

A herd of women gallop valiantly through the streets of Berlin, occupying its squares and neighing at celebrated monuments and sculptures of men on horses. Visual artist Helena Byström and choreographer Anna Källblad, the duo behind "City Horses", speak with Beatrix Joyce about the nature of the nomadic project and public space as a stage for liberation.

Beatrix Joyce: How did "City Horses" come about?

Helena Byström: We were in Skopje on an international collaboration project and the idea for "City Horses" came as we were walking around the city centre. In 2014, Skopje underwent a major revamp. The government laid down streets of marble and covered the houses with façades sporting kitschy Ancient Greek lookalikes and false balconies. They erected gigantic statues of warriors and bronze sculptures of powerful men sat on top of horses. It was a demonstration of power and a search for a cultural identity, in the wake of Yugoslavia's disintegration. It felt so strange to us because you don't build cities like that nowadays.

Anna Källblad: Yes. As artists and as women, we sought to respond to this. We were triggered by the absence of women in our history books, our historical monuments and art in public spaces. How come female stories aren't represented? Faced with male dominance in public space, it was a desperate and physical reaction as a woman to become a horse. With this performative gesture we wish to add something, to use the body to make new suggestions of how women are represented. We ask: how is the movement of women controlled, suggested and interpreted? The objectification and control of the female body in public space points to questions of power and ownership. After Skopje, we

sought to "conquer" other places and bring "City Horses" to our own cities and locations where Europe has a history of expansion and colonialism.

BJ: How do you find your dancers and how do you prepare them for the performance?

AK: After an open call, we put together a group of dancers that includes local performers and three performers from the previous show. We work with them in the studio, and we bring them to a nearby pasture or stable to watch horses. Dancers are particularly skilled at observing movement and non-verbal communication between bodies, and these skills can also be applied on horses. We ask our dancers to tune into their presence and be attentive to their reactions – that's how they learn to embody them.

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HB: Also, I think that being close to horses allows you to see and feel how grand and muscular they are. We hope our dancers can feel inspired by this and adopt a similar presence; this feeling of standing there and no one being able to move them, no matter what.

AK: Yes. And when they move, they do it because they want to, because they feel like it. The women in this work don't move in order to please, they move because it's their choice. This creates a different kind of ownership, both over the female body and over public space.

HB: Indeed, and they can go anywhere! Like a herd of wild horses, nomadic and free. And these freedoms are different for everyone. It's different to move as a woman in Spain than it is in Germany or Norway. We wish to create an exchange with the dancers on this topic, to bring them together and gain an understanding for how experiences differ across cultures and ask which experiences we might share.

BJ: Yes. And audiences in different countries will also have different reactions. What kind of responses have you observed so far?

AK: The performance itself is quite humorous: seeing a group of grown women galloping around looks silly, there's comedy in that! People tend to stare, or laugh, or do a double take in surprise! But in equal measure people tend to stay and watch and really take the work in.

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HB: Some people laugh outright, and others get irritated. You can see in their reactions they feel they're taking up too much space on the pavement. But then there are also people who join in: children run alongside them and imitate their movements. It can be very playful. People can relate to the image of young girls pretending to ride horses in the schoolyard. Ultimately, it's also a way of dealing with serious issues: through play. 🐾

Running Wild and Free

On City Horses

Interview: Beatrix Joyce