

99 words for void

BY ZOÉ COSSON

Ever since the rise in terrorist attacks in Europe, particularly those that took place in Brussels in March 2016, heavily armed military has occupied public space in the name of security. The project *99 Words for Void*, initiated by the Estonian performance duo Maïke and Iggy Lond Malmberg, is a response to this anxiety-inducing presence.

What values do soldiers defend? What does their presence mean? Are they there to protect, reassure, justify a state of emergency, or simply to get citizens used to seeing a uniform?

Far from providing a quick answer to these burning questions, the duo, most well known for Long Malmberg, comes clanging on stage disguised as flamboyant knights come to defend the fundamental values of Europe (liberty, democracy, equality, and respect for human rights). Only they have no idea whatsoever what these values are made of. Determined to understand, they adopt our behavior, imitate our language, try to adapt to the inherent ideological structure of our culture, in an approach that is purposefully naïve and hilariously ironic.

Coming from their mouths, the humanist rhetoric that “all humans are equal, every one is free to say what they want, Europe represents democracy” quickly rings hollow considering how hard it is to make them compatible with the current state of security policy and neoliberal values. *99 Words for Void* is inspired by the inherent contradictions of the European model.

While the performance crystallizes one of these paradoxes and puts it on display—a woman bears a sign that reads “I disapprove of what you say, but will defend to death your right to say it”—the idea of togetherness collides with neoliberal policies, freedom of expression butts up against good intentions and our state of emergency goes head-to-head with individual liberties. Armed with these empty slogans, projected slides, a banjo and heavy metal music, these hipster knights explore ideological dissonances and the sense of alienation they provoke. Europe has opted for individual rights and liberties at the expense of a collective utopia, and this transpires in a claustrophobic performance that does not embrace the spectators: the hope for a future utopia seems to be over.

In an interview where Iggy Malmberg sports a sweater with the words “post-Europe”, the duo explains that they do not propose a way out or solutions to this identity crisis, rather they embody its complexity, expressed in the shape of some much welcome self-criticism.