



Artforum, September 2015  
(author: Jos Van den Bergh)

## ARTFORUM

When this year's Venice Biennale director, Okwui Enwezor, asked Lili Reynaud-Dewar to propose a project, she produced *My Epidemic* (small modest bad blood opera), 2015. The theme of this "opera" is a reflection on AIDS, starting with a famous case from the beginning of the 2000s, when the French writer Guillaume Dustan was attacked by Didier Lestrade, a founding member of ACT UP Paris, for claiming that it was his personal and legal right to have unsafe sex and write about it.

Reynaud-Dewar, who teaches at HEAD (Haute École d'Art et de Design) in Geneva, often works with different partners as part of her artistic practice. For the Venice project, her students were invited to participate by joining her and the composer Nicolas Murer in singing the libretto she had written for Murer's score. This consisted of an imaginary discussion between, on the one hand, a group of activists trying to encourage safe sex, and, on the other, an individual (performed by the artist herself) claiming to have the liberty to do what she wants.



From left:  
*My epidemic*, 2015;  
*My epidemic (a body as public as a book can be)*, 2015

## CLEARING

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If this sounds heavy-handed, the result in Venice and its pendant in Brussels were anything but. In the Belgian capital, Reynaud-Dewar used a variation on the title of her installation in Venice: “My Epidemic (a body as public as a book can be).” For this show, the two-story gallery housed in a late-nineteenth-century mansion was transformed into one big installation. What could have seemed an outdated discussion on the tension between public and private spaces was instead a vigorous and illuminating presentation.

The ground-floor windows and the facing wall were covered with bright white curtains inscribed with texts taken from the artist’s recently published book *My Epidemic (texts and my work and the work of other artists)* (2015) and splashes of paint. Ramaya Tegegne, one of Reynaud-Dewar’s former students, was asked to choose excerpts and quotes, and she came up with such fragmented lines as “Naturally from their decision to take down the wall of privacy and intimacy, to become absolutely transparent as a discipline, a contemporary mode of being,” and, in a less oracular mode, “‘The personal is the political’—true, but maybe the message is also that emotion is political. This is radical emotion. Not attention-getting, but stripped down, vulnerable, stark.” Between the curtains, three HD videos were projected. All of them showed the artist dancing naked, her body covered with black and red paint, in a variety of enclosed spaces, public and private. But the lack of contextual details makes the public private and vice versa. In a sly way, Reynaud-Dewar succeeded in confusing the viewer about where one was, what one was looking at, and from what position. A mischievous example was a scene shot in the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice, where Reynaud-Dewar danced in a windowed room on the ground floor next to a canal. Suddenly a gondola with tourists glides by the window grating. In a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment, you can see that one of the tourists spots the naked performer and is just in time to set her friend to take a snapshot.

Upstairs, a similar strategy of exposure and enclosure was at work. But here, the ink on the white curtains was deep red, and Reynaud-Dewar, covered with red paint, danced in an agitated manner. To my eye, a specific line of text stood out: “He moved to a provincial French city and spent most of his time alone in his apartment, gradually disappearing from the public space of media.” Since the “he” in this case refers to Dustan, who died in 2005, it was difficult not to see the splashes on the curtains as spurts of blood and the artist/performer as a healing shaman.