

# **THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DISQUIET**

**A NEEDCOMPANY production  
with support of the Flemish Government**




**D**rawing from the inspiration of the performative installation MALAM / NIGHT (2021), Grace Ellen Barkey creates **The Garden of Earthly Disquiet**, a new dance performance. MALAM / NIGHT began with obsessively filming flowers and plants in her garden during sleepless nights. Over the past years, Barkey was seriously ill and spent a long time in - as she describes herself - the twilight zone between the passing world and the real one. The nights made this wondrous time even more mysterious. In her intense observations of the flowers, she connected with her deceased parents and ancestors. Born in Indonesia, these magical encounters are not strange to her. The stories of her family are sad and violent. Each story hides the whole colonial history and its wounds. She decided to combine her night videos with Wayang, the Indonesian shadow play. Grace, as the Dhalang or puppeteer, creates the images and tells stories in a very abstract way. Instead of using shadow, she plays with light to bring her world to life. This performative installation honours her ancestors and connects past and present in a ritualistic, healing way. For MALAM / NIGHT, Grace decided to decolonise her name and uses her grandmother's name, Tjang.



MALAM / Night ©Emma van der Put





For the new performance '**The garden of earthly disquiet**', Grace Tjang goes back to the cruelty of her family stories. Bringing the violence of the night alive together with six dancers. In MALAM / NIGHT Tjang started from the traditional Javanese shadowplay of Wajang Koelit, where she uses lightdrawing instead of the shadows of two-dimensional puppets. For '**The garden of earthly disquiet**' Grace Tjang draws inspiration from two other forms of Wayang: Wayang Gedhog and Wayang Wong. These forms of Wayang uses human actors - masked or unmasked - initially based on the Hindu epics Ramayana or the Mahabharata. Grace Tjang tells the dark stories of traumatic nights - an obscure and mysterious world full of restlessness and fears.



In MALAM/NIGHT, the figure of the little deer had an important role. It refers to the Wajang Kantjil where the adventures of a fairy-tale character, a deer - Kantjil in Javanese - are told. The little deer set against monsters and demons of the night as an innocent hero.

The observation of nature has been a necessity in her work for several years. The impermanence and obviousness of nature under threat are the fundamental inspirations of her recent work.

The reference to 'The Garden of Delights' by Hieronymus Bosch brings out the absurdity that is always present in Barkey's universe.





The Garden of Delights ©Hieronymus Bosch

# THOUGHTS ON A PERFORMANCE

**ERWIN JANS** The history of transient beauty. The melancholy in the look that already sees the ruin in the construction. The mark of transience. Such transience is also the consciousness of your personal history. Your personal past. A sense of legacy and tradition. Both family and cultural. The legacy of a name. This is expressed in the installation MALAM / NIGHT (2021). This meditative installation is based on the natural-image projections made by Grace in combination with light-drawings that she arranges and alters herself during the course of the performance:

*'I create the night of my observation and imagination, but also the night of my memories and my parental patrimony. Ever deeper in the nocturnal layers, I honour my past, the tales of my parents, grandparents, ancestors. Each family story hides the whole colonial history and its wounds. How striking it is that, in colonial history, women are used and then cast aside, forgotten. For this project I have decided to decolonise my name and to use the name of my grandmother.'*

Grace Tjang. This is the name she assigns to MALAM/NIGHT. And she identifies with the Wayang puppeteer:

*'For years I have spent nights looking at the plants in my garden. The structures, the light of the street lanterns or the moon, the shadows, the mysterious glittering after the rain. I looked so hard that the structures became mine. The same organic shapes and play of light and shadow can be seen in Wayang puppetry. I am the Wayang puppeteer - the Dhalang.'*





Grace Ellen Barkey casts herself in another genealogy. In doing so she reveals a different past. She allows the vibrations of a different history to shake up her own artistic identity. Maybe this is the meaning of the Tjang name? The identity as a vibration. The identity that lights up in a shape that disappears as quickly as it came? Like the characters in Wayang puppetry? Perhaps we should view our identity more often as a coincidence and learn to see the beauty in that.

We live in a time wherein something is returning, wherein a repressed history manifests itself and begins to demand accountability. Movements like #metoo and Black Lives Matter, the call to decolonise but also the climate movement: they are all based on a return of who or what was outcast, forgotten, misunderstood or abused in history. Those forgotten and misunderstood stories now come to claim their place and rewrite the history that already exists. Everyone has only one identity, according to Amin Maalouf, but this does however consist of many facets and backgrounds. He therefore suggests 'identity research' should be conducted, in addition to 'conscience research'. It resembles the genealogical method promoted by Nietzsche: the deeper you delve into the past, the more layers you find from which your identity is composed and the more 'impure' you become: 'Everyone, without exception, has a heterogeneous identity. You only have to ask yourself a few questions and you encounter forgotten fractures, unexpected side paths and you discover that you are complex, unique, irreplaceable.' Maalouf also uses this beautiful image: a person's identity is 'a drawing on taut skin; merely one part needs to be touched and the whole person vibrates with it.'





Installations such as Day and Night (2019), Bambi's Perspective (2020), Magnolia (2020) and MALAM / NIGHT (2021) are testament to a stillness. An internalisation. A deepening perhaps. 'Things left unsaid, things not revealed, are expressed in the absurd but also in the mystic', says Grace Ellen Barkey. Both the frantic imagination and the stillness are attempts to express the unspeakable. In these installations, the spectator's senses are no longer overfed and overstimulated with absurd, grotesque and surreal images between which the connection is unclear with rationale alone. The starting point of her installations is Grace Ellen's personal connection with nature. For years, she filmed the trees, flowers, leaves and grass in her garden in Brussels. Often at night. During her walks, she collected whatever caught her attention. In her installations, she projects those images on the walls, displays the leaves in glass museum cases, or lays out colourful mandalas on the floor with dried leaves, ferns and plumes. She herself calls it 'an investigation into transposing a space into a narrowness'. The senses are confronted with detailed shots of nature. Leaves and flowers are filmed at such close range that they transform into abstract structures. They are presented as colourful Rorschach tests. Or put together in harmonious patterns that can be blown apart by the slightest breath of wind. They are temporary and fragile like sand mandalas, which are erased after their completion. Has Bambi replaced the clown for good? Or is the deer's innocent gaze nothing but the flip side of the red nose's anarchy? Like the clown's absurd and grotesque puns, the deer's innocence and naivety is a refusal of reality as it is or pretends to be. A poetic and hushed paean to vulnerability and finitude: 'A claustrophobic look at the idea that humans are mortal and nature is eternal. Beauty is only beautiful if she is impermanent. Only then will she have a history,' Grace Ellen Barkey said.



### **Wayang Wong**

Although Wayang usually refers to shadow play using leather puppets, it is additionally used for performances with silent actor-dancers (Wayang Wong). The traditional Wayang display in Java is given as part of a celebration to mark an important event in the life of an individual or group.

The Wayang display serves to pass the communal vigil, which is an undeniable part of such a ritual celebration.



# UNDER THE COVER OF THE NIGHT

A portrait of Grace Tjang  
by Kathleen Weyts

We have to make sure, above all, that our mind is not halved by a horizon.  
— Amartya Sen, Identity & Violence. The Illusion of Destiny.

## MALAM / NIGHT

Grace Ellen Barkey is a woman, a granddaughter, a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a Javanese, an Indonesian, a woman of the former Dutch East Indies, an Indonesian-Chinese, an Indonesian-Chinese-Dutch, an Indonesian-Chinese-Dutch-Belgian, a woman from Amsterdam, from Brussels, a fighter, a princess, a warrior princess, a survivor, a dancer, a performer, an image maker, an artist.

Grace Ellen Barkey is a nightbird.

At Mill in Molenbeek she works for weeks on a new installation/performance, in complete solitude. Her loved ones, friends, colleagues work in the same building. She retreats to her studio and gives shape to her interpretation of the night. The night that is so familiar to her. Insomnia has taught her to embrace the night, to contemplate the world that manifests itself in the dim glow of a streetlamp. The front garden of her house is her observatory, her night world. The plants, the natural elements, the pale light and the night shadows appeal to her imagination. They take her to another continent, where organic shapes, light and shadow form the basis of an age-old puppetry called wayang. The nocturnal spectacle unleashes the past in her, a family history that carries all the wounds and scars of this century and the previous ones. A history of men and women, especially women. The granddaughter, daughter, performer, artist creates a tropical tingling poetic universe of shadow and light, she honours all that preceded her.

Grace Ellen Barkey is now Grace Tjang.



## Little stories, a great history

Two men of Dutch origin conceive a child out of wedlock in the Dutch East Indies, one a son, the other a daughter. The men do not know each other, but the life path of their children will intersect.

‘My family is a family in transition. There’s a lot of melancholy. We came from Indonesia. I was two when we left the country. When my mother died, I wanted to dig into my origins. I went looking for the stories. They are many, but in one small story lurks a whole history, a history called colonization.’

Grace makes a performance. Grace is the granddaughter of Tjang Afung. She rummages in her parents’ past, looking for nourishment for her art, for her soul. An Indonesian girl in the Netherlands, later in Belgium, anxious to find pieces of the puzzle distilled from the lives that precede her. Lives that took place in the Dutch East Indies.

Between Sumatra and Borneo lies the island of Banka, the island of the tin mines. Since the 18th century, cheap and technically skilled workers, descendants of Chinese coolies, have been extracting the crystalline silvery-white metal from the soil, first for the sultan, later for the Dutch rulers. There, in 1923, the Chinese Tjang Afung gives birth to a boy. The father, perhaps named Leonard, is a Dutchman. Three more children follow, but no marriage. The boy is nine when his father decides to move to Europe. He takes the children, drops them in an orphanage on another island and leaves. None of them will ever see their mother again.

Grace’s father tells her a story about a drink his mother gave him so that he would forget her. ‘But daddy! Such a drink, that is not possible at all, it does not exist!’ Grace’s reaction is spontaneous and cruel, her father is distraught. By asking questions, Grace, the (grand)daughter-who-is-now-a-mother conjures up memories. It takes time. The mementos are scarce. Tjang Afung was Buddhist, she took her children to the temple. There was a niece who often helped her, the father of the niece was a woodworker... She lived and died in Banka. She gave her children a drink to forget about her. That’s about all Grace knows.

Grace’s father sees his father again once, just after the war. It feels uncomfortable and their lives quickly drift apart again. Years later, in the Netherlands – Grace is ten or twelve – the (grand)father, who feels the end of his life is approaching, requests to meet. It remains a one-off visit. Leonard – if that was his name – did not leave the Indies alone, he was in the company of Mrs Kilian and another man. A ménage à trois. He dies and none of his children wants to inherit a penny from him. His eldest son visits Mrs Kilian out of politeness. She appreciates it and wants to go with him to Paris, the deceased father exchanged for the son.

*‘My father was 17 when the war started, as soon as he became 18 he was called to fight against the Japanese. His defence of the motherland involves only one day. With the gun on his shoulder, he guards a small airfield. The next day he is locked up in a Japanese prison camp. His father didn’t give him much, but he did give him a name: Barkey. That name was registered as Dutch and even though my father looked anything but like a Dutchman, his name made him end up in that camp. My mother was locked up in a similar camp. But that’s another story.’*

Over the years Grace blends the family stories, in small chunks she pieces together the past and in the meantime, she leads her life. She follows a dance training, creates performances, she works hard, her mother dies, she dives into the library of the Tropical Museum and teaches herself the techniques of Javanese dance, she meets Jan, falls in love, they set up a company together, she moves to Brussels, she gives birth, she gets sick, critically ill, she fights, she performs, she



travels from stage to stage, from country to country... but never to Indonesia, never to Banka.

After the war, Grace's father makes a number of decisions. He follows his heart and becomes Indonesian, he marries a woman without papers, without a family name. The turbulent after-effects of the war and the struggle for independence make him long for a different existence. The Netherlands is repatriating its citizens. In 1960, the young family attempts the crossing. An illegal act. Indonesia doesn't mind getting rid of the bastard children of Dutch rule. The dream of the fledgling family comes with a struggle for non-existent rights. The Dutch government must perform a post-colonial act. The names of those who are being pardoned are published in the Official Gazette. The undocumented Indonesian gives up his recently acquired nationality, from now on he and his family will go through life as Dutch citizens. The topic is never mentioned again. The young father, new-fangled European, traces the origin of his name to 1500. The Barkey family tree has its roots in Germany, branches out via England to South America and fans out to Indonesia. The history of the progenitors was written by European migrants and settlers. The origin of the Chinese (grand) mother remains irrevocably shrouded in mystery.

*'October 2020. My father is 93 and doesn't survive COVID-19. I write a text to say goodbye and look back on his extraordinary life. A life marked by a mother who was erased from memory with a drink. It's time to save her from the folds of oblivion. To honour her. To heal our broken bond. I'm working on NIGHT / MALAM and I decide to decolonize my name. I'm now Grace Tjang.'*



## Mother

*'My mother's father lived his life on two islands. On one he lived with his legitimate wife and their eleven children. On the other he stayed with my grandmother, with whom he fathered three more children, who did not get his name. My grandmother and her children are locked up in the infamous Japanese women's camp of Surabaya. My mother is only a child, she has malaria and is therefore not put on the transport that will take her mother to another camp. The truck leaves. The child-who-later-on-will-be-my-mother is lifted up by an unknown woman and thrown into the arms of her mother.'*

The Japanese are notorious for their torture techniques. Unlike the father-with-two-lives, mother and children survive the madness. She has to start looking for a new home. The widow-concubine becomes a nanny and after a while again a concubine. No photos of her have been preserved.

'I know these stories from my father. My mother is silent. All her life she would never say a word about her mother. I only understood her silence when I read 'Bezonken rood' by Jeroen Brouwers. 'I thought at the time: now I want another mother because this one is broken.'" The child who witnesses the dehumanization of his mother in the camps has a broken mother image for the rest of his existence. 'I was born with the melancholy that settled in my parents' lives, with the scars of the trauma that marked these children of the colony at a very young age.'

Parting is part of life. But in Grace Tjang's life, parting takes on a new dimension. Like a snake, it squirms through her family history, ruthless, raw, leaving deep scars. The mother's parting comes unseemly early. Grace is almost graduating from the dance academy in Amsterdam. She creates a performance that will receive a lot of acclaim, also outside the academy. Her mother will never see Grace shine on that stage, or on any stage for that matter. Her mother is ill and dies. The girl becomes wife and mother of Victor Afung and Romy Louise, a king's wish fulfilled. The snake stealthily slips back into her life, and this time it bears a name: Lynch. Lynch is a killer. He ravages the DNA and attacks first the grandmother, then the mother, and a little over a decade later also the daughter. How do you say goodbye to your young children? How do you say goodbye to life? To a loved one? A father? How do you live when death manifests itself in your body? If no future beckons, no plan? It sets you free. Freed from all obligations, life goes on until it stops. What the f\*\*\*! Tomorrow, next month, next year, you may not be here anymore. Lynch rages like wildfire, up to four times it unleashes its demons in her body, in her intestines, in her womb, in her breasts and again in her intestines. But Grace is a warrior princess— a survivor.

*'My mother was a very melancholic woman. It was very difficult for her to live in the Netherlands, far from her family, her friends, her familiar surroundings. She left with only one possession, her wedding dress, which did not survive the crossing.'*





## MALAM / NIGHT

Grace Tjang sets up screens, she shifts projectors, puts drawings and shapes under lamps, creates a temple, a jungle, a shimmering rustling universe. Layer by layer she adds light, colour, sound, images... The installation invites you to wander, get lost, dream. A deer pops up and lures us into the forest.

*'I've been drawing all my life. No one has ever encouraged me to do so, I still think I'm not really good at it. I can't make anything without first visualizing it, looking for a shape, sampling material. I make videos with my iPad, obsessive, meditative. I like to take my time for things. I like to create very precise settings. But my time is limited. I want to do everything now. Performing comes down to creating an image. Choreography is of secondary importance. I create movements and personages, like the Javanese princess. By doing so, I add small comments, little gestures'. Grace the dancer/performer likes to be surrounded, to share the stage with others. But more and more the solitary studio beckons. Where new images emerge from the world within.*

*'My background is very much political. There is so much violence, there are so many injuries. People today look back to the past en masse. Those who stayed behind look differently than those who left. Their lives were different, their memory coloured the events differently. Sukarno is a hero or a criminal, depending on the perspective. The Netherlands apologizes for colonization. My young Indonesian niece dabbles with the liberation of Indonesia. But for an entire generation, that liberation ushered in an era of oppression and extreme violence.'*

*'My family from Indonesia, and me and my family here, are looking for mutual recognition. To what connects us. I bear a responsibility for my parents' history. Fortunately, my children still knew my father, so his world, my world is not completely foreign to them. But the differences will fade. Over the generations, the Indonesia inside us will fade. Indonesians have a tough time talking about the past. But their children and the children of their children are outraged and angry today. They ask other questions. The world is now ready to talk about colonization and what followed.'*

*'We are not just Indonesians. We are mixed, of mixed descent. Hakka Chinese-Indonesian-Dutch. We didn't belong anywhere, not there, not here. We found ourselves in between all those worlds. My parents and their parents were found guilty because they exist. Leaving the Japanese prison camp, they were locked up in another concentration camp, built by Indonesians. Anyone with a little foreign blood was locked up in there.'*

Grace carries within her the melancholy of her origins. The blood of the colonizer is also her blood, and so is the blood of the Hakka Chinese and the Javanese. Life was added to the blood and, via illness, death was added too. Grace is not a storyteller. She is an image maker. Each image begins with a temple, a refuge, a place where people dance, stories are depicted and everything flows harmoniously together.



*'I grew up in a poor but warm nest. My parents didn't judge. In our house there were all those beautiful sounds and nice smells. I always felt very protected. I'm grateful for the stories I've been given. They feed me as a human being, as a mother, as an artist. I smuggle them into my installations, into my productions. Without words.'*

DNA nourished with poverty, trauma and illness does not necessarily lead to anger, violence, hatred, bitterness. In the face of death, in the face of night, in the here and now, everything we fight for on the razor's edge, fades. That is what Grace Tjang teaches us as she invites us into her world, generously, lovingly, poetically. She immerses us in the stories that colour her life, shapes them into images and sound, gratefully using the mystery of the night.

Text by Kathleen Weyts, translated by Luc Franken

# GRACE ELLEN BARKEY

Artist, choreographer and performer **Grace Ellen Barkey** was born in Surabaya (Indonesia). Barkey lives and works in Brussels and is co-founder of the artists' company Needcompany (1986). Her work lies on the border between theatre, dance, performance and visual art. 'To me, absurdity is the only reality' was Frank Zappa's motto, and it is also the common ground running through Barkey's absurd, performative work.

She steadily adds to her visual oeuvre. Her most recent installations relay a stillness. An internalisation. 'Things left unsaid, things not revealed, are expressed in the absurd but also in the mystic', says Grace Ellen Barkey. Both the frantic imagination and the stillness are attempts to express the unspeakable. In these installations, the spectator's senses are not overfed and overstimulated with absurd, grotesque and surreal images between which the connection is unclear with rationale alone. The starting point of her installations is Grace Ellen Barkey's personal connection with nature. In 2021, she decolonised her name and adopted the name of her grandmother, Grace Tjang. In doing so, she allows another history to resonate in her own identity as an artist.

This is a link to a videowork Grace made with MALAM material - ideally shown on three screens.

[Triptych of MALAM / NIGHT](#)

(Password: PLAYPERFORMANCE - to be watched in a dark room)

This is a link a to an impression of the performance [MALAM / NIGHT](#)

(Password: PLAYPERFORMANCE)

# AYA SUZUKI

**Aya Suzuki** is a Japanese percussionist based in Brussels and Japan. Her studies in Japan and Ghent led her to the contemporary music scene. She has played with Belgian ensembles such as Ictus and SPECTRA. Her performances are physically engaged, based on the belief that music choreographs the body's movements. Her story with Needcompany started with Maarten Seghers' song cycle 'Songs of Disconnection' (2021-2023).

For **The garden of earthly disquiet** Aya researches the traditional Indonesian gamelan music as the basis for her composition. She attempts to create microtones that characterizes gamelan music by making instruments by herself and exploring classical percussion instruments.

Watch an excerpt from [Nine Bells by Tom Johnson](#) and [Rebonds by Xenakis](#).



©Grace Tjang

# **THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DISQUIET**

**Concept, Choreography GRACE TJANG**

**Music AYA SUZUKI**

**Performers GSUNG IM HER, AYA SUZUKI, MARTHA GARDNER and MAARTEN SEGHERS**

**Dramaturgy ELKE JANSSENS**

**Production management RUNE FLORYN**

**Production NEEDCOMPANY**

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