


# Why Did Instagram Pause This Play? Its Creators Still Don't Know.

Marion Siéfert's “\_jeanne\_dark\_,” about a shy teenager beginning to express her sexuality, contains no nudity yet still ran afoul of Instagram's opaque policies.

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Marion Siéfert wrote “\_jeanne\_dark\_,” a pun on the French styling of Joan of Arc, based on her own stifled upbringing in a Roman Catholic family in France. Julien Mignot for The New York Times

By **Laura Cappelle**

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PARIS — It was hailed as France’s first “Instagram play.” In Marion Siéfert’s “[\\_jeanne\\_dark\\_](#),” a 16-year-old character, Jeanne, goes live on the app to tell the world about her private frustrations — and as she films herself with a smartphone onstage, Instagram users can watch, too, and weigh in.

Yet in early 2021, a few months into the production’s run, Instagram started cutting off these live streams, citing “nudity or sexual acts.” Then the account tied to the play disappeared from the platform’s search results. For months, Siéfert and her team scrambled to understand why their work — which will have its New York premiere on Sept. 14, as part of the French Institute Alliance Française’s [Crossing the Line Festival](#) — was being repeatedly targeted.

“People thought what we were doing was great, the future of creation,” Siéfert said in Paris earlier this month. “But for me, it’s been more like a nightmare.”

Siéfert joins a long list of artists and activists who have locked horns with Instagram in recent years over its community guidelines, which ban content the company deems inappropriate. That includes nudity, and especially [photos and videos showing women’s nipples](#) (outside of breastfeeding and health-related issues, like a mastectomy), a policy that has prompted an online campaign, “Free the Nipple.”

But “\_jeanne\_dark\_” doesn’t fall into this category: Siéfert, who was aware of the policy, steered clear of nudity from the start. When the automated interruptions started, the artistic team filed appeals through Instagram’s in-app system, yet received no response or clarification. They said their attempts to contact employees of Instagram also went nowhere.

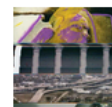
Only after a series of mock performances on a private account did Siéfert pinpoint the gesture that apparently triggered Instagram’s detection algorithm. At that point, Helena de Laurens, 33, who plays Jeanne, cupped her covered breasts from the sides and moved them up and down.

The scene, which Siéfert cut in the spring of 2021, may have fallen foul of Instagram and Facebook’s infamous policy on “breast squeezing,” which was [clarified in 2020](#) to state that hugging, cupping or holding breasts is allowed, but not squeezing in a grabbing motion, because of a surmised association with pornography. (According to Instagram, no such issue was identified with the account \_jeanne\_dark\_. A spokeswoman declined to answer further questions about the company’s moderation policies.)

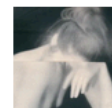
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Helena de Laurens, who plays Jeanne. “I had found something that was very funny, I was quite proud of it,” she said of the play. [Matthieu Bareyre](#)

According to research conducted by Dr. Carolina Are, a fellow at Northumbria University’s Center for Digital Citizens in Britain, very few appeals to Instagram trigger a response from a human moderator. “It’s an incredibly murky system,” she said in a recent video interview.

She traces the increase in heavy-handed moderation on Instagram and Facebook (both owned by Meta) to two bills that passed in 2018, the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act. Their stated purpose — to [hold tech companies accountable for sex-trafficking schemes on their platforms](#) — has led, she said, to bans on a wide range of material Instagram’s algorithm classifies as risqué, not just in the U.S. but around the world. (It has regularly flagged [Dr. Are’s own videos](#), too, since she is also a pole dance instructor.)

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“Facebook in particular censored female bodies before, but nothing on this scale,” she said. “It creates a chilling effect on expression.”

The gesture at issue in Siéfert’s play came with a narrative context. Jeanne, initially a shy teenager who is bullied at school and feels stifled by her Roman Catholic family — her Instagram handle ([\\_jeanne\\_dark\\_](#)) is a pun on the French styling of Joan of Arc — has grown emboldened, and begins a pastiche of sexualized music videos.

“I had found something that was very funny, I was quite proud of it,” de Laurens said recently in Paris. “There was something a little grotesque and excessive about it. She parodies people, but she also wants to be like them.”



This Instagram play wasn't Siéfert's first artistic brush with social media. The 35-year-old director, whose own sheltered, Catholic upbringing in the French city of Orléans inspired the character of Jeanne, mined Facebook for information about her audience in her first professional production, "2 or 3 Things I Know About You," from 2016.

Once people responded on Facebook that they were attending the show, Siéfert would study their public profiles to create a script based on them. Onstage, she'd comment on screenshots as her character, a naïve alien looking to make human friends. "I would find out about their holidays, but also intimate things, like a bereavement," Siéfert said. Some people laughed; others were moved or shocked to see themselves through that lens. "Sometimes the information was very beautiful, but at the same time, it was a lot of power."



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Siéfert's experimental approach to audience interaction was

Siéfert’s experimental approach to audience interaction was shaped, she said, by the years she spent in Germany — first as an exchange student in Berlin, where she discovered the local performance scene, and later at Giessen’s Institute for Applied Theatre Studies. With “\_jeanne\_dark\_,” she was “interested in bringing theater to a place that isn’t really made for it, that is part of the fabric of people’s daily lives. What we didn’t know was: Are there actually people who will want to watch us on Instagram?”

There were — not least because “\_jeanne\_dark\_” had its premiere in the fall of 2020, between the first two waves of the Covid-19 pandemic in France, as the entire theater industry wondered how to effectively harness digital formats. Between 200 and 600 viewers tuned in for the live streams throughout that first season, and the play was honored with a special “digital award” by France’s Critics’ Union in 2021.

Yet as the production met with acclaim, new issues kept arising behind the scenes with Instagram, even after the breast-cupping gesture was removed. According to screenshots provided by Siéfert, “\_jeanne\_dark\_” was cut off a total of four times throughout 2021, twice with two-week bans on further live streams, forcing the team to resort to an alternative account. Ironically, Siéfert said, the theater audience often thought the ban notification was “part of the show.”

In addition to “nudity or sexual acts,” the final ban, in November 2021, cited “violence and incitation.”

“The rules change constantly, you never know where you stand,” Siéfert said. She alleges that starting in May 2021, the account was also “[shadow banned](#)” for weeks — meaning that it became nearly impossible to find through the app’s search engine, and existing followers no longer received live notifications. (According to Instagram, the account \_jeanne\_dark\_ wasn’t flagged in a manner that might have led to such issues.)

While Siéfert’s next play, “Daddy,” set to premiere at the Odéon playhouse in Paris in 2023, will delve into another virtual world — a video game — it will involve no screens or live digital element. Her experience with Instagram, which she describes as a “hostile space” for artists, has been enough.

“It has often been sold as the app for creativity, but it’s just publicity,” she said. “When you actually put a work of art on Instagram, this is what happens.”

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