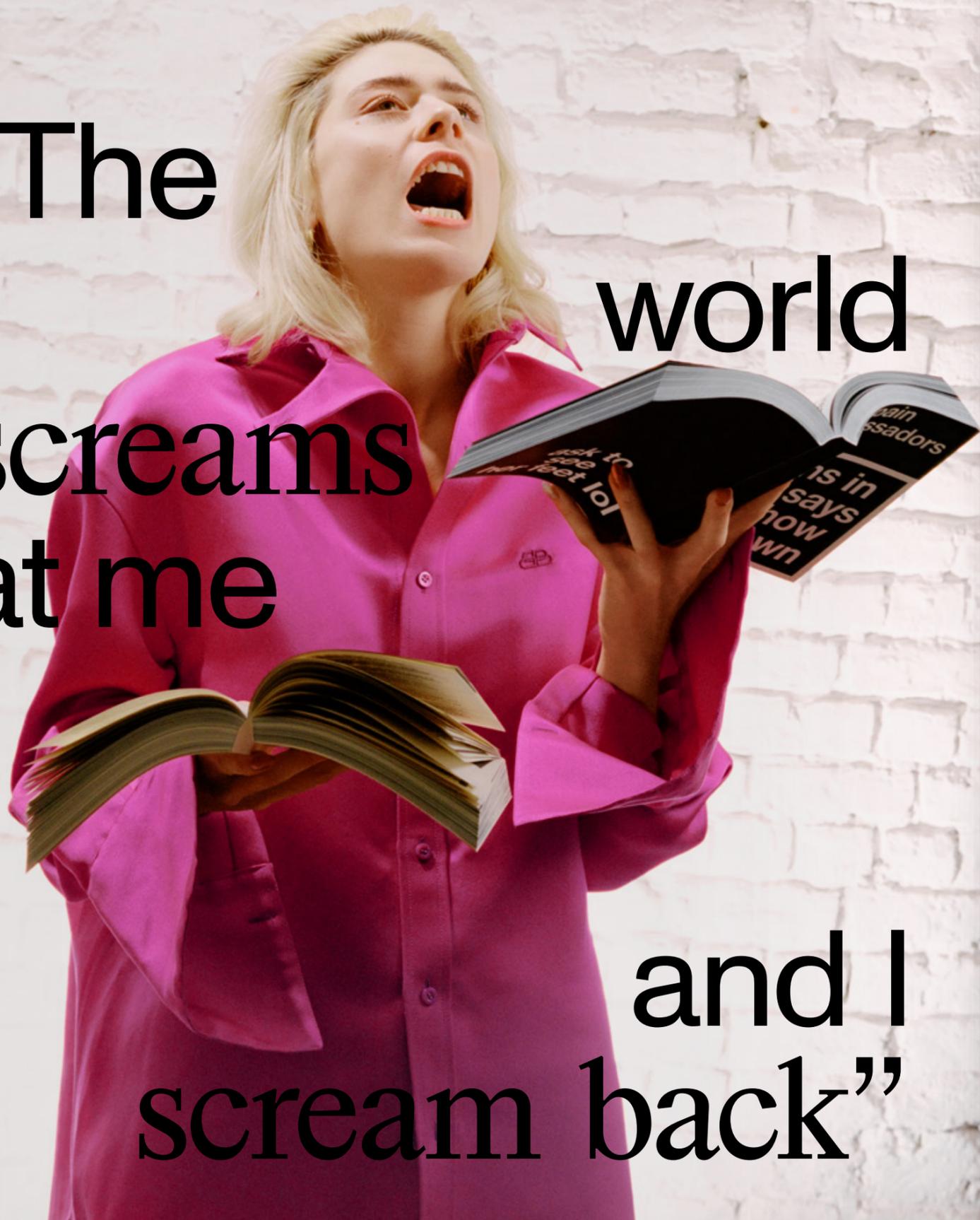


# Nora Turato

“The world screams at me and I scream back”



Using her voice and words as her medium, Croatian-born and Amsterdam-based artist Nora Turato is dismantling the patriarchal idea that women's loud voices are inordinate – one furious and enrapturing performance after another

Photography by Image Group

All looks by Balenciaga  
Summer 19 Collection



Text by Kathryn O'Regan

In her landmark feminist novel, *I Love Dick* (1997), the writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus notes, “I think the sheer fact of women talking, being paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else, public is the most revolutionary thing in the world.” Kraus’ conviction is embodied by artist Nora Turato in her bold spoken word performances, where she roams about enclosed gallery spaces spouting a seemingly random collection of sentences for 20 minutes at a time. More than the words themselves, the performances are marked by the brashness and boom of Turato’s voice. It wavers between a high squawk and an army sergeant’s roar in a rhapsody of emotions: a fearless acting-out of the accusations of hysteria and fragility predominantly aimed at women.

Turato’s performances hinge on the radicalism of a woman talking, loudly and incessantly, in defiance against a widespread patriarchal tendency to silence and suppress women’s voices. According to the 28-year-old, whose practice initially grew out of a blend of punk music and graphic design, what she is most proud of in her work is that she is a part of the first generation of women in her family “who can work through their own

thoughts and mumblings” and most of all, who “can do it publicly and get away with it”. For Turato, who was born in Zagreb in 1991 at the onset of the Croatian War of Independence which lasted until 1995, this approach is significant because of her personal history. “I can make money off of it and live off of it, you know what I mean?” the artist exclaims over the phone. “For instance, there were women in my family who were locked up for reasons like what I’m doing now – talking to people on the streets, talking to people.” she explains. “I can get credit for something others were systematically dismissed for. I’m celebrating that and I’m curious to see how far I can push it.”

In a decade shaped by the increase in women speaking out – such as the #MeToo movement and epoch-defining moments such as Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony against Brett Kavanaugh, Turato’s new brand of loud art performance is particularly timely and important. “We got so far as women but the burden is [still] huge, the fear of losing social gains, of not living up to being a woman, of having to lean in and sometimes having to lie down,” says Turato with regard to the

varying pressures shoved onto women today. In her performances, Turato uses a cacophony of voices and a mixture of source materials as a response to the demands placed on women to “have it all” and “to be everything at once” but “to never be ‘too much’.” It should come as little surprise, then, that this is set to be a huge year for Turato and her rowdy performances. She is following up last year’s appearances at Liste Art Fair Basel and MANIFESTA 12 in Palermo with concurrent solo shows at Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz (*Explained Away*) and at Beursschouwburg in Brussels (*Diffusion Line*) this spring.

Turato’s performances are wildly fluctuating. During them, her voice oscillates between high-pitched girly singsong (reminiscent of radio jingles), bizarre babbling, jittering stutters, shrill shrieks, deep rambling monologues, and sometimes even different languages. This acrobatic use of voice carries the performance through humour, seriousness and ferocity. Performing mostly in gallery spaces (although in the future she would like to take her performances to the theatre or cinema), she is unrelenting, glorious and magnetic – dressed in a sharp-shouldered Balenciaga suit – among a crowd of onlookers who at times appear as though they can’t quite believe what they are witnessing. Actually, Turato has noticed that people who don’t necessarily like her work, but look for something to say about it anyway, refer to it as ‘intense’. “I’ve really become allergic to this,” she remarks. Some of her favourite comments on the other hand are those which emphasise how her performances resemble the barrage of thoughts running through your head. Overall, her philosophy is: “If you’re going to take up 20 minutes of someone’s time, you better put on a show.”

Turato is as irreverent and direct as you might expect from an artist whose work pivots on the act of yelling and breaking down taboos. Of her Croatian childhood in the early Nineties, she responds with signature imprudence: “I think the biggest thing I got from Croatia was that I was so severely bored my whole childhood, so I found ways to entertain myself by doing music or this or that, so I generated ways out of boredom that generated what I’m doing now.” Turato left Croatia straight after high school and moved to Amsterdam, where she studied graphic design at Gerrit Rietveld Academie. She regards herself to be really “fucking lucky” that her parents allowed her to study abroad, maintaining that if they hadn’t, she doesn’t know what she would be doing now. As part of her Bachelor’s degree in graphic design, Turato made a video with a voiceover, which spawned her subsequent performance work. “People just really loved it, and continued asking me to do it. It kind of just went from there.”

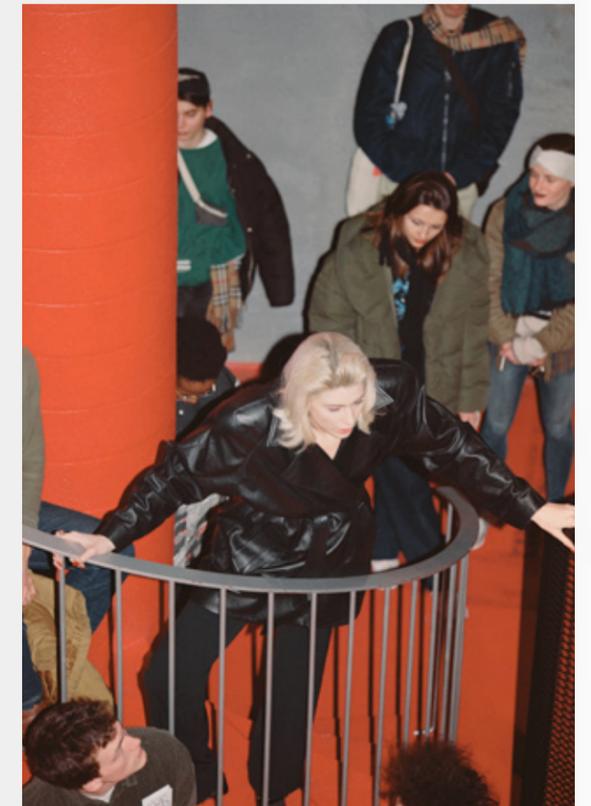
It makes sense that Turato dislikes having her work described as ‘intense’. She associates the adjective with a societal fear of women being ‘too much’. “How many times was I told I was intense?” ponders Turato. “There must be something to ‘too-muchness’ that society still needs to digest. I’ve been told I was ‘too much’ since I was two, probably. I remember my granddad told me no one would marry me because I was ‘too much’ at the dinner table and I told him I couldn’t care less.” In retaliation, Turato’s performances demonstrate what she calls an “almost nonsensical desire to be loud, too much, unstable, possibly insane in public and to make some-



BOTH PAGES  
Total look: Balenciaga Summer 19 collection



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OPPOSITE  
TOTAL LOOK: Balenciaga  
Summer 19 collection

Styling: Kamilla Richter  
Hair: Tom van den Berg  
Location: Beursschouwburg, Brussels

There were women in my family who were locked up for reasons like what I'm doing now — talking to people on the streets, talking to people. I'm the first woman who can do this and get away with it in a way

thing out of it." Overall, she aims "to perform a woman that is fragile, and prove that it can be a valid, productive and established way of existing."

This desire amounts to the essential power of Turato's work, her ability to explore and express the multiplicity of self — and a feminine self in particular — through the manipulation of voice and language. "I really feel like I can be many things, many characters, and sometimes I'm really more interested in this whole rollercoaster of not being able to pinpoint what I'm trying to be, or what I am," she reveals. In terms of conveying this sense of female multiplicity, Turato refers to pop cultural figures such as Courtney Love and Isabelle Huppert's character in Paul Verhoeven's psychological thriller *Elle* (2016), as inspirations. "In the Nineties, you had Courtney Love and all of these female characters, who for the first time were not always one thing. They could be hysterical, they could be sensitive, also cute, they could be nasty, they could be evil," says Turato. "What I loved about *Elle* is that [Huppert's] character is like everything, so many things and you can't pinpoint it as one thing. I'm interested in a female character that gives you so many things and doesn't have to be one thing for the sake of entertainment or understandability or something."

What might have started out initially as a 'hobby', as Turato describes her work, became a fully-fledged project in 2016. While the performances are distinguished by their jarring clash of words and voices, and high-octane freneticism, the level of craftsmanship that goes into composing each one cannot be dismissed. Turato works on approximately two performances a year, which she has so far found to be "the best way to keep things fresh and relevant" because, as she puts it, "language changes so fast." Due to the adroit way she knits vocal miscellanea together, altering her tone of voice with unsettling speed, you might be forgiven for thinking that some elements of Turato's performances are improvised, when in fact they are the result of arduous research, writing and rehearsal. "In a way it's kind of interesting because there's an insane amount of work behind the performances, and then when I do one, it looks so effortless," she muses. "It looks like I'm just talking when so much labour goes into it."

The texts themselves derive from a multitude of

sources, culled from Turato's extensive reading — "everything from Instagram comments to really good books to magazines." According to the artist, however, "a lot of the best stuff" comes from "just talking to random people [...] they say something and I just quickly write it down." In a way her performance work reflects her background in graphic design: "they are all connected in some form to language." Her heated verbal demonstrations are often accompanied by printed matter designed by Turato herself, in both an abstract and concrete exploration of language and words. As she shouts at one point during her performance, *Leaning is the new sitting* (2018), performed at Vleeshal Markt in Middelburg, the Netherlands, "I have only words to play with."

It is, however, the current of fury and contradictory emotions surging through Turato's performances — which, in their own disparate manner, discuss topics such as modern relationships, sex, gender, neoliberalism, millennials, communication and media — that makes them so urgent and affecting. In her performance, *I'm happy to own my implicit biases* (2018), she theatrically explains to the audience: "He asked me if I was angry. I said 'I'm not angry, I'm just sad.' I was proud to describe myself in terms of sadness rather than anger because that felt a lot more lady-like." She then works her way up to a crescendo of utterances: "Gently gendered, kinda sad. Gently gendered, *sooo* sensitive. I apologise for passing on a sadness." Meanwhile at her Vleeshal Markt show, she admits to herself: "Sorry I just ramble. I talk because silence sounds fucked up."

And that's the crux of it: silence might still be expected of women, so Turato speaks up, proving that a woman talking publicly is still an act of insurgency. She says it best when she quips: "As soon as you do something like that — this freaking out, this public moment where people are going to listen to this person performing — obviously you're looking to prove something, to overthrow something, to dismantle all of these stereotypes." Bombarded with expectations to be a respectable amount of everything, Turato responds by being unashamedly 'too much' — "the world screams at me and I scream back."