

Playground

GRACE SCHWINDT / CHARLOTTE BOUCKAERT / KAREL VAN LAERE / PLAYGROUND FESTIVAL

Care, time and decay



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It's a rare thrill when a festival plants its flag squarely in the in-between, where performative arts rub up against the visual arts and the boundaries are deliciously smudged. In Belgium, the 'Playground Festival', a collaboration between STUK and Museum M, is one of few that dares to claim this space. I arrived as a wanderer without a map; I didn't know the artists in the lineup. So, I surrendered to curiosity, letting it tug me from room to room, moment to moment. This is how the path revealed itself.

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Between Conservation and Deterioration

I started my exploration by strolling through Grace Schwindt's exhibition 'A History of Touch' at Museum M. This bright top-floor gallery is uncluttered but dense with forms: paintings and sculptures, gathered from her two-year residency at the museum, quietly negotiate their coexistence. The paintings range from large, sweeping canvases to delicate sketch-studies. Lines fold, colours drift, bodies blur into landscapes; their fluidity is seductive. At their strongest, horizons and flesh truly melt into one another.

The sculptures, however, hold me longer. Hybrid figures of human torsos and limbs metamorphosing into vegetal forms, suggesting slow, symbiotic coexistence of body and plants. Their long, almost balletic legs give them a graceful, theatrical stillness. Faint traces on the pedestals hint at frozen movement: life and history feel suspended, half-fossilised. Off to the side, a mosaic of ceramic squares captures my attention: they contain the imprints of a statue. The hollow forms thus become an anti-statue, where we can only imagine the object as missing, except for one fragment of a leg laying in the cast. Only later, I learn that Schwindt spent hours in the museum's storage among forgotten, dust-covered statues (many of them of religious origins), cracked, bruised relics of past care. Her fascination for the care and conservation of these

objects becomes the conceptual incentive for these broken and fragile hybrids.

With this knowledge (or maybe prejudice) I enter Schwindt's performance *'A vocabulary of care', in a different part of the labyrinthine Museum M.* And indeed, it's this contextual background that gives the performance depth. The walls of the room are draped with straps of coloured fabric reaching all the way to the floor. *Two female dancers stand in front of a video projection on the back wall. The sleaves of their black sweaters are connected to dozens of these straps, as if they themselves grow out of the walls.* The colourful, flowing strips of fabric spread throughout parts of the wall, hang in front of the projection, or sprout from the dancers' backs and arms. Sometimes they look like bodily extensions, sometimes as tentacles softly restraining the movement of the dancers.

On the screen, a third performer appears among images of leaves, tree trunks, body-gestures, and ambiguous materials, speaking in hushed voice about *c*osmic dust, flickering light, micro-vibrations of hands and limbs. One performer curls into the textile strips, pressing against the wall, as if trying to merge with the moving nature on-screen. Soon, that nature shifts into a battlefield terrain: cracks, illness, contagion. The dancers wrap themselves in the straps, over eyes, lips, entire heads: a powerful image in itself. A recurring gesture – outstretched arms and hands waving in the air, tapping and touching invisible objects – pulls me back to the sculptures in the room above, and the traces of frozen movements. Yet without the explicit context of museum storage rooms and tactile care, I fear it must appear like a sign without a signifier, as movement vocabulary lacks dynamism and pregnancy to really stand on its own, particularly in the second part of the performance.

To capture the invisible

I go searching for the next artwork and immediately lose my bearings. Museum M's layout and the cryptic room names in the programme seem designed to confuse and disorient, (maybe getting lost in the museum is the entire point?). Luckily, I spot a Pzazz editor drifting through a doorway and decide to follow, hoping they have caught the trail to the next worthwhile encounter. I am not disappointed.

Near the museum's entrance, tucked quietly into a corner, stands an innocuous white box. Inside it, hidden from view, a dancer is moving in slow, deliberate sequences. We don't see her, we can only hear the movements, stirring our imagination of some sort of Schrödinger's dance. Around the box, the museum's permanent collection makes for odd and curious contrasts: an old TV showing a cat and a small bird sharing a frame in unusual peace, a series of paintings observing the scene from their fixed positions. Between these static objects, a more contemporary rectangular video installation, insists on its own inner logic and temporality. On it, images appear and vanish of fleeting silhouettes, suspended gestures, body-parts caught mid-motion before dissolving again. Suddenly I realise: The pictures on the monitor are from inside the white box: A digital camera fitted to a small peeping hole in the box captures the live movements of the dancer – but only if the public outside click the camera!

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The mechanism of Charlotte Bouckaert's installation lies in the shifting visuals as live photographs taken in real time, produced by a black digital camera attached to the box. The viewer decides if he wants to become a collaborator: he can adjust the speed, click to capture, accelerate the disappearance. Each shot becomes an image already slipping away: *before and after the shot* fold into each other, leaving us in the small but charged interval where presence becomes archive and then immediately, absence. It's a small work, easy to overlook, which feels almost intentional. But once you register what's happening, the piece opens a surprisingly spacious reflection on image-making, on spectatorship, on the fragile contract between presence and its documentation. The white box becomes a space where attention is questioned, where the viewer's impulse to capture becomes complicit of the act of vanishing.

Anatomical choreography

Finding Karel Van Laere's installation felt like another small navigational puzzle inside Museum M's layout: as I was about to leave the museum, I took a wrong turn and there I was. I had wandered directly into Van Laere's *'Slow'* (2013) video installation. On the screen his body is hauled through the streets of Taiwan. It is undeniably funny seeing the suited man slowly slide across streets and past surprised onlookers, dragged by an invisible chord. On the floor in a corner the rugged and dirty suit is laid out like a man flattened by a bulldozer. It is an installation that plays with visual imagery in an imaginative way, which made me look forward to the last stop on my journey: Van Laere's performance 'Reach', performed at STUK the next day.

As was the case with Grace Schwindt earlier, Van Laere's installation and performance works share clear thematic and stylistic characteristics: a similar calculated conceptual atmosphere, and a similar slice of bizarre technological humour. 'Reach' is inspired by medical operations, and here Van Laere re-creates his own public medical spectacle. The audience stand in a circle around Van Laere and his two co-performers (a doctor and a dentist). Between them, they have a table with a laparoscopic instrument, used to operate the abdomen and pelvis with surgery that uses cameras and small instruments inserted through tiny holes in the body rather than through big invasive cuts. Here, no surgery is performed, but in a sort of mechanical choreography, the instruments are used to tie up, bring together and separate audio cables that project a polyphony of sounds and tapes on the speakers around the room. A camera projects an enlarged image on three screen, devices that multiply the performance in real time.

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Van Laere speaks of the tension between the human body and technological systems, and indeed the laparoscopic instruments he observed and the precise cutting away of 'excess tissue'. The missing body haunts the performance. These cameras, screens and audial constructions shift the scales and dematerialise the clinical instruments. But as the performance leans deeper into this seduction, a more uncomfortable question begins to grow in me: what happens with the real body that these instruments work on? The body that is not a metaphor, not an aesthetic object, but a sick, living person undergoing these procedures? The clinical gaze that extracts aesthetic pleasure from vulnerability, the medical image divorced from the person it represents, has a long and unfortunate

lineage, and '*REACH*' doesn't fully escape that history. It gives us the wound without the wounded, the procedure without the patient, the aesthetics of medical precision without the ethical weight that shaped them. What we watch is not just a technological choreography but a reminder of how thin the line is between object and subject, between the person operating and the person under the knife.

To move through Museum M and STUK becomes an engagement with intervals: the pauses, overlaps, and echoes that reverberate between still objects and the living beings that move around them. The Playground festival's dispersed spaces and programming mirror the temporal and spatial rhythms of the works themselves. If you look closely, you may find something truly special lingering in this grey zone.