We all got used to it as it became more wide-spread.

2 Nicole Bachmann and Ruth Beale formed *Performance as Publishing* in London in 2010. It is an artist-led research project which investigates overlaps in performance practice, events, discourse and writing. *Performance as Publishing* explores the work of contemporary artists who use text and writing/speaking as a basis for their performance. <<http://performanceaspublishing.com/>> (accessed 2017-11-05)

**Dimitrina:** I'm not really sure, outside of the UK. In Zurich, there are some artists working in this direction. Like Delphine Chapuis Schmitz, or Martina-Sofie Wildberger, and some others. There are not so many artists whose practices concentrate on text-based works. It seems to me that the practice is still somehow marginalized and needs more care. There needs to be an effort to further contextualize these practices, but also to draw a broader audience. The audience is often somewhat distant from this kind of practices, seeing them as perhaps too intellectual. That's my impression at least.

**Nicole:** I think I was able to develop my practice in London, because there is such a big scene, and I felt that my work fit well within that context. I've been away for quite some time so I cannot speak about Zurich so much. It's true that my work has been shown more in the UK. Probably because the scene is bigger, and there is a specific interest in language-based performance, and artists working with text. This may be one of the reasons why I'm so attached to London, because my practice can flourish there, with so many inputs and things going on around that interest. And then, my working language is English.

**Dimitrina:** Have you tried working in German?

**Nicole:** Not really. What I like about English is it's so ambiguous. The words have so many different meanings. I can play around. It's much lighter. Whenever I write in German it tends to become heavy, or clunky. It's just the wrong material.

**Dimitrina:** You know Franz Kafka's decision to write in German was very conscious. His initial language was Czech. This idea of writing in a foreign language, in which you are always minor, even if you are completely fluent, as you are in English.

**Nicole:** I think you have a different approach if you use a foreign language. Maybe you're freer. Sometimes I do think about a sentence I wrote, is it grammatically correct? But then again, it does not really matter. English suits the way I write better than German, in this abstract kind of light way in which one thing can be the other thing. It's like a set of Lego, which you can put together in various ways. To me, German has always been heavier, less playful.

**Dimitrina:** You said the installation is a kind of script of the performance. I'm quite interested in this idea of the script. Can the script become an independent installation, and does it remain a script then? Do you always have a script? To what extent are you following the script in your performances? Is the script a kind of grid? Does it have to be followed closely?

**Nicole:** It has changed. Initially, I'd write a script. Then I'd rehearse with the actors, and apply minor changes. Actors are so trained with text that it's like having a copy editor. When she says it doesn't work, you realize some passage needs another word, you need to change it around, and so on. For this piece, *I don't want your whispers*, I wanted to change the working method, and have the work be created in a kind of workshops, process-based. I wrote a script, thinking about how to find your voice, but also about lines, and how lines become borders. The script was about ten pages and outlined what I wanted the piece to be about. When the three of us met, the actor, the dancer and me, we started to work on sections of the text, figuring out how they could be interpreted. At one point we got stuck with the part that was really abstract, going *sa-se-si-so-sooh*. And it turned out to be the most interesting part of the whole script. Suddenly, something seemed to happen. Before that, Anna was speaking, Pat was dancing, it didn't come together. Whereas with the abstract part, suddenly they were equal. I decided to get rid of the script and work with that small part. Gradually, we then expanded it and I added more words, added parts of the old script back in, too. The script grew as we were rehearsing. It's a very experimental piece, which did start out with a script, but the script repeats the same sounds all over again, and provides instructions like rhythmical, louder, staccato. It's like finding the sound, in the beginning – finding your voice, finding your rhythm, testing out sounds. And then it becomes more like a chorus in which different voices are speaking. It's reduced to stage directions on the side, and it's through rehearsing, testing and rehearsing and rehearsing, that the script comes



to life. This is also why I couldn't print this script. It's as if you printed a description of a painting which says, use blue, use red, and use yellow, but then you'd never know what the painting was. I think it's similar with this script. If you printed it and gave it to people to read, it wouldn't be the piece, because that comes to life through the voice, and how she says it, how the interpretation goes.

**Dimitrina:** You mean the embodiment of the text that makes it a living thing. But then what about re-enactment? If you have to repeat the piece, how does it change in repetition? Reality itself is performative, because it is always in production. At the same time, performativity – referring to J.L. Austin and Judith Butler – is always connected to utterance, and the metamorphoses that language allows. Even if it is the most fixed and abstracted form, at the same time it also has all the potentiality for transformation and change. This abstracted form can change bodies and realities.

**Nicole:** It changes totally. Someone asked me whether the script was for sale as a commodity. You know, like Tino Sehgal. For my work it's absurd, because it doesn't work like that. In that sense, my practice is not stable at all. I'd have to be present. I could do it with a different dancer. I could do it with a different actress. But it would be a completely different piece. It would be the same structure, but the feeling would be different. A performance is slightly different each time it is performed. Even though we had shown the piece in London in June, and we had rehearsed a lot for it, now we again rehearsed two full days. Because it is always the same word, or the same few words, for ten minutes, you have to create a narration, a journey.

**Dimitrina:** You mean a kind of threshold, like the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, into which you have to jump in order to create a relational environment between you and the dancer?

**Nicole:** They are my material. I realized if I just write the script and have one day with the actor, my work won't progress. I need several days to rehearse, because that's the productive time when I create. Yes, I create beforehand by writing the text, but actually making the work happens in the studio with the actor and the dancer. It's experimenting, trying to go this way or that way. Like a sculptor who'd spend days and days or weeks in the studio to make a work, I also need time to make the work in a process based manner, to have a week or two in-between and think about it, what really works, and how to go forward, then back to the studio to rehearse again. Luckily I received a Produktionbeitrag from Pro Helvetia, which made this process possible and enabled me to make *I don't want your whispers*.

**Dimitrina:** How do you decide on the typography when you work with your installations?

**Nicole:** I tried out a few fonts until I went back to Helvetica. I only use that now. I tried Sabon and other fonts, but it becomes too literary, looks like a book. I use typography, but more in the sense of how I arrange the characters on the poster, where does the letter go, and where is there white space, placing the words on white paper.