

#### IN PURPLE

A film by Johanna Billing with Mix Dancers 12:00 min/loop, HD, 2019

For almost three years, the artist Johanna Billing collaborated with the dance group Mix Dancers from Råslätt, Jönköping. In the meeting between the dancers and her artistic practice, the film *In Purple* emerged during a long process of discovery, where an activity that usually takes place in a basement with purple painted walls has taken the shape of a parade.

The dance group Mix Dancers perform hip hop, afro, and dance hall styles. It was started by a group of young girls who got tired of everything being about football. For over a decade the dance group has evolved into an important activity in the area through the dance school Mix Dancers Academy. The dance group's history and great importance for the place and in many young women's life are central to the artwork.

The area Råslätt is built around a centre with schools, sport fields, a church and other public services. It was part of the "Million Programme" (a public housing program carried out in Sweden in the 1960s and 70s). Like many other housing estates from that era, most of the outdoor sporting arenas are for activities mainly practiced by men. Dance is a mix of sport, spare time activity and cultural expression aimed at an audience that was not taken into consideration when the sports facilities were built in the 1960s and 70s. *In Purple* illustrates the lack of public space for women and girls as well as how the knowledge and work within the group is carried forward into the future, from the older participants to the younger.

The film depicts a physically demanding, choreographed parade where the group slowly moves along the estate's pedestrian paths and green areas, accompanied by the sounds of lawn mowers, birds and utility vehicles. Together they carry large, heavy, purple window panes, they pause between the buildings to change their grip. The panes reflect the pink, green and purple of the surrounding façades, created by the artists Jon Pärson and Lennart Joanson who in the 1980s painted 80,000 square meters of the façade to soften the brutalist architecture. The camera lens places it all on the same level: gestures, surroundings, sound, movements, and architectural motifs are interwoven into a unified experience. The movement is focused and methodical, but also vulnerable. One small misstep and the glass

*In Purple*Production photo:
Jenny Lindberg

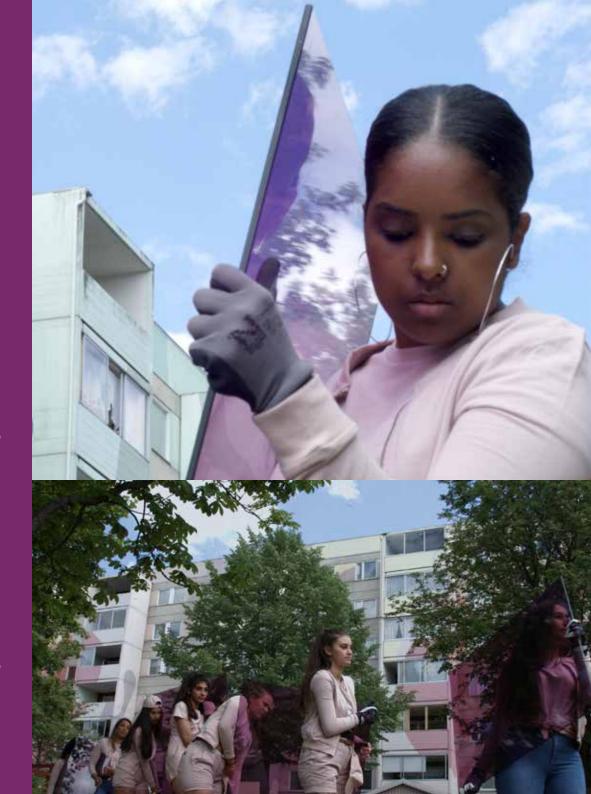
Cover: In Purple Production photo: Jenny Lindberg panes could break. The simultaneously heavy and fragile panes become a filter that colour the surroundings, and literally illustrate how Mix Dancers have affected their environment. They also show how strong, but at the same time exposed a self-organised group can be.

In a symbolic act the older members of the group hand over the panes to the younger ones they have trained to take over the activities, and who onerously carry them on. This generational shift, both the figurative one in the artwork and the one in the real world, emphasise the working conditions and sometimes high expectations on young shoulders that the volunteers behind a group such a Mix Dancers face. *In Purple* is a tribute to the enthusiast who carry things forward, an establishment of their necessity and a call for the surrounding society to give them reasonable conditions to succeed. With her background in dance and music, Johanna Billing also has a personal entry point to the project. She grew up in Jönköping herself and has her own experiences of trying to organise alternative cultural platforms outside of the established frameworks.

The music in the choreography has been created in collaboration with Neva Deelay. The piece was commissioned by the Public Art Agency Sweden within the governmental assignment Konst händer (Art happens). Collaborative partners: Mix Dancers and Jönköping municipality/Stadsgården.

*In Purple* Still from video

*In Purple*Still from video



### GLASS, DANCE AND PLACE

By Tor Lindstrand

As I've worked on this text, I've often thought about how Johanna Billing keeps coming back to children, adolescents, and places in her work. The places that children and young people are given in society, and the places that they claim for themselves. During our conversations, and on the occasions when I've accompanied Johanna to work with Mix Dancers in Råslätt, Jönköping, these have been constantly recurring themes. This text is composed as a series of fragments, which include historic snapshots of the discussions concerning the Million Programme, more specifically as it relates to the children's perspective adopted during the planning stage, descriptions of the architecture in Råslätt, and my own memories of following their work on the film. My ambition has been to reflect some of the multi-dimensional, contradictory complexity that I see, both in the film In Purple and in the everyday experience of life in the Million Programme, but which I feel is often overlooked by the over-simplified view of these neighbourhoods that dominates our political debate and our media.

Råslätt is a large residential area that sits by the side of the E4 motorway, some distance south of the Jönköping city centre. This is a typical Million Programme area, with a large central square with sports fields, community centres, a church, and commercial and public services, all surrounded by six-to-eight-floor residential blocks, schools, and nurseries. Traffic is segregated throughout the area. Practically all Råslätt was designed by the architect Lars Stalin, who earned his degree at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm and spent some time working for Sven Markelius's architect firm before moving to Jönköping, where he started his own business after a brief spell at the countu planning office. The buildings are all constructed from concrete units, in accordance with a single set of principles: distinctive vertical elements executed in exposed aggregate are alternated with smooth elements and windows. The balconies are made of concrete, too, and serve as sculptural vertical elements along the entire height of the buildings. This is an approach to construction typical of the time, which has since faced a lot of criticism for its excessive scale and insufficient variation. However one might feel about this, the buildings in Råslätt are ambitiously designed and expertly executed. Most of the buildings have a north-south alignment, which produces the characteristic, long, boulevard-like green walkways, lined with tall trees, that run through the whole area. Anyone who passes by Råslätt will immediately recognise the neighbourhood because of the extensive repainting project carried out by artists Jon Pärson and Lennart Joanson in the late 1980s. In this monumental effort, 80,000 square

metres of building façade were painted with abstract patterns in colours typical of the time. The scale of the project, and the sensitivity it expressed for the innate qualities of the existing architecture, has turned Råslätt into Sweden's not merely largest but perhaps also best example of the potential of artistically driven expression. In the news, Råslätt, like many other Million Programme residential areas, receives overwhelmingly negative coverage. Internet search results are dominated by stories about social problems, crime, and unrest. The mass media ignore all local differences, and regard all Million Programme districts as one and the same. Rather than being their own, individual local communities, they are represented as a continuous, connected whole. This is by no means a recent development. As anybody who has studied the Million Programme knows, stories like these have been in circulation for more than half a century. This history is dominated by outside accounts of how these areas, as an effect of their very planning and architecture, have had an impact on the people who live in them.

Before the bulldozers had even arrived to level the fields and reinforce the mud, the buildings already towered seven floors high on the engineer generals' maps. That was when they summoned the architects. Would they mind being good sports and seeing to the finishing touches? If the architects felt humiliated, and if what they really wanted to do was to weep cradled in their mothers' arms before setting fire to the whole project, they did a good job of hiding it...

Imagine if just one of all the politicians and engineers who were paid salaries and pensions to programme the computer had just asked themselves what forces they were really serving, and realised that they could build a community rather than a suburb. Imagine if somebody had said: 'Build for the people!'

Taken from M. Schwartz and S. Sjöqvist, *Kvinnoliv Förortsliv* [Women's life, suburban life] (Stockholm: Gidlunds förlag, 1978).

The first time I visit Råslätt, I arrive there in the company of artist Johanna Billing. We've encountered one another in various contexts over the years, I think the first time was in the 1990s, when Johanna wrote about music for Merge magazine, which I was the editor of. Johanna also has a background in dance; I remember seeing her video piece *Graduate Show* at her degree show at Konstfack. In this work, Johanna gave other students dance lessons,

and then proceeded to document their resulting performance in a video. As I recall, it was a reaction to a culture at Konstfack which placed a strong emphasis on individual achievement, an expression of the power of instead doing something as a group. It was about an artwork that revolved around courage, about daring to present something before you have fully mastered it. In hindsight, now that much of the work is done, and I'm writing this text, the connection to this early work about courage seems very obvious to me.

However, when I'm sitting in the car, driving down the E4, I'm thinking nothing of the sort. We're still in the early stages of the process, and Johanna tells me about the work during our drive. For her, it follows familiar patterns; throughout her artistic career, she has repeatedly allowed participation-directed events to influence and impact her work. It's a matter of orchestrating encounters where the final outcome is a negotiation between different interests, often captured on film. Perhaps they are best understood as a kind of carefully staged documentaries, which would allow the works to be interpreted from several, parallel perspectives: multidimensional, complex, and kaleidoscopic. Although the process is often based on various manners of collaboration and participation, the result is always an autonomous artwork that has a clear originator in Johanna Billing.

Outside the shopping centre, we meet up with Sibel and Samantha Akdogan, sisters who live with their familu in Råslätt. Todau, theu are in their mid-20s. but the elder sister Sibel was only 12 years old when she founded Mix Dancers. The dance group she was a member of had been closed down. Sibel wanted to start her own group, and the Swedish workers' uouth association Unga Örnar (Young Eagles) helped her find a studio. At first, it was she who gave street dance classes to her little sister Samantha and her friends. Then, Mix Dancers attracted increasing numbers of members, and over the years. it has come to mean a great deal to hundreds of young girls in Råslätt and the neighbouring residential areas. Together, they've built a community where the activities are directed by the members themselves. It's all about self-determination, responsibility, organisation, and creativity. We head down to their dance studio in the basement of the Stadsgården youth centre in Råslätt, which they are sharing with a local religious association on this particular day. A length of fabric divides the room. The premises have that distinctive community youth centre aesthetic that can be found all over the country. Temporary solutions and renovations have been carried out with humble means over the years. Sibel and Samantha tell us how they got the landlord, Vätterhem, to pay for paint in exchange for Mix Dancers promising to do the work. Now, the room is purple, with a Mix Dancers logo on one wall.

Over the years, the group has received financial support from Unga Örnar and the ABF educational association, but what has ultimately made Mix Dancers one of the dominant cultural presences in Råslätt are the thousands of hours

invested by Sibel, Samantha, and all the other volunteers. It's remarkable to see how much experience they've amassed; they speak assuredly of their work, of the importance of getting organised, of financial challenges, and most of all, of the joy they experience when they see their younger members grow and forge their own identities. Before we head back home, Johanna measures the window panes at the youth centre – she has an idea for how she might include them in the film. We discuss how to get hold of tinted glass, and since the architects' office I work for has recently used tinted glass for a school project, I'm able to offer her some recommendations regarding different kinds of glass and manufacturers. In the car, we talk about the ongoing work to find music for the film, the expectations that Mix Dancers might have about the choice of music, and how these aspects will impact what kind of film will be made. To me, this conversation reveals that reflections on core issues such as who is really a participant, creator, or commissioner make up a significant aspect of working on this film; based on my conversations with Johanna, I'm beginning to envisage a negotiation between different participants, who have all had to renegotiate their positions. Much later, this comes back to me as I'm rewriting sections of this text – the way any public space can be understood as an ongoing negotiation between what already is, what is being suggested, and the various interests affected by the change that is occurring.

"We've left the stage of poverty, when our main ambition was to increase production and thus our own financial security. Our resources have made other choices available to us. We could build a new society, where our security and our options for our living, working, and leisure environments would be greater than in our current, concentrated cities. A society which, thanks to its space and flexibility, would be in harmony with the characteristic dynamics of our culture. How our society is formed is up to each and every one of us. We all have to participate. We all have to realise that this is not merely our right, but our duty. We have to gain a better awareness of the problems of social planning and try to form an idea of the society that we would like to live and work in through free and open debate."

Taken from *Idé* 65 [Idea 65], the exhibition catalogue for *Den planerade regionen* [The planned region], Örebro, 1965.

When new neighbourhoods and residential areas were being planned in the post-war years, the interests of children and adolescents were treated as a priority. In 1962, the government commissioned a study into youth issues. In the report Lokaler för ungdomsverksamhet [Facilities for youth activities] (SOU 1965:63), society's responsibility for fulfilling the needs for suitable facilities for various youth activities is emphasised. The varying needs of different youth activities are discussed, and financial and administrative measures are proposed. In a later government report titled Barns utemiljö

[Children's outdoor environments] (SOU 1970:1), the question of the demand for facilities for leisure and youth activities was raised once more. The great disparities in access to facilities in different municipalities was discussed. Further, it was reported how youth activities had ended up being the shared responsibility of several local administrations, and how this state of affairs also differed greatly between municipalities. So, while city planners and architects were intentionally basing their planning on the needs of children and adolescents, there were also great challenges to address involving organisation, ongoing operation, maintenance, and administration. While criticism against the physical environment itself has grown, beginning with the 'Skärholmen debate' of 1968 and continuing until today, the lack of children's and youth's activities has been a problem from the very beginning. Initially, this was because the facilities had not yet been constructed, and later, it was because of a lack of funds for operating, maintaining, and developing activities. In many of the contemporary descriptions in popular culture, media reports, and research, we're told of the effect that these new urban districts had on the residents. Women, children, and adolescents are said to be suffering the most.

'Do you want to live like your parents?'
'No, I could never face that.'
'Why do you say that?'
'No, all they do is work, work, work, go home, watch the telly, and then get up again. You always know exactly what you'll be doing next. They never go out; they just sit around. First, in the morning, they get up, and eat something. Then, they go to work, come home, nag me about something if I'm in, watch the telly, read the paper, maybe sit around crocheting for a bit. Go to bed, go to sleep. Get up. Work. All the time.'

Taken from *Stora grupper av människor* [Large groups of people], A-K. Jönsson, P. Björklund, M. Kihl, and G. du Rées, (SVT, 1974) [short film].

The story that emerges is based on the claim that the architecture of the late 1960s and 1970s possesses a remarkable power to impress itself upon the people who live in it. Just surviving the negative influence of this physical environment is made out to be a near-impossible task.

Large groups of people will be filled with violent, bitter rage here, in the suburbs, in the metropolitan outskirts Heavily gathering clumps of people clumps of rage
More and more people forced to live on the verge
of what they can manage
just to get by

And still, still It is our
life here, there is
nothing else, not now
Before the rage fuses us together, before
bitterness flowers into a
clear, blooming flame, a rose
A rose of pain, with petals

breathlessly opening in silence, dew There is life here, and there is no other life

than that which could be ours

Taken from *Stora grupper av människor* [Large groups of people], G. Sonnevi, published in Folket i Bild, issue 11972.

In early June 2018, I travel to Råslätt from Stockholm. At daybreak the next morning, shooting begins on the film that Johanna Billing has been working towards for the last couple of years. When I arrive on the set, work is in full swing: the camera team, several representatives from Public Art Agency Sweden [Statens Konstråd], photographers, and members of Mix Dancers are all there. Johanna doesn't have much time for chitchat – she's busu answering questions, discussing camera angles, and joining the dancers to experiment with various ways of relating to one another, to the cameras, and to the environment. The dancers are used to cameras: theu've been shooting dance videos for years now. They have chosen their own outfits for the shoot: soft track suit jackets, t-shirts, baseball caps and trainers, all in the same pale shade of pink. They help each other carry large, heavy panes of glass through Råslätt, along the wide pedestrian walkways. The panes of glass are laminated with a clear magenta film that makes them give off a pink and purple shimmer in the light. The glass reflects the surrounding buildings, the concrete units of the facades, and the pale pink and uellow abstract patterns painted on them, all jumbled up with greenery, faces, and bodies. Filmed by several cameras, from several directions, the dancers advance slowly through the area.

They stop, and the panes of glass are handed over from the older members to younger ones, who carry them back through the neighbourhood. After a few hours of work, it's time for a fika break. Rose, Sibel's and Samantha's mum, have laid a table outside their flat. I remember Rose well from my first visit to Råslätt. She's proud of her daughters' accomplishments, and she has

obviously been a huge support to them in their efforts. Rose herself has both initiated and volunteered for several projects aimed at the youth, women, and elderly of Råslätt. After the coffee break, the film shoot continues. The panes of glass continue their journey, now making their way to the outskirts of the area and through one of its underpasses. Once the scene has been shot, the nine dancers gather in front of the entrance to the underpass. A photographer who is there to document the work steps up, and the dancers coolly line up to have their picture taken.

"One thing that observation of the behaviour of children makes clear, though it has only recently entered the world of reports and textbooks, and has yet to affect environmental policies, is that children will play everywhere and with anything. The provision that is made for their needs operates on one plane, but children operate on another. They will play wherever they happen to be, for as Arvid Bengtsson says, 'play is a constant happening, a constant act of creation in the mind or in practice.' A city that is really concerned with the needs of its young will make the whole environment accessible to them, because, whether invited or not, they are going to use the whole environment."

Taken from C. Ward, *The Child in the City* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 86.

The criticism of the new neighbourhoods that were developed outside the major urban centres in the 1960s and 1970s is rife with images of children, photographed from below, with grand-scale, repetitive façades in the background. Later, this trope was complemented with pictures of gangs of youths, unemployed, and addicts. Kids who swear a lot and hate everything and everyone they encounter, basically. The message was clear: Out here, amongst the concrete, human beings are fated to grow hard, cold, and inhumane. In the suburbs, the only life on offer is one lived on the edge. The media did its part too to further reinforce this notion of the suburbs as a place where life was no longer possible. That's what the stories about the suburb were like back then, and in many ways, we're hearing the same stories today when people describe the suburbs as lawless 'no-go' zones, when elected politicians talk about deploying the military, and when we speak of parallel societies within our own. Once again, these descriptions are made from the outside. Once again, the line between the constructed and the human is erased, lumped together into new images, which highlight certain messages while keeping others hidden from view. To this day, our conceptions of the Million Programme remain clearly influenced by these contradictory phenomena: residential areas developed for the express purpose of raising housing standards throughout the nation, a goal that was achieved in statistical terms, but which became emblematic of everything that is wrong in society. To late modernist and structuralist thinkers, architecture was supposed to be an infrastructure, a backdrop to the democratic actions of the citizens. Architecture was meant to provide space for individual freedom, not to manifest such freedom through its own form. But the criticism raised in the 70s, rather, considered the architecture to be an expression of a system that sought to hold down the individual, a place where ennui coerced human beings to seek to escape from reality, to flee a mental ice age of sorts. Today, as we know, we hold very different city planning ideals. We build mixed-use urban environments for active entrepreneurs, and cities for the creative classes, who always find their way forward no matter the political landscape. In a society that is no longer defined in political but rather economic terms, the residential areas of the 1960s and 1970s might well seem incomprehensible. Perhaps the architecture of the Million Programme is regarded as a kind of realised manifesto against the principles of free market economy. Here, freedom isn't to be taken as synonymous with freedom of choice, and here, equality trumps individual differences.

"It is nice to speak of what it was like in the countryside in days gone by, when cows mooed, hens cackled, and horses neighed, and the people starved in their TB-infused shacks, as Gunnar Sträng likes to put it. However, we can't achieve solidarity with the poorer parts of the country if there aren't any inner-city dwellers getting up in the mornings to go to work and achieve the production results we rely on to have anything to distribute across the nation. And these portrayals of the people who live in suburbs or major urban centres as lost somehow, practically a lesser kind of human being... Doomed to live in an unreasonable environment... We say this to anybody who makes them: 'You are doing harm to our ethos of solidarity.' And if the environment is flawed, let us say: 'We will work together to improve the environment."

Speech by Olof Palme, taken from *Stora grupper av människor* [Large groups of people] (SVT, 1974).

Konst händer [Art is Happening] represents a considerable responsibility for the Public Art Agency Sweden. It's not just that there are so many projects to be executed in a relatively short time, in areas that politicians, civil servants, and invited artists often won't have any local knowledge of; rather, it is the many questions the project raises. How might we define public art? Where do we draw the line when it comes to political interference in and instrumentalisation of art? What promises can we actually make, and what role can art play in everyday life?

Many of these highly complex and difficult questions are also raised by Johanna's work. Her process latches on to a continuous narrative, and the work becomes yet another piece of an ongoing negotiation. From an external vantage point, one might criticise the work as being just another layer of stories told from the outside, but it would be more accurate to say that this story has been produced simultaneously from within and from without. In our

very first conversation about this work, Johanna speaks of the lack of support for the cultural activities of young women and girls. How she experienced this herself growing up in Jönköping, and how this history is reflected in her own work on the film. This is also something that Johanna and the members of Mix Dancers keep returning to: the struggle to improve conditions for young girls and women, the struggle to claim space. I've understood that this has been a priority for Johanna throughout the process: ceasing the negotiation and claiming and giving space. Rather than chasing down a result, she's waited for conversations to happen. If progress has been slow, she's allowed it to be slow. If a shoot has had to be postponed because of this, then so be it. Sibel and Samantha tell us that initially, they envisioned a music video, or maybe a film about them. Instead, it has become a film by them; along with the rest of Mix Dancers and Johanna, they have been involved in the decision-making for every aspect of the work. Now that *In Purple* is finished, I think of all its different aspects as very precisely phrased, but open questions. I see images of the transfer of culture from one human individual to another, of the joy of creating and sharing a moment with others, but also of the vulnerability of all this. The fragility of this work, the way we actually have to actively maintain and care for so much of what we take for granted just to keep it from simply disappearing. In short clips from the film, we glimpse the typical trappings of residential areas: sports fields and playgrounds for younger children, where other kinds of activities are marginalised or given no room at all.

A constant of the narrative that has been and remains attached to the Million Programme areas is that of young people: children, adolescents, or young adults. The stories of life in the suburbs all revolve around the everyday experiences of the young. These are also the same lives that we use as a projection screen for a large portion of our political discourse. And despite that, nothing is happening. The message from the youth in the suburbs has been the same ever since the Swedish punk band Ebba Grön stood on stage in their own suburb, Rågsved, singing in an attempt to save the oasis they themselves had built there: 'It's always been like that out here, no one's ever cared about us.' At the same time, it is the youth culture that distinguishes the Million Programme suburbs from the inner city or the middle-class suburbs with detached houses. It makes no difference if it's punk or hip-hop. In the suburbs, it's still only the kids' own passion that makes a difference. Even if nobody wants to see it, even if it's suppressed in the media, our collective consciousness remains haunted by the freedom that was once planned for it. A freedom that nobody wants to see. Only in the suburbs could the responsibility for claiming a space in society for young women rest on the shoulders of a 12-year-old.

This text was originally commissioned by the Public Art Agency Sweden and appears on www.statenskonstrad.se in its original form. Translated from Swedish by Jan Salomonsson.

*In Purple* Production photo: Jenny Lindberg



## TOR LINDSTRAND

Biography

Tor Lindstrand (Stockholm) is an architect, a senior lecturer in Spatial Design at Konstfack, and one of the founders of the Larsson Lindstrand Palme arkitektkontor AB architect firm. As his practice oscillates between architecture, art, and performance, he works in a diverse array of cultural contexts, often in collaboration with others. Apart from in Sweden, his works have been shown at the Venice Architecture biennale, TATE Liverpool, Performa in New York, and the Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture. Tor Lindstrand is a member of the Eva Bonnier donation board, an award committee member for Ung Svensk Form, and an architecture critic for Form magazine.

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Ebba Grön, We're Only In It for the Drugs No. 1 (1979).



# JOHANNA BILLING Biography

Johanna Billing was born in Jönköping in 1973, trained at the University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm and now lives and works in Stockholm. Her conceptually oriented video art is often situated in the interplay between the individual and society, the public and the private, the staged and the improvised. Questions of learning, time and socially scrutinising processes are recurring themes, and her films often involve music, which through dialogue and collaboration becomes a medium for exchange, memory and reconstruction. Billing has participated in many international exhibitions such as Documenta, the Venice Biennale and the Istanbul Biennial and exhibited individually at institutions such as Moderna Museet and P.S.1 in New York.

Participants: Mix Dancers and Flavours Crew: Samantha Akdogan, Sibel Akdogan, Mashail Hussein, Lea Tesfagabir, Sabrina Akdogan, Julia Saydi, Louise Chung, Emelie Oskarsson and Carmen Chamoun. Costume and choreography: Mix Dancers. Music for Mix Dancers' choreography: Dilje Özlem Yigitbas/Neva Deelay, remaining music in the soundtrack by Carla Jo. A-photo: Camilla Topuntoli. B-photo: Patrik Johansson. Remaining photography: Henry Moore Selder. Editing: Johanna Billing. Sound: Peter Adolfsson. Stills: Jenny Lindberg. Sound mix: Henrik Sunbring, Helter Skelter. Grading: Max Strömberg. VFX: Peter Marin, Swiss International. Graphic design: Leo Denis Norgren. Film production: HER film. Produced by: Public Art Agency Sweden (within the governmental assignment Konst händer). Partners: Mix Dancers, Jönköpings kommun/Stadsgården. Curator: Marti Manen. Project coordinator: Emma Engström, Public Arts Agency Sweden and Hugo Ranerås and Filip Zezovski Lind, Jönköpings kommun. Particular thanks to: Stadsgården, Vätterhem, Rose Akdogan, Edin Benyamin, Jenifer Umatino, Gabriella Mourad, Olivia Yeboha, Johanna Linder, Lasses Glas, Taberg, Malin Hüber, Tor Lindstrand and Hannah Reinikainen.



