

AUSGANGS OFFEN

EXIT : OPEN



A FILM ABOUT DEATH, DYING AND TRANSIENCE.

A COPRODUCTION BY DARUM & WUK PERFORMING ARTS. WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY DARUM. STARRING: RUTH BILLER, FRANZ HAMMERBACHER, JASMIN KREUZER, GEORG PARLOW, ROBERT N., CAROLINE S., EMMA WIEDERHOLD, BRIGITTE ZOLLES, DR. SOPHIE ZWÖLFER AND FEATURING LAURA ANDRESS & VICTORIA HALPER. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: ALI ANDRESS. EDITING: VICTORIA HALPER. MUSIC & SOUND DESIGN: KAI KRÖSCHE. SET DESIGN: JOHANNES WECKL & SOPHIA LINHART.

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A film about
death, dying and transience

A co-production by DARUM and WUK performing arts

DARUM .

DARSTELLENDE KUNST UND MUSIK

performing | WUK
arts

EXIT: OPEN

EXIT: OPEN leads its audience through an abandoned office complex in Vienna, Austria. Room by room the audience encounters various “faces of death”: the doctor, the son, the big sister, the terminally ill woman, the dying. A danse macabre with individual perspectives on dying, death and transience featuring true stories told by various people personally affected by death.

Hope

Circulation

Ritual

Control

Loss

Guidance

Order

Return

Path

Blackout

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DIRECTED BY DARUM (ANDRESS | KRÖSCHE | HALPER)

DOCUMENTARY | AUSTRIA | 2020 | 99 MIN.

COLOR | 1:2.39 | DIGITAL (DCP) | 4K | 50 FPS | STEREO 2.0

LANGUAGE German

OPTIONAL SUBTITLES English, German for the hearing impaired

For no other concept in the world are there as many euphemisms as for the concept of “death”: instinctively, people avoid death, they try to make it invisible and push the dead to the edges of perception. The dead (and its precursor: the dying) remind us of the transience of things and, inevitably, our own demise. What comes after expiration eludes our knowledge and pushes us back into the realm of good faith and speculation. However, ignorance creates fear. How should we face the inevitable reality of death?

EXIT: OPEN is the follow up production by the young Viennese film and performance collective DARUM succeeding UNGEBETENE GÄSTE / UNINVITED GUESTS (a performative installation about lonely funerals), which was nominated for the Austrian Theater Award, the NESTROY Special Prize 2019 and invited to the prestigious Impulse Festival 2020 in Cologne, Germany. EXIT: OPEN was set to premiere at the beginning of April 2020 as a one-to-one performative live installation through a series of abandoned office rooms in the south of Vienna, Austria. Due to the Corona crisis and the associated event restrictions, it quickly became clear that the project would not be able to take place in its original form. DARUM and its three artistic directors Laura Andreß, Victoria Halper, Kai Krösche, being experienced in film, adapted EXIT: OPEN to an unusual documentary film that allows its viewers to experience the installation in first person through the camera’s eye while confronting various manifestations of death, dying, and transience in naked intimacy.

Based on extensive research and interviews with people who have had near-death experiences, the terminally ill, the dying, their relatives and those professionally involved with the dying and the dead, an experimental hybrid between documentary film and one-to-one performance has been created: EXIT: OPEN reveals repressed feelings, uncovers hidden thoughts and offers the possibility to understand the incomprehensible by sitting face to face with people personally affected by death in an unusual way, staring into their eyes, while keeping a safe distance from the other side of the camera lens.

Questions for DARUM

EXIT: OPEN



DARUM: Victoria Halper, Kai Krösche, Laura Andreß

EXIT: OPEN, a documentary project about death, was originally conceived as a very intimate live experience, as a one-to-one performance for one viewer at a time. Why did you decide on the medium of film for your adaptation?

EXIT: OPEN was planned as a walk-through installation with elements of performance as well as sound and media art. Each audience member would have received their individual starting time and would have then moved from one room to the next at a clearly defined time. In the rooms, the audience would have sat directly opposite an installation or our performers, looking directly into their faces, while listening to their individual experiences with death – a very intimate setting, almost like a confessional. Each audience member would have made their way from one room to the other while the next audience member entered the space that had just been left. Each viewer would have made the same journey through the venue experiencing the same immediate perspective. All of these conceptual factors proved adaptable to the medium of film: the camera's eye is like the audience's gaze, close-ups enable immediacy, and changes of location are a standard practice in film. By turning the performance into a film, shot in the first person perspective, we aimed to ensure that the intimate confrontations were as close to the real performance as film could allow. The switch between closeness and distance, movement and stillness, hardly seemed possible in any other medium.

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EXIT: OPEN takes its audience to a very unusual place when it comes to talking about death – an empty office complex in the south of Vienna. Why did you decide on this location for the performance and then for the film?

We were searching for a place that reflects the central aspect of the project's themes: ephemerality. The office complex and ground, where the entire film takes place, has long passed its heyday and has been vacant for several years. What remains are a few artifacts of its former everyday working life: broken blinds, coffee stains in the kitchen, desk imprints on the carpets, and random nails in the wall. Not only were these remnants of the past inspiring, but also the layout of the interconnected office rooms was exactly what the project needed. The film moves flawlessly from one room to the other with the feeling of a one-take, showing the experience of the live performance exactly as it was conceived for this space. Room after room, we meet different protagonists and hear their true stories. It was important to us that the audience member opens the door and enters each new room, each new intimate space of a new performer, as though you were visiting someone at home.

EXIT: OPEN is similar to an episodic film, divided into different chapters: each room deals with its own superordinate theme. How did this come about?

We wanted EXIT: OPEN to deal with a broad diversity of facets – or what we call faces. In order to approach the theme of death in a complex manner and at the same time reduce its abstraction, which often triggers anxiety, dismay or sometimes paralysis in us, we wanted to make it something negotiable and concrete. For us, the "faces of death" are on one hand to be understood as a metaphor (in the form of the stories of real people who tell of their immediate experiences with death and thus give it a face), but on the other hand, also very concretely, in the sense of physical manifestations of death, dying, and decay, which the audience meets in the installative spaces. The personal stories of each face strive to give the audience insight into the incomprehensible. Each story stands on its own and for itself.

As part of your research, you came into contact with people who have had to deal with death firsthand. How did you go about your research? What are some of the different experiences that you encountered?

Initially we discussed the various ways people come into contact with death and started searching for those people and sometimes people and their stories found us. Along with the primary research of interviews we started the project with an extensive secondary research which included reading books, articles, and journals about the topics of death and dying as well as delving into the plethora of artistic work dealing with death: films, literature, paintings, and sculpture. The internet gave us access to quick bite-sized stories by way of YouTube videos like those of Caitlin Doughtys "Ask a Mortician" or The Guardian's "Death Land" series. Nevertheless, it was the face-to-face contact that was the most important aspect of our research, not only because that is how we found our performers but because we wanted the stories in EXIT: OPEN to be authentic. We contacted many different people and asked to hear about their individual experiences. Since it's a very sensitive issue for many people to talk about death, especially their own experience with death, it took some time to build trust with our interviewees, resulting in many detours. We visited old age homes, hospices, and palliative care units, we spoke to people who are professionally involved with the topic of death

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and dying (doctors and undertakers, therapists and social workers, grief counsellors, palliative care assistants, scientists and authors) as well as the terminally ill, survivors and people who have had near-death experiences. All of their stories are influenced on the concept and stories told in EXIT: OPEN.

Death and dying are often seen as taboo topics – its not really what people want to talk about. How has the current worldwide situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and its omnipresence of death had an influence on the project?

In our experience, to say that death is a taboo is a correct and an incorrect statement at the same time. It is correct since many people are reluctant to talk about their own future death or immediate mourning experiences; it is incorrect in that death, as an abstraction, is a constant topic in the news, in everyday small talk, in the entertainment industry, or even in everyone's personal decision making processes. Therefore EXIT: OPEN focuses on the very personal aspects of death, the ones that aren't always shared out loud. Our performers are people who, in one way or other, are close to or are getting closer to death than most of us in our everyday lives. They speak to the audience, reciting monologues that have been written based on conversations and interviews we had with them as well as other people in similar situations who we have come into contact with during our research. These collected thoughts, citations, anecdotes, and facts have been dramaturgically sorted and turned into literary monologues for the performance. We wanted a behind-closed-doors film that gives the audience insight into the very thing which is not always discussed.

That was our thought process leading up to the performance. Then the Covid-19 crisis, with its thousands of dead, appeared and the very topic of death received more attention than it ever had in recent history. Suddenly it is no longer just „the others“ who are affected by a deadly natural disaster and lack of access to basic health-care. Death abruptly came into our immediate surroundings. Everyone knows one or more people who belong to the high risk group and therefore everyone shares the same worry and quite a few belong to the risk group themselves. That being said, this communal focus solely on the consequences of the pandemic (which is, of course, completely understandable) is a limited perspective; people die all the time after all, not just because of Covid-19. Our fear of this still largely unexplored virus leaves us, despite its constant presence in the media, largely alone with all the piercing questions that the topics of death and dying trigger in us. This is why we believe that a project like EXIT: OPEN, even without the context of our current day and age, can offer some answers (be it comforting, new or even disturbing) and raise awareness about this timeless topic which concerns all of us.

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Hope

In the fight against death and its most powerful weapon, disease, medical science and medicine seem to be our greatest hope. The “angels in white”, a title that the German language imparts on medical staff, are perceived as a life-saving force, capable of accomplishing superhuman things by saving lives. It is medicine that can heal the sick and often even bring the dead back to life. But just as often as not medical science is completely powerless from the onset. This double-edged sword between omnipotence and powerlessness is the theme of the room named HOPE. A young doctor shares her perspective on and experiences with death and dying as well as the never-ending cycle of success and failure in everyday medical life.

Told by the practicing physician Dr. Sophie Zwölfer (37).

*„As a physician, one has a very special relationship to death.
Without it we are practically unnecessary and yet,
it remains our worst enemy.”*

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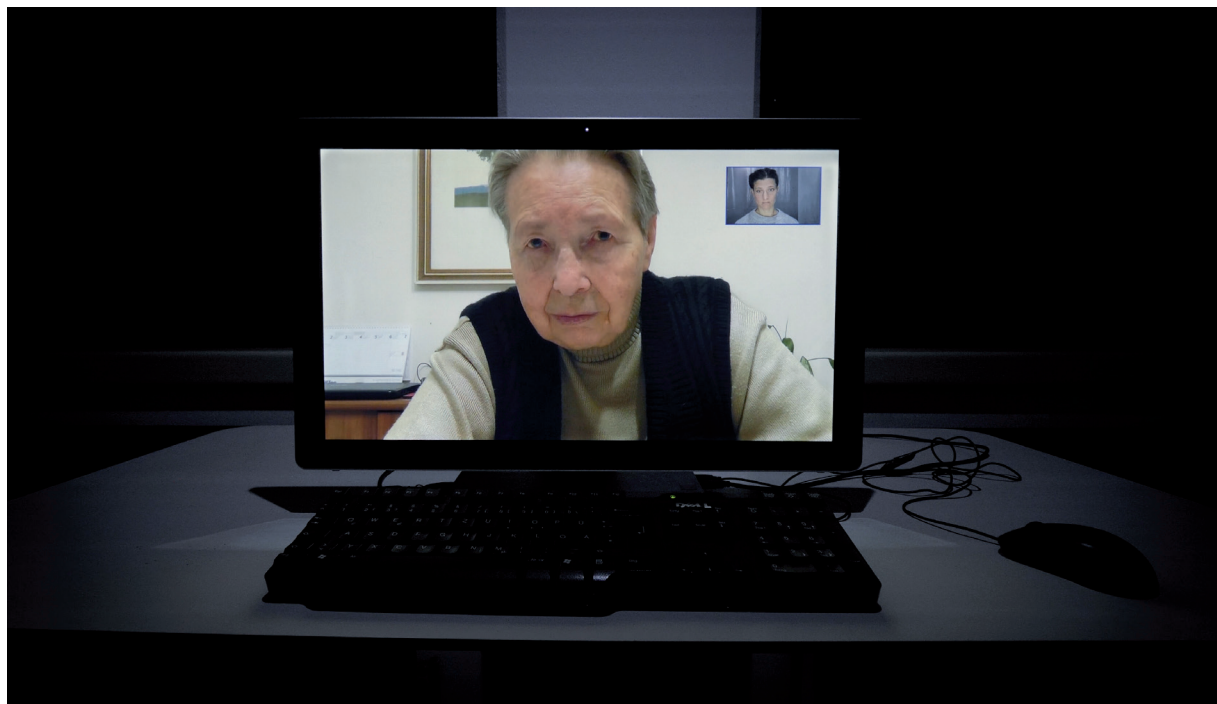
Ritual

Research has found that the ritual of burying the dead is as old as the human recognition of death itself. The profession of the undertaker (aka funeral director), who takes care of funeral arrangements and all other final details on behalf of the bereaved, has existed since ancient times. The retrieval and washing of the body, clothing and make-up, the coffin, final internment with items of importance, etc. – at a modern funeral home everyone gets the complete package. The room RITUAL puts us face-to-face with a representative of a profession that even today is viewed with a touch of scepticism: a funeral director tells us about the daily handling of corpses, shares old clichés about working with the dead, and gives us insight in how to deal with people who get emotional in a state of emergency.

Told by the undertaker and death companion Jasmin Kreuzer (50).

*"They can't see anymore, the dead.
There is nothing behind their eyes. Emptiness."*

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Control

For many people, death is perceived as the ultimate loss of control because we are deprived of any choice on how or when we will die or any other matter concerning our own death. Most of us do not know what will happen after we die: from major conflicts such as inheritance disputes, to details like the proper burial, most things are beyond our control after our death. CONTROL offers us the possibility of governance after death as told by an elderly woman who has already arranged everything for her death during her lifetime: from inheritance, to her choice of coffin for her cremation and the flower arrangements for her own funeral. A decisive as well as pragmatic message directly from a nursing home, sent, of all things, via an unstable Internet livestream.

Told by the pensioner Caroline S. (84).

*"I'm not going to have an expensive
oak tree destroyed for my funeral.
I don't care which ashes end up in my urn."*

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Guidance

Taking the time to accompany a dying relative in their final days has become increasingly rare in our time. Often this task falls to professional death doulas or dying companions as well as nursing staff and doctors. They assist the dying with empathy, but nevertheless their professional attitude is more distanced than the personal closeness of a family member. GUIDANCE makes us aware that the personal accompaniment of a loved one during their final phase of life is an intense and demanding process that can also put the accompanying family member in an unexpected emotional state. A son tells us about his very personal experience of accompanying his mother during her dying process – and its serious consequences on his own wellbeing.

Told by the author Georg Parlow (64).

„You will fall apart. Parts of you – the parts, that you think you are – you will lose them as you go“

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Order

Death is surrounded by many unknowns, but one of our deepest subconscious beliefs counters our fear of death. We intrinsically hope that death will follow a certain order: from the oldest to the youngest. Before we ourselves die, our parents will die, and before them our grandparents. If this supposed „order“ is interrupted, chaos seems to reign, shaking us all the more deeply. It is no surprise then, that the death of a child, especially in the womb, is considered one of the greatest taboos within the already taboo-laden topic of death. ORDER shares the harrowing ordeal of the death of an unborn child during an advanced pregnancy experienced through the eyes of a child itself – in this instance, an older sister.

Told by the student Emma Wiederhold (11).

*„It was very clear to me that I wanted to see him again.
I wanted to see my brother.“*

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Return

The answer to the question of what comes after our death eludes our factual knowledge and can usually only be answered by faith and hypothesis. We are fascinated by the reports of those who have reawakened after death, whose heart had stopped for a few minutes and who can tell us about their “near-death experiences” so that we can get an idea of what is to come. Most of these reports are positive, hopeful retellings of a white light, a sense of security and of warmth. These images and feelings are contrary to those the revived protagonist in the room RETURN experienced after a serious car accident. His encounter paints a different, darker picture. A fascinating as well as disturbing view into the multi-coloured darkness that left him as a victim, with a feeling of powerlessness and the utter loss of control.

Told by the author and publisher Franz Hammerbacher (53).

„The thing I remember most is that silence in the minutes after. Complete, total, endless silence. Eternal.“

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Path

When the news of a serious, incurable disease is affirmed, everything changes in the affected person's life. Suddenly the diffuse, abstract knowledge of one's own finiteness is replaced by a statistically halfway reliably calculable survival rate, which imposes an invisible but mathematically deducible expiration date on one's own existence. This message of pending death does not necessarily have to lead one down a path of despair and resignation as we learn in the monologue during the PATH. A pensioner who suffers from the severe lung disease COPD has learned to enjoy life after a few serious, almost fatal, setbacks, which, despite all her new limitations bring upon new opportunities. PATH is a short declaration of the love of life.

Told by the pensioner Brigitte Zolles (66).

„I confess, I wanted to die. But after some time I could move a finger again and then a toe. And I thought to myself: If I can do that, I can do everything else.“

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The Team

DARUM. Darstellende Kunst und Musik

Founded in 2018, the art collective DARUM produces interdisciplinary art that combines film, theatre, music, literature, room and visual art with performance. In search of new and immediately experienceable aesthetic forms of expression, DARUM develops its immersive projects by way of extensive hands-on research, resulting in works that often blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary taking place in unconventional and thematically engaging spaces.

DARUM's projects are all based on the question of "why?". But questions are often the better answers: therefore, DARUM strives to "fail better" in its artistic pursuit to answer their self-imposed questions despite the meaning of the collective's name: DARUM ("because" in German).

DARUM is a creative hub for artists from diverse artistic backgrounds and is headed by Laura Andreß, Victoria Halper und Kai Krösche.

The debut performance project UNGEBETENE GÄSTE / UNINVITED GUESTS received much critical acclaim and was nominated for the prestigious Austrian Theatre Award, the NESTROY in 2019. It was also invited to be reimaged at the 2020 Impulse Festival in Cologne, Germany. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the festival has been cancelled and may be moved to a later date.

AUSGANG: OFFEN / EXIT: OPEN is the group's second production.

Further information and media:

www.darum.at | www.facebook.com/darumkollektiv

Direction, screenplay and film production: DARUM

Laura Andreß studied theatre, film, and media studies in Vienna. After internships and assistantships at various theatres, performance houses, and festivals (including the Burgtheater Wien, Wiener Festwochen, Schauspielhaus Wien, PACT Zollverein, ImPulsTanz) and in the independent Viennese theatre scene, she studied Dramaturgy as part of the Masters Programme at the HfS „Ernst Busch“ Berlin. Her senior project premiered in 2018 at the Berlin Performing Arts Festival. She works as a freelance dramaturg and production manager (for Florentina Holzinger, among others). She collaboratively develops performative and documentary concepts for television, film and theater. Her interest in very real and personal stories results in many conversations with a variety of people that then influence and contribute to her work.

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Victoria Halper is a trained actor, director, certified cultural manager, and video artist. Born in Toronto, Canada to Austrian immigrants, she was raised bilingually, speaking English and German. She studied acting and directing at the University of Toronto completing her degree with distinction in 2010. Following her family's roots, she emigrated to Austria in 2010, where she has worked as an assistant director at various theatres (Volkstheater Wien, Schauspielhaus Graz, Landestheater Niederösterreich, among others). She has been active in the independent theatre scene in Vienna, Graz, and Upper Austria. During her stay in Linz ('13-'16) she headed the bilingual theatre group "Theatermenschen" as a producer, director, and actor (Austrian Premieres of Hannah Moscovitch's „East Berlin" and Charlotte Josefina's „Bitch Boxer", among others). She received the Cultural Medal from the city of Traun, Upper Austria and Upper Austria in Film Spezial Prize for her debut feature film „Kommissar Taler", which she produced, directed, and edited. Since her move to Vienna in 2016, she has been experimenting in various forms of performing arts including contemporary circus, essay performances, immersive theatre, performative installations, video art as well as playful forms of ludification theatre in public spaces. In 2018 she received the Newcomer Scholarship for Performing Arts from the Austrian Federal Chancellery.

www.victoriahalper.com

Kai Krösche is a director, video artist, writer, and musician. After his first working experience at the theatre in the context of a directing internship at the Volksbühne Berlin with Christoph Schlingensiefel's „Kunst und Gemüse, A. Hipler" (2004), he studied theatre, film and media studies as well as philosophy at the University of Vienna. Since 2005 he has been working on the conception and execution of his own theatre and performance projects as well as working within various fields as music composition, sound design, video, dramaturgy, and performance at Schauspiel Köln, Landestheater Niederösterreich, WUK (Vienna), Volkstheater Vienna, WERK X, WERK X-Petersplatz (Vienna) and HochX (Munich), among others. Since 2002, he has completed numerous short and experimental film projects as a screenwriter and director, some of which have been screened at festivals. His upcoming short film "Gegenschein" (written by James Stanson) is currently in post production.

www.kai-kroesche.net

Set Design

Johannes Weckl studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich as well as stage and film design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna under Prof. Bernhard Kleber, where he graduated in 2012. Since 2007 he has been designing stages, sets, and costumes for theatres (including the Schauspielhaus Wien, Volksoper Wien, Landestheater Niederösterreich, Landestheater Linz, among others) as well as for independent theatre productions directed by Haiko Pfost, Yosi Wanunu, Volker Schmidt, Michikazu Matsune, Ibrahim Quraishi, Zhang Xian, Steffen Höld, Barbara Weber, Michael Schlecht, Milena Michalek and Anna Zirner, and others. He also worked as a set designer for the LIFE BALL in 2019 and designs venues or lobbies (Impulse Theater Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Werk X, brut, WUK performing arts) and set designs for directors and film artists such as Björn Kämmerer, Bernadette Weigel, and Stefanie Winter.

www.johannesweckl.com

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Camera and lighting

Ali Andress is a documentary filmmaker, cameraman, and musician. Since 2017 he has been researching, filming, editing, scoring and producing his own series called „Andress' Oberösterreich“, broadcasting weekly on Upper Austria's largest private channel LT1. He travels throughout Upper Austria in search of unusual topics and tales of destiny which form the focal point of each episode. Initially, a camera assistant at the ORF (Austrian National Television), he then trained as a press and advertising photographer. His freelance work as a cameraman included commercials for the Haus der EU, Kimaera Porsche, Strabag, among other companies. As a musician he often composes for his own projects as well as for various bands and his own solo projects or performs at events for big companies like BMW or Bosch. His filmic passion is to capture humanity at its best and he really likes to get in his protagonist's face.

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Credits

Written, directed and produced by DARUM (Laura Andreß | Victoria Halper | Kai Krösche)
Starring Ruth Biller, Franz Hammerbacher, Jasmin Kreuzer, Robert N., Georg Parlow, Caroline S., Emma Wiederhold, Brigitte Zolles, Dr. Sophie Zwölfer as well as Laura Andreß and Victoria Halper
Camera and lighting Ali Andress
Set design Johannes Weckl (head), Sophia Linhart
Film editing, in-film videos and colour correction Victoria Halper
Music and Sound Design Kai Krösche
Interviews Laura Andreß
Texts Kai Krösche
Production Managers ProSiBe (Siglind Güttler, Bernhard Werschnak)
Lighting Kai Krösche, Johannes Weckl
Press Patrizia Büchele
Assistance to the Directors (Performance) Verena Rumplmair
English subtitles James Watson
Marketing cooperation Victoria Horvat, Armin Kirchner, Bernd Seiser
Volunteers (Performance) Lara Cortellini, Isabel Dettinger
Photo "Worms" Roman Mintert

Filmed in April 2020 on site at the "Kempelenpark" in Vienna, Austria.

No animals were harmed during the making of this film.

Filming was carried out under strict accordance with the legal requirements and restrictions for coping with the corona crisis and the guidelines of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber for the film and music industry.

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