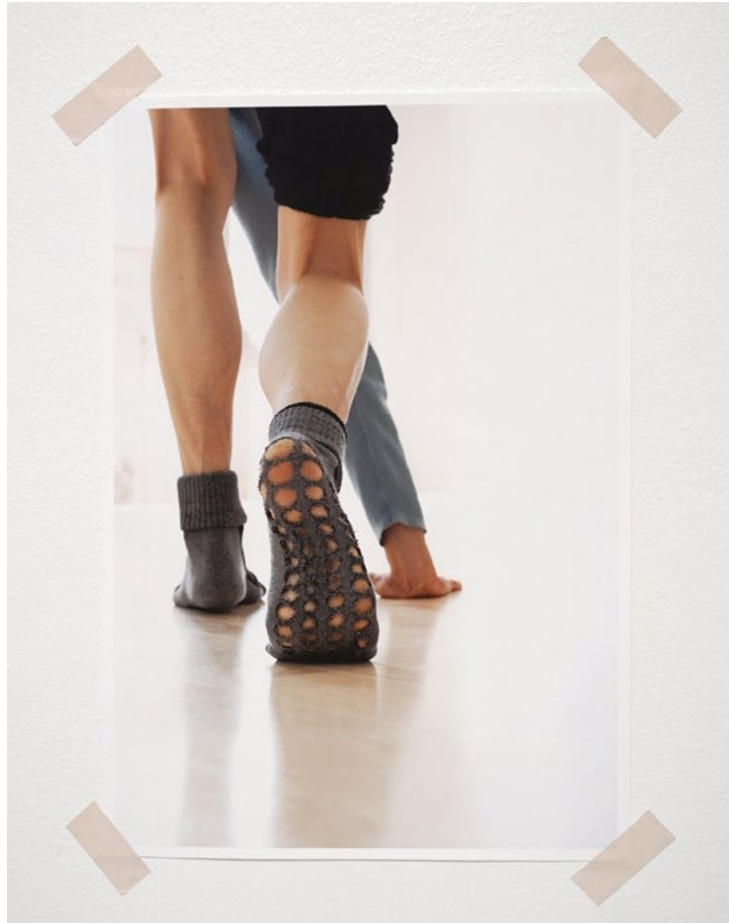


## ***A SLASH IS A DASH IS A SPLASH***

Discussion between Laura Cemin and Keiu Krikmann  
February 4, 2022 - Draakoni Gallery, Tallinn (EE)



**Keiu Krikmann:** First of all, thank you Laura for inviting me for this discussion. My name is Keiu Krikmann, I am a translator, writer, editor, and curator. I briefly worked together with Laura on one of her earlier exhibitions in Tallinn, so it's nice to be back in a different situation with her.

I think we could start by briefly presenting your background because although you have been showing in Estonia quite a bit, maybe it is good to give people some context. You could especially think about the three themes that are very present in the space, which is movement, words, and materials.

**Laura Cemin:** Thank you all for coming. And thank you Keiu for accepting the invitation to have this talk. I'm Laura Cemin and I am originally from Italy, but now I live in Helsinki.

My background is in dance, I have a degree in ballet and contemporary dance and I've worked as a professional dancer in the United States. I didn't last very long since I soon got very tired of an environment that demands constant control, theme which I still deal with in my practice.

When I came back to Europe, I started studying journalism. I've always enjoyed writing and I imagined myself becoming a critic for theater, but I left my studies after 6 months because I really didn't like the program. To quit something again felt like a failure - the idea of failure is another recurring theme in my practice.

Afterward, I started to study photography in Italy and I did my exchange studies at the Estonian Academy of Fine Arts. This was the reason why I came to Tallinn in the first place.

For my Master's, I decided to enroll in a Fine Art program in Sweden, to explore different media and modes of art making. I started to work more with the body and with performance and, towards the end of my studies, with materials as well. Initially, I felt quite a bit of resistance - I really didn't want to perform anymore after my dance career, but soon I understood that the only choice was to surrender to what seemed such a logical path to follow. I started working more with the body in space, while material came quite late. This is actually my first material-based show.

**KK:** Maybe this is a good way to come into the space, and especially to think about what you said about movement in space since I think this is an exhibition where traces of movement are very much present. It's suggested in the sense that movement is about to

happen or it has happened and you have just missed it. For this, you've divided all the pieces into two categories, scores, and tools. Although when I step into the gallery the pieces don't strike me as particularly useful or functional, rather they suggest a poetic atmosphere.

But coming back to the scores and tools, could you talk about this logic? How does this functional language apply to these poetic objects?

**LC:** Everything in my practice starts from movement. Either I move in the space and then something is created or I depart from a specific movement and I try to unpack it. This show for example starts from the actions of falling and slipping. I've been exploring these two movements through the body practicing different ways of falling. As I was telling you before this talk Keiu, at the beginning of this two-year-long research I landed badly while rehearsing falling and I got a concussion. This led me to learn how to fall safely and to explore all the techniques that exist to do so.

Movement is very present in the sculptures as well: the movements of the hands gripping the porcelain, or the traces of my body falling on the soap bars.

Finally, I also create the choreography for a body in space, a path for what could be my body or the body of the audience.

As you mentioned, the pieces are divided into tools and scores (score is intended as instruction as a dance or movement score would be). One score is the picture that you see on the left wall titled "fall flat, flat fall". I consider it an instruction for a possible faller to know how to slip. To realize this picture, I've cut out the rubber from a pair of anti-slip socks and I positioned myself in space as I would be ready to run/fall. I see it as a playful invitation.

"Cuc/ca/gna", the text hanging there, is another score and an absurd stage play. But we can talk about this more in detail in a moment. And finally the drawings on the window sill. They are very subtle so it is easy to miss them. I was looking at possible ways of documenting the movements done while climbing. As a dancer, I'm used to documenting movement on paper with words, diagrams, or drawings. In dance, there are different notation systems that can be used to document a choreography, while in climbing each climber can have a personal way of notating their own routes. I found online this system which associates a shape to a way of holding the grips, like the pinch, the pocket, the slope.

In climbing every route is called a problem, because it's something you need to figure out and find a solution for. These drawings are called "impossible problems" because I used the shapes as visual elements and not as an actual movement notation, therefore I don't think the routes are actually climbable. When entering the gallery some months ago to check the space, I noticed that the window sill was covered with fake marble PVC and I thought about drawing the shapes directly on it - a fake rock for impossible rock climbing routes.

Regarding the tools for falling, these are the soap bars that resemble balancing boards or dysfunctional slippery yoga mats - usually, yoga mats are called sticky mats; the climbing wall with porcelain grips that are too slippery and too fragile; and finally the greasy pole in the back of the gallery, which can be read as the materialization of the English idiom "to climbing the greasy pole", which means you are progressing on a difficult career path and you could fall back to any point. It also refers to an Italian traditional game called l'albero della cuccagna. A huge log 30 meters high is set in the middle of the town square and salami, ham and cheese hang from its top. People compete to climb this pole full of grease. The situation is set for failure, but those who are able to reach the top and grab the food can take it home. The actual prize is mainly the pride of having reached the highest point and therefore to be the best player in town.

**KK:** Is this game set for a specific holiday?

**LC:** I think the log is placed in the city square when the saint protector of the town is celebrated. It is an old game so you don't see it so much nowadays, at least in the North where I come from.

About the dysfunctionality of these tools, it's exactly what I was after when making them.

What I like to do is to take an existing object, or a tool that has a function, and change the material it is made of to understand what else can these tools do if their original function changes. For example, if a sticky mat is not sticky anymore, what can you do with it? So I guess I'm interested in the failure of the objects as they would traditionally be intended and what this failure enables. When I work with materials I try to ask myself, what does this material enable in my body? The soap allows me to be slippery, to fall, to slide, to relearn how to balance or how to walk on it. The same applies to porcelain. I've never worked with porcelain before and I discovered it to be a very interesting material, very different from clay as it is much chewier and it's difficult to tame. It shrinks very much, it is very fragile too. I was trying to understand how to have a relationship with it without fighting all the time. And what can this dialogue bring?

**KK:** Perhaps still talking a little bit about movement. You said that you've been researching falling for a while and I guess it also has a quite direct connection to dancing. Probably as a dancer you need to know how to fall, but what about climbing? What is your specific interest in climbing? It is a little bit of a different way of moving.

**LC:** I am not a climber. I did climb when I was a child because my friend had a climbing gym in her basement. We liked to climb the walls till the ceiling and fall on the foam, climb and fall on the foam on repeat. I really enjoyed letting go, arriving at the top of the wall

and just falling down. When I grew older, the fear of falling became bigger – I'm actually very afraid of falling! I guess this is a reason why I keep making works about falling, because of this fear.

I'm interested in climbing because it's an act that requires a lot of concentration; the climber is usually attached with a rope to the wall and there is another person, the beholder, who is holding the rope at the bottom. This person needs to catch the climber midair when they say "fall", when they let go. Some friends who are climbers told me that you never get over the fear of falling, but you climb anyway. I found it very interesting. Climbing is also a way of solving a problem with your body. When looking at the wall, a climber can somehow understand which hand and foot goes where, but they can only know for sure who to "solve the problem" when they put their body into it. This kind of bodily knowledge it's very interesting for me. Although the idea of making a piece about climbing came mainly from the grips, from my need to create something tactile.

**KK:** About this climbing wall in particular, which kind of logic do the grips follow, is there a sort of a logic of movement, or is this more a visual pattern?

**LC:** When I planned the installation, I wanted to understand how a person in the climbing gym creates the paths. I looked up various methods but when I tried to put them into practice, they didn't make any sense to me, simply because I am not a climber. I then decided to make the paths in the same way I make my visual poems. It is impossible to see, but the grips draw possible falls, a slip, a waterfall... The grips became letters or symbols of an abstract language. I approached the wall as a page and wrote a poem on it.

**KK:** We talked about climbing, which has a vertical directionality while when you fall, you fall into a horizontal plane. While discussing in preparation for this talk, you mentioned the metaphorical aspect of these two directions. So you are not only dealing with literal movements, vertical or horizontal. Could you say something about this as well?

**LC:** Sure. I'm very interested in the metaphorical use of language. I was looking at all the possible ways the verb to fall can be used in the English language, and actually in most cases falling has a negative connotation and is paired with failing. As I mentioned before, failure has been a recurring theme in my practice, as well as the question of success. Why do we strive for it and why are we always asked to excel and reach the highest possible point? The society we live in is built on a vertical line, it is hierarchical, there is always a step further to take, one more thing to do, one more title to achieve.

When climbing the greasy pole, we are not stable. Our bodies are always tense and every wrong step could take us down. What I am trying to propose here is to see the act of falling as a way to ground ourselves, but also to explore a different way of relating to each other that is horizontal rather than hierarchical.

Verticality is not only present in the structure of the society, but also in religion for example. I grew up in a catholic environment, and according to catholicism, there is something bigger and better on top of us. As Catholics, we are asked to spend our lives cleaning ourselves from our sins to ascend towards God. What is above us is pure while what is on the ground is disgusting, muddy, the pleasures of the body are impure. I see a connection with Descartes's division between body and mind, reason ruling the flesh.

A second context, which has been more shaping for me, is ballet. Ballet technique is based on the constant fight against gravity. As a dancer, you always need to appear very light, almost flying. Every fall while dancing is the piercing of the dream's bubble, it's breaking the enchantment that ballet creates.

As you correctly mentioned, I'm not interested only in falling as a movement per se, but also in the metaphors and the language around it. We use the word to fall without even noticing it and most of the time it holds a negative connotation. Even to fall in love, which it's something beautiful, always implies the loss of control, the fear of not knowing, not being able to rationalize.

**KK:** I guess there are also two expressions that came to mind. One is falling from grace, but the other one is falling with grace. This is also something that I thought about a lot when I was thinking about this exhibition.

We've been talking also about bodies. But when you step into this exhibition, there are no bodies. Did you imagine what type of body could move around in space beside your own? And also imagining those bodies with a context, because obviously, bodies are never just like ethereal entities, but they always come with their context, especially political context, social context, cultural context. They're marked by all those sorts of areas. So if you were to imagine the bodies this exhibition is made for, what would those bodies be like?

**LC:** I've been thinking a lot about the absence and presence of the body in the show. I see this exhibition both as a training room, but also as scenography for a play. You can see that the space has been used, but you don't know who used it. When creating the show I was thinking about the possibility of always having a body in the space, reading, performing, or just existing here. I chose not to include this human presence at the end because I wanted to leave space for the audience to step in.

I imagine someone moving in it and becoming part of this environment made of other bodies, which are the sculptures. I don't think I can say which body this show is made for, because everybody as you said is shaped by what is around it. Our bodies are archives of what we experience and literally how we move, since muscles are created through movement in repetition. What I wish is that everyone can bring their own story and background in the space and experience it in their own way with their unique body.

Many people asked if they could touch the sculptures. I appreciate this desire to touch and connect to the sculptures through a different sense. I started working with materials when I found out that my mom has a problem with her eyes and later in life, she will lose her

sight. When I was still photographing, I started wondering how she will be able to experience artworks if she can't see them. This brought me to think about touch. I imagined more tactile relations to artworks.

**KK:** This is a really nice segue into my next questions, which would be more specific about material. When you look at everything that is in this space, I think you can really say that the show it's not about material, but there is a notable material presence. Usually, when artists work with material or use material in such a prominent way, there is the idea of presenting some sort of tacit knowledge. In your case, you are using material in a way that makes language visible or an explicit sort of translating. So not seeing materials as something that speaks for itself in this particular way that material can speak without words, but you actually try to translate between material and words. What do you think about this? Is it possible to translate in this way?  
I find this idea of translating between those two realms intriguing, but it seems incredibly difficult as well.

**LC:** I think it's both possible and impossible. Some of the pieces are literal translations of idiomatic sentences like the slippery slope or the greasy pole. But I also create a score for these materials or write instructions for them. Let's take the soap as an example. The soap squares were flat when installed on the metal beams and my instruction for them was to balance on these beams; although because of gravity, humidity and pressure the soap took completely new shapes. I am intrigued by the possibility to propose something to a material as you would do to a dancer.

**KK:**..but the material doesn't listen.

**LC:** Just interprets. I think that's the key. What does it mean to translate or what's the degree of interpretation? It is something very intriguing and also fairly new for me. I want to explore more in-depth this relation between how words can be translated into the material, but also how can the material become a language in itself or perhaps a set of signs.

**KK:** Maybe now it would be a good time to also point out that this exhibition actually includes a play. I also wanted to ask you about writing in this way, like concrete poetry. Where did it come from? Why did you choose this way of expression?

**LC:** Lately I've been writing more and more in an associate way. I start from a concept, an idea, or perhaps a rhythm, and then I connect to it other things in a very playful and uncensored way. I usually speak the texts out loud, I record them and then I write them on paper. The text already has a rhythm in it and it seems logical that this rhythm would somehow be notated on paper. This text started from reading a long list of idioms with the word fall in them and as soon. While reading it out loud, various associations came to mind and I vocalized those too. This is how the text came about. Since the show deals with falling as a possibility of letting go of control, I felt that this approach to the text is very fitting, in fact, the control I have over it is pretty minimal.

**KK:** Do you mean in terms of structuring?

**LC:** Exactly.

But the content deals with control too. There are two voices in the play, an actor that is auditioning for the part and a director. The actor starts to read the score, but every now and then their mind drifts off. The director is constantly scolding them and bringing them back to the script.

At one point, the actor asks the director the reason why To fall in love is not included in the script, and there the director starts to melt-down. Basically, we understand that the director wants everything to follow a strict structure and path because of their fear of losing control, of being lost, of not knowing.

Towards the end of the play, the text is in free fall. The words spread across the page and it becomes difficult to understand who is talking. The hierarchy is broken.

In the play, all the sculptures are mentioned in one way or another, this is why I consider the exhibition to be the scenography for it.

**KK:** In a similar way that the play very physically starts extending itself in its pages, you can actually extend its temporality even more and take a copy with you to read it at home.

**LC:** That's correct. The play is quite long and dense, multilayered, so I thought it would be nice to have the possibility to read it sitting down comfortably at home, or wherever. When reading it in a different context, and discovering the sculptures mentioned in it, I hope some connections will start to happen and the experience of the show will expand. There is an interesting delay that happens.

**KK:** I guess that's it for me. Thank you for guiding us through the show!  
And if there are any questions, please feel free to ask.

Audience: I was wondering, what are the marks that are visible on the soap? Did you create a choreography for how you moved on them and shape them in this way?

**LC:** There hasn't been a specific choreography. I laid the soap bars on the floor and covered them with water. Then I started by simply

balancing, walking, rolling on them.

Some of the marks are made only by my body, some by other bodies, other objects with different shapes, weights. I was asking myself: if I do this movement, what kind of trace is left on the surface? Or how will the soap react to gravity and a body falling on it? The soap is extremely hard to break or shape. I really had to fall on it many times.

**Audience:** So you said that you are afraid of falling. When I came inside, I found the space as a playground. It's funny because kids fall all the time, but then they just run again. They fall, they cry, they do it again. Is there a connection to that, to children falling?

**LC:** As I previously mentioned, when I was a child I enjoyed climbing and then falling, because the ground was also soft. Before researching falling, for example, I did long research on jumping and for it I visited jumping centers, where there are huge trampolines. I loved to go there when I was a child, but as an adult I was so incredibly afraid, while the kids around me were so fearless! Another connection to childhood are the soap sculptures. I call them democratic tools because when you're walking on them, it doesn't matter if you're a child, a trained dancer, or an older person, you will fall anyway. Everyone would need to learn from scratch how to move and walk on them. The idea of play is very important, as well as lightness and humor in my practice.

**Audience:** What is the material on the pole?

**LC:** It's grease for cars, and this one doesn't have a scent. I like it as a material because it's extremely slippery but looks sticky like honey. It's really alluring but at the same time a little disgusting. The foam base came because I felt the need to have a soft element in the space. Also, it slightly tilts the pole, which is an intentional choice. It is a reference to the letter *l* in italic, letter *l* mention in the play. A singularity that is on the verge of falling, but no one is there to catch it.

**KK & LC:** Thanks a lot for coming.

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**Keiu Krikmann** is a writer, curator and translator based in Tallinn (EE). She has regularly written, translated and edited texts on art, design and architecture since 2010 and her work has been published both in Estonia and internationally. She has worked as the programme manager of the project space Konstanet (2013–2019) and as the gallerist at the Estonian Academy of Arts (2016–2018). Since 2015, she has been a guest lecturer at the Estonian Academy of Arts and is part of the core team of the Tallinn Applied Art Triennial.