

Hannah Kaya, A cull to —, Studio XX, Montréal

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Hannah Kaya

A cull to —, performance during the exhibition, *Mal(Sous)Entendus / Mi(S)(Xed)Communications*, of the festival *HTMlles | Au-delà du # — Échecs et devenirs*, Studio XX, Montréal, 2018. Photos : Natacha Clitandre, courtesy of Studio XX, Montréal

Hannah Kaya

A cull to —

The room was filled with people and noise when artist Hannah Kaya started and finished her intimate twenty-four hour durational performance *A cull to —*, presented as part of the HTMlles biannual feminist new media art festival produced by Montréal-based artist-run centre, Studio XX. It was the only performance programmed for the festival's main event, the group exhibition titled *Mi(s)(xed)communications / Mal(sous)entendus*. Placed in a corner of the central gallery, next to three other artworks that dealt with what comes after the #MeToo denunciations, *A cull to —* normally received visitors with an emblematic, persistent silence that only Kaya would be able to break.

That was the reason she was there.

Outside of the performance, all that could be seen were promises of a work to come, or traces of a work that had already been. It was, nevertheless, a very cozy space. A futon mattress with lots of pillows was placed on a rug next to a small desk with an open laptop on it. This is where Kaya would work. Hanging from the ceiling, to delimit the installation's space, two texts written by the artist printed on large sheets of paper formed a sort of physical border around the installation. The first text, which faced her bed, was written one day after Kaya was sexually assaulted. It was her first attempt to try and make sense of what had happened to her.

On the other side of the paper, facing the rest of the exhibition, was a public call to action written by the artist and two other students who were also members of the Community Disclosure Network at their university. Hannah felt that this document was a failure, and this performance was one of her creative efforts to comprehend the assault and try to heal. The artwork would take the form of a task: she would have twenty-four hours to write a third text only using words that had already been written in the two preceding texts. This writing process would be shared by means of video projection

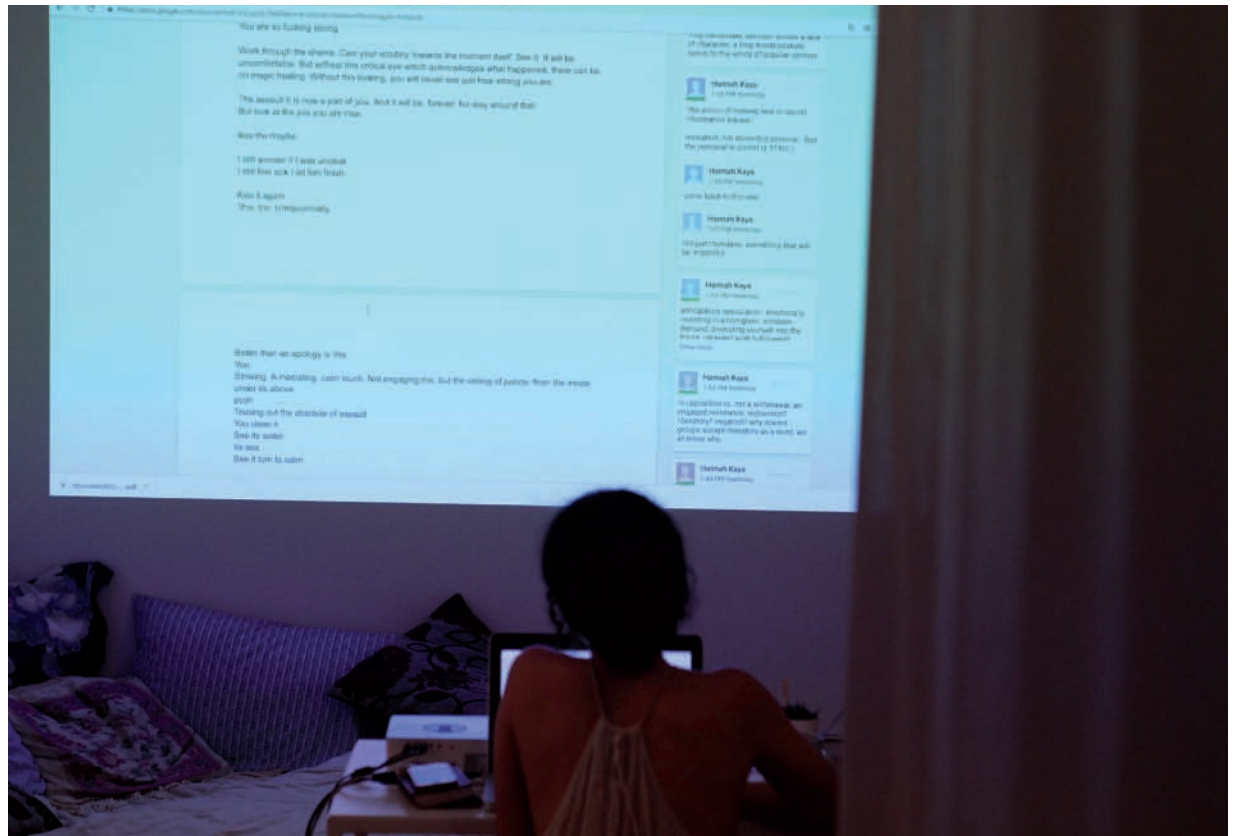
in the gallery and on a Google document available on the festival's website.

The anonymity that had been Kaya's strategy when she began her personal healing journey did not become the centre of her narrative. The decision to make her story public by exhibiting her trauma succeeded in breaking through barriers that the work could have faced once it was presented to the audience. On the exhibition's opening night, *A cull to —* was little more than an announcement: a document on a laptop screen listed the date and time of the performance. It was very clear that something was missing, and the emptiness of the bedroom-like installation was both alienating and inviting at the same time.

After all, emptiness is also life—all living organisms are mostly empty.

The trajectory of *A cull to —* was nonlinear, and as a result it surpassed Kaya's capacity to intervene in it. It had three visibly distinct phases. In the first one, prior to the performance, the artwork was activated by a large audience that visited the gallery during the first two days of the festival. The bedroom was all set, just waiting for Kaya's arrival. When she finally started at 1:00 p.m. on a cold Saturday afternoon—wearing white flowing clothes, her hair curly and loose, eventually sitting on the welcoming pillows and writing on the blank pages—the work immediately grew in size and in amplitude. It wasn't only Kaya's story anymore, it was also the audience's—most of whom were complete strangers, now following each step of her re-signification of a traumatic experience that was now also theirs.

And then Kaya left. She stood up almost twenty-four hours later and read her final text. She didn't perform it or recite it. Kaya let the text exist in the most autonomous way possible within the limits of the performance context. In one of the final paragraphs the words describe the complexity of



the healing challenge: “The assault ‘has legs.’ It’s the re-traumatization hidden in the most innocent places. A perverted joke, an adorable story or video, and suddenly your eyes well up.” The multiple and contradictory narratives had been pacified inside of her, and the sharing of this experience produced a powerful and resonating effect. Tears came to the public’s eyes. The connection with the artist, through her very personal yet recognizable trauma, could be felt physically or virtually by everyone that took part in this moment. The performance-installation provided fruitful ground for reconciliation with multiple forms of trauma.

A cull to—triggered powerful sensations of kinship and sisterhood between artist, artwork, and audience. The intimacy transmitted by following the development of the piece transcended the white cube and invaded the privacy of our homes. By accessing the Google document online and following the artist on her writing path, we felt like we were holding hands with her, helping her through this tough time; and in a very compelling reflex, we could also reflect on our own stories of abuse.

The notion of overcoming or getting over things cannot really be applied here. Nevertheless, we feel accompanied by Kaya’s vulnerability. The aesthetic experience allowed by the transformative power of this time-based work also invites us to make an epistemological shift. Instead of struggling to forget or trying hard to surpass trauma, we should perhaps admit that these events will always walk with us, wherever we go.

In *Complexity and Life* (2005), physicist Fritjof Capra notes that “a living organism is an open system that maintains itself in a state far from equilibrium, and yet is stable.” A living organism knows how to inhabit emptiness. A living organism is capable of healing, and of extending this curative process beyond any walls or any closed space.

A cull to curing and learning to walk side by side with pain.

Renata Azevedo Moreira

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