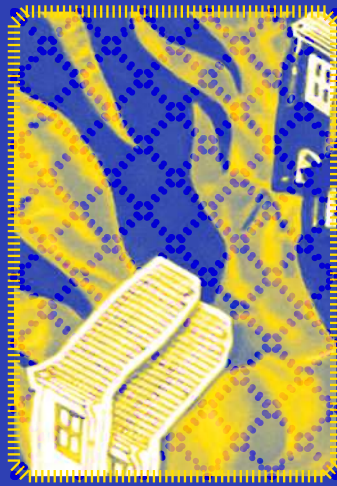
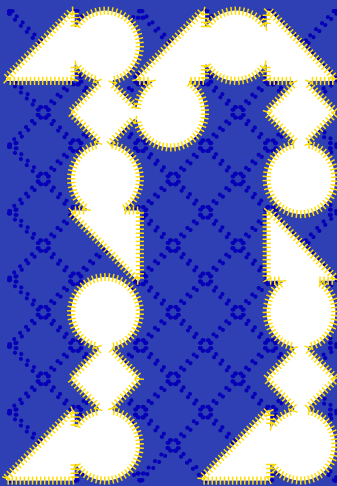
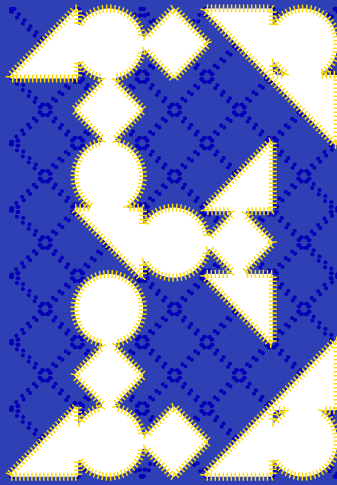
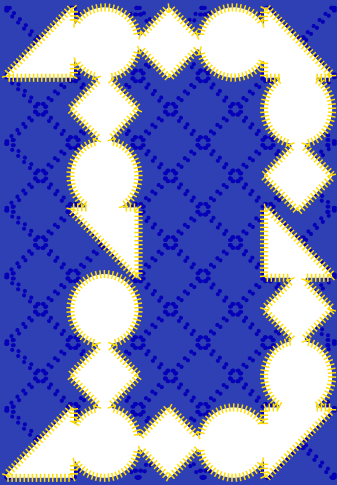
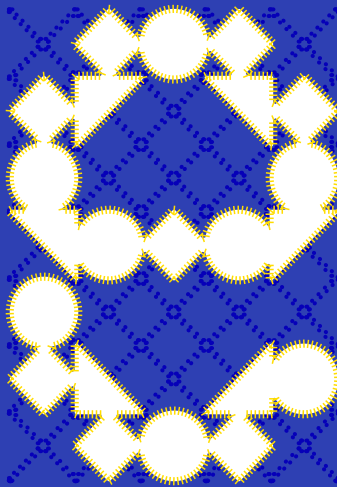
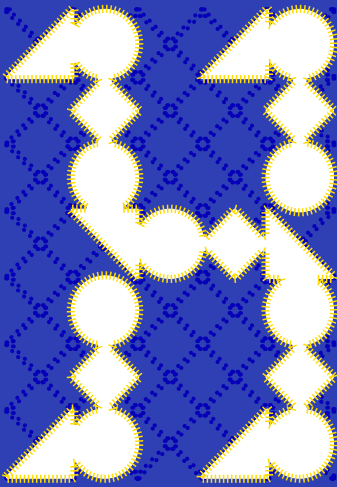


HEDEN  
X  
Polarization



A Reader

VHDG

WHO6




# HEDEN X Polarization

A Reader

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This reader presents a reflective account of the HEDEN x Polarization program, held from 3–19 October 2025. It considers the event as a whole through the reflection by Anna Lillioja while engaging closely with the individual artistic contributions presented during the program and the exhibition. In addition, each participating artist and speaker was invited to contribute a text developed from their own work and presentation, reflecting on their practice and research in relation to the theme of polarization. The publication also includes a photographic documentation of the event and concludes with a final reflection by the curator.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

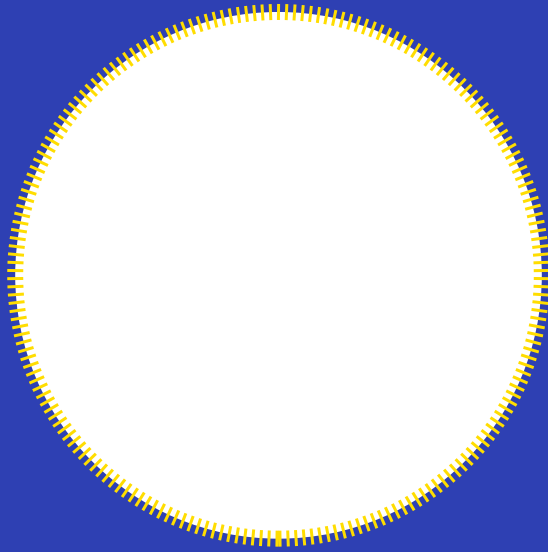
By Anna Lillioja

**W**e are often told that polarization is dangerous: people drifting apart, debates turning into battles, trust evaporating. The United Nations (UN) has published reports warning that polarization poses a threat to social cohesion and democratic resilience. International media emphasize its role in declining trust in the press. We see polarization in public discussions about topics like migration, climate (change), farming and identity politics, in Friesland as much as anywhere else in the Netherlands. During the program HEDEN x Polarization, organised by Kunstinitiatief VHDG, the subject surfaced in many different ways. During the seminar and exhibition the public reflected on the roots of growing division, but also asked whether polarization is always a problem, or simply a natural part of societies in motion. Is polarization really as harmful as it is often thought? Or is it actually necessary for a vibrant democratic society? And how can we better understand this charged phenomenon?

The evening unfolded through the presentation of the work of four artists and a talk by sociologist Pascal Gielen. He explained how neoliberal politicians and major media outlets fuel polarization, and how a society built on competition and constant performance breeds loneliness, mistrust, and frustration - making people more susceptible to adopting radical political positions and worldviews. After his keynote, artists and visitors gathered for group conversations, based on questions like the role of art in polarizing societies, that were retrieved by the participants beforehand. Meeting each other at the table, people questioned the role and limits of socially engaged art, and the power structures it operates within. Structures that sometimes prevent it from reaching intended audiences beyond its own bubble. One question stayed with many of us: how do we connect in times of polarization?

Throughout history, art has been first and foremost the place where outspoken opinions and convictions are given a platform - a space where injustice was challenged, where the fight for recognition was waged, and where emancipation emerged. Yet when museums, art spaces, and artists speak out politically, they often polarise with part of their audience. How should art institutions and artists navigate this field of tension? In the end, this question for the arts is the same one facing society as a whole: what kind of public world do we want to live in?

2.



# Contributing Artists

# FRANCISCO BAQUERIZO RACINES

## La Quema (del Planeta "B") (2025)

By Anna Lillioja

The Ecuadorian artist Francisco Baquerizo Racines (b. 1993, Quito, Ecuador) creates visual worlds situated in specific realities, where he explores the dichotomy between the spheres of "Center" and "Periphery," the "legal" and "illegal." During HEDEN x Polarization he presented the art-work La Quema (del Planeta "B") (2025) that ties back to Dutch colonial history and the traces of power struggle and inequality it has left on today's life in Ecuador. Through a specific ritual, the video-installation shows us how polarization can have its roots in events from hundreds of years ago.

La Quema (del Planeta "B") (2025) explores polarization through Ecuador's año viejo tradition, where effigies are burned at New Year's to both celebrate and protest. The burning of the effigy stems from a ritual practiced at New Years, when old and past things are burnt and left behind. Burning effigies becomes a form of resistance, reflecting the struggle against injustice. Artists Joshua Jurado and Diego Cuesta were invited by Francisco? to build a galleon effigy, referencing the 1624 Dutch attack on Guayaquil, to link historical colonial violence with contemporary issues like rising violence and extractivism. The effigy in the video is burnt in Guayaquil in Ecuador, while locals - affected by this injustice and violence - watch on. This seems to be a moment for the locals to take back power into their own hands and say: we will not let this colonial history dictate our lives forever. While we watch the video, we are seated on benches made from cardboard banana boxes. A reminder of the produce that made some rich and others suffer until today.

This communitarian art project asks us to reflect on how, even in our celebrations, we are reminded of the historical and political tensions, and (class? societal?) divisions that still affect us today.



Film still 4:04 min

Film still 4:52 min



La Quema (del Planeta "B")



Film still 8:38 min

Film still 7:57 min



## **Artist reflection:**

### ***Ecuador, or the Imaginary Line In Between***

By Francisco Baquerizo Racines

In what the dominant Western gaze continues to classify as “contemporary,” it is necessary to ask: contemporary to whom, to what, and to where. Polarization operates as a mechanism that organizes thought and cultural production according to its own authority. When I studied art in Quito\*, our discussions rarely emerged from our own conceptual frameworks. The government in power at the time, which presented itself as socialist, attempted to address colonial repair, but ultimately reproduced the very lens it claimed to challenge. Years later, those debates were reframed by the right wing as threats, and this framing now echoes within current political rhetoric in the United States. This revealed how quickly such positions become trapped within dominant structures. It also led many of us to question the nation-state project itself and to search for ways of understanding a society shaped by centuries of direct domination.

For more than five centuries, narratives have shifted without dismantling the structures that organize life in Abya-Yala\* or in other words, Latin America. Alternatives cannot be found by idealizing a pre-1492 world. Reading Peruvian Andean philosopher Javier Lajo’s reflection on Andean time\*, understood as a zigzag rather than a linear progression, opened a way for me to consider time, culture and identity outside the binary cycles we repeatedly reproduce. “Me voy a volver,” a phrase that describes our relationship to Pacha, the Quechua and Kichwa concept that encompasses earth and time as an indivisible whole, became central to this reflection.

These ideas informed my work *La Quema (del planeta “B”)*, which revisits the 1624 burning of Guayaquil\* by the Nassau fleet through the lens of Ecuador’s *año viejo* tradition, in which paper effigies are burned during New Year celebrations. This mestizo ritual proposes renewal through repetition and sustains a tension between popular culture, capitalist desire, political protest and the informal economies that

make artistic practices possible in precarious contexts.

I recognized a parallel in the popular graphics that saturate public space. They imitate dominant imagery while departing from it, generating forms that are unlicensed yet deeply expressive of "local identity". These "pirated" aesthetics reveal desire as well as the impossibility of reconciling that desire with the systems they replicate. A recent example demonstrates a similar tension beyond the graphic realm. In Namibia, the councillor elected for the Ompundja constituency is named Adolf Hitler Uunona. His name, drawn from one of the most infamous figures of European history, exposes contradictions between imposed power and local agency. It challenges assumptions within European thought regarding representation and authority. The point is not to romanticize such manifestations as resistance but to recognize them as observations that illuminate broader dynamics.

The same intention guided the replication of the VOC Amsterdam vessel from the National Maritime Museum within the vernacular language of the *año viejo* effigy. The work sought to construct a loosened narrative that has long defined a territory, not through a polarized distinction between good and evil, but by revealing the truth embedded in the images produced during the action. The fire became a point of reflection, a space where time folds and memory materializes.

The region (Abya-Yala) continues to be compelled to adopt a single model for organizing society, the model known as democracy, which repeatedly fails while offering only two dominant options: democracy or an alleged left-wing threat, often interpreted by the United States, Europe and their allies as a (potential or suspicious) path to dictatorship. If we continue to follow imposed models, whether by advertising a neighborhood ice-cream shop in Guayaquil using a precarious local rendering of the Smurfs or by aspiring to political forms enforced for more than five centuries, whose role are we performing? Are we participating, or merely serving? What does our presence in the world signify for the economic centres that set the terms?

Perhaps addressing these questions requires reconnecting with Pacha and recognizing time and space as inseparable, a perspective

that can unsettle the polarization imposed on our ways of thinking and open another sense of contemporaneity. But La Quema was never meant to offer solutions or interpretive closure. It arose from the need to acknowledge a form of truth that does not necessarily coincide with what we call reality. A truth that surfaced through the captured images by the action and through the act of burning itself. The work sought to make that truth visible, even if only for a moment, without pretending to resolve the distance between what is lived and what is real.

***Reflection on used terminology:***

**\*Abya Yala:** Term used by several Indigenous nations of the Americas (especially Guna, Quechua, and Aymara communities) to refer to the American continent. It means "land in full maturity" or "land of vital blood," and is used as an alternative to "the Americas" or "Latin America."

**\*Andean Time:** In Javier Lajo's formulation, it is a spiralling movement of return and renewal in which past, present and future coexist as an ongoing dialogue of memory and becoming, rather than as a linear sequence.

**\*Quito:** Pre-Inca city and current capital of Ecuador. **Guayaquil:** The main port city of Ecuador.

# KATAYOON BARZEGAR

## Replica (2022)

By Anna Lillioja

**K**atayoon Barzegar (b. 1990, Tehran) is a visual artist working across sculpture, installation, video, and text. In her practice, she investigates how structures of power materialize in bodies and spaces. Our bodies are always evolving, shaped by internal but also external forces and power structures. How and who are we supposed to be? And how do we mold ourselves to this demand? Katayoon contributed to HEDEN x Polarization with the artwork *Replica (2022)*, which shows how political and social systems shape the way we see ourselves and others. Using sculptural headpieces and video, the work shows how power can quietly shape our behaviour, identity, and relationships - often without us realizing it. These layers of influence act like a second skin.

'The human body is disciplined through different kinds of ideologies and is thus forced to position itself therein. The headpiece is a replica of these sociopolitical layers that accumulate and attach themselves to us like a prosthesis,' says Katayoon.

During the opening performance, Katayoon asks us to rip apart a piece of paper and add them all to one bowl of liquid. Marking the first stage of creating a papier-mâché model. We are molding a blank page into a new form and the individual into the collective.

By drawing on experiences from both Iran and the Netherlands, Katayoon also reflects on the disorientation that can come from living between two very different worlds. Because this asks even more of us in terms of molding and shaping ourselves to varying demands. *Replica* connects to the theme of polarization by highlighting how divided systems and beliefs can become part of us, often creating inner conflict.



Replica 1, video performance still 00:08

Replica 1, video performance still 01:00



## Artist reflection

By Katayoon Barzegar

"The boundaries of the body are vast and elusive. We carry layers around us, some tangible, many intangible. They grow from memories, expectations, desires, and the silent pressure of structures that shape us. These layers accumulate around the head, stacking themselves like extensions of our perspective, shaping how we see and how we are seen."

During my performance at HEDEN x Polarization, I read this text part by part and tore it apart as I spoke. Each fragment of language, once released into the exhibition space, was dropped into a bowl of water. I soaked the text as a way of softening it, breaking it down into something malleable and raw. This collected soaked paper will later become material for making new headpieces. For me, this action was not about destruction; it was about transformation. It reflected the ongoing process of observing my own layers, and the layers placed on us by systems of power, and imagining how they might be reshaped.

My project *Replica* consists of several headpieces, the first of which I created after migrating from Iran to the Netherlands. The ongoing project began from the experience of living between different contexts and the disorientation that followed. In both environments, bodies are classified and disciplined by norms, ideologies, and expectations. The headpiece became a way to externalise these sociopolitical layers: provisional prostheses made from what we internalise.

In relation to polarization, *Replica* reflects on how bodies are positioned within fixed and often opposing categories. In my opinion, polarization simplifies people into sides, and reinforces the boundaries between them, shaping how individuals are understood and how they must orient themselves in society. My migration experience made these dynamics especially clear, and revealed how each context constructs its own forms of division, its own versions of "us" and "them", while also showing that some patterns of polarization are universal.

As described in the exhibition text, media, political narratives, and social systems often amplify these divides, reducing complex realities into simplified oppositions. I recognise this in the ways bodies are categorised through ideology, gender, race, cultural behaviour, and more. By turning these pressures into tangible objects, Replica creates a deliberate distance between the body and the structures it has internalised. This distance forms a liminal space where internalized polarities can be examined rather than automatically embodied. The reforming of the material suggests that even the forces that divide us can be made visible, questioned, and reshaped, Echoing art's role as a space for repair, healing, and transformation, it can challenge fixed perspectives and bring deeply internalized assumptions to the surface.

Replica 1, video performance still 02:25





Replica 2 installation view



Replica 2, video performance still 00:04

# PHILIPPA DRIEST

## Hole in the [w]hole (2025)

By Anna Lillioja

**W**hat systems of power are visible, and which ones are hidden or leaking through the cracks?

Philippa Driest (b. 1993, The Hague), asks us this question today. Philippa is an artist and founder of KIOSK, a bookshop and printwork place in Rotterdam. Her work of art making and organizing speaks on the relationality, transmission and dissemination of printing, books, banners and pamphlets. KIOSK is a place where practice and theory meet, following the thread of situated artistic practices as a way to explore alternatives to our political, economic, and social systems. Philippa contributed to HEDEN x Polarization with her artwork Hole in the [w]hole (2025) that consists of textile work(s) and a small installation of a bookshelf with books, stickers and pamphlets.

The textile piece Hole in the [w]hole (2025) explores power through printed fragments, which are symbols and images pipes, or rather pieces of piping, suggesting a leakage. The broken pipelines could be symbols of worlds colliding, and substances from one leaking into the other. Is it a wanted intrusion? The notion of a leakage seems to suggest otherwise, for a leakage is usually something we do not warmly welcome.

Philippa's work draws on the visual language of public monuments as symbols of power. Her work appropriates this visual language in order to question how power circulates in dominated imagery. What are dominant symbols and images we see in public space? And how can collective gestures reframe the forms and hierarchies that organise what is seen, held, or given space.

The bookshelf brought the spirit of KIOSK Rotterdam to Leeuwarden, where the contents were made available for the public to take and share. Through this approach, the materials themselves convey the interconnectedness, transmission, and spread of print culture: books, stickers, and pamphlets that are often carried from one person to another by hand, in pockets, suitcases, and car trunks or added to walls and street lights in public space for everyone to see.

Books are often part of a form of cultural capital that is not equally accessible to everyone. As a result, the exchange of this intellectual wealth tends to take place within familiar circles or shared contexts. This raises the question of how books, stickers, and pamphlets might also travel beyond these spaces and reach others, rather than remaining within the same echo chambers. In this sense, KIOSK is much more than a bookstore: it is a place where, in the spirit of solidarity, different communities come together through cultural events, allowing culture, food, warmth and other resources to circulate and be shared more widely.

Hole in the (w)hole, exhibition view



## **Artist reflection**

By Philippa Driest

These texts are excerpts and resamplings of a text written for performance: *listening to the leakages and destroying the myths of power*. [2025]

### **Chapter 1: BUILDING**

I want to build a house that is not owned

I want to build a house  
that is not owned

I want to build a house  
that cannot be bought or sold

I want to build a house  
that cannot be commodified

I want to build a house  
where no one can claim ownership

I want to build a house  
that defies possession

I want to build a house  
with no borders  
where the walls belong to all who need them

I want to build a home  
not measured in square meters  
but in shared struggles and the need for space to imagine

I want to build a house  
not carved from profit but from resistance and collective dreams

## Chapter 2: LEAKAGES

On entering the house

the quiet surrender of walls

The unnoticed, persistent forces that work their way through the pipes

Is this house haunted or am I haunting this house?

The undermining of the structures of control

The persistence of leaks of small actions

an ongoing, subtle force of change

The slow erosion of their fortress, breaking it down bit by bit

What they thought was sealed, is always open

If we listen closely we can hear the leakages talk

Within the frame of housing through state or market regulation,

The leaks are a concern for the profitability, as it endangers its foundation

In the speculation process;

the leak is instrumentalized as a way to deteriorate housing,

to fumble with its foundation, to make it unlivable.

Heating systems are being detached, the inside of radiators unleashed,  
flooding floors with tar black water.

Welcoming the mold and rot to enter the housing, toilets are being filled  
with cement,

making it unlivable for squatters

With housing for profit, people are being treated as leaks,  
having to spill out of their neighbourhoods,  
forcing people to want their own homes brought down due to the  
unsafety that has been created, forcing people to think destructive of  
their own homes.

It is not only violent, it shows the supremacist functioning of governing space.  
Whose lives are being cared for and valued?

Through the cracks of systems, leaks appear to find their own ways.  
When many leaks unite, they become a current and carve out their direction.

I wonder: *Is this house haunted or am I haunting this house?*

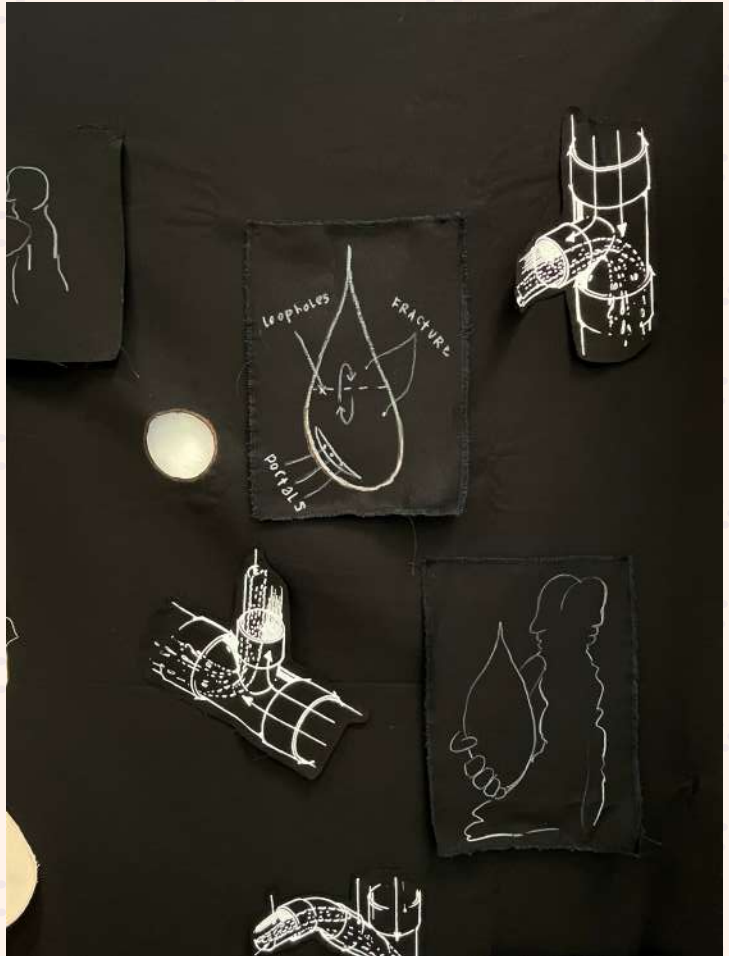
The voices of the forgotten, slipping through the cracks.  
The infrastructure of the leaks, tracing paths of resistance that re-  
fuse to be sealed,  
that seep into every corner they thought was safe,  
running beneath their feet, a quiet rebellion against what they tried to control,  
the cracks that can't be patched, through the walls that were built to divide.

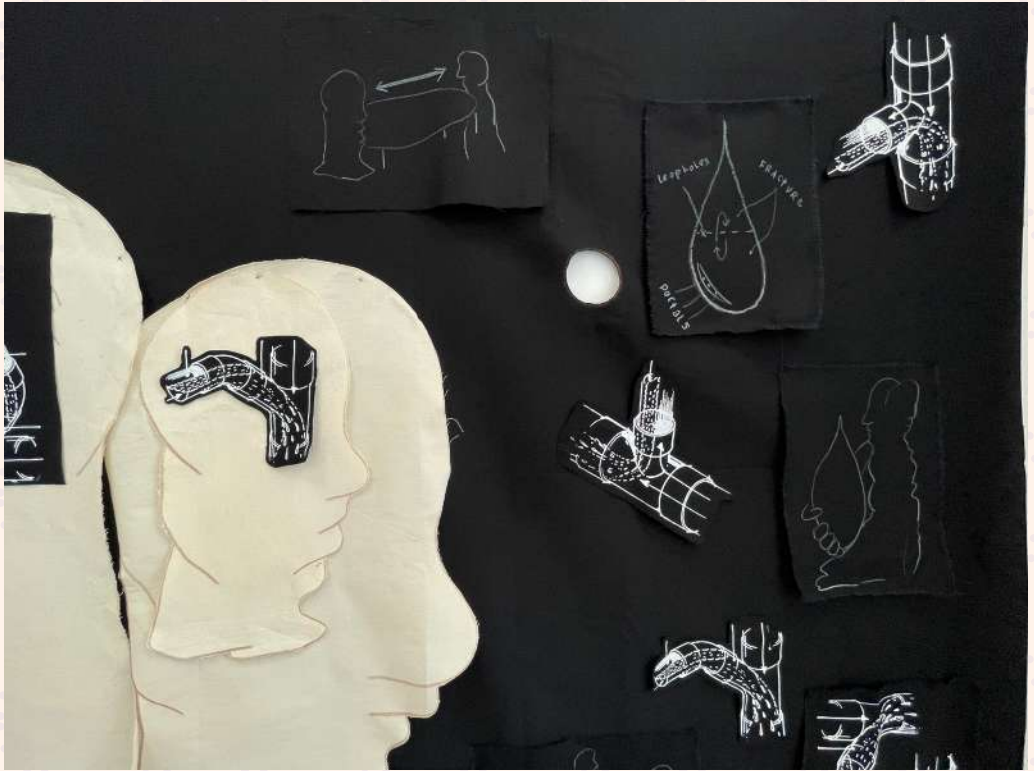
The leaks are gateways, they can't seal them all  
The leaks refuse to be contained  
The quiet surrender of walls  
the ongoings of reclamation

*If we listen closely we can hear the leakages talk*

Chapter 3 continues on maintenance ...

Hole in the (w)hole, exhibition view





Hole in the (w)hole, exhibition view



Hole in the (w)hole, exhibition view

# ZUZA BANASIŃSKA

## Kontrowers (2025)

By Anna Lillioja

Zuza Banasińska (b. 1994, Warsaw) is an artist and film maker. Her practice centres on video-based environments where virtual and elements from daily-life merge, creating immersive spaces that invite an emotional and sensory response and film maker. Zuza contributed to HEDEN x Polarization with a variation of her work *Kontrowers (2025)*, a film that looks at how division shapes identity and power, focusing on a small village in the Holy Cross Mountains in Poland. Using documentary footage, printed film stills, and a soundscape, the work reflects on how culture and politics create division, centered around a mysterious stone that surfaces throughout.

The central stone in the film, of which stills are shown in the exhibition, acts as a symbol of this divide. By showing how people interact with this object, touching on issues of gender, class, and cultural memory, *Kontrowers* reveals how divisions continue to shape our understanding of the past, present and future.

With the stone as the anchor, we can see how different narratives can be formed around a shared past or around seemingly similar objects and spaces. The extreme close-up pictures are alienating and force us to look at familiar things with new eyes. The wrinkly skin of an old woman lying in bed, confined to her resting place, becomes a freeing and wide desert landscape to get lost in. Just as fairy tales carry double meanings, one for children, another for adults, *Kontrowers* shows how the same symbols can divide or unite, depending on who tells the story and how it is told. It reveals how polarization, at its core, is not just a political divide but a battle over whose truth prevails in the stories we share.

Zuza is also interested in the idea of possession, not only in supernatural terms, but as a broader metaphor for power and control. Her sometimes eerie stills, filled with spiritual symbols and centered around the magical stone, certainly evoke a feeling of possession. Yet the careful staging of these images suggests that this sense of possession is also ultimately man-made, shaped by whoever holds the power to construct the scene.



Kontrowers film still 05:44 min

## Artist reflection

By Zuza Banasińska

In the 1990s, a farmer found a stone in Kontrewers with carvings no one could agree on. The local authorities, unable to contain the competing meanings, buried it, pretending it had been moved to a museum. Fifteen years later, it resurfaced again.

Kontrewers is a village in the Holy Cross Mountains in Poland, one of the oldest geological regions in Central Europe. The village's name means "dispute over a borderland." There, layers of time overlap. Fossils press against post-communist monuments while dinosaur footprints lie beside fast-food restaurants.

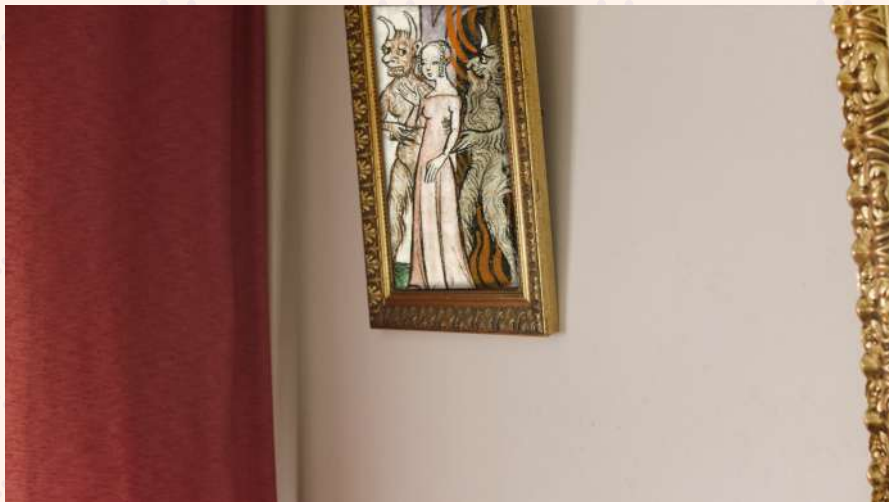
That resurfacing revived an older folktale. A girl in Kontrewers was once deemed possessed. She kept going alone to the forest, hiding from the world. One day, as her mother tried to bring her back, the girl got frightened, and killed the mother with a small stone. A priest was summoned and an exorcism took place. The departing voices did not disappear but etched themselves into the stone, whose slow growth became their residue.

Possession, here, is not only danger but proximity: an intimate relation with forces beyond oneself, a disturbance of sovereignty and of the social order. The girl and the stone occupy a borderland between life and death, self and other, human and non-human.

This idea of the borderland led me to my collaborator for my film: my 102-year-old grandmother. Confined to her living room, longing for death, yet held back by her Catholic faith, she exists in a suspended temporality. "I open my eyes in the morning," she says, "and I lie here until evening." In this threshold state, her laughter breaks through with unruly agency, childlike, disobedient. She allows herself to be "possessed," overtaken by affects.

Possession, then, is not an episode but an ongoing negotiation: a polarization between forces that inhabit us, often unnoticed. It reveals the fragility of modern sovereignty, the myth of the self-contained, self-possessed individual.

The stone, the girl, my grandmother and me, we each leave traces. Not evidence, but indexes: marks of presence and relation. In the exhibition, I presented stills from my film. They are mediated residues of an already fragmented narrative. Through these fragments, I invite to witness without claiming, to inhabit contradictions, and to let possession remain an unsettled, generative tension.

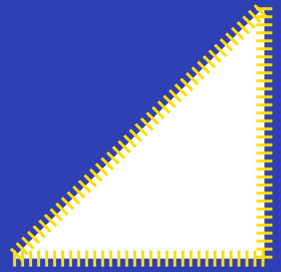
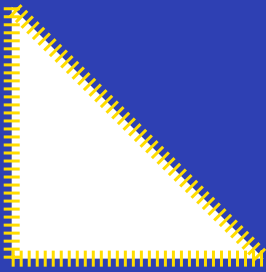
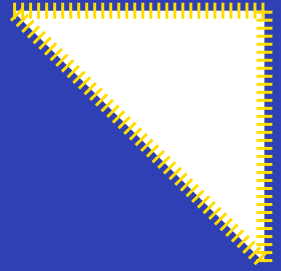


Kontrowers film still 09:26 min

Kontrowers film still 08:53 min



3.



On  
Polarization  
A Talk By  
Pascal Gielen

# Introduction to Pascal Gielen's talk On Polarization.

By Anna Lillioja

**P**ascal Gielen (b. 1970) is a writer and full professor of Sociology of Culture and Politics at the University of Antwerp, where he also leads the Culture Commons Quest Office. He is editor-in-chief of the international book series *Antennae: Arts in Society* and has published numerous books translated into several languages, including English, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian. Gielen's research focuses on creative labour, the commons (shared resources), and urban and cultural politics, often in contexts of conflict. In his contribution to *HEDEN x Polarization*, he shared insights from his work on how culture and shared resources can foster trust and community in an age of digitalization, neoliberalization, and growing social polarization.

Seventy-two years after its completion, the lithograph *Relativity* [year] by M.C. Escher is shown once more in the artist's birthplace. This time in a PowerPoint presentation on a TV screen. Sociologist Pascal Gielen is halfway through his talk on polarization, when the image of the recursive stairs appears on the screen. 'Deeper causes of polarization', says the title of the slide, accompanied by other terms, including neo-liberalism and homo economicus. Pascal does not enounce his choice of image, but one can guess the association. We are finding ourselves in an endless loop of progress, without actually advancing. A collective trap we all believe in.

As if we were people walking the stairs in Escher's painting, we are strolling around in a world that at first glance seems logical and serene. We have the freedom to go around as we please, a freedom that we believe has been granted to us by economic progress. In reality, we are trapped in a system that exploits these freedoms.

Pascal quotes Herbert Marcuse: "Under a repressive whole, liberty becomes a powerful instrument of domination." <sup>1</sup> Free elections of masters, writes Marcuse, do not abolish the masters or the slaves. Just because you're allowed to choose doesn't mean you're actually free. More often, those choices keep you stuck in an endless want for things that the system has taught you to want.

This climb on the endless staircase of progress leaves us frustrated and alienated. Because our modern notion of progress is measured in economic terms, and not in cultural or communal terms, we are left to fend for ourselves and, as a result, lose trust in one another. The cultural sector is far from immune. The notion of the genius artist, his ultimate recognition found in a solo exhibition at a prestigious venue, is widespread. It is in this vacuum of trust where polarization takes root.

In the space where Pascal holds his presentation, the walls are adorned with artworks: a big textile canvas with images of sewage pipes on it, symbolizing passageways, photographed filmic stills of a story about a rock that divided a small community. The audience sits on small stools. Someone is wearing rainbow coloured socks, and a dog's nails scratch the floor of the white box. Our coming together seems quite colourful, but here, in this room, we are a quite uniform group, trying to intellectualize polarization.

Polarization is a game well played by far-right movements, but that is not to say they made it up. Decades ago, in the seventies, the left was far more polarising and provocative. Donald Trump, as Pascal suggests, even uses punk tactics such as constant disruption and media hijacking. He is not a mere puppet of the system: he has agency and creativity in the polarization game. Being provocative in elections is normalized, but staying provocative in power is harder. Yet, that is just what Trump does. A polariser plays with the tools of democracy from a position of power. He succeeds in disrupting rules and schedules, improvising as he goes. Witness to this is his recent United Nations speech, where he was given five minutes to speak, but he spoke for an hour.

As Trump shows, polarization has a performative aspect to it. It is no surprise, then, that polarization began to rise fast just around the time television and mass media were invented. In the polarization game, the middle always loses, because you must take a position to stand out. The harder you shout, the more attention you get. But also, the more difficult it gets to have a dialogue. This is not only true for the far-right, but equally so for the leftist woke movement. A cancel-culture of publicly calling people out who have acted or spoken in non-accordance with set moral values does not ultimately seek connection; it alienates. Trump hijacks the media and the public stage to disrupt and polarize. The woke movement uses [social] media to impose boycotts or professional repercussions.

'Animals play without killing each other,' says Pascal. 'And they haven't verbalized any rules.' He shows us a video of protests in Georgia. It looks like a rave: a mass of moving bodies dance to music. A young man comments to the camera, something in these lines: 'At first I thought it was weird to dance, we are protesting a serious cause. But then my body just began to move. And I realized it was just what we had to do.' Such a peaceful, communal dancing might be what our societies as a whole are missing. Intuitive togetherness, without a playbook. Playing, without killing. The question then remains: how do we play with everyone, and not just our own kind?



# Rave Politics Decreating the Language of Death

By Pascal Gielen

## *The Beat of Protest*

In the flickering frame of an Instagram video, a protest in Tbilisi, Georgia, late November 2024, we see a city street transformed into an electric battleground. Bodies clump at the edge of the frame; the camera shakes in the hand of someone in the crowd. In the center, a spray of fireworks arcs toward riot police, glittering like a fountain of pyrotechnic rage against shields and helmets. The music underscoring this mobile document is unmistakable techno, a driving 130bpm pulse that suggests another site of conflagration altogether: the dance floor. Behind the beats, between explosive claps, the concrete façade of parliament glows in the flash of incendiary flare and camera light, while protesters throw their firework-bursts at the state's armed agents. Civilians and law enforcement converge in a choreography of smoke and sound.

These are protests born of contested elections, a suspended European Union accession process and allegations of fraud and authoritarian drift by the ruling Georgian Dream party. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets asking for annulment of the results and new elections under impartial supervision. Clashes with police have been intense and persistent, with fireworks, stones and pyrotechnics hurled at lines of riot troops.

Viewed through the flattened surface of a mobile screen, protest becomes performance. Yet the soundtrack, nascent or inserted, does not tame the footage into spectacle. Instead, it reveals an austere truth about the confluence of protest and rave: the protest-

er's firework and the DJ's bass drop speak with the same eruptive grammar. The beat is a political signal. It is a declaration that somatic rhythm, collective body in motion, is also a site of political agency.

What is political about the beat? When DJ's set reverberates through a festival arena, it is not merely music but an intensification of sound that converges onto the body as an affective field, a visceral space where individual ego dissolves into mass. The hard, unrelenting thump of bass frequencies evokes war-like artillery strikes: the kick drum is a drum like a heartbeat, like a blast. Even outside the dark clubs and festival fields - from Tomorrowland's vast positive continuum to the subterranean warehouse rave - electronic music traffics in samples that reflect the sonic lexicon of conflict: distant explosions, aggressive yelps, barking dogs, guttural noise. These are the sounds of war and aggression rewritten as danceable rhythm. They make bodies swing together; the crowd becomes a kinetic unity responding to these waves. The sound of death returns as the feeling of life.

## ***Beating Language***

Precisely in the refusal of speech politics begins. Techno suspends the sovereign position of the speaking subject. It beats language. On the dance floor, nobody argues, explains, persuades or justifies. There are no words nor footnotes. There is only repetition, intensity and duration. A kick drum that insists. A hi-hat that cuts. A bassline that occupies the body before the mind has time to respond. The rave does not address the individual; it absorbs them.

This is not accidental. Certain aesthetic regimes deliberately de-individualize. Techno does not ask who you are, it asks whether you can stay. It does not mirror identity but erodes it, sanding down the ego through rhythmic insistence. The face dissolves into sweat, the name into movement, the biography into tempo. The dancer becomes a function of the beat, not its author. One does not express oneself; one is modulated on the dance floor.

Here, Simone Weil's notion of *décréation* becomes unexpectedly precise. For Weil, decreation does not mean destruction but subtraction: the undoing of the ego as the center of the world. It is a disciplined movement away from the 'I', a relinquishing of self-sovereignty so that something other can pass through. On the dance floor, this movement occurs without theology, without ascetic doctrine and without moral instruction. The rave decreates through excess: through volume, fatigue, repetition and bodily surrender. The ego does not vanish into nothingness, but into a collective sensorium. Subjectivity is redistributed across bodies, rhythms and affects. One body pulses because all bodies pulse. In this sense, rave and techno are practices of secular decreation: not the annihilation of the self, but its decentering.

At the same time, techno performs another, more radical operation: it desacralizes language itself. Giorgio Agamben has shown how Western politics is bound to linguistic capture. Law, sovereignty, bureaucracy and administration all rely on the capacity to name, classify and formalize. Power speaks. It issues statements, protocols and calculations. The language of death today is not only the language of weapons, but of reports, statistics, balance sheets and 'necessary measures'. It is a language that kills without emotion. It murders with commas.

Techno steps outside this necro-political regime. It operates in a pre-linguistic zone. There is no semantic content to debate, no message to refute and no slogan to co-opt. Meaning does not circulate; affect does. The rave thus suspends the economy of signification on which bureaucratic power depends. It does not replace one discourse with another; it withdraws from discourse altogether.

Yet the paradox remains: the sonic material of techno often borrows directly from the battlefield. The kick drum resembles artillery. Distorted synths echo sirens. Barking samples evoke command dogs and militarized aggression. These sounds appear to come straight from the front line. And still, on the dance floor, they no longer signal death. They mobilize life.

Here Agamben's understanding of decreation becomes crucial.

Decreation, for him, is not negation but deactivation: the act of returning what is actual to its contingency, to the fact that it could also have been otherwise, or not at all. In techno, the language of war is sampled, looped and accelerated until it loses its command function. It no longer orders bodies to obey or flee. It synchronizes them. The sound of death is not denied but stripped of necessity and turned into a possibility of life. War is not erased; it is rendered inoperative.

## ***Beating Bureaucracy***

If rave culture deactivates language, it does so against a very specific adversary: the contemporary language of bureaucracy. This is not the screaming language of the battlefield, but the calm, neutral, administrative idiom of jurisdiction. It is the language spoken by ministers, policy papers, diplomats, expert panels and budgetary committees. A language without blood, precisely because it has already drained it.

Hannah Arendt famously analyzed this mechanism in Eichmann in Jerusalem. What terrified her was not fanaticism, but normality. Bureaucratic evil does not shout, it files. It does not hate, it executes procedures. Responsibility dissolves into function, morality into compliance. Violence becomes abstract, depersonalized and routinized. Death is administered through forms. This is the modern language of death: a language in which nobody kills, but everyone 'does their job'.

Today, this bureaucratic idiom has expanded far beyond totalitarian regimes. It saturates liberal democracies. It governs welfare reform, austerity policies, border regimes and war decisions alike. When the welfare state is dismantled, it is done 'responsibly'. When social protections are reduced, it is 'necessary'. When billions of euros in frozen Russian assets could be redirected to support Ukraine, what stands out is not action but refusal. Political leaders justify this refusal through the language of prudence, legality and national interest, presenting it as sober calculation and constitutional restraint. Yet this calculated inaction has lethal consequences. Every delayed decision

means fewer air-defense systems, less protection for energy infrastructure, and diminished care for a civilian population under constant attack. What appears as financial caution translates into material shortages that expose lives. Ukrainian citizens become variables in a European balance sheet, while democratic responsibility dissolves into committees, legal caveats and jurisdictional excuses. This is the contemporary language of death: not violent, but procedural. Democracy is not undermined by reckless action, but by excessive calculation. Language cleans the inaction. Numbers anesthetize feelings.

The same logic governs the pseudo-scientific debates surrounding violence elsewhere. Whether Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide becomes a matter of legal thresholds, definitions, expert opinions and institutional mandates. Meanwhile, bodies accumulate. Bureaucratic language does not deny death, it postpones its acknowledgment indefinitely. It speaks about life while managing death. It's what is called 'necro-diplomacy'.

This linguistic regime is deeply entwined with what can be called repressive liberalism: a political culture that celebrates individual freedom while governing through technocratic control and non-deliberation. Decisions are increasingly taken without debate, consultation or democratic friction. Parliaments ratify what has already been decided elsewhere. The media translate policy into inevitability. Deliberative democracy withers under the weight of 'no alternative'.

At the same time, responsibility is radically individualized. The citizen becomes an entrepreneur of the self. Risk is privatized. Failure is moralized. The contemporary freelancer embodies this logic perfectly. The term itself is revealing. Free lance originally referred to a medieval mercenary: a soldier who sold his lance to the highest bidder. Today's freelancer similarly rents out skills, time and body, permanently available, structurally insecure, formally autonomous yet materially dependent. Freedom here is indistinguishable from exposure.

Rave culture resists this regime on multiple fronts. First, by refusing language altogether. The dance floor does not negotiate. It does not justify. It does not calculate. It is overwhelming. Second, by

organizing itself outside the market and state. A-legal raves, temporary autonomous zones, informal networks, encrypted communication, mobile infrastructures. Organization without bureaucracy. Coordination without administration. Third, by re-collectivizing bodies. Techno dissolves the isolated individual into a synchronized mass. The freelancer disappears into the swarm.

This happens with astonishing efficiency. Raves mobilize thousands across borders in hours. They operate internationally, horizontally and anonymously. They evade surveillance not by hiding, but by moving too fast, too loud and too collectively. Algorithms struggle with bodies that do not speak, do not post, do not brand themselves. The rave produces opacity through excess. Against the language of death, rave offers no counter-discourse. It offers a counter-practice. One that does not speak or argue for life but makes it felt.

## ***Agonism Without Words***

The language of death is undone in rave culture in two distinct yet entangled ways.

First, by inversion. The sonic material of war is not rejected but metabolized. Frontline sounds are looped, amplified, stripped of referential command and turned into rhythm. The explosion becomes a kick. The siren becomes a synth line. The bark of the dog becomes a percussive accent. What once disciplined bodies through fear now synchronizes them through pleasure. Death is not aestheticized; it is disarmed. Its language is forced to serve life.

Second, and more radically, by suspension. Language itself is switched off. Meaning does not circulate. Arguments do not accumulate. There is no message to interpret, nor demands to negotiate. Techno operates in what could be called a pre- or extra-linguistic political register. Communication happens without content. Bodies respond directly to rhythm, intensity and duration. Aesthesis precedes semantics.

This produces a very different form of politics. Not delibera-

tive, not representational nor juridical, but agonistic. Chantal Mouffe has argued that democratic politics cannot be reduced to rational consensus. Conflict is irreducible. Affects, passions and antagonisms do not disappear when ignored; they return in distorted, often violent forms. Liberal democracy's obsession with neutrality, expertise and procedural rationality has evacuated precisely those dimensions where political energy resides.

Rave culture occupies that evacuated space. It does not seek consensus. It stages coexistence without agreement. Bodies move together without sharing opinions. This is agonism without speech. Conflict is not resolved; it is suspended through shared intensity. The rave does not produce unity of thought, but temporary alignment of affect. It is a politics of nearness rather than persuasion.

This is why the rave should not be confused with deliberative democracy's public sphere. It ignores parliaments, committees, media panels and expert debates. It bypasses the juridical-bureaucratic choreography of representative democracy altogether. In doing so, it mirrors an uncomfortable truth: contemporary power itself no longer governs through deliberation. Decisions are taken elsewhere, faster, more opaquely, shielded by technical language. Rave does not withdraw from a functioning deliberative democracy; it responds to its erosion.

Here the comparison with Donald Trump becomes unavoidable. Richard Sennett described Trump not as a politician but as a performer: a figure who mobilizes affect rather than argument, who operates through gesture, repetition, provocation and spectacle. Trump does not convince, he excites. He does not reason, he resonates. His politics is post-deliberative, theatrical and bodily.

In this sense, rave and Trump operate on the same affective terrain. But their vectors differ radically. Trump individualizes affect around a charismatic figure. Rave de-individualizes it. Trump amplifies ego, rave erodes it. Trump produces identification; rave produces dissolution. One centralizes power, the other disperses it across bodies.

This is precisely why rave culture may be one of the few practices capable of countering illiberal politics on its own terrain. Not by restoring rational debate, but by outperforming affective mobilization. By offering a collective intensity that does not crystallize into authority. By staging freedom, equality and solidarity without translating them into slogans or institutional rhetorics.

Yet this is also where the danger lies. The pre-linguistic power of rave is politically ambivalent. The same de-individualizing force can slide into mass psychology, ecstatic obedience, or authoritarian capture. Affect is promiscuous. It can be mobilized from the left or the right. Rave is not inherently emancipatory.

Its political potential lies elsewhere: in its capacity to re-sensitize bodies to values that liberal democracy has reduced to abstractions. On the dance floor, everyone is equal. There are no titles, no résumés, no CVs. Hierarchies flatten.

Here, freedom, equality and solidarity are not explained. They are felt. Experienced. Rehearsed. Without language. And this, perhaps, is rave's most radical gesture against the language of death: it does not argue for life. It remembers how life is lived together.

## ***Dancing Against Authority***

Authoritarian power fears what it cannot translate into language. That fear became visible in Italy in 2022, when one of the first measures of Giorgia Meloni's government was to criminalize so-called 'illegal' raves. With a single decree, gatherings of more than fifty people, organized outside authorized frameworks, became punishable with severe prison sentences and confiscation of equipment. The law was rushed through under the banner of public order and security, widely criticized by jurists as disproportionate and constitutionally dubious.

The target was not noise. It was not drugs. It was not even safety. The target was an autonomous collective body that assembled without permission, without representation, without economic rationale, without speaking the language of administration. Raves

escaped both market logic and state choreography. They generated solidarity without policy, equality without law, freedom without contracts. In short, they staged a kind of political community without its institutions.

This is precisely what makes rave culture threatening. Not because it articulates a program, but because it withdraws from the grammar of governance. The rave does not demand recognition. It does not petition. It does not enter dialogue. It simply happens. And in happening, it exposes the fragility of a political order that increasingly survives on abstraction, calculation and control.

The language of death thrives on distance. It separates decision from consequence, numbers from bodies and policies from lives. Rave collapses that distance. It brings bodies together. It intensifies presence. It restores immediacy. In doing so, it re-politicizes what bureaucracy neutralizes: vulnerability, dependency and especially interdependence.

This is where decreation becomes political. By undoing the sovereignty of the ego, rave undermines the anthropological foundation of neoliberal governance: the self-responsible individual. On the dance floor, one does not optimize, compete or brand oneself. One leans. One depends. One is carried by rhythm and by others. The self is not destroyed, but decentered.

This decreative force does not produce a blueprint for a new society. It produces something more fragile and more fundamental: a shared aesthetic experience in which political communities are not regulated but embodied. Freedom is felt as movement without command. Equality is sensed as horizontal proximity. These are not ideals imposed from above, but atmospheres generated from below.

That is why rave culture cannot be reduced to entertainment, subculture or escapism. Nor should it be romanticized as inherently progressive. Its power is ambivalent, its affects volatile. But precisely because it operates beneath language, beneath representation and beneath institutional capture, it remains one of the few contemporary practices capable of interrupting the language of death. Not

by opposing it with better arguments. But by making it irrelevant.

When bodies move together in darkness, when sound erases speech, when rhythm replaces reason, something shifts. Life is no longer managed. It is momentarily reclaimed. In that fleeting, fragile collectivity, politics returns to where it began: not in institutions, not in laws, not in spreadsheets, but in shared sensation.

Perhaps that is why authoritarian regimes keep listening to the beat. They know it can steady bodies into formation yet carries the same pulse that might loosen a crowd just enough to slip beyond command.

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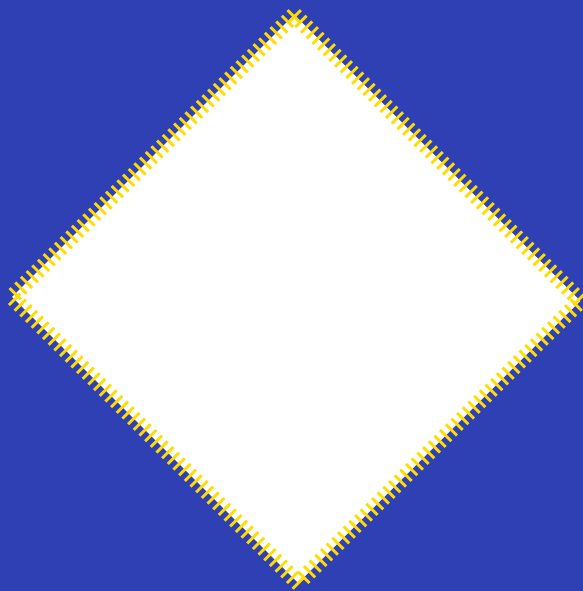
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4.



# REFLECTION ON THE NIGHT'S GROUP DISCUSSION

By Anna Lillioja

The people who tell our stories are often the people with power. As a consequence, there are many stories that are forgotten and lost. Some think it is the artist's duty to cut into this fabric of power and mend in the voices that are underrepresented and have not been heard. Others question: should art be socially engaged? One of tonight's artists comments that wanting to be socially engaged can also become a problem in itself. This problem arises when the artist talks about marginalized people, who are also capable of talking for themselves. Assuming the artist is not one of them.

Another challenge lies with socially engaged artists who end up preaching to the choir, often relying on complex (visual) language that is accessible only to a limited, educated audience. In his work about his home country Ecuador he is thus constantly asking himself: how can I talk about lesser-known Ecuadorian culture, without becoming esoteric? Another person at the table comments: 'Art is complicit in power. We are no longer painting the King's portrait. But we still have to oblige to funds and institutions.'

By being socially engaged, we strive towards a democratic society where there is a place for a diversity of people, opinions and wishes. Social media caters to this demand by offering everyone the opportunity to express their opinion, but has also become a platform for polarization. One participant puts it quite poetically: 'The internet is a diary that no one is supposed to read.' Someone at the same table thinks that true diversity opposes polarization by including, instead of excluding. But another remark: isn't the election of Trump - a poster boy of polarization - also an inevitable result of this same democracy? The polar opposite of polarization, suggests a voice, is a totalitarian society. 'Scary...' exclaims the group.

Images and metaphors are widely used among politicians, like Trump, to underline their message and make them feel. So we try some of our own to grasp the workings of polarization:

'It's like riding your bike. When you turn the handle to the left and want to move back towards the centre, you sometimes overcorrect to the right.'

Or:

'Society always moves in waves.'

Is it really a negative course we are on, or is it just one of the naturally occurring bumps in the road?

If a level of polarization actually signals a healthy society, should we even try to change it? Perhaps we are creating more polarization, by trying to change it. We think we course-correct, while in reality, we pull the bicycle handle into an endless wobble.

A third group of participants is punching out letters from a piece of paper, making a collage of words: punch, care, speak, art. Some think we should at least try to infiltrate each other's worlds. That our aim should not be to burst someone else's bubble or totally wreck our echo chambers, but to find small entry points. Poking a finger, disrupting and engaging with curiosity. Many art institutions do try to engage groups of people, but end up alienating them because they lack the right language and thus end up curating what they already know and believe. Therefore representing what is asked of them by funds and their ideology. We are very aware of the echo chambers of others, but lack a true awareness of our own.

While some of these words are uttered, on the dark streets outside the gallery room, three football hooligans walk past. They stare into our white cube full of esoterism and one of them, provokingly, knocks on the window with a pointed finger. We ourselves are engaged by another, our bubble bursts.



## 5. PHOTO REPORT



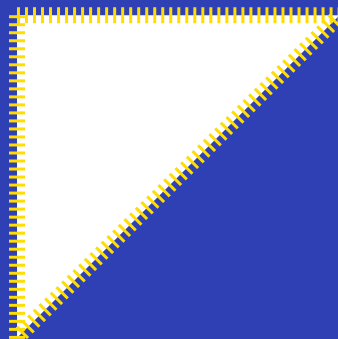
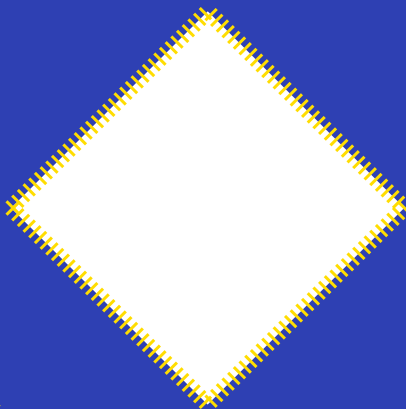
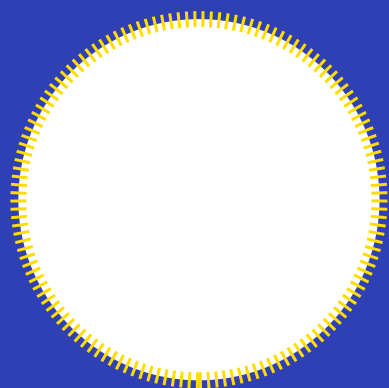








6.



# CURATORIAL STATEMENT

By Teodóra Róka

**D**uring this edition of HEDEN, we aimed to unpack polarization by closely examining how it operates in society and the roles that art and its institutions play in navigating it. Pascal Gielen's lecture introduced terms for discussing contemporary social trends such as estrangement, individualization, and growing distrust of others and of (governmental) institutions. The invited artists Francisco Baquerizo Racines, Katayoon Barzeĝar, Philippa Driest and Zuza Banasińska, their works and presentations were brought together to reflect on social fragmentation and to explore ways of responding to it.

In his keynote, Gielen argued that in a time of expanding bureaucratization, there is an urgent need to search for a new homo communis and for renewed cultural commons. He characterized our present moment as one shaped by the political force of 'repressive liberalism'. Under the banner of 'freedom', governments outsource responsibility for public services such as education, healthcare, public transport, and the arts to the market. At the same time, these services are increasingly controlled by those same governments, through monitoring, performance measures, and administrative rules. In this context, Gielen observed how contemporary individuals are caught between growing demands for self-reliance and systems of oversight, a tension that fuels social fragmentation and polarization.

The artists' contributions invited the public to engage with communities affected by polarization or to turn inward, reflecting on how we internalize polarizing forces. Their work explored how we relate to others, express political views and often favor division over dialogue. Katayoon opened the evening with a performance that explored polarization at the level of the body. Showing how societal forces shape our bodily habits and how we form connections or distance ourselves from others. Francisco's work moved outward to the societal scale, examining the Ecuadorian New Year tradition of Año Viejo, in which effigies are collectively burned. He framed this custom as driven by capitalist desires, while using those same desires to challenge colonialism and Western extractivism. Philippa Driest also shared an interest in everyday visual culture, working with popular graphics in public spaces. Using

the symbols of broken pipes and leakages, she showed how this visual language spreads through holes in walls into homes and public buildings. From this observation, she begins to ask: can we use these same 'leakages' to circulate a different visual language? In contrast, Zuza works through narrative and speculation, drawing on archaic imagery and myths. She showed how a local symbol of stone can both unite and divide a small Polish community. This made us reflect on contemporary symbols that serve a similar function today, ranging from gender-neutral toilets to national flags. Their meaning can change depending on who tells the story and how it is told. Symbols can spark aggressive and polarizing debates between communities that, in essence, uphold similar values of solidarity.

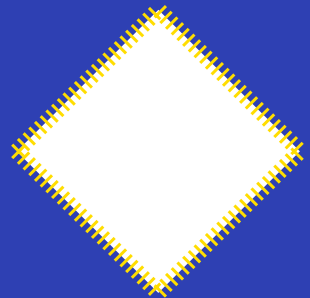
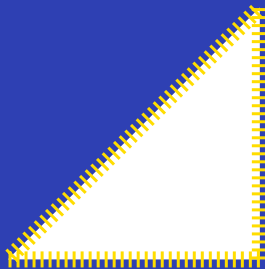
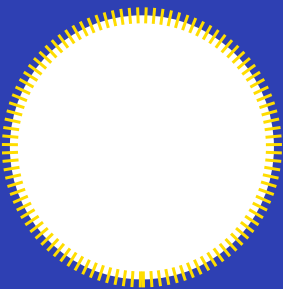
Seen together, the four artistic practices trace a trajectory from intimate, bodily experience to broader systemic critique: from embodied gestures to activist symbolism, from mythic storytelling to political reflection, and from the streets of rural villages and cities to the white cube of VHDG. Across these works, a central question emerges: what is the role of art, artists, and art institutions in times of growing polarization?

Today, national debates in the Netherlands around nitrogen policy, the energy transition, and migration increasingly expose tensions between people with conflicting interests and values. In Friesland (Fryslân), these tensions have become tangible in farmers' protests, resistance to the arrival of newcomers and refugees, and public actions drawing attention to threats to biodiversity.

Throughout history, art has provided a space to voice bold positions, challenge injustice and enable emancipation. Similarly, artists who collaborate with VHDG, often use their work to speak out against injustice. Yet today, when museums, art spaces, or artists take explicit political positions, they risk losing part of their audience. Political engagement is often seen as fueling polarization, prompting calls for cultural institutions to remain 'neutral'. As museums fulfill a public role and are funded by public means, they are expected to function as neutral spaces. But what, in this context, does neutrality actually mean?

This event revealed a clear desire for spaces where people can listen and reflect without the pressure to agree. Audiences must be cared for and acknowledged, and public spaces require attention and bottom-up engagement from those who use them. The artists demonstrated that polarization exists not only in discourse but in the body, in archives, and in the gestures of everyday life. Institutional work, therefore, cannot rely solely on language or dialogue. Art creates a space within the world of images and symbols, grounded in abstract or specific contexts. Moving beyond purely symbolic gestures is essential: it prevents images from becoming merely illustrative and, more importantly, ensures that disagreement is not treated as a moral violation. In this, the inherent ambiguity of art becomes a vital tool, opening possibilities for engaging with conflict and difference.

HEDEN aimed to slow down attention through long-form conversations and to allow space for mediation. Polarization often creates a binary discourse: right/wrong, for/against, safe/unsafe. We aimed to interrupt this logic through the lenses of theoretical, artistic contributions, personal narratives, and collective reflection. The hope was that each of these could complicate the others, giving participants the chance to be confused. The evening deliberately avoided presenting polarization as a problem with a clear solution. Instead, it prioritized complexity, ambiguity, and friction. It concluded with a shared acknowledgment that the questions confronting the arts reflect those facing society at large, and that living together in difference requires ongoing care and attention.



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By Philippa Driest

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