

My identity is this expanse!

A journey about human resilience and the power of poetry
(based on the true story of Yunus Yusuf)

A VR piece by Karolina Markiewicz and Pascal Piron
in collaboration with VR artist Tamiko Thiel

BAHN

ZEILT
productions

 **FILM FUND**
LUXEMBOURG

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Luxembourg - 2020 - VR - 15'

A VR piece by Karolina Markiewicz and Pascal Piron
In collaboration with VR artist Tamiko Thiel

Based on the true story of Yunus Yusuf

With the poem

If I Were Another by Mahmoud Darwish

In memory of

Mtaneos Khoury and Nour Halak

WORLD PREMIERE



My Identity Is This Expanse! is a virtual reality film and installation that tells you the story of a child who, resilient to despair, seeks relief through memories, imagination, and the strength of poetry.

Mahmoud Darwish's poem *If I Were Another*, is both the child's and the viewer's entrance into this realm of relief and resilience.

The journey is based on the true story of Yunus Yusuf, who was transported under these circumstances from Afghanistan to Luxembourg at the age of 13. It is also the story of millions of other refugee children and adults, both today and throughout history.



Karolina Markiewicz & Pascal Piron

[authors & film directors]

The collaborative work of Karolina Markiewicz and Pascal Piron since 2013 creates links between cinema, visual arts, and theater. At the center, the individual is part of a human community, oscillating between impermanence, resignation and hope.

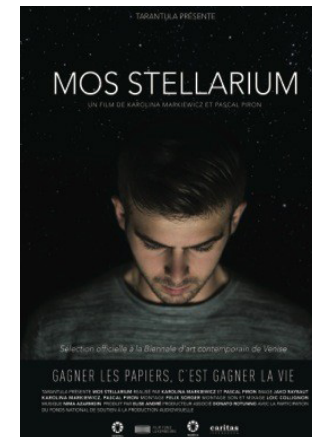
They work as teachers with students from immigrant or refugee backgrounds and with students from the University of Lorraine.

Their artistic works include both documentary and fiction films, experiences in virtual reality, as well as painting, photography, and theater.

Fever was presented at the European Photography Month, VR Arles, and the Louvre in Paris as part of the Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin. *Les Formidables* was released in 2013 and *Mos Stellarium* (documentary and video installation) in 2015 and was selected for the 56th Biennale di Venezia di Arte to represent Liechtenstein.

They have just released the documentary film, *The living witnesses* and also had a solo exhibition, entitled *pfh* * - *fucking human factor*, precious human factor at the National Audiovisual Center, and at Mudam in Luxembourg as the part of the collective exhibition *Me, family*.

www.markiewicz-piron.com



Filmography

2021 *The living witnesses*, documentary

2019 *Sublimation*, VR

2019 *Fever*, VR

2015 *Mos Stellarium*, documentary

2014 *Les Formidables*, documentary

Biography



Tamiko Thiel

[VR artist]

Tamiko Thiel was lead product designer on the Connection Machine CM-1/CM-2 (1986/1987), the first commercial artificial intelligence supercomputer, and in 1989 the fastest computer in the world. CMs are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art New York and the Smithsonian Institution.

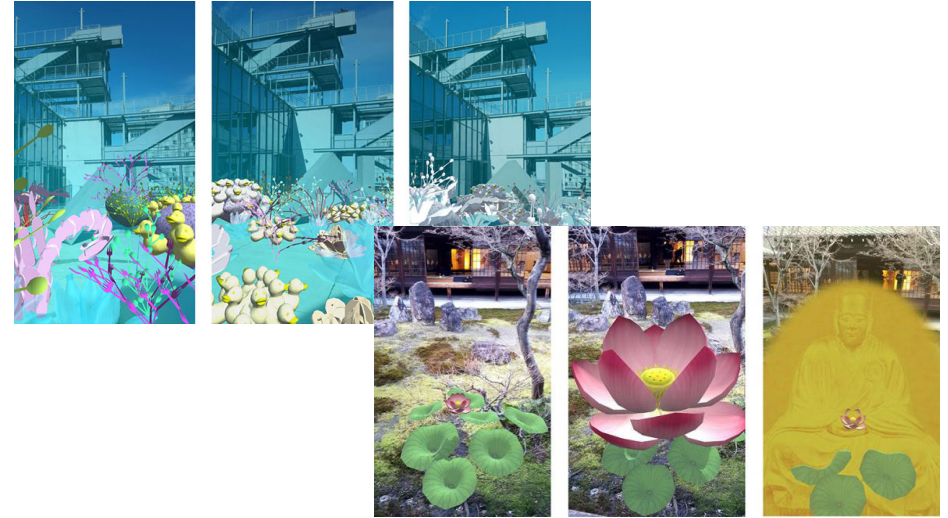
Her first work in virtual reality (VR) was as creative director/producer of *Starbright World* (1994-1997), an online virtual play space for seriously ill children, in collaboration with Steven Spielberg.

Her VR artwork *Beyond Manzanar* (2000) is in the collection of the San Jose Museum of Art/Silicon Valley. As Google VR artist in residence she created *Land of Cloud* (2017), which won the 2018 VRHAM audience award.

She is founding member of augmented reality (AR) artist group Manifest. AR, participating in their path-breaking AR intervention at MoMA (NY) in 2010 with ART Critic Face Matrix, which seems to question the validity of AR as an art form, and main curator/organizer of their intervention into the 2011 Venice Biennial with *Shades of Absence*, a work on censorship of artworks.

In 2018 the Whitney Museum in New York commissioned her AR artwork *Unexpected Growth*, now in the permanent collection.

www.tamikothiel.com



***Tamiko Thiel was awarded the 2018
iX Immersive Media “Visionary Pioneer”
prize by the Society for Art and Technology
Montreal for 30+ years of creating
poetic objects and spaces of memory
exploring social and cultural issues***





Karolina Markiewicz & Pascal Piron

[Directors]



Why did you choose the poem *If I were another* by Mahmoud Darwish like a guiding theme for your project?

We discovered Darwish's poetry during our studies in France, first in French, then later on in English and in Arabic. Karolina learns Arabic because she wants to understand the particularity of the language and because she wants also to communicate with her students who are refugees, among them, some of them arrived from Syria, some others from Palestine, but for all these kids, Mahmoud Darwish is a reference. It's like a common ground, which we believed poetry is. Through its power, a man, a woman, or a kid can overcome the horror like the process of exile is - or at least put imaged words or sentences on it. This particular poem is like a song, who can easily be memorized, sung by someone in constant exile, even after having arrived at a new destination.

You already produced some documentaries. Why did you choose VR format to tell this story?

Virtual reality gives the possibility for the public to experience a situation, like the one kid's experience in their journey in exile. With VR you can put yourself in someone's shoes. We are trying for the last 15 years to understand through the eyes and the testimonies of children and young adults, what it is to flee your own country, to lose everything, and to try to rebuild your world, what

it means to build a whole new story. We made documentaries about these topics with interviews or road trips, we also made more abstract artworks with this background, where we wanted to tell this story based on facts, assembled over years with several stories we were told by children, our students. We wanted to be as close as possible to what they encountered and also how they recall these moments. They often say that their journey of exile with a lot of violence was like a movie or as a video game.

We worked here with the whole team of Zeilt but also with Tamiko Thiel, on the resilience of these children, through their imagination, through their culture, like Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, but also on the representation of it, in their memories.

Tell us more about the collaboration with American-Japanese digital artist Tamiko Thiel?

It was a very intense collaboration, in the sense that we directly felt we had something we shared: reflections about the exile and the immigration we have in common. We also knew that we would like to be as close as possible to the aesthetic representation of children and teenagers who encountered exile. We read a lot of testimonies, we watched movies, and found drawings made by refugee children, they were and are still produced in different camps throughout the world and circulate on social media, but there was also an

exhibition in Strasbourg in 2017 and a related publication with the title *Déflagrations*.

You can find similar drawings made by Jewish and Gypsy children during the Second World War in the camps. In Auschwitz-Birkenau is a permanent exhibition including children's drawings: *Traces of Life: The World of the Children* by Michal Rovner.

You both work as teachers at Luxembourg highschoools with migrants. Could you tell us more about them and what they brought to the project? A young woman, former student and former refugee has been part of the project, for instance.

For *My Identity Is This Expanse!*, we gathered testimonies from children in exile who arrived alone in Luxembourg, one of them was Yunus Yusuf and he was the first to talk about being trapped in a vegetable crate during his journey from Afghanistan to Luxembourg over a period of 8 months. He was 13 years old at the time and had lost his parents and siblings on the journey. He thought his family had died crossing the sea. But they were reunited after three years thanks to non-governmental organisations and new friends, teachers. Today, he is 24 years old, married, has studied economics and is currently an assistant teacher - he has acquired the nationality of Luxembourg.

After his testimony, and that of many other exiled

children, we soon came to the conclusion that it is crucial for us to tell the stories and to use art to bring individual fates closer to the larger story and to engage the public.



Tamiko Thiel and Pascal Piron

We first made *The Formidables*, which was both a documentary and a video installation as part of a group exhibition called *Angste Povera* in 2014. Then *Mos Stellarium*, a documentary and video installation that was shown in film festivals and museums (*Mos Stellarium* in installation also represented Liechtenstein in its first exhibition, entitled *Silver Lining*, at the Venice Art Biennale in 2015). In our art and film work, it is important for us to be confronted and to confront the audience with the reality of people, their individual stories,

especially those of young people and children who represent our common future. This is how we get closer and bring the audience closer to the ongoing history and those terrible breaks, for example, the endless war in Syria, the one in Yemen or today, the historical break of the summer of 2021 in Afghanistan, whose first victims are the children.

These children survive, broken, but they survive and often in the crucial moments, the violent moments they cling to their imagination, their memories or their culture.

“Many other children and teenagers told us similar stories on their particular journeys. They often refer to this as like on films or in video games, because it’s their esthetical anchorage.”

Karolina Markiewicz & Pascal Piron

Mahmoud Darwish is the poet of exile par excellence, known everywhere by the Arabic-speaking community but also more widely by the community of displaced people, the refugees. We have paralleled Yunus' documentary story with the universality of Darwish's poetry to offer an immersion into the process of exile, the process of escape that millions of children are experiencing today.”

The young woman we would also like to mention is Christina Khoury, who came from Syria in 2013, with her parents and her brother. They were transported in a truck. There were two trucks with refugees, in the other one everyone died. She tells her journey in *Mos Stellarium* like Yunus Yusuf and four other teenagers, who are adults now. She recently became Luxembourgish and is studying international law and political sciences. Christina interpreted Mahmoud Darwish's poem for this project in Arabic.



Christina Khoury

This whole community of students (former and actual) will take part in the exhibition which incorporates *My Identity Is This Expanse!* at the Casino Luxembourg - Forum d'art contemporain.

Who else helped and inspired you to create this project?

Of course all our students who came to Luxembourg and told us their stories are crucial for *My Identity Is This Expanse!* but also the team we worked with during the XR European Creators Lab in Munich in 2017, especially Mitya Sorkin and Fabrizio Palmas. Later on, we also met Wejdan Nassif, a Syrian writer, living in France and Dr Raphaël Pitti - humanitarian doctor who intervenes in different war zones through the world. Actually all these people encouraged us to work on this sensitive project.

“In our artistic and cinematographic work, it’s important for us to be confronted and to confront the public with the reality of people, their stories, especially the stories of young people who co-shape our common future.”

Karolina Markiewicz & Pascal Piron

Sound and voice play an important role in the film. Could you give us more details?

Music, sound design and voices always seem important milestones for virtual reality. We really like to work on sound (this aspect). Sometimes it's even important to erase the visuals as much as possible to create more space to sound... and for a more emotional immersion. This is the idea for *My Identity Is This Expanse!* - we have created a prologue where you almost don't see anything: just a flickering light, but you are able to hear children, two very young voices of Edi and Leo Hudson who seem to play together. You are being confronted with children by playing with them. This opening situation is disrupted by an explosion. That means a radical change in the story, but you don't forget the children and their world (context).



Edi and Leo Hudson

Interview

We worked with the expertise of Sonic Invasion and Unison studio and with marvelous professional and no-professional actors: children and adults from different origins and backgrounds: Edi and Leo Hudson, Lara Windeshausen, Maja Clement, Christina Khoury, Catherine Elsen, Elisabet Johannesdottir, Pitt Simon, Jules Werner, Khalid Abubakar.

We discussed and rehearsed the scenes with them several times like you would do for theater, before going into the studio for recording. Once we had the recorded interpretation, we created the sound design and the music. For the music, we started from the visuals we already had and Kevin Muhlen finalized his composition, creating various layers of the sound score with different



Karolina Markiewicz and Tamiko Thiel

digital and analog instruments, all in collaboration with Nataša Grujovic's on the accordion. The poem and its musicality both in Arabic and English was a key for the whole creation.

In the end, we created a choir of voices with all the actors in order to lead you to the reflection of a larger repetitive history which is of course obvious when the core thought is articulated around the migration problematic in its universality.

***My Identity Is This Expanse!* is also an installation. How does it reinforce your story?**

An immersive installation in various possibilities anchors the single story of one refugee child much more and enables us to offer a physical, palpable interpretation of it. *My Identity Is This Expanse!* is a downscale of a very complex historical problematic with which we, as a society, are sometimes confronted through the behemoth media and more precisely through images. An installation or a whole exhibition where the virtual reality film is a part of, can articulate more precisely the political, philosophical, or poetical aspects of what is exile, refuge and, of course resilience. In our ten years of practice as visual artist, we reach to all possible techniques to reflect the context and its complexity in which we live. This is maybe the most important aspect of our work together.



Kevin Muhlen and Natasa Grujovic

***“My Identity Is This Expanse!
is an immersive experience with
which we raise awareness for
all these historical attempts of
destruction of young human’s
minds and their incredible
resilience to these attempts.”***

Karolina Markiewicz & Pascal Piron





Mahmoud Darwish

[Palestinian poet]

Mahmoud Darwish is considered the poet of exile.

Born in a village destroyed by Israeli soldiers in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, he evoked the loss of his homeland in more than two dozen books of poetry and prose, which have sold millions of copies and made him the most celebrated writer of verse in the Arab world.

He lived in the USA, Soviet Union, Cairo, Beirut, Tunis, Paris. His poetry came to mirror his own journey, likening the Palestinian experience abroad to an epic voyage of the damned.

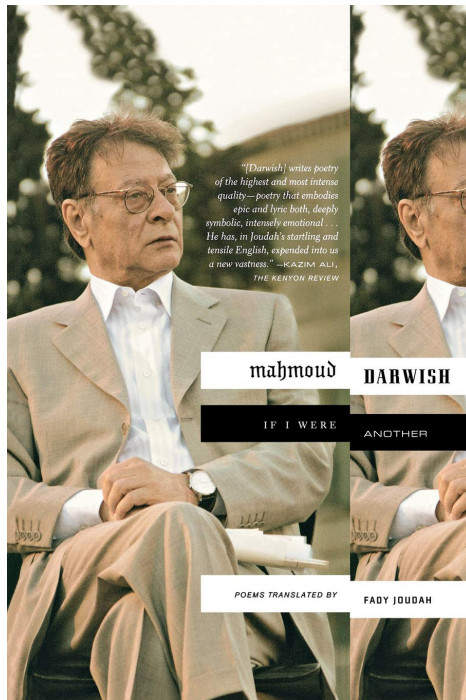
His work speaks of his internal exile and uprootedness, his meditations on his historical, collective, and personal past. Many of his poems mirror the loss of homeland, the frustrations of being under siege, of being occupied.

He won numerous awards, including the Lotus Prize (1969); the Lenin Peace Prize (1983); France's highest medal; the Knight of Arts and Letters (1993); the Lannan Foundation Prize for Cultural Freedom, and many others.



“A person can only be born in one place. However, he may die several times elsewhere: in the exiles and prisons, and in a homeland transformed by the occupation and oppression into a nightmare...”

Mahmoud Darwish



“Brilliant translated by Fady Joudah, If I were Another is a powerful yet elegant work by a master poet that demonstrates why Darwish was one of the most celebrated poets of his time and was hailed as the voice and conscience of an entire people...”

Farrar, Straus and Giroux Publishing

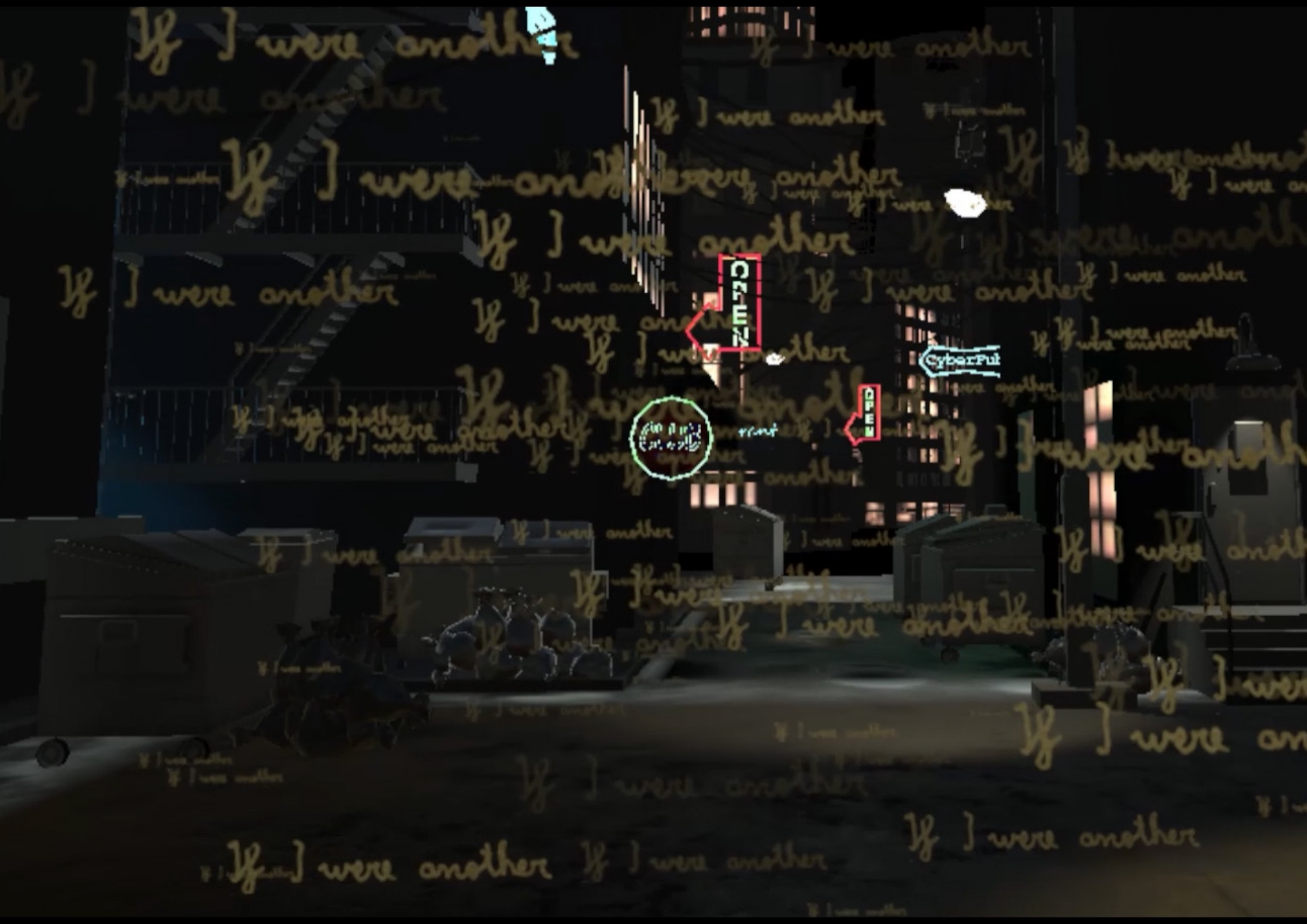
If I Were Another

If I were another on the road, I would not have looked back, I would have said what one traveler said to another: stranger! awaken the guitar more! Delay our tomorrow so our road may extend and space may widen for us, and we may get rescued from our story together: you are so much yourself. And I am so much other than myself right here before you!

If I were another I would have belonged to the road, neither you nor I would return. Awaken the guitar and we might sense the unknown and the route that tempts the traveler to test gravity. I am only my steps, and you are both my compass and my chasm.

If I were another on the road, I would have hidden my emotions in the suitcase, so my poem would be of water, diaphanous, white, abstract, and lightweight ... stronger than memory, and weaker than dewdrops, and I would have said:
My identity is this expanse!

If I were another on the road, I would have said to the guitar: teach me an extra string! Because the house is farther, and the road to it prettier— That's what my new song would say. Whenever the road lengthens the meaning renews, and I become two on this road: I ... and another!



If I were another

If I were another

If I were another

If I were another

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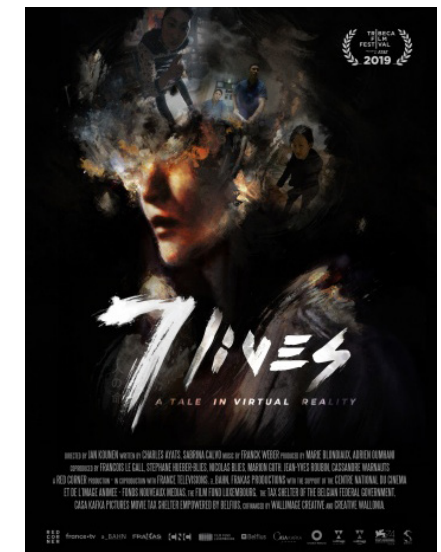
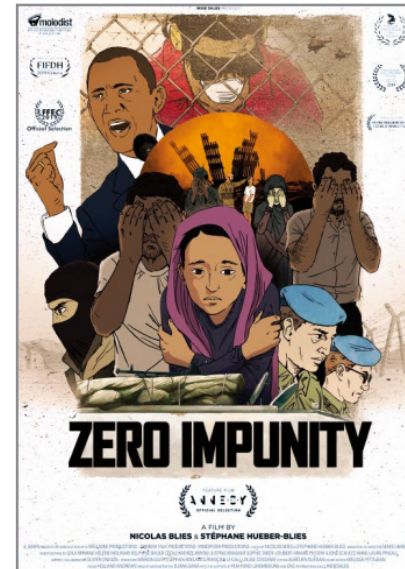
Since the founding of a_BAHN in 2013, we've been working on developing a cinema of hybridization; in other words, a cinema at the intersection of forms and genres, which breaks free from established norms.

a_BAHN focuses on authors developing challenging narratives with high artistic value, and an international audience. As producers, we accompany them in the development of a singular view on the world. Our authors seek to interpret reality, to give birth to universes. Above all, they seek to inhabit the world poetically. By making us doubt, by making us question ourselves, they make us more alive... and sometimes actors of change.

a_BAHN produced, among other, the highly-acclaimed animated film *Zero Impunity* by Blies Brothers (2019, Annecy International Animation Film Festival, Sao Paulo IFF, Moscow IFF, Thessaloniki IFF, Amiens IFF, Guadalajara IFF...), Blies Brothers' transmédia *Soundhunters* (ARTE - 2016, nominated for the Prix Europa) or VR films like *7 Lives* by Jan Kounen (2019, Tribeca Film Festival) and *Cosmos Within Us* by Tupac Martir (2019, Mostra di Venezia International Film Festival, Raindance Film Festival - Best Experience award).

a_BAHN has currently several films in production, especially ARTE's documentary *Monk*, *Pannonica: An American Story* by Jacques Goldstein, the ambitious TV documentary series *Draw For Change*, or the touring immersive experience *Sweet Dreams* by Robin McNicholas and Simon Wroe.

www.a-bahn.com



Installation

[Location Based Experience]

My Identity Is This Expanse! is also a location-based installation.

It is a poetic and political work and the installation reflects this double identity.

A small space of 2 x 2 m, surrounded by a metal structure, on which are suspended 4 double white curtains with drawings of refugee children embroidered on the 4 sides of the outside and the poem by Mahmoud Darwish *If I were another* on the 4 sides of the interior space, with projections of images of historical drawings of refugee children.

The user installs themselves on a pile of various blankets making the link with the blankets with which the displaced refugees are covered on their journey in the experience. This place is central in the installation.

The virtual reality headset is suspended above the user.

The installation serves as a visual metaphor for the mental and poetic space of displaced refugee children and thereby accentuates a decent immersion. One can imagine a live poetic performance of the work of Mahmoud Darwish, the poet of exile.





Exhibition

My Identity Is This Expanse!

is exhibited at Casino Luxembourg - forum
d'art contemporain, as part of Karolina
Markiewicz and Pascal Piron's monographic
exhibition

**Stronger than memory and weaker than
dewdrops**

from 25 September 2021 to 30 January 2022

casino
luxembourg

With support of Film Fund Luxembourg

written and directed by

Karolina Markiewicz & Pascal Piron

in collaboration with VR artist (poem sequences)

Tamiko Thiel

Executive producers: Marion Guth, François Le Gall

Associate producer: Laurent Witz

Production: a_BAHN,

In association with: Zeilt productions

Production year: 2020

Language: English

Music composers: Nataša Grujović, Kevin Muhlen

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