



EN

Kuba Stępień

All the stories I have ever told you were fiction

curated by Romuald Demidenko
20 Jul–2 Sep 2023

All the stories I have ever told you were fiction,
video, 17"10'

performers: Aaa Biczysko, Neo Mosa, Yebin
Hwang, Stefa Gosiewsk, Kuba Stępień

camerapersons: Szuga Szu, Emiko Okime

editing and colour correction: Natalia Pośnik

costumes: Martyna Szumowinki (No Przesada)

make-up: Liliana Bogacka

hair: Delfina Tłałka

nail-art: Ugly Nails

set coordinator: Domi Depowsk

sound recording: Joanna Szczęsnowicz

sound collaboration: Julek Płoski

special thanks: Patryk Walaszkowski

exhibition production: 66P Subjective Institution
of Culture team



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The exhibition features the multimedia work *All the stories I have ever told you were fiction* by Kuba Stępień. The film takes viewers into a dreamlike world of gestures and non-verbal narration produced by performers united in semi-impromptu movement. The six interweaving scenes making up the video performance create a hypnotic collage of fiction, imagination and desire, constructed from images of bodies, collective movement and intimacy, challenging the standards of normative communication and binary orders.

The film can be seen both as a personal vision of collective tenderness and as a universal manifesto of identity and expression that evades conventional approaches. Its narrative is ultimately devoid of a verbal layer; instead of words, it is filled with a choreography that is based on texts about non-heteronormative representation and overlooked subjectivities.

The protagonists featured in the work reveal behaviours and take on roles navigating between the reflection of their own fantasies and the performance of everyday life. The video provokes us to enter into the depicted world, in which the protagonists can enact their own radical micro politics, despite being rooted in a modernity in which bodies are still subjected to scrutiny or punishment, identified as those “passing,” disrespected and removed from view or territory. Reduced to the form of film, the recording of the performance demands at least partial fulfilment and invites the viewer to not only observe but also react, opt for what is possible and at the same time abandon habits of gender identity and behaviour, resist binary divisions by creating plat-forms of support.

Romuald Demidenko in conversation with Kuba Stępień

It is possible to find in your practice both elements connected with your own experiences and subtle references to conventions often adopted by non-heteronormative subjectivities or people functioning outside of binary orders. How do you approach acting, taking on specific roles or looking at yourself and others through the camera lens in these contexts?

I treat camera actions as a space of rehearsal, testing, having fun, playing roles and seeing how one can switch between the binaries of seriousness, rationality or correctness. Between the gaze of the cameraperson, the representation of the collective

The key notions in *All the stories I have ever told you were fiction* are “auto-fiction” and “auto-ethnography.” Taken from one of McKenzie Wark’s books, these terms hint at the possibility of freely pushing the boundaries between the real and the conventional in relation to one’s own experiences. The screening thus becomes a vision of a utopian, though perhaps only seemingly so, world of bodies that cannot be subjugated to the system. What we are watching, however, need not be a mere simulation, but a prediction of what is about to occur, and in all probability is already taking place – the reproduction of self-projection intended to confuse the tools of surveillance, the departure from the compulsion to keep devices that manage our fears close to our bodies, resisting the lists of restrictions with codes of intimacy, tenderness and contentment (without the need to capitalise on them), and, eventually, the chance of witnessing newly-created collective queer-subjectivities.

Kuba Stępień (b. 1997) draws on their own memories, notes and existing narratives. They create film-and-performative works, exploring the possibility of existence of subjective identity politics and alliances that offer an alternative to heteronormativity. In their practice they use and process media and materials from a variety of sources. They are involved in musical projects, performing and recording under the pseudonym Apkvp. In 2020, the IA label released their conceptual album Lava Grotto. Their works have recently been shown at Scherben Gallery in Berlin, the Museum of Art in Łódź, Zachęta – the National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, as part of the Zielona Góra Biennale and at the Survival Festival in Wrocław, among others. They participated in the Kem School programme in Warsaw and studied at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. They graduated in media art from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (MA diploma 2023), in photography and multimedia from the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, and from the Academy of Photography in Krakow.

All the stories I have ever told you were fiction is a recording of a performance for the camera featuring Kuba Stępień and people close to him. Their three-day encounter is shown at the exhibition through shots making up a video lasting just over seventeen minutes. The characters in the film pretend to be the people they actually are or embody their imagined selves. Consisting of six interweaving scenes, the moving image can be viewed both as a personal vision of collective intimacy and as a universal manifesto of identity and expression that escapes conventional approaches.

audience and the people participating in the action. On the other hand, from the perspective of the performers, it also allows them to control and reclaim power over their own representation and the narrative that is created around them.

***All the stories I have ever told you were fiction* is a cinematic collage of images and narrative devoid of text in a literal sense. Instead, it is based on collectively produced gestures.**

The starting point for me is fiction about real events that have taken place, in the sense that fiction and fantasy are driven by emotions and desires, conveying more truth than a real, non-

fictional narrative. I combine “auto-fiction” with “auto-theory” and try to work with these two formulas, starting with auto-theory and moving towards auto-fiction, although it is a fluid process. The most important books that I kept returning to during the process were *Reverse Cowgirl* by McKenzie Wark, which she calls more of an “auto-ethnography of the opacity of the self,” Paul B. Preciado’s body-essay *Testo Junkie* and *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson, which refers to her own love relationship with a non-binary person.

This is the first time I have acted in this way, as have others I work with. We allowed ourselves to work through quite a lot at many stages, avoiding naming or categorising certain issues, which did not completely suppress the potentiality contained in the whole process.

What was the process of translating the text into the format of a video performance like?

The work on the performance began about a year and a half ago, when I became aware of my invisible disabilities, such as my inability to focus, read, remember, learn, my lack of visual imagination or fantasy, my problem with falling asleep and, perhaps most crucial, my lack of dreams or lack of access to them. I then began to look for non-normative potentialities in this and to work in a more experimental way, for example by rewriting notes from books many times, until they became a completely new text, as if my own. Then I would translate the text into other formats, embody it, meditate on it or work with other people, involving my own intimate experiences to produce some visual fantasies, representations of experiences, states or desires. Over the course of time I was able to develop six visual visions-fictions, each of which became a starting point for one of the scenes, so I think of what we were doing during the performance as performing fiction. There was no script, only scores as starting points, very open to being filled in, played with or reworked. They made it possible to happen, to create selves and worlds, based on what I feel is a queer radical desire.

I use the term video performances to call the works you make, and performances for the camera lens to refer to subsequent scenes, although I am aware that you are creating something more separate. Within which genre would you say your work should be situated?

As for video performance or performance for the camera, it probably depends on the context, as both genres have their own clear references and a canon, often drawing on documented one-on-one actions with a camera. I refer to the project as a film that was created through the conscious, affective manipulation of performance documentation. The intention was to have six scenes that interweave to create a “rhizomatic” arrangement, although I consider it a very peculiar creation that does not need to be divided into scenes or classified as one genre or another. I think that it manages to smoothly escape any attempts at assigning to genres and categories, at the same time ignoring normative expectations from outside of itself. Paul B. Preciado, speaking of his film adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel, calls it a “non-binary artistic object.” I strongly identify with this term and I think I could also use it with reference to my work.

As was the case in one of your previous video performances, you appear in the film alongside the other characters. Who are the people we see?

Some of the people were close to me before I started working on the film, others I got to know through those already involved in the process. I intuitively felt who I wanted to work with and who I would be comfortable with, creating a safe space for things to happen based on a fluid hierarchy. It was also important to me that each person had at least one another person in the group besides me whom they knew, felt comfortable and safe with, and that the performers did not have an established relationship between each other. This would develop and build during the meeting itself, while experiencing who we are becoming for and towards each other in the group, noticing the tensions that arise between us and how we feel and express them.

In the opening scene of the film, we see a person jumping up in slow motion. How should we read this first frame?

I would not like to make any suggestions in terms of interpretation. I myself take pleasure in the ambiguity that accompanies my own reading of this scene. I think this initial fragment resonates with a kind of emotional and energetic charge that “does” something in us. A bit like communing with sound through movement or observing other people dancing next to us. I wanted to create a work that would not expect too much from the people watching it, but

instead be open, inclusive and accessible. It is designed to be received more through the body, I want it to be able to touch, embrace and hug in an intangible way. It is possible to derive from it what we happen to need at a given time, without feeling that we are missing out on something, that we do not have access to something or that we need some special knowledge, skills or tools. In a way, even if it sounds naive, I created this work as a positive and hopeful utopia or fantasy, which I lacked and which I badly needed being a queer non-binary person in the Polish reality and in the current political situation.

One performer’s prop is included in the exhibition: her wings. How were they created and what do they express, along with other elements covering and sometimes revealing the bodies of the characters in the film: costumes, make-up and nails?

Each of these elements was created in collaboration – in the case of the costumes, with Martyna Konieczny (No Przesada). During video chats, we discussed my non-professional sketches and ideas, fantasising together about what we could do. Then, over one weekend in Łódź, using the clothes and materials we had gathered, we constructed the costumes in Martyna’s studio that could be sewn the following week. The very act of creating the costumes for the characters only became real during the fitting sessions, where we exchanged different elements and could construct ourselves based on these clothes. During the performance, as the scenes unfolded there was also an exchange of some of the garments between the performers, so neither the costumes nor the roles were fixed. Similarly, in the case of the make-up, which was done by Liliana Bogacka, or the nails by Ugly Nails, or the hair, which was done by Delfina Tłałka – it was in a way a collaborative process, an attempt to respond to the needs and fantasies of the people for whom they were created. I find it important to provide the people with whom I collaborate with the space to create themselves anew, in conditions that admit experimentation and interdependence.