

“But I Have My
Gossips”:
Maja Bekan’s
Continuous
Project Altered
(Daily)

Thyrza Nichols
Goodeve

Yes, Sir, set up your sail,
And row forth with evil hail,
for without fail,
I will not out of this town,
But I have my gossips, everyone,
One foot further I will not go.
They will not drown, by St. John
And I may save their lives!
They love me full well, by Christ!
But you let them into your boat,
Otherwise row now where you like
And get yourself a new wife

–The Noah's play from the mystery cycle of the
Chester Cycle¹

¹Found in Sylvia Federici, Chapter 5: "On the Meaning of 'Gossip, in *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2018), 42.

She is quoting from Thomas Wright, *A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England during the Middle Ages* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1862), 420-21.

Maja Bekan's work is very much of its time, meaning, everything she makes is crafted in the very moment of its own making. Content is not preordained; it comes into being during a prolonged period of research culled from archives, conversations, and rehearsals with her collaborators. In this sense she is also not of her time—e.g., the contemporary context of Instagram self-promotion, fetishization of the art object, and monetization.

Her work has more in common with the task-oriented collective improvisations produced at the Judson Church in the 1960s under the guidance of Yvonne Rainer, or the process works of Robert Morris whose “continuous project altered daily”² serves partly as the title of this essay. In fact, one can think of her as a creature birthed by Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) because, as one learns about her process, one hears in the themes and spoken words of each project the echo of its very making.

²Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961); *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 1969. This is also the title of his collected writings, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Collected Writings of Robert Morris* (MIT Press, 1995).

Bekan's is a decidedly feminist practice where the artwork evolves with –and through –the labor of women. For this reason, it is difficult to summarize or write a linear account of her body of work.

Her videos, texts, films, public conversations, installations, and performances are best understood as variously themed discrete iterations bred of improvisation, rather than a linear progression of singular works bound by specific end dates which can be listed on a CV.

An example is a work which originated in 2014 while she was in residency at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. She put out an open call (as she did for *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)* to seek volunteers interested in making a project. Bekan met with them over tea and cakes and discovered they were mostly retirees. As they got to know one another, the conversation turned to the subject of the disappearance of a beloved statue –made by Alfons Karyn in 1928 of a nude boy –which had been in Oleandrow Square behind the Socialist Realist Marszałkowska Residential District in Warsaw from 1969-1992. It was removed in 1992 during the post-1989 jettison of Soviet statues throughout the former Soviet Union.

Even though their political views were diverse,³ they all wanted “their boy” back on the plinth where he belonged.⁴ This quest became the work although it took three years and several project iterations⁵ until the statue was installed in 2017 in a room at the Ujazdowski Castle with six guards (told “they could do whatever they wanted”) titled *Social Room*. The occasion was *23 Assemblies*, Beka’s 2017 solo exhibition curated by Anna Ptak. The title, *23 Assemblies*, is Anna Ptak’s astute characterization of Beka’s practice as iterative and continuous.

Rather than refer to the projects in the solo exhibition as installations or performances, Ptak describes the work as a combination of “assemblies”⁶ and “happenings.” In fact, she views Beka’s work as a kind of meta-discourse on performance in the 21st century,

“a partial summary of solutions for performance in times of uncertainty for life and art. It [23

³Since each woman had worked under the post-war communist regime of the Polish People’s Republic founded in 1947, to the transformations introduced into communism of the market economy in the 1990s, to the current regime of the ultra-conservative homophobic and xenophobic Law and Justice Party, they were hardly unified by any one ideology.

⁴Anna Ptak, Curatorial essay for *23 Assemblies*, the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle in 2017. The working title was *Exercise Togetherness*.

⁵Ptak mentions a video titled, *Essential Environments No. 2: A Series of Unexpected Incidents* which was a reconstruction of a 2016 dress rehearsal where, “we also see a group reconstructing the history of the search for a lost sculpture, a process which allows them to make this story their own, to make it an inalienable part of their biographies, as well as the square, that they inhabit and care for.”

⁶*Ibid*, Ptak.



Found image, self-defense demonstrations (1942) Manchester Daily Express



Found image, self-defense demonstrations (1942), Eddie Worth / AP



Found image, a member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force attending RAF Police school during WWII, demonstrates self-defense (1942).

Assemblies] uses the space of the Ujazdowski Castle to synthesize critical, cognitive, and choreographic approaches.”

Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other) –ongoing since the summer of 2020 can also be described as a hybrid of assembly and happenings. It is made spontaneously in the moment of each rehearsal, like a happening. Although process is always a subject of each work, Bekan points out that *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)* is the first time she has used the rehearsal as the space where “the content will be produced in the very process of the performance’s making.” In other words, “The process of rehearsal is actually what is and will produce the (art)work itself.” An “assembly” of these rehearsals will be on view on July 28th but not as a finished product.⁷

Staying With the Trouble in the Time of Pandemic: *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)*

⁷Quotes from Maja Bekan in conversation with the author, June 8, 2021. The work will continue as a living exhibition of rehearsals and happenings until October.

The origins of *Hold It Together* involved the same conditions as her other productions: an open call, an extended research phase, and...the development of the project with her collaborators. But, in March of 2020, the world went into open-ended lockdown due to Covid-19. This meant, until further notice, she and her collaborators could not meet in physical space. She became, like the rest of the world, restricted to human interaction by Zoom. Now, Zoom has its advantages but intimate chemistry between strangers who then feel comfortable to riff and improvise wildly, is not one of them. Try as she did, the distancing effect produced by communication across the flattened digital space of tiny squares squashed the spontaneity of the group. Bekan was therefore pressured to perform the role of director, a position of hierarchy and control which is anathema to her practice. Then one day, “I realized I don’t have to be a guide if I just think of this as **friendship**.”

From that point on, this coterie of female friends⁸ set out to make an open-ended work “along the lines of an old radio-play,” inspired by the topic of the troublemaker.

⁸Maja Bekan with Pon-Pon Yeh, Mandy Morrison, (Marie Christine), Juliana Cope, Daniela Chaparro, (Cynthia Berkshire), Susan Hapgood, Alison Kuo, and many others.

The first in-person rehearsal was held with vaccinated bodies at the ISCP space in June of 2021 after a trying year of Zoom meetings. Those who could be there that day were dressed in beige work suits made by Bekan, decorated with hand painted gold designs. Each performer was given a clipboard with an informal archive of material including one pointed feminist essay, a list of traits, and the manner of death.



Installation view, Maja Bekan: *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)*, International Studio & Curatorial Program project space, 2021.

The **PARTISAN** clipboard included a xeroxed photograph of a World War I Serbian woman fighter dressed as a man along with the article, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality" by Iris Marion Young published in 1980. This crossdressing Serbian fighter was known for "their" inability to throw hand grenades and died "violently towards the end of the war by friendly fire." The **HOUSE/WORKER**, who died with her family in a house fire, was paired with the article "Four Theses on the Comrade" by Jodi Dean, while The **ARTIST/KILLJOY**, "killed by a jealous lover," was given "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)" by Sara Ahmed. The **SPY**, "hunted, prosecuted, imprisoned, died of old age in the east, after being stripped of her citizenship," had "The Transformation of Silence into Action" by Audre Lorde clipped to her clipboard. And in a feat of inspiration on Bekan's part, The **POLITICIAN**, "murdered by the opposition," was given "On the Meaning of 'Gossip'" by Silvia Federici as source material.



Found image, young partisan, Yugoslavia, circa 1940s.

I was present at this first rehearsal of vaccinated performers as they met, improvised poses and movements, and chatted in an atmosphere of spontaneous combustion. At one point I heard Began blurt, “Gossip is safety!” —a comment which mixed with the voices and sounds of the other women as they responded. It was just a moment in an afternoon of flux but a moment which crystalized a profound theme of *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)*.

The idea of gossip as safety may seem strange unless one has read Federici on gossip. In this masterful essay, a chapter from her book *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (2018), Federici gives an historical account of the change in meaning of the word gossip from Medieval times, when it simply meant women friends, to the transformation of it into a weapon of misogyny during the rise of modern England. In other words, across the 16th century, the gossip joined the misogynist affiliation of the witch, the nag, and the scold. All were troublemakers—hanged, burned, or fitted with “the ‘scold’s bridle,’ also called the ‘branks,’ a sadistic contraption made of metal and leather that would tear the woman’s tongue if she attempted to talk....” Such a bridle was also used on slaves. But as to disciplining women’s bodies into obedience in early modern Europe,

“this torture instrument was designed as a punishment for women of the lower classes deemed ‘nags’ or ‘scolds’ or riotous, who were often suspected of witchcraft. Wives who were seen as witches, shrews, and scolds were also forced to wear it locked onto their heads.”⁹

*

Listening to Bekan shout “**Gossip is safety,**” I thought of Noah’s wife in a 16th century mystery play quoted by Federici.¹⁰ In this scene she threatens her husband if he dares exclude her “gossips” from his boat.¹¹ What an image: Noah, the ultimate patriarch, famous for saving animals two by two is caught, —possibly—prohibiting female sociality from surviving into the future, if not for the trouble Na’amah—the unfamiliar name of Noah’s wife—makes.

As I witnessed the making of *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)*, I realized all who visit the exhibition will become members of a 21st century incarnation of “gossips” ready, if not literally to board the boat which will save human and non-humans alike, but willing to witness and participate and *Hold It Together* post Covid-19 because *We Have Each Other*.

⁹Federici, 39-40.

In this way, the room at the ISCP from May 2021-October 2021 –a box teeming with the sound of its own making –**is a gathering place for visitors, volunteers, artists, workers, and friends** who might be a (House)WORKER, POLITICIAN, PARTISAN, SPY, ARTIST/KILLJOY, member of rights, **who will always choose the safety of “our gossips” no matter how much trouble we cause.**

¹⁰Quoting from Thomas Wright's, *A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England during the Middle Ages* “Mystery plays were the product of guild members, who by creating and financing these representations tried to boost their social standing as part of the local power structure.” Federici continues, “Thus, they were committed to upholding expected forms of behavior and satirizing those to be condemned. They were critical of strong, independent women, and especially of their relations to their husbands, to whom—the accusation went—they preferred their friends.” Federici, 42.

¹¹In our time of anthropocentric climate collapse, such imagery is less allegorical than possible. See hard science fiction writer and environmental activist Kim Stanley Robinson's climate fiction novel *2140* set in a flooded New York City.

PARTICIPANTS:

Maja Bekan with **Pon-Pon Yeh,**

Mandy Morrison, (Marie

Christine), **Juliana Cope,**

Daniela Chaparro, (Cynthia

Berkshire), **Susan Hapgood,**

Alison Kuo, and many others

Marie Christine and Cynthia Berkshire joined *Hold it Together. (We Have Each Other)*
Zoom sessions from June 2020 - May 2021.

Maja Bekan: Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)

This work is a constructed situation with space intervention including light, paint, carpet, objects, costumes, text and performance. Variable size, material and time.

This exhibition is coordinated by Alison Kuo, ISCP Arts Residency Manager, with exhibition assistant coordinator, Daniela Chaparro.

Special thanks to Vesna Bijeljic, Kari Conte, Juliana Cope, Gunndís Ýr Finnbogadóttir, Moko Fukuyama, Stine Hebert, Boris Krga, Frances Maggio, Angela Serino, Srdjan Petrovic and all the participants of the P for Performance reading group.

This exhibition is supported by Dutch Culture USA program of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York; Hartfield Foundation; Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation; Mondriaan Fund; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council; New York City Council District 34; New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature; Stroom Den Haag; Teiger Foundation; Willem de Kooning Foundation; and William Talbott Hillman Foundation.



Maja Bekan: Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)
April 13-October 22, 2021

International Studio & Curatorial Program
1040 Metropolitan Avenue
Brooklyn, New York
www.iscp-nyc.org



Rehearsal, *Hold It Together. (We Have Each Other)* by Maja Bekan, 2021.
Courtesy of the artist