French-born artist Laure Prouvost, now based in Antwerp, produces visually and aurally rich moving image installations in which she conflates reality and fiction, words and images, reveling in moments of mistranslation that open up new avenues of meaning. The winner of the 2013 Turner Prize, Prouvost’s recent presentations create immersive, interdisciplinary spaces, exhibiting painting, sculpture, collage, drawing, sound scores, or found objects alongside her moving image projections. Laure Prouvost is one of nine artists commissioned through the Walker’s Interdisciplinary Art Initiative, supported by the Mellon Foundation, which is dedicated to the continued development of artists’ practices as they experiment across artistic disciplines. Her new performance work, They Are Waiting For You, premieres at the Walker February 9–10, 2018. In the following essay, Victoria Brooks, curator of Time-Based Visual Arts at EMPAC (Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), reflects on Prouvost’s recent production residency at EMPAC.

“It seems there can never be an absolute spectacle overpowering cowed spectators: some hair will always get in the gate.”

—Ian Breakwell

Based on my experience, the first thing a visual artist will do when confronted
by the material fact of producing a performance for a theater—where the seats rise from a rectilinear proscenium and the stage recedes, channelled by several pairs of heavy black duvetyn legs that shield the audience from the stage mechanics—is to get rid of a theater’s various stage curtains, like the “wings” and “borders.” By removing these visible indices of theatrical design, the audience can gaze into a vast black box, as if a dollhouse with one wall removed. The stage becomes a sort of three-dimensional screen, if with depth and the technical support—the human and infrastructural ground that makes the production possible—is made visible as a constituent of the narrative. And indeed, these same requests came within the first hour of Laure Prouvost, Sam Belinfante, and Pierre Droulers’ recent production residency at EMPAC and, as such, the stage was set (or rather un-set) for They Are Waiting For You.

In order to write a “making-of” that doesn’t describe the content of the show prior to its premiere, I will take a similarly structural and/or materialist approach. That is to say, I’ll focus on those things in support of the production: the architecture, materials, objects, technology, and people. At EMPAC, the residencies not only include intensive infrastructural support (including the theater, concert hall, and production studios), but the collaboration of an experienced team of engineers and technicians who have worked for more than a decade with artists from visual arts, film, performance, and music to translate technically complex and interdisciplinary ideas into form. One way in is to step through some of the performance’s requirements, especially its titular means of production. The development of They Are Waiting For You has thus far included several residency periods at both commissioning institutions, EMPAC and the Walker Art Center, all of which lead up to a world premiere at the Walker in February 2018 and a performance at EMPAC the week following.

They Are Waiting For You is collaborative, and its production has been a process of artistic and technical experimentation by everyone involved. Prouvost’s uncle, Pierre Droulers, is experienced in theatrical environments. (He is, of course, the one who resists theatricality the most.) Belinfante previously collaborated with Prouvost on the technical aspects of her installations. As an artist his prolific and interdisciplinary approach encompasses visual arts, performance, and film, while his source material is always sonic and/or
musical. As such, for They Are Waiting For You he arranges the music, narration, video, and the on-stage actions as if a conductor.

The piece includes, of course, Prouvost, Belinfante, Droulers, a production manger, curators/producers from each institution, a rigger, a master electrician, an audio engineer, several video engineers, production technicians and stage hands, four singers from the Artemis Ensemble, the percussionist Eli Keszler, a micro-perforated screen, a variety of scrims and improvised fabrics, a kabuki drop, some theatrical lights (including washes, work, and moving lights), various tables and chairs, fixed seating in the auditorium, multiple line-sets and battens, a fly system, a genie lift, microphones distributed around the audience, a set of drums, logs, branches, bread, oranges, a couple of projectors, one or two video cameras, a dancer, a naked woman, a motorbike, a few bags of leaves, a large fish, a helium balloon, and maybe a goat. This list of constituent parts and collaborators could read like a call list for an imagined Laure Prouvost video shoot, except for a couple of major differences: the specific architectural features of a theater, the titles of some of the technical team, and, of course, the audience.

But this comparison is not meant as a means to frame the discourse around the mechanical reproducibility of moving image versus the liveness of the theater. For this show I prefer to follow Erika Balsom’s approach to situate cinema in the realm of the performing arts by foregrounding it as an event, one that is experientially unique even as it is mechanical or digitally reproduced. In the simplest sense this framework gestures to artist Ian Breakwell’s hair in the proverbial gate of spectacle quoted in the epigraph of this text. It is the act of projection along with the particulars of architecture, acoustics, screen quality, atmosphere, and people that muddies the gap between the experience of cinema and theater.
Though primarily a visual artist whose videos, installations, and signs are mostly presented in galleries and museums, Prouvost also remains present as a performer in all of her works. However, she is usually at least one step removed from the audience—either mediated by the camera or through narrative fictionalization of familial history. Prouvost’s vocal performance is marked by an unmistakable whisper that slips between mistranslation and neologism as she urges us, and the “magic electronics” (programmed by Belinfante), to follow her instructions. In the making of They Are Waiting For You, Prouvost’s approach to the relationship of language and image is expanded through the potential of the linguistic and architectural construction of the theater. As an artist who usually works in moving image, this is an unfamiliar mode of production: a literal new language. Although there are common conditions in the experience of watching cinema and theater, such as forward-facing fixed seating and a certain disciplined linearity of audience experience (many early cinemas are converted theaters, of course), the language born out of the divergent techniques of film production and theatrical production is often at odds. The staging of this mistranslation, which remains at the heart of Prouvost’s work, therefore becomes the underlying context of this performance.

It was particularly interesting to observe how Prouvost, Belinfante, and Droulers—as individual artists who each film, record, edit, and perform themselves—relinquished authorial control at different moments during the residency. The unruliness of others’ experience, expertise, ideas, and actions can engender radically new ways of working as well as frustrating confusions. “No improvisation!” was the retort regularly yelled to and by anyone involved in the production when anyone appeared to be going “off-script” (even when there was not something necessarily as tangible as a printed page to follow). This phrase, aside from propagating a common parlance during the residency, served to cloak critique and gently refuse an idea whilst remaining generous to deflated egos. Linguistic shortcuts are present in the making of just about any artwork that requires the skills of a group and therefore the deft navigation of complex webs of social interaction. Usually by the second day, everyone has synched their speech patterns with the vernacular of any given production. Moreover, as a curator of “time-based visual art” who also produces EMPAC commissioned artworks, my role is much like that of a translator: situated in-between the artists and the engineers, technicians, and infrastructure, between the museum, the studio, the cinema, and the theater, all the while attempting to catch the mistranslations between disciplinarily specific vernaculars.
This period of experimentation was mirrored through the frame of the performance. The anatomy of the production was structurally visible, and, as such, the first act was staged as cinema. Prouvost’s video—made for her current solo exhibition at Walker Art Center—was projected on a large micro-perforated screen that masks the stage at the proscenium. The video addressed us, the audience, as a group, iterating through words and actions a set of instructions. The spatial and linguistic transformation that followed tapped into our common experiences as well disciplined audience members. The material of the projection surface was slowly revealed as a back light shined onto it and reconstructed the screen as scrim: what was opaque became semi-transparent, no longer able to reflect a seamless cinematic illusion.

The performance progressed and focused our attention, as viewers, past this projection screen and into the stage space. I was reminded, as this shift happened, of Breakwell’s insistence on the gap between watching and seeing; *They Are Waiting For You* presented so many different ways of seeing (and, for that matter, hearing). A literal array of surfaces appear and disappear at multiple distances, animated by a fast-paced switching of sources between pre-recorded footage and live video that in turn doubles the performed actions on stage. It appeared the whole theater was activated in order to fracture the distance between language, object, and experience. In a traditional theatrical context, a scrim interacts with light to conceal and reveal, a cyclorama reflects, and duvetyn absorbs both light and sound in order to cloak, mask, and frame the stage area like the rectilinear limit of a lens. But rather than theatrical tricks, *They Are Waiting For You* used this material tactility to produce a sense of unmoored dislocation for us as viewers. This was produced through the joyful choreography of the theatrical infrastructure, such as an interlude of “batten ballet” when curtains, scrims, and light fixtures took over the stage with the rapid rise-and-fall of the line-sets. As the stage elements appeared to act on their own, undisciplined, they exposed the supposedly rational technical and linguistic structures that support our experience.
On the last day of the residency, we invited the local public to give feedback on the work-in-progress, and as the dramaturgy of the middle section did not yet match its ambitious technicality, it was decided to stage the show as a beginning and an end with an imaginary middle. This section took place overlaid with Prouvost’s voice directing us to “imagine” the actions that were, for the most part, not happening on stage. And sitting there in the semi-dark, the performance still happened. Not in a spectacle of complicated theatrical tricks, not in practical or special effects, but in the audience imagining a series of images and actions. Philosopher Vilem Flusser claimed that, “film does not give an account of events but imagines events and makes them imaginable: it makes history, if always three steps removed from the concrete phenomena.” They Are Waiting For You goes a step further. It collapses the event with the phenomena, and it points towards the audience as actively capable of conjuring both.

Toward the end of the performance, smoke imperceptibly started to fill the room. These particles were transformed into a hazy screen when a projector was turned on and pointed out towards the house. Choral voices and spoken words were distributed around the audience and we were all enveloped in a sort of cinematic sensorium. They Are Waiting For You is certainly expanded cinema with its double-entendre act of projection and its play with the construction of discipline. It gestures back to a time when magic lanterns and moving images shared the stage with performers and lighting tricks, when the act of seeing was always an act of learning.
Notes


3 Ian Breakwell (1943–2005) was a British conceptual artist and diarist equally committed to the interplay of image and language, and the place of experience in cinema. His work took many forms including photocollage, theater performances, film, film performances and expanded-cinema events, installations, environments, video, audio works, digital imaging, and writing. He worked as part of the Artists Placement Group with John Latham among others. Prouvost worked with Latham for several years and continues to incorporate references to the artist in her own works.
