

GABRIELA LÖFFEL

portfolio

(selection)

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The media artist Gabriela Löffel looks behind the scenes—of the financial markets, the film industry, asylum policy, disputes between the state and the private sector, and so on. It would be even more accurate to say that she looks into the scenes, i.e. she seeks insights into the mechanisms, techniques and staging strategies of power, which, in Foucault's words, do not emanate from the actions of individual actors, but can be observed precisely in this performative interplay of self-techniques and system architectures.

For example, she deconstructs the supposedly apolitical Performance (*Performance* 2017/18) of a coaching session for speaking skills, which uses a recording of a CEO's speech at an international security congress as material for optimisation, or observes the sealing off of the system on the construction sites of a freeport (*Inside* 2019) and an asylum centre (*Sans titres* 2021/22). Löffel repeatedly works with translators and other professionals from the fields of communication, casting and staging. She focuses her attentive gaze on the practice of hidden services. What she uncovers are not the explosive facts of the fields within which her political interests lie, but the subtle forms of powerful realisations.

The topics, places and actors that the artist gets up close to, are controversial and her works bear witness to the 'close observer' standpoint that she adopts in her research.

At the same time, however, she keeps her distance and brings the objects closer to the viewer not in the form of revelations, but as translated material that shifts the usual focus of attention.

Rehearsal situations, stages and empty rows of spectators, simulation techniques—the recurring emphasis on the difference to the real situation in Löffel's works contrasts with documentary conventions, but in the Brechtian sense can be attributed to realism, which reproduces 'the actual reality [that] has slipped into the functional' (cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozeß* 1931). Tracking down the techniques and economies of global powers, Löffel looks closely in all her works: at the narratives, the skilful rhetoric, the interchangeable performers, business premises and marketing strategies. Her artistic approach resembles a kind of habitat research with which she attempts to capture 'the enormous absence of the political in these complex realities', as she explains in a conversation about *The Case* (2015). Her focus on this present absence turns her installations into unsettling spaces for reflection.

Sigrid Adorf

Art Scientist, Professor of Contemporary Art and Culture Analysis and Deputy Director of the Institute for Cultural Studies, ZHdK



Videostills "Offscreen"

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GRAMMAR OF CALCULATED AMBIGUITY

Installation / single channel video / speakers / headphones / 76min. / 2023-2024

IN COLLABORATION WITH

ANDREA BINDER - Research Group Leader at Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin

KATHARINA PISTOR - Professor of Comparative Law at Columbia Law School New York

JULIETTE GARSIDE - Journalist Deputy business editor at The Guardian London, member of ICIJ

OLIVER ZIHLMANN - Journalist, Co-Head at Tamedia Research Desk Switzerland, member of ICIJ

LEAH BRADSHAW - Forensic Phonetician at University Zürich

VOLKER DELLWO - Professor of Phonetics and Speech Sciences at University Zürich

The video installation “Grammar of calculated ambiguity” is based on an audio recording I made two weeks after the publication of the Pandora Papers¹, during a conference organised by the offshore finance industry. This event was reserved for insiders of the financial services sector - trustees, lawyers, and wealth managers - and was aimed solely at those who can be considered the architects of offshore structures. The finance industry embodies a key role in the responsibility for current global emergencies such as the climate crisis and the drastic increase in inequality. An examination of these structures and infrastructures forms the focus of this project.

This audio recording documents a panel discussing the perception of public opinion on the offshore finance industry. Due to the recording conditions, several passages are acoustically difficult to understand and disturbed by noise. To extract the words lost in the noise and disturbances and thus also discuss the content, I invited a group of experts to a recording studio and handed them the audio recording for processing.

The group was filmed during their entire precise listening, dissection and analytical deconstruction of the audio recording and the following reconstruction of the narrative.

Musician Olga Kokcharova created a composition for “Grammar of calculated ambiguity” that further examines the thematic exploration and the central role of sound.

This sound creation engages with the installation's headphones and speakers as modulable and porous forms.

The installation consists of a video projection (or a screen), and the sound is played through headphones and loudspeakers.

¹ Pandora Papers: 11.9 million leaked documents, containing 2.9 TB of data about the secret offshore accounts of current and former presidents, prime ministers, business leaders, and celebrities, published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists - ICIJ from October 2021.

EXCERPT FROM THE AUDIO RECORDING

“I mean, there was very little in the Panama Papers that was contro... controversial in, er, a legal sense, er, and the story actually died quite quickly. If you look at the BBC website, very quickly it moved down the... the rankings because nobody was clicking on it, and it ended up at the bottom. Because I think that for a lot of people, you know, there's not much to look at here. [...] story, there's nothing illegal that's been done”

“Yeah, now, on that point, I think one of the difficulties is that it's much easier to sell crime and scandal, isn't it? Joe Public understands a... a criminal allegation, they understand the scandal, they don't understand international capital finance flows.”

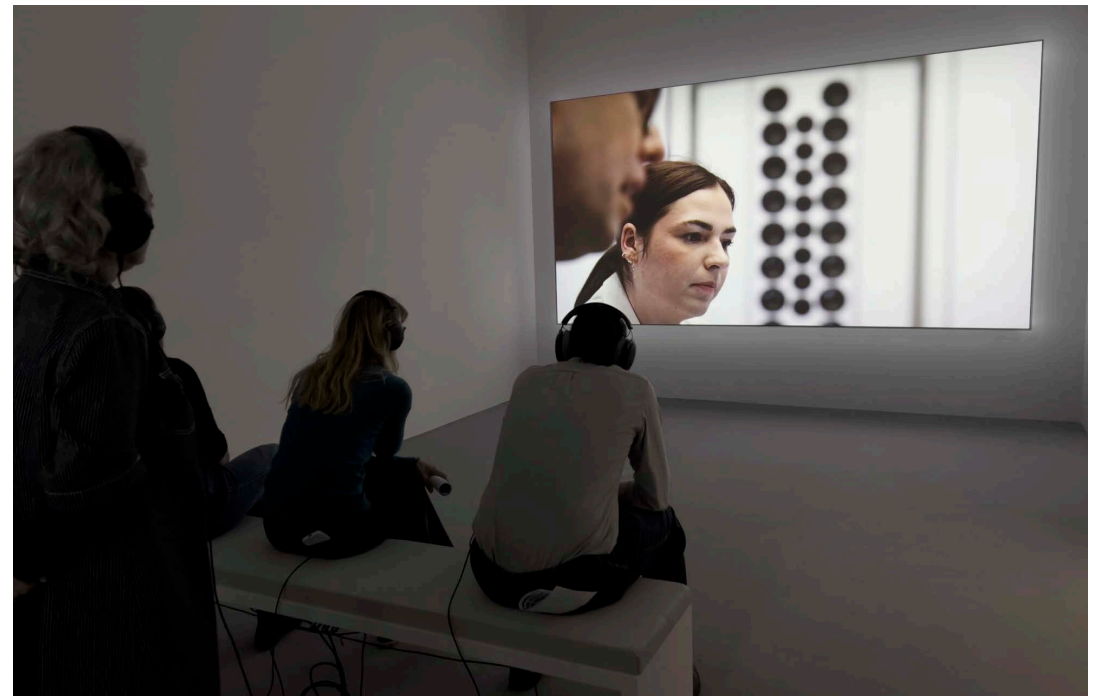
“Can I just weave a question into that? Do we need to care so much? [...] It doesn't seem like the government actually care that much. They could stamp this out if they want, but their self-interest is... is, you know, is... is embedded in not doing so.”

VIDEO-EXCERPT

<https://vimeo.com>



Videostills “Grammar of calculated ambiguity” 2023-2024



Exhibition “Neutrality Model” Aargauer Kunsthau, 2025

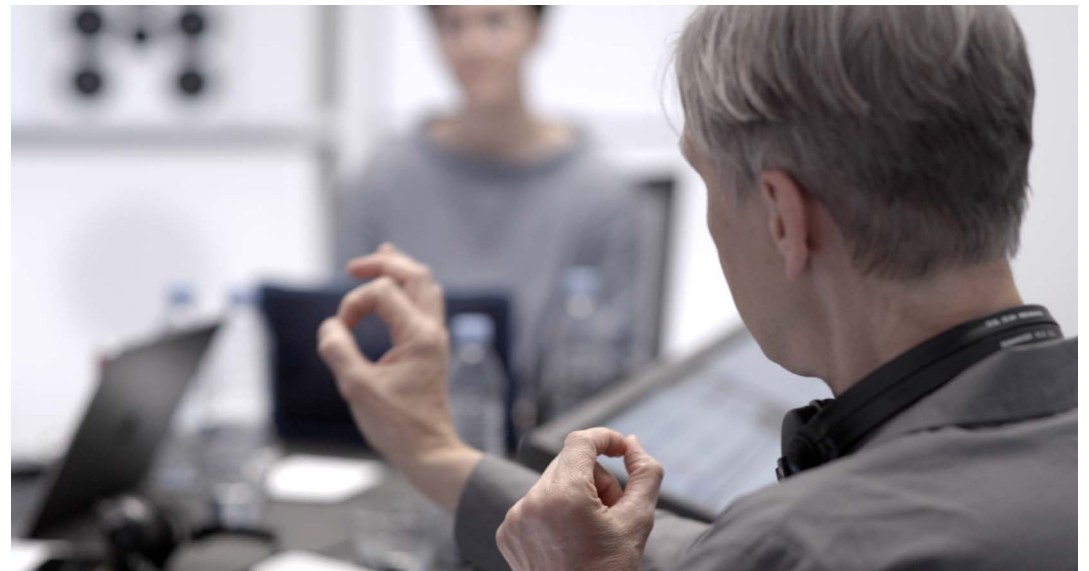
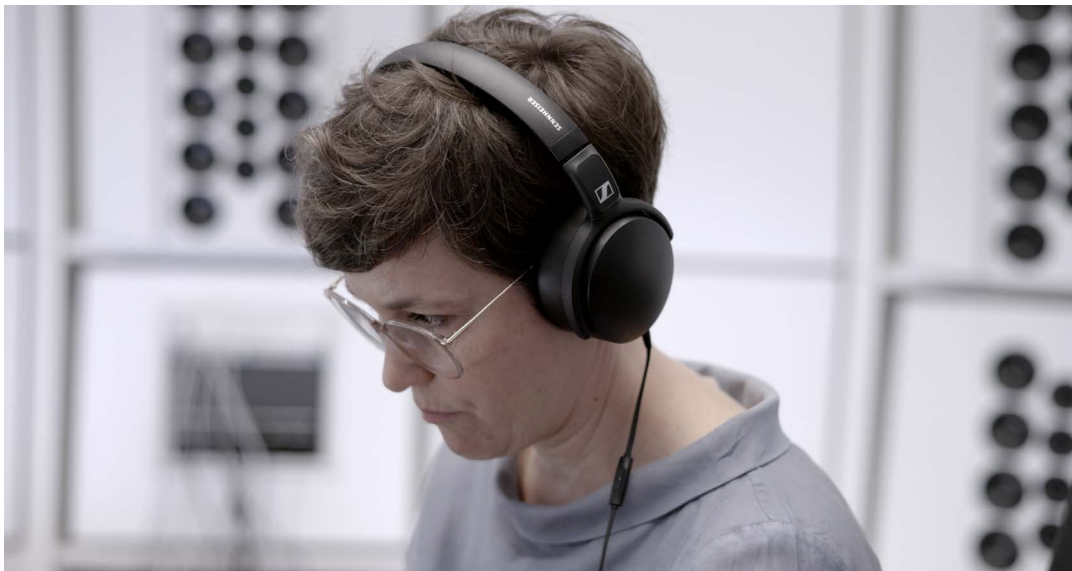
Photo : Erika Irmeler



Videostills "Grammar of calculated ambiguity" 2023-2024



Exhibition "Neutrality Model" Aargauer Kunsthaus, 2025
Photo : David Aebi



WE DO NOT HAVE TO KNOW EACH OTHER IN ADVANCE

Installation / 2-channel video / 20min15" / 2024

IN COLLABORATION WITH

CÉDRIC GAGNEUR, IVAN LARSON, MARGAUX MONETTI, AKANÉ NUSSBAUM, MARC OOSTERHOFF,
BLAISE PORQUET, JULIA RIEDER - Dancers

Public space forms the central focus of “We do not have to know each other in advance” a video installation that intertwines moments from dance performances, archival material, and text excerpts. An essay to articulate the performativity of bodies within this political zone that constitutes public space. For this project, I used visual material from the “Archives des Contestataires Genève” depicting people occupying public space, debating, and visualising protest and resistance. The street, as public space, is by definition a zone of constant negotiation and a foundation of democracy. A democracy measures its legitimacy not only by how it provides space for protest movements, but also by the visible tensions it permits—or does not permit—to exist in its collective spaces.

To propose a voice to these questions about the politics of public space and resistance, I draw on excerpts from the philosopher Judith Butler’s “Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly” (Harvard University Press). Using these visual and textual materials as a foundation, I collaborated with dancer and choreographer Cédric Gagneur to develop movements and choreographies for a group of dancers.

The process itself is central: how will these dancers decode, interpret, and engage with the political realities documented in the archives and texts? How will they embody and convey strategies of intertwining, collapsing, sliding, and becoming heavy—individual bodies merging into a collective one, exploring positions of resistance together? These process-based choreographies aim to translate and to incarnate the questions raised by the archival images and Butler’s texts. The fragments woven into “We do not have to know each other in advance” could also serve as a manual for a precarious public space—a political space increasingly at risk of disappearing.

EXTRACTS FROM “NOTES TOWARD A PERFORMATIVE THEORY OF ASSEMBLY” BY JUDITH BUTLER

“The „we“ is enacted by the assembly of bodies, plural, persisting, acting, and laying claim to a public sphere by which one has been abandoned.”

“No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise, happens only „ between“ bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another’s. In this way, my body does not act alone when it acts politically.”

“The power to move or be still, to speak and to act, belongs to the assembly prior to, and in excess of, whatever rights a particular government decides to confer or to protect.”

“When we think about public assembly, we are always thinking about the police power that either lets it happen or stops it from happening, and we are on guard against the moment in which the state starts to attack the people it is supposed to represent.”

Filmed at Pavillon ADC Genève

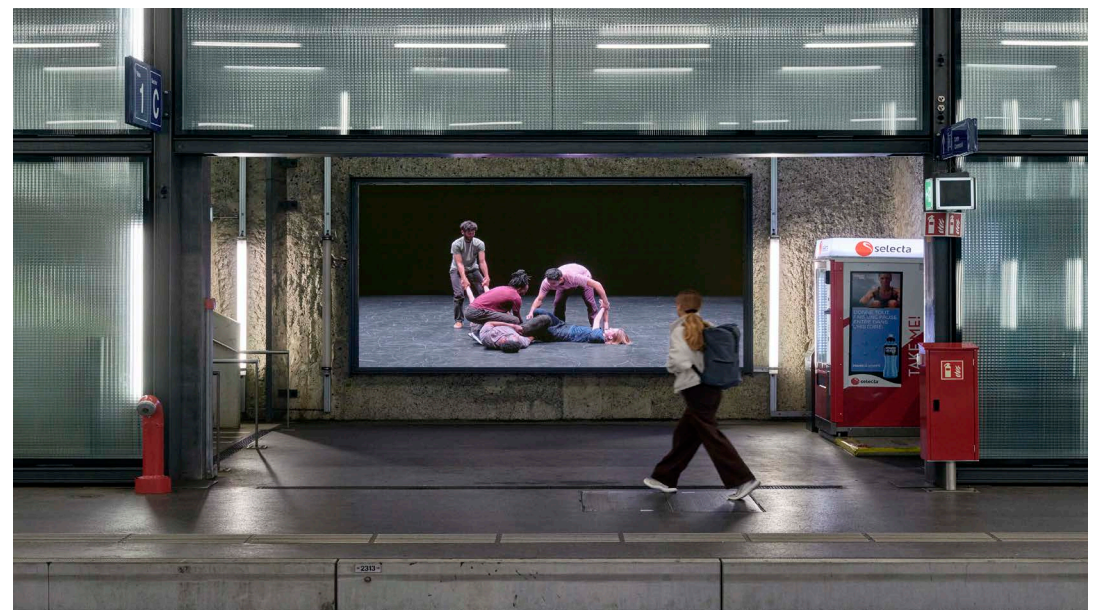
Commissioned by the Fonds cantonal d’art contemporain and the Fonds d’art contemporain de la Ville de Genève for MIRE 2024

VIDEO-EXCERPT

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills “We do not have to know each other in advance” 2024



“We do not have to know each other in advance”

MIRE Art in public spaces, Geneva. Photo : Serge Fruehauf 2024

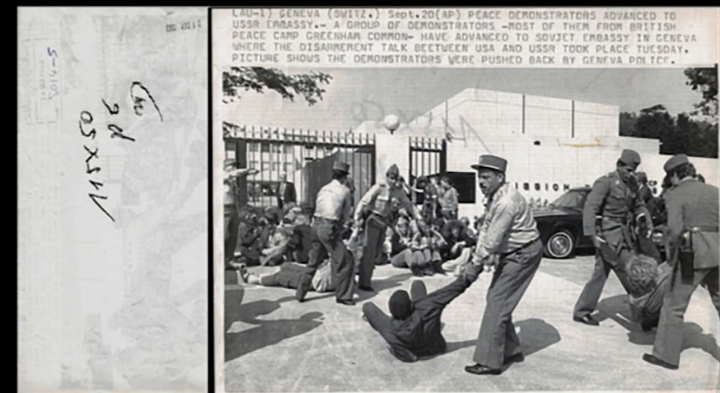


Videostills "We do not have to know each other in advance" 2024



These mobilizations make their claims through language, action, gesture, and movement; through linking arms; through refusing to move; through forming bodily modes of obstruction to police and state authorities.

Judith Butler, in "Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly"



5.752.414.468

Installation / 3-channel video / speakers / 115min. / 2020-2021

IN COLLABORATION WITH

ULRIKE MÜLLER - Casting director

IRENE VON ALBERTI - Film director

ROCIO DIAZ, KARL SCHIRNHOFER - Casting Camera

Actors

FRIEDERIKE KEMPTER, KRISTIAN WANZL NEKRASOV, ANDY MURRAY

NEDA RAHMANIAN, RICHARD GONLAG, ANDREAS NICKL

FRANZISKA MACHENS, JENNY SCHILY, JOHN KEOGH

"5.752.414.468" explores Case no. ARB/12/12 of the ICSID (International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes, an organisation of the World Bank group) between Vattenfall (Swedish energy company) and the Federal Republic of Germany. Due to the nuclear accident at Fukushima, the German federal government decided a 13th Amendment to the Nuclear Energy Law aiming to phase out nuclear energy faster. Vattenfall, who operates several nuclear power plants in Germany, filed a request with ICSID against that political decision, demanding 5,752,414,468 billion Euro in compensation.

The first 10-day hearing of the arbitration was live streamed, with a censorship delay of 4 hours. For the first time, that format made the process accessible to the public. This was intended as a "pledge for transparency" from ICSID in response, one might presume, to the increasing public criticism against international free-trade agreements such as the TTIP and CETA.

In "5.752.414.468" I am using excerpts from this hearing's opening and closing arguments as raw material, which I handed over as a script to a casting office.

The casting process, as an essential, though invisible, part of the film production, allows me to deconstruct and dissect the original text in a operation room of fiction in order to get a closer view into the insides of the spoken words. I tasked casting office Ulrike Müller in Berlin to cast the actors for the three main characters of the process (judge and lawyers). Ulrike Müller conducted the casting together with film director Irene von Alberti at the Berlin Tempodrom. I filmed this whole process, with the audition of nine actors, which lasted several days. The casting room, selected specifically, is itself also a significant part of the staged elements, whose form is meant to echo and reflect the themes contained in the script.

These recordings, combined with fragments of the original voices from the ICSID hearing constitute the three-channel video installation "5.752.414.468". The never-ending problem of nuclear energy as well as the power relationships enshrined in international investment agreements provide the basis for the 1h55 duration chosen here for the installation. Through this duration, I am referring to the idea of the ongoing and unending, that is also found in the filmed casting process, which does not end up in the final shooting of a feature film.

The thematic spaces and their visual language are also processed through the sound composition by musician Gaudenz Badrutt.

The installation consists of three identical and synchronised screens, the sound is played through loudspeakers.

Filmed at Tempodrom Berlin

VIDEO-EXCERPT

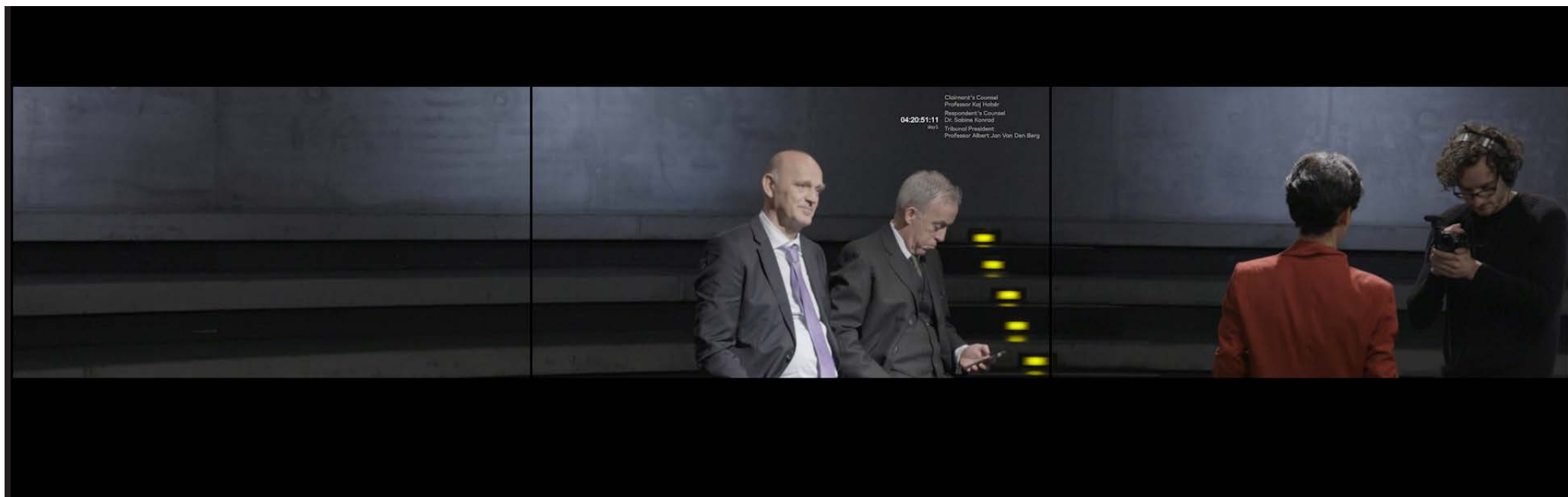
<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills "5.752.414.468" 2020-2021



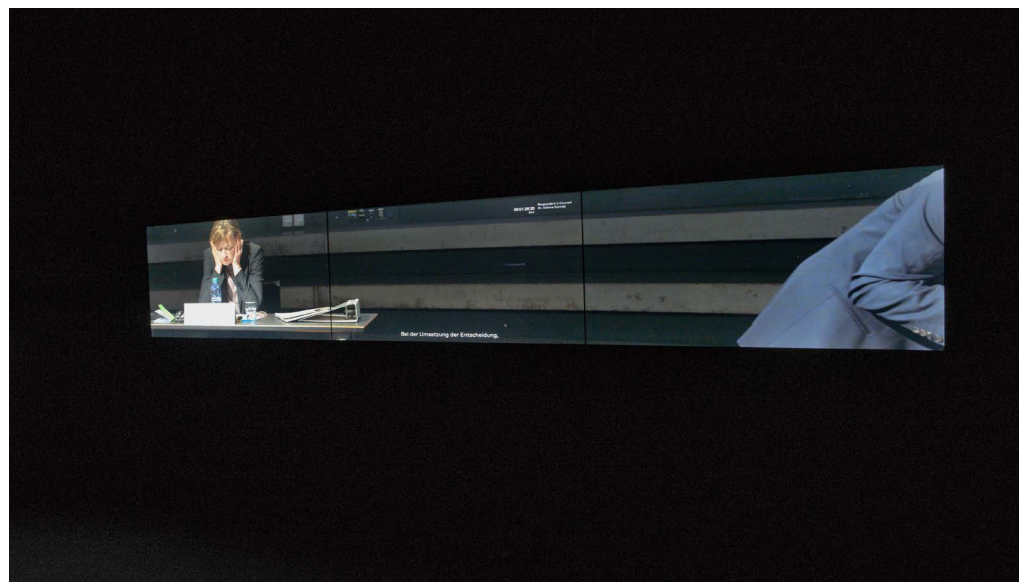
Exhibition Vebikus Kunsthalle, Schaffhausen 2022



Splitscreen
Videostills "5.752.414.468" 2020-2021



Videostills "5.752.414.468" 2020-2021



Exhibition Swiss Art Awards 2022, Basel

SANS TITRES

Series of 24 photographs with text / 2021–2022

In Grand-Saconnex, next to one of the runways at Geneva airport, a new federal asylum centre (with no administrative functions) has been under construction since 2020. This facility, which will also function as a deportation centre, is highly politically controversial. Many NGOs that campaign on human rights issues, in particular the rights of refugees in Switzerland, have criticised the establishment of such centres following the amendment of the Asylum Act in 2019.

These federal asylum centres are the responsibility of Switzerland's State Secretariat for Migration SEM, which has contracted private companies to operate them. One such contract was awarded to ORS Service AG, which is now one of the main service providers to the federal asylum centres, including the centre in Grand-Saconnex. ORS Service AG belongs to ORS Group, a private company with many subsidiaries in Germany, Italy, Spain and elsewhere. In 2013, via holding companies, Equistone Partners Europe became ORS Group's main shareholder. Equistone Partners Europe is a London-based private equity company founded in 2011 as a spin-off from Barclays Bank. As a private equity company, Equistone Partners Europe's shares are not publicly traded and are therefore not subject to commercial disclosure regulations. As a consequence, it is not possible to discover how much profit Equistone Partners Europe makes with ORS Group. Like that of every private equity firm, Equistone Partners Europe's portfolio strategy is to retain the companies it acquires for a few years and then sell them on* at as high a profit as possible. In order to maximise profits, the companies it acquires undergo extensive restructuring.

The series of photographs "Sans titres" sets about identifying the ownership structures embedded in those profit-driven financial systems that operate within asylum policy. Therefore, I have photographed the construction site of the federal asylum centre in Grand-Saconnex from the outside and the inside. The pictures are combined with texts and definitions of terms encountered in both asylum policy and the finance industry. All of the definitions are taken from the publicly accessible glossaries and documents of investment companies, government institutions and NGOs that operate in the field of asylum policy and in the finance industry. The combination of these terms and concepts with images of the federal asylum centre—still under construction and unoccupied—should make it possible to view the financial capitalisation of the asylum system from a critical perspective. At what point and via what structures do finance, investment and speculation become active, determining and intervening elements of asylum policy?

*In 2022, Equistone Partners Europe sold its majority stake in ORS Group for CHF44 million. The company was acquired by Serco Group PLC, a British company listed on the London Stock Exchange. Serco is an international service provider to governments, including in the fields of migration and law enforcement, mainly in Great Britain and Australia.

Enquête photographique

Commissioned by the Département de la culture et de la transition numérique de la Ville de Genève.

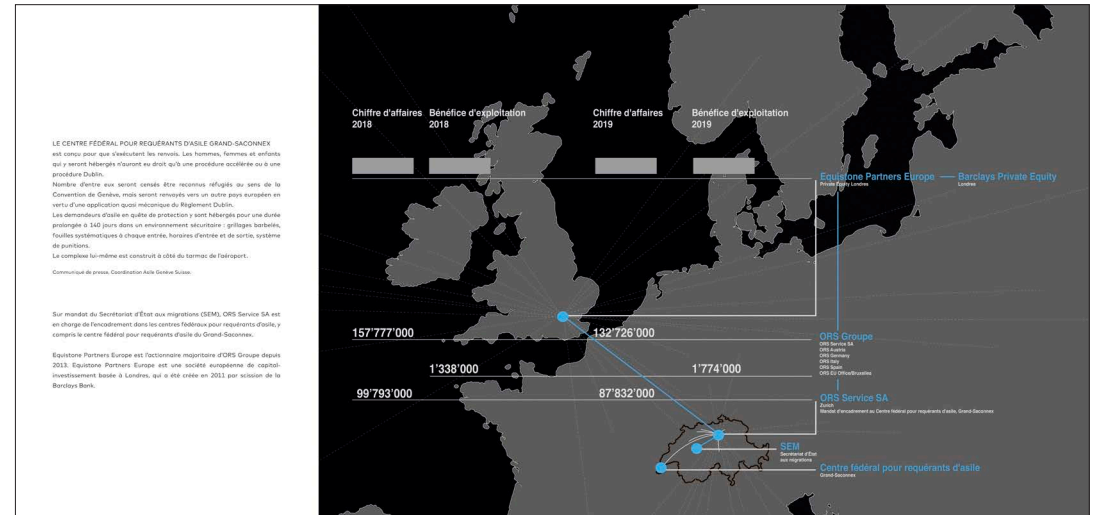
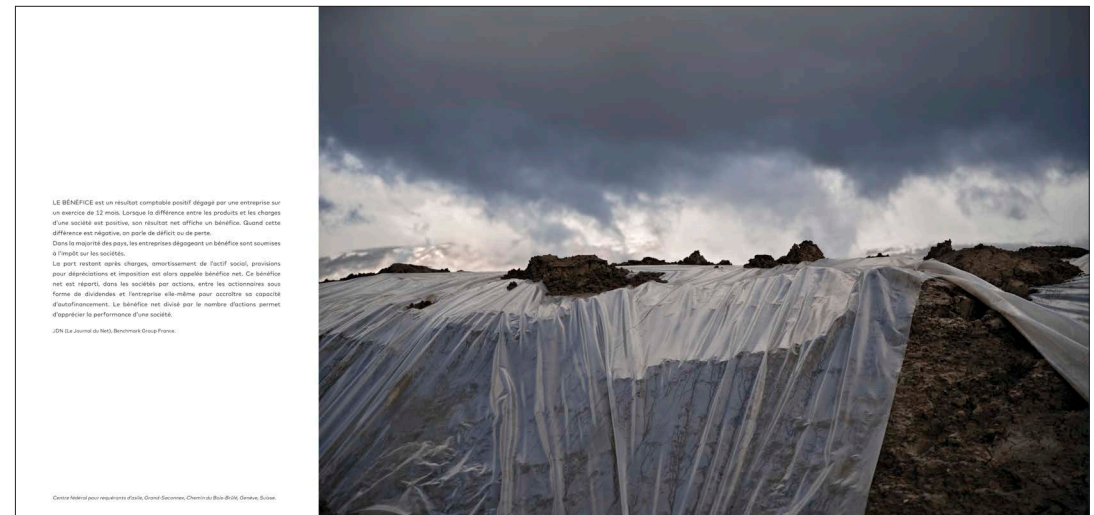


Photo from the series "Sans titres"



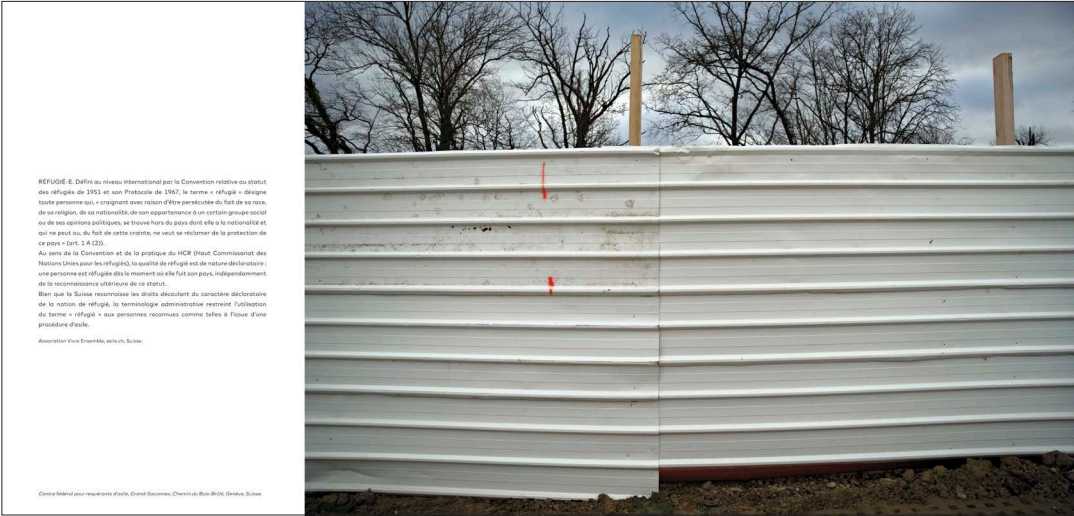
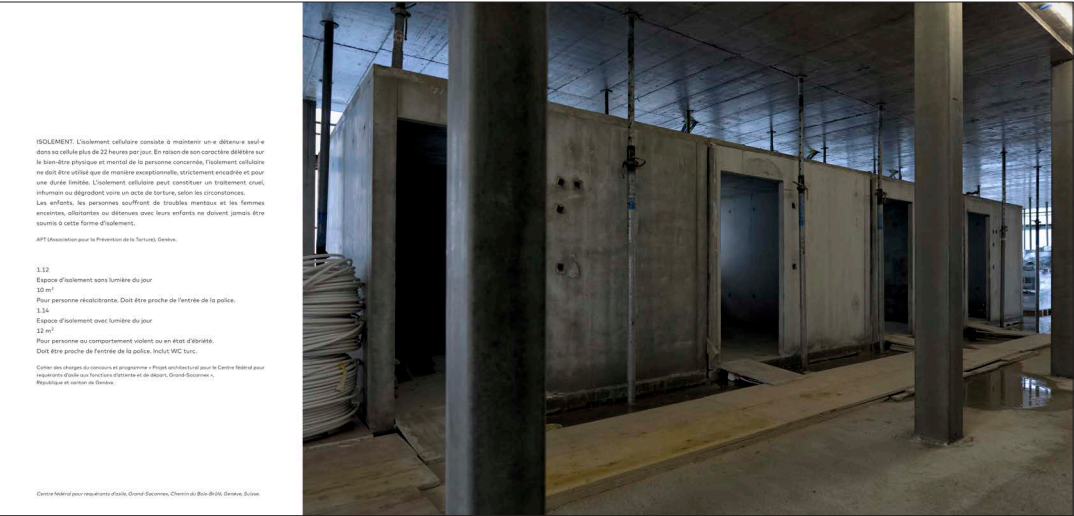
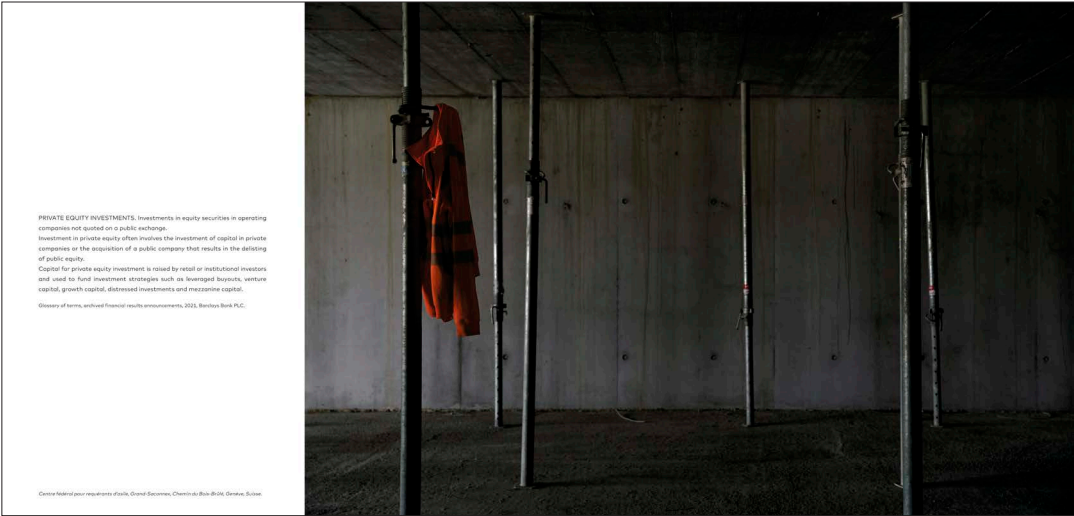


Photo from the series “Sans titres”



INSIDE

Installation / 3-channel video / speakers / 35min. / 2019

IN COLLABORATION WITH

TI WANG - Interpreter

ANNELY STEINER, LAURENT AUSSEL - Technicians at Volumetric Studio

TERM DEFINITIONS

LAWYER Guangzhou, China

LAWYER Shanghai, China

SÉBASTIEN GUEX - Historian at University of Lausanne

MARC-ANDRÉ RENOLD - Professor at University of Geneva, and lawyer

My research work for “Inside” started in the Free Trade Zone in Shanghai, at the “International Artwork Exchange Center” then under construction. With this project, I explore issues related to the freeports for art storage, also using translation processes to raise questions about the structural conditions for the type of global finance systems at work in these Art Free Ports.

After Shanghai, I continued my exploration at the Geneva Art Free Port. There, in front of the first Free Port of the kind, I staged and filmed a translation sequence. The Free Port of Geneva serves here as the film setting where interpreter Ti Wang simultaneously interprets from Mandarin Chinese into English the conversation I recorded during my visit at the construction site of the “International Artwork Exchange Center” in Shanghai. Another part of “Inside” approaches the interior of the Art Free Port. The impossibility of filming with my camera the real Inside has led me into the domain of Virtual Reality and to the places where these realities are designed, the VR studios. In one of the most innovating European volumetric production studios “4D Views” in Grenoble, the interpreter, Ti Wang, works again between the Chinese and English language. This time, she interprets the texts that I have mandated from Chinese and Swiss lawyers and historian specialising on the question of Free Ports. Each of them gave explanations and comments on terms I had proposed, like “Territory”, “Offshore”, “Technique”... . As the interpreter translates these recorded audio files at the “4DViews” studio, she is led with the help of VR glasses inside a fictional 3D Art Free Port, created according to my indications. All these work phases and interpreting processes were filmed in their entirety and edited together with the different voices into a 3-channel video installation.

The transfer of these themes pertaining to Art Free Ports into a place of translation, of performative language, and virtual reality, allows me to create space for interruption, and gives way to possible insights on the overlaps between the fields of economic policies, financial structures and art markets.

Filmed in front of the Free Port in Geneva, the International Artwork Exchange Center in Shanghai, and in “4DViews” VR studio in Grenoble.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills “Inside” 2019

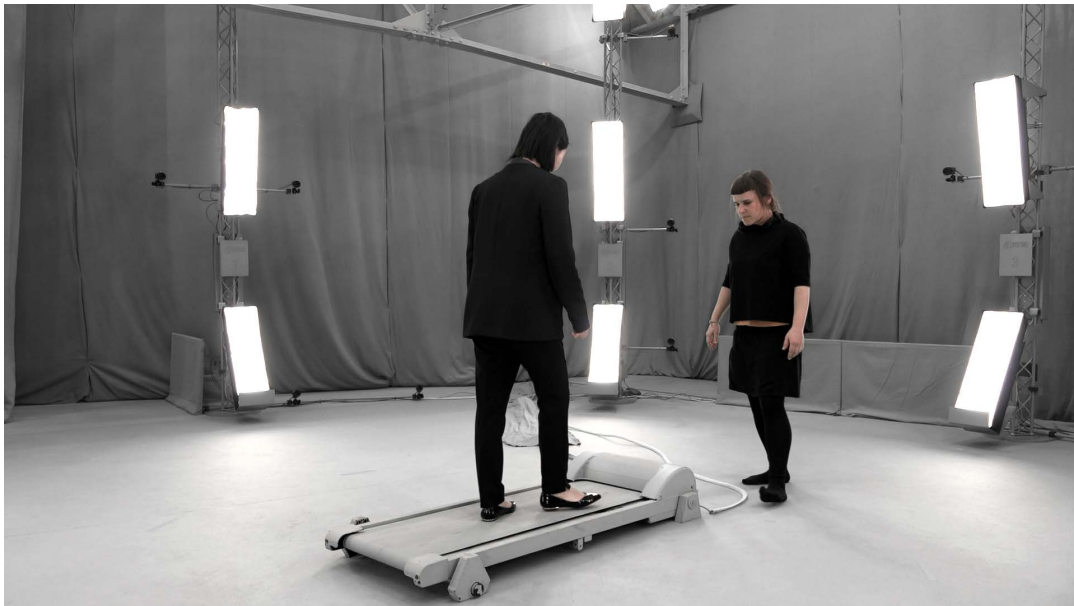
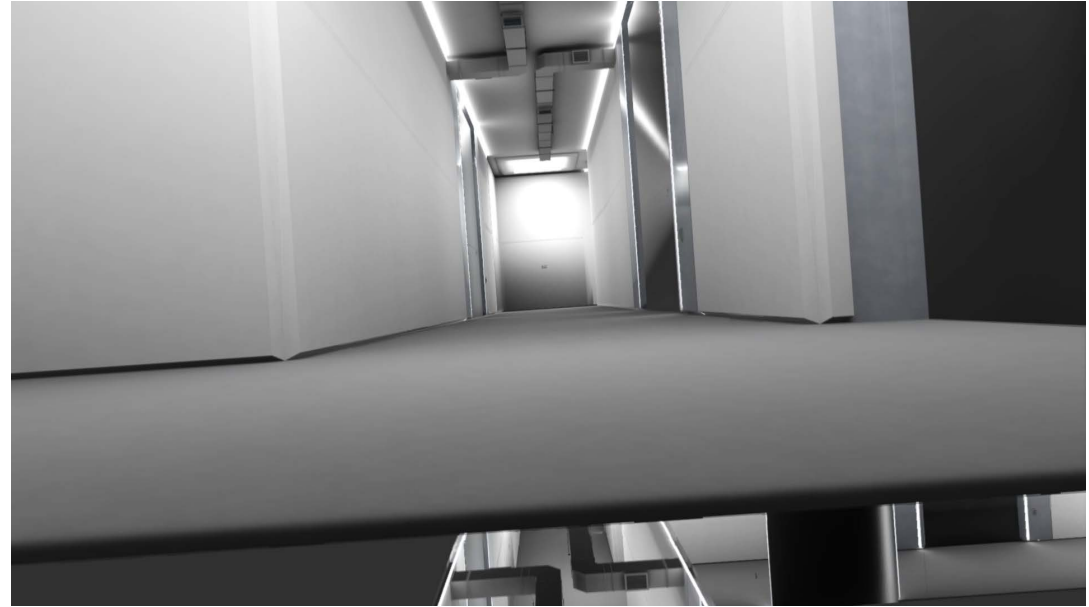


Exhibition “Inside” Cacy 2020

Photo : Claude Cortinovis



Videostills "Inside" 2019



PERFORMANCE

Installation / 2-channel video / speakers / 25min. / 2017-2018

IN COLLABORATION WITH

AMY CARROLL - Speech Coach

RUDI VAN DER MERWE - Speaker

This video installation is based on an audio recording of a conference speech presented by the CTO of a homeland security company. I made this recording during an international security industry trade fair.

During the last years since 2001, globally, the security industry has undergone wide-ranging promotion and expansion, and this development of industries and services in the domain of homeland security could possibly be read as an economic reflection of politics. In national budgets and likewise the performance on the stock markets, the security industry constantly generates both keen interest and high revenues. Politicised, the term „security“ is turned into discourse and increasingly finds its way into everyday public and private events, but often without allowing any consistent and highly necessary discussion of its definition to take place.

The content of the recorded conference presentation raises several questions concerning economic and political interests, and at the same time the use of language and rhetoric appears into focus.

In order to examine this speech more closely, to work with what it says and how it says it, I commissioned the optimisation of the recording of it by a coach for public speaking. Speech coach Amy Carroll, together with the speaker, Rudi van der Merwe, reprocesses the speech on stage in an empty conference hall in front of my camera. The perfecting which the recorded speech undergoes at the hands of the coach involves adapting both body language and spoken language specifically to its function. This process of optimisation and appropriation by a public-speaking specialist allows me to subject the spoken language and the content of the speech to sustained scrutiny. The production of efficient language that serves, as in this speech, to convey economic and political interests, should become visible here.

I filmed this performative moment of speech coach Amy Carroll and speaker Rudi van der Merwe with two cameras and from different perspectives.

The filming location, the EPFL conference centre, serves as an aesthetically symbolic setting and space for, likewise, posing the questions concerning language and re-presentation.

The installation comprises two video projections and stereo sound through speakers.

EXCERPT FROM THE AUDIO RECORDING

„The market size last year is about three-hundred-ninety billion Dollars. One example of our findings is that the dominance of the USA in this market will continue. The second one will be China, which is today the second one. () What are the fastest-growing markets - this is very important, because you want to go to a market which grows very fast, because you can then catch a market share - it is big data, video analytics, cybersecurity and video surveillance. And then border and perimeter barriers due to, mainly to Europe, is the second-fastest market“

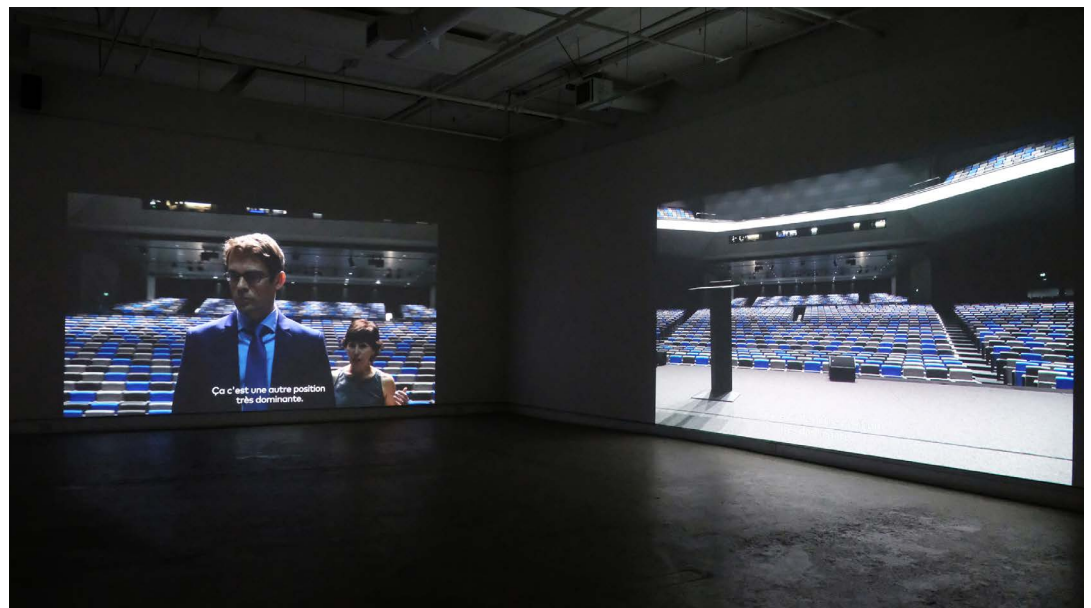
Filmed at the Swiss Tech Convention Center / EPFL Lausanne.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills “Performance” 2017-2018



Exhibition Optica Centre d'art contemporain, Montréal 2021

Photo : Claudia Goulet-Blais

UNSEEN

Series of 7 photos / 34,6cm x 52cm x 9cm / Light box / 2016

This series of photographs originated during the Swift International Banking Operations Seminar (Sibos) in Geneva in 2016. Sibos is the most important global trade fair for the finance sector and takes place in a different city each year. It is typically attended by as many as 8000 CEOs, decision-makers and experts from financial institutions worldwide. Specialists from financial market infrastructures and global businesses, as well as partners from the technology branch, gather together here, in an exclusive setting, in order to negotiate, to develop business and fiscal strategies, to network and to determine the future issues facing the finance industry. At this event I was able to observe the presentation and representation of the world of finance at close quarters and investigate the codes produced by them. Traces such as those of global financial policy rose to the visible surface at this event intended exclusively for an embedded professional audience. The possible wider attendance of the public at large was effectively excluded by the daily admission fee of CHF1000.

I focused my choice of view and image on the architecture of the fair stands. The design of these installations, which steer the view of every outsider looking in; glazed spaces that control visibility and vision and prevent the possible identification of the people inside. This fragmenting architecture, organising every look from outside, was what interested me for this photo series, and it is here, therefore, that non-visibility takes centre stage, forming the framework of "Unseen".

The photographs are installed as light boxes.



Light box



Photo from the series "Unseen"

THE CASE

Installation / 2-channel video / headphones / 34min. / 2015

The 2014 “ELSA Moot Court Competition on WTO Law” (court competition in international trade law), which took place at the World Trade Organization in Geneva, builds the base for “The Case”.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the only international organization holding authority over the rules of international trade. In 1995, it replaced the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), which had been created in 1947.

WTO’s primary goal is to foster liberalism via the promotion of free trade, the settlement of commercial disputes and the oversight of national policies.

The Elsa Moot Court Competition on WTO Law for jurists is a simulated hearing of a legal case, which different parties expose and debate on. It constitutes a moment where language morphs into rhetorics and thus also into a specific instrument of discourse and politics. These processes, by which lawyers and judges rhetorically negotiate laws, also constitute political moments that unveil the power of language.

During the semi-final and the final round, I filmed two different teams. One was from the renowned Harvard Law School in Cambridge, which acted as the complainant during the final round. The other team came from the National and Kapodistrian University in Athens. It embodied the complainant at the semi-final, and the respondent at the final round of the hearing on the same legal case.

The legal case at the 2014 ELSA Moot Court Competition is built on a complaint filed with the WTO Court by the fictive African State “United Kingdom of Commercia” against another fictive African State called the “Federal Republic of Aquitania”.

The case may be described as follows :

In 2005, Nova Tertia, one of the Federal Republic of Aquitania’s provinces, sells its water supply and water treatment to a private company, Avanti SA, signing a contract for 20 years.

In 2007, the company rises its service costs by 70%. At the same time, it refuses to carry out the extension and renovation works the government has been calling for several times. This leads to a protest movement against the contract signed with Avanti SA among the population.

In 2009, the province of Nova Tertia suspends the contract concluded with Avanti SA by anticipation.

The Headquarters of Avanti SA being in Commercia, the company requests the Ministry of Trade of the United Kingdom of Commercia to file a complaint against the Federal Republic of Aquitania with the WTO Court.

This fictitious legal case, its description and the utterly realistic issues it brings up, raises questions regarding the production of rhetorics, of language and of their application within economic and political structures.

I confront these questions with a visual language which produces fictive hypotheses to disturb again the boundaries between documentary and fictional content.

The installation comprises 2 synchronized screens hanging next to each other, and the sound on headphones.

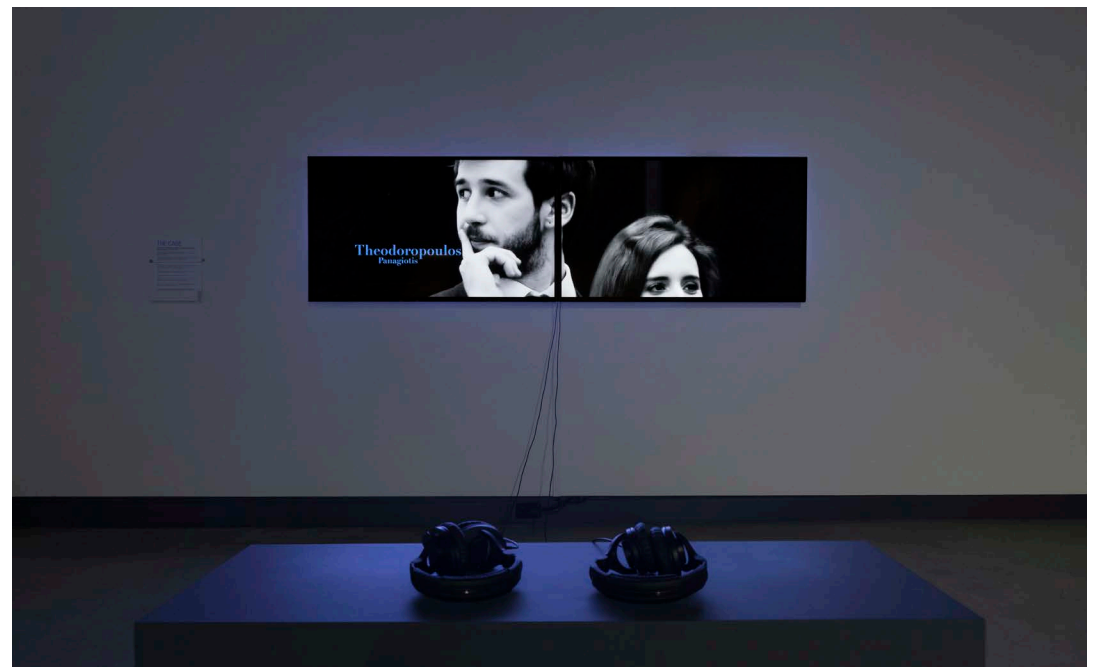
Filmed at the WTO, Geneva.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills “The Case” 2015



Exhibition “The Case” Dazibao Montréal, 2015

Photo : Marilou Crispin

FASSUNG #1

Installation / single channel video / headphones / photo 13cm x 17cm / 24min. / 2015

IN COLLABORATION WITH
BENEDIKT GREINER - Actor

At the 100th anniversary celebrations of the Swiss Air Force "Air 14", I staged an interview with one of the employees of Pilatus Aircraft. Upon a common agreement, he exposed some of his personal positions to me. Pilatus Aircraft is a company that may be qualified as a kind of symbol of Swiss politics with regard to war material exports and applications - politics that have been regularly criticized, both nationally and internationally, since the 1970's.

Shortly after the interview, which was recorded on video, and which quite unsurprisingly didn't yield any new information whatsoever on the company's export strategy, I received a text message from my interview partner at Pilatus:

"Hello Mrs Loeffel. I kindly ask you to keep any recording you made of me during the interview confidential and I trust in your discretion. Best regards."

That text message is the point of departure for the realization of "Fassung #1".

After having consulted with several business journalists in Switzerland, it could be supposed that such mandate to remain silent, such censorship, may not merely be a coincidence. Rather, it could be considered as a partially internalised method in the world of business, especially targeting critical journalists (often based on and elaborated in conjunction with the Swiss Federal Unfair Competition Law/ UWG, UCA).

I then transposed this filmed interview in a theater, on an empty stage, in the absence of an audience, a stage also being a space of rhetorics. There is an actor on the stage, he sits in front of a screen and watches the original interview. He attempts to imitate the interviewee as faithfully as possible. His task is to translate the Pilatus employee's words from Swiss German into high German and to reproduce his gestures and body language - he has to be that person. This process of direct duplication induces various emotions in the actor, stress as well as disruptive moments where we can see and hear the failure of language and translation.

This imitation technique, one of the most basic methods in drama, allows for the observation of language use through copying and simulating. Thanks to the translation and transfer of the recorded interview into another linguistic space, we are able to build up some distance to the actual content, which in turn possibly allows for a questioning of the circumstances which language and power relations evolve in.

The video is being presented on a screen equipped with headphones. A photograph of the text message hangs beside the screen.

Filmed at the Stadttheater in Bern, Vidmarhalle.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :
<https://vimeo.com>



Videostills "Fassung #1" 2015



OFFSCREEN

*Installation/ 3-channel video / 2 framed screens / Wireless headphones /
Speakers / 28min. / 2012-2013 (german version 2014)*

IN COLLABORATION WITH

ALISTER MAZZOTTI - Stunt choreographer

TOLGA DEGIRMEEN, SASCHA GIRNDT, RALPH GÜTHLER, ANJA SAUERMAN, VANESSA WIEDUWILT - Stunt artists

BENEDIKT GREINER - German-language narrator

PAULO DOS SANTOS - French-language narrator

JULIEN TSONGAS - English-language narrator

“Offscreen” is based on the account of a young man who went on a package holiday to Afghanistan and Iran in 2011. Holidaying in crisis zones, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea and Somalia is the latest holiday offer from the tourist industry. Promotional slogans such as “Be there and Gain a real understanding of conflicts” are used, while “Help rebuild” and “Get your hands dirty” appeal to tourists wishing to participate in on-site aid efforts. Getting personally involved in “useful work”, for example clearing landmine fields, is just one of the tours awaiting travellers. This new form of tourism is an extreme and worrying example of how we deal with the realities of war, and of how tourism now deals with it as a consumer good.

An actor reinterpret the narrative text that I have edited, in order to create a shift here as well. This voice-over takes centre-stage in “Offscreen”, it takes the visitors through the exhibition via headphones.

The text has been complemented and expanded upon with filmed images. In this visual language, I establish yet another layer which creates space for reflection. To do this, I use the motion picture and its production infrastructure, the film studio in Babelsberg Potsdam. These production sites, which have previously been used to make blockbuster films about historical and fictive wars, evoking a variety of memories, feelings and experiences, were where I filmed for this project. With my camera, I observed the different scenes including the plane set and the “Berliner Strasse” film set, which have become visual references for war films thanks to motion pictures such as “The Pianist”.

I also filmed stunt artists rehearsing scenes in the special effects studio during their preparation, in a simulate setting, for the actual shooting (so-called video previews). They used the holiday narrative as the context for the scenes. Stunt artists represent danger and action – they brave danger and thus lend their bodies to the original person, the actor. In this way, stunt performers are body doubles, and as bodies that are exclusively in danger and in action, they symbolise the perfection that can face up to almost (any) danger. I relate these aspects to the war tourists.

In the installation, the studio recordings are projected onto two framed screens, which in turn are in the form of a stage scenery in the exhibition room. The recordings of the stunt performers are projected directly onto the wall.

There are three versions of the installation, in English, in German and in French.

Filmed at the Studio Babelsberg Potsdam.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills “Offscreen” 2012-2013



Exhibition „Geschichte in Geschichten“ Helmhaus Zürich, 2015

Photo : FBM Studio

EMBEDDED LANGUAGE

Installation / 2-channel video / headphones / 19min. / 2013

IN COLLABORATION WITH

JEAN-LUC MONTMINY - Dubbing artist

JOEY GALIMI - Studio director

CAROLL CAFARDY - Sound engineer

At an International Defence Exhibition 2012 in Poland, I interviewed, in English, an executive from a Polish arms manufacturing firm. I then transposed this filmed interview in a Dubbing-studio in Montreal, Canada. Dubbing artist and actor Jean-Luc Montminy (who is the French-Canadian voice for actors including Bruce Willis and Denzel Washington) dubbed the interview into French in collaboration with a studio director and a sound engineer, as would be done for a motion picture production.

I captured this moment of language and discourse deconstruction and reconstruction with my camera. The moment at which an arms manufacturer is given another language and other words by a dubbing artist and the technical infrastructure at a cinema becomes visible here. This process can lead to questions about language and power and their (in)visibility, and also brings in the issue of armed politics in relation to film/the world of cinema. Film and war have had a complex dialectic relationship since the beginning of motion picture history, and are closely connected in terms of the production, the technology and image reception. Looking at these relationships is part of this discussion.

This shift of a documentary to the production site of fiction – the film studio, should allow questioning around the complex issues of political and economic interests on the difficult grounds of arms dealing. The installation comprises two synchronized screens and the sound on headphones.

Filmed in Cinélume film studio in Montreal.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills "Embedded Language" 2013



UNTITLED

Series of 8 photos / 23x34.5cm / Text / 2013

This series of photographs is part of a research project that took me 2012 to an international Defence Exhibition in Poland. There are around 400 companies from 29 countries at this trade fair, presenting their “goods” and “services”. Politics and business go hand and hand into the spotlight. For a week, contracts, agreements and deals are negotiated – and no-one worries about possibly being observed by a critical eye. All of this takes place at a standard trade fair: there is a festive atmosphere, with culinary and musical entertainment provided round the clock. Predominantly female trade fair hostesses also help create a “inviting” environment for businesspeople and politicians.

Reality-distorting constructions became directly visible here, and the fair is a way of trivialising armed politics and military force. The reality of war is completely masked and replaced with a show of technology and entertainment, and, in my opinion, this perfectly illustrates the very complex issues of how realities are made (in)visible. To consider this question further, I refer to extracts of texts, including this one by Judith Butler:

“Efforts to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war delimit public discourse by establishing and disposing the sensuous parameters of reality itself— including what can be seen and what can be heard. As a result, it makes sense to ask, does regulating the limits of what is visible or audible serve as a precondition of war waging, one facilitated by cameras and other technologies of communication?”

Judith Butler

In: “Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?” Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009



Photo : Gabriela Löffel

International Defence Industry Exhibition Poland, 2012



SETTING

Installation / 2-channel video / speakers / 33min. / 2011

IN COLLABORATION WITH

DANIEL HUG - Sound Designer

MIRUNA COCA-COZMA - French-language narrator

NADJA SCHULZ-BERLINGHOFF - German -language narrator

Grafenwöhr is the biggest US army training camp outside the United States. The camp, comprising a total area of 276km², was set up under the Kingdom of Bavaria and has been US property since 1945. It lies within a nature reserve, public access is prohibited. Soldiers stationed at Grafenwöhr usually undergo a three weeks training before being sent off to Iraq or Afghanistan. At the same time, students, unemployed persons and other German nationals are employed as extras at the training area. For three weeks, they are supposed to act the part of Arab civilians to assist the soldiers in their training.

The accounts of two former extras build the backbone of "Setting". The recordings that I made with the extras are reinterpreted by an actress. This voice-over creates another shift in which realities, staging and facts, which have been transferred to different arenas, reappear. Attention is therefore focused on the actual starting point of this "staged war in Bavaria".

These shifts are also present at the audio-visual level. I worked with sound designer Daniel Hug on the narratives of the extras. We created a soundtrack containing references to films and war films, and the different sounds associated with these. The sound manufacturing process is filmed with static video cameras in the radio play studio, in order to allow sound, in its visual form, to take centre stage. This provokes questions about staging and realities.

These video recordings are assembled as a rhythmic image composition and installed in the room as a dual projection, alongside the audio track. However, for a large part of the narrative, no pictures are visible. The sound fills the whole room and the video images appear unexpectedly at various dramaturgical points in the narrative.

There are two versions of the installation, in German and in French.

Filmed at the radio play Studio DRS 2, TPC - Technology and Production Center, Basel.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://vimeo.com/>



Videostills "Setting" 2011



THE EASY WAY OUT

Installation / 3-channel video / headphones / speakers / slideshow / 20min. / 2010

IN COLLABORATION WITH

SOPHIE HENGL, BENOÎT KREMER, NATHALIE LOISEAU - Simultaneous interpreters for the French-language version

CARMEN DELGADO, MARKUS METTLER, VALERIA TSCHANNEN - Simultaneous interpreters for the German-language version

In “The easy way out” interpreters, who normally work in the shadow of the diplomats and politicians for whom they interpret, are put in the spotlight, in front of the video camera, and observed. The starting point of this project was an audio recording that I made on the border of the US military training area in Grafenwöhr, Bavaria. It centres on a discussion between a US soldier who has just come back from Iraq, a German hotel owner in Grafenwöhr who provides accommodation for soldiers and the bilingual car saleswoman who lives next door. The three interpreters experiment with simultaneously interpreting this conversation which moves from everyday life in Bavaria and in conflict zones right through to political opinions and stances.

I filmed this moment of seeking words and comprehension, of attempting to transfer information and of simultaneous understanding in a situation that is stressful for the interpreters. The recording is on three separate, synchronously recorded pieces of footage.

In the exhibition room, the interpretations can be heard through the headphones, and at the same time the video images of the respective interpreters appear projected on three screens. The original audio conversation, recorded in Bavaria, can be heard over loudspeakers. The information in the conversation is fragmented and thus leaves space for verification and attentive listening to the words and meanings, and their origins. The observer is also struck by the repeated speechlessness of the interpreters faced with the conversation to be interpreted, as well as their efforts to extract themselves from this void. Photographs of this border area between the US military training area and the Bavarian country landscape are presented on flat screens. Territorial symbols and cultural traces can be identified.

„Wer etwas zu sagen hat, trete vor und schweige!“

[ve:r] ['etvas] [tsu:] ['za:gen] [hat], ['tre:tə] [fo:r] [unt] ['vaige]

Karl Kraus, aus „In dieser grossen Zeit“ Die Fackel Nr. 404, Dezember 1914

There are two versions of this installation, with German interpreters and with French interpreters.

VIDEO-EXCERPT :

<https://loeffelgabriela.com/>



Photo from the slideshow / “The easy way out” 2010



Exhibition “The easy way out” Galerie Ex-Machina Genève 2010

Photo : Erika Irmeler

EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS (selection)

2025

“Modell Neutralität” Aargauer Kunsthaut, Aarau
“Witnessing Witnessing” EMAF, Kunsthalle Osnabrück
“Grammar of calculated ambiguity” Galería Metropolitana, Santiago Chile
KorSonoR sound art+visual art festival, Genève
Enquêtes photographique, Centre de la photographie Genève

2024

MIRE, commissioned by FMAC and FCAC Geneva Art in public space
“Vertigo – Video Scenarios of Rapid Changes” Mast, Bologna
Biel/Bienne Video Festival, Galerie A13
Artgenève, Art fair Genève

2023

“Werte im Wandel” Kunsthaut, Interlaken
“Tell the story or it goes” Matca, Cluj-Napoca
Frauenkunstpreis, Kunsthaut Interlaken
“In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire” Kochi-Muziris Biennale India

2022

“A visual alphabet of industry, work and technology” Mast, Bologna
Swiss Art Awards, Basel
“Les Instants Vidéo” Friche la Belle de Mai, Marseille
Vebikus Kunsthalle, Schaffhausen
“Monitoring” 39. Kasseler Dokumentarfilm- und Videofest, Kassel

2021

“Performance” Standard/deluxe, Lausanne
Optica Centre d’art contemporain, Montréal

2020

“Inside” Centre d’art contemporain Cacy, Yverdon-les-Bains
“Storytelling - Erzählende Kunst Heute und Morgen” Grimmwelt, Kassel (cancelled)

2019

“Film as idea, film as film, film as art” Galeria Studio, Varsovie
Nominees for the Aparté Art Grant Galerie Ruine, Genève

2018

“Gut gespielt. Der Mensch und sein Avatar” Alte Fabrik Rapperswil-Jona
Art Paris Art Fair, Videoprogram, Paris
“Stumble and choose” Médiathèque FMAC, Genève
“Multiple Contexts” Around Space Gallery, Shanghai
“Choreography of the frame” Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Wien

2017

“Work in motion” Mast, Bologna
Espace libre, Biel
“Video–Σ” Neues Kino, Projektraum M54, Basel
“Extended Cahiers” Ground, Moskau

2016

“Komplexe Systeme” E-Werk Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, Freiburg iB

“Twisting C(r)ash” Romantso, Athen

Swiss Art Awards, Basel

2015

“Geschichte in Geschichten” Helmhaus, Zürich
“Twisting C(r)ash” Le Commun, Genève
“Embedded Language” Dazibao, Montréal
“Fassung #1” Liste Art Fair Basel, Special Guest at Druckwerk
“Kinematographische Räume” Kaskadenkondensator, Basel

2014

Swiss Art Awards, Basel
“Bieler Fototage 2014” Biel

2013

“The easy way out” La Bande Vidéo, Québec
“Move Movie” Centre d’Art Contemporain Cacy, Yverdon-les-Bains
“Offscreen” Halle Nord, Genève

2012

“Setting” Espace d’Art Contemporain (les halles), Porrentruy

2011

“Hors Bords” Halle Nord, Genève
“Staging Voices” Progr / Stadtgalerie, Bern
Swiss Art Awards, Basel
“Crosnier Extra Muros” Société des arts Genève, BAC Genève
“Ex-Hibition” Galerie Ex-machina, Genève

2010

“The easy way out” Standard/deluxe, Lausanne
“Fokus” Schweizer Videokunst, Landshuter Kunsthaut, Neue Galerie
“Fallbeispiel” on Arte “die Nacht/la Nuit”
“50JPG” Galerie Stargazer, Genève
“The easy way out” Galerie Ex-Machina, Genève

2009

“Angle vide” on Arte “die Nacht/la Nuit”
Duplex, Genève

2008

“Fenstersprung” PROGR, Bern
“Gleiche Höhe” Kunstprojekt Schweiz/Österreich, Wien
“Tribühne” Passagegalerie Künstlerhaus Wien
“700IS Selection 2007” ATA, San Francisco

2007

“700IS Selection 2007” Alsager Gallery, Manchester. Filmcentre Rodina, St.Pétersbourg
“Aeschlimann-Corti Stipendiaausstellung” Kunstmuseum, Thun
“CWW” O3ONE, Belgrad

2006

Centre Georges Pompidou “Arte die Nacht/la Nuit” Paris
“Angle vide” on Arte “die Nacht/la Nuit”

2005

“Fokus” on Arte “die Nacht/la Nuit”
“Success, Friends and career” Attitudes, Genève
“Aeschlimann-Corti Stipendiaausstellung” Kunstmuseum, Bern
“Electric rendez-vous” Plug.In, Basel

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2025-2028

Studio, maison des arts du Grütli Geneva

2024

Prix d'art, Fondation Dr. Liechti

2023

Work Grant, Pro Helvetia

2022

Lewis Baltz Research Fund

Research Grant 2022 Cultural Service City Geneva

2021

DDA Documents d'artistes Genève

2020

Enquêtes photographique, Department of Culture Geneva

2019

Contribution Fonds cantonal d'art contemporain, Genève

2018

Contribution Migros-Kulturprozent

Work grant, Pro Helvetia

2017

Grant for artist over 35, Cultural Service City Geneva

2016

Swiss Art Award

Research Grant, Pro Helvetia

2015

Award Irène Reymond Fondation

Grant Bildende Kunst, Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

2013

Award "Anerkennungspreis / Fotopreise 2013" Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

Contribution Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

2012

Grant 2012 Société des Arts, Genève

Contribution Fonds d'art contemporain de la Ville de Genève (FMAC)

Contribution Fonds cantonal d'art contemporain, Genève (FCAC)

Contribution Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

2011

Swiss Art Award

Award "Fondation Gertrude Hirzel" Société des arts Genève

Contribution Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

Contribution Migros-Kulturprozent

2009

Contribution Migros-Kulturprozent

Contribution Abteilung Kulturelles Stadt Bern

2007

Award "Aeschlimann-Corti Stipendium"

2006

Contribution Migros-Kulturprozent

Contribution Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

COLLECTIONS

Swiss Federal Art Collection, Federal Office of Culture

MAST Collection of Photography, Bologna

Swiss National Library Collection

Collection des Beaux-Arts Jura

Kantonale Kunstsammlung Bern, Amt für Kultur Kanton Bern

FMAC / Fonds d'art contemporain de la Ville de Genève

RESIDENCIES

2023

Beirut, research residency Pro Helvetia

2021

London, Landis&Gyr Foundation

2020

Shanghai, Pro Helvetia

2013

"La Bande Vidéo" Québec CA / "Vidéographe" Montréal CA

2006

"Artdirekt" Berlin D

"Gil-society" Akureyri IS / "Skaftfell" Seydisfjörður IS

PUBLICATIONS

"Vitamin V: Video and the Moving Image in Contemporary Art" [Phaidon Editors](#), release 2025

"Going Public – Creating Visibility in the Field of Art" Sigrid Adorf, [Diaphanes Verlag](#), release 2025

"It Might Hurt, but Nevertheless. On some aspects of Gabriela Löffel's artworks" [DDA Genève](#), Boris Buden

"Sans titres" [La Couleurs des Jours 46](#) Élisabeth Chardon

"Performance" [Optica Montreal](#), 2021 Michele Robecchi

"Elemente des Wirklichen im Sinne einer Versuchsanordnung" [INSERT](#) 2021, Sigrid Adorf

"Écouter un Film" [Art&Fiction](#) 2020 Sigrid Adorf, Karine Tissot

"Spreadsheet #9" tria, independent publishing platform based Zürich and Beijing <https://www.tria.ch/Spreadsheet>

"Inside the Market" [Kunstbulletin 04.2020](#) Sönke Gau

"Gabriela Löffel désarme les lieux de pouvoir" [Tribune de Genève](#) 05/2020 Florence Millioud-Henriques

"Storytelling" modo Verlag 2020 Hg. Peter Stohler, [Grimmwelt Kassel](#)

"Offscreen -Wenn Bilder jenseits ihrer Ränder zurückblicken" [Fink Verlag München](#) 2019 Sigrid Adorf

"slightly slipping on a banana skin" Médiathèque 2016-2018 Genève FMAC 2018 B. Le Pimpec, I.Vuille

"Gabriela Löffel - Die Schweizerin erkundet in ihren Videos die Codes der Macht" [Artline 06.2016](#) Annette Hoffmann

"Die beunruhigende Abstraktion der Macht" [Kunstbulletin 06.2016](#) Brita Polzer

[Collection Cahiers d'Artistes 2015](#) Pro Helvetia Andrea Cinel

"Gabriela Löffel - Millefeuille" [Le Courrier 12. 2013](#) Samuel Schellenberg

"Bühnen für den Krieg" [Kunstbulletin 11.2013](#) Brita Polzer

"Setting" Citysharing.ch 2013, Merel van Tilburg <http://www.citysharing.ch/>

"La fiction comme expérience des réalités" [Kunstbulletin 05.2011](#) Françoise Ninghetto

VITAMIN V: VIDEO AND THE MOVING IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

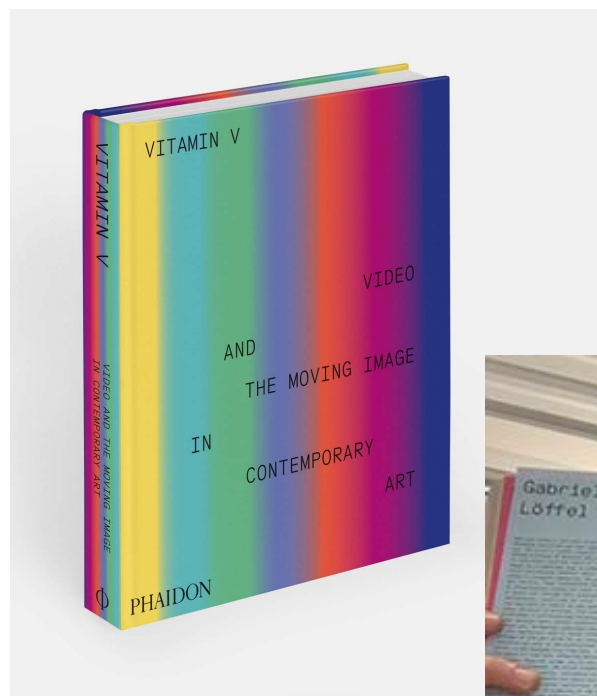
Phaidon Editors, with an introduction by Erika Balsom. 2025

Text by **MICHELE ROBECCHI**

Gabriela Löffel's film work investigates political and financial structures and their impact on contemporary society. The artist's lengthy research methodology is filtered through a process of technical and visual analysis conceived to individuate potential angles of representation. The final result is a closed-door mise-en-scène—a parallel and physically inaccessible dimension where the dialogue between Löffel's characters emphasizes the complexities of the subject material. These conversations leave gaps that are open to interpretation, arming the viewer with some comprehension of events yet, through their presentation as multiscreen installations, reinforcing the notion that an all-encompassing experience of reality is only possible when a single, linear narrative is discarded. This celebration of gray zones establishes a confrontational relationship with the current media landscape where constant availability and interactivity coexist with increasingly polarized stances.

One example of this operational mode is *Inside* (2019), an institutional critique of free-port areas for art storage. The work's audio recording was made at the International Artwork Exchange Center in the Shanghai Free Trade Zone, and then brought to the Geneva Art Free Port, reflecting Switzerland's key role in this global financial system. Due to restrictions on filming on the actual premises, the artist created the videos with the aid of virtual reality, overlapping the audio recordings with commentary by lawyers and historians on the structural conditions and geo-financial implications of these places. Instigated by Löffel to elaborate on the meaning of terms such as "territory" and "offshore," their observations are translated by an interpreter into English and Mandarin Chinese, introducing language as an additional performative element while questioning foundational aspects of the global art market and economy at large.

A similarly theatrical setup features in *5.752.414.468* (2020–21), where the Tempodrom, a 1980s Berlin music establishment, is the location of a casting call. The nine actors auditioning are asked to reenact excerpts from a script based on a juridical case between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Swedish energy company Vattenfall, which sued the German government for over five billion euros—hence the work's title—following Germany's attempt to phase out nuclear power. Löffel's multichannel film alternates sound bites from the public proceedings linked to the dispute with the actors' reenactments, literally blurring fiction and reality, an uncanny sensation exacerbated by the casting director's occasional instructions to the actors. The claustrophobic atmosphere that permeates the film goes unresolved, leaving questions about both the legal resolution of the case and the outcome of the casting process. This state of limbo effectively acts as a metaphor for the irreconcilable debate on the pros and cons of nuclear energy, as well as offering a sample of the artist's own distinctive brand of critical investigation.



"Ecouter un film"

Art&Fiction éditions d'artistes, 2020

extract from

"Inside the virtuality: Reality!" text by SIGRID ADORF

"He, the general manager assistant of the Shanghai Free Trade Zone International Culture Investment and Development Company, said: 'The artist has asked whether she can get in to have a look. Is it possible?' She, the person responsible for the construction site of the new International Artworks Exchange Center in the Free Trade Zone in Shanghai, said: 'No, it's not possible, I'm sorry. It's confidential now. It's not open to the public.'"

He said: The artist asked..., she said: No... Again and again the same linguistic forms are repeated throughout the discussion, which is being simultaneously translated into English by a young Chinese interpreter listening in on her earpiece. We, the viewers of the three-channel video installation *Inside* (2019), watch her concentrate, make notes, pause, then quickly and precisely produce her translated version of the discussion we can just hear going on in the background. *He says the artist is asking if she can just have a look inside, just to see, not take any photos, just a look through the window...* We are becoming retrospective witnesses of the persistent attempt to penetrate the Shanghai Free Trade Zone (FTZ) building, which is still under construction. But the artist always gets the same answer: No, unfortunately it is just not possible – for security reasons, the interior of the building is private. There is no media access, certainly not for foreigners.

The discussion, communicated many times over yet always remaining real, lies at the heart of the work. Recorded in situ as a simple audio file including ambient noises, the discussion is trans-

formed by the translation into mere information. At the same time, however, it also retains a proximity to the original situation, linked in time through the simultaneous translation. Visually, too, it operates using transitions and shifts: in the background behind the interpreter we see an out-of-focus grey building, its red lettering *Ports Francs* placing the image in Geneva, described by Hito Steyerl in her article *Duty-Free Art* (2015)¹ as the mother of all customs warehouses. The press too has repeatedly tackled the issue of customs warehouses, those dark treasure troves of international art dealers which grew in significance after the financial crisis of 2008. As transit zones in which luxury goods can be stored duty-free for unlimited periods of time, they constitute a refuge for the world's economic elite, protected by public law yet closed off from the public, in which tax evasion, profiteering and art theft are possible on a grand scale. ... *it's confidential...* On two screens side by side, *Inside* shows the meaningless outside of the whole: film clips of the warehouses in Geneva and Shanghai featuring very slow mechanical panning shots moving between the speaker's face and views of the buildings. Red lips, red lettering and red hoists in grey surroundings – empty exchanges underlining the concealment.

According to Bertholt Brecht in 1931, "The situation has become so complicated because the simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions. Reality as such has slipped into the

domain of the functional."² The realism problem that preoccupied Brecht has been neither resolved nor reduced, though. To "depict reality", as he expected "from an art with a completely different function in social life", something else is required.³ Brecht's idea of the need for art to "depict reality" because reality does not simply reveal itself, presents a question which has lasting relevance. "So there is indeed 'something to construct', something 'artificial', 'invented'. So art really is necessary. [...] For those who show only the experiential aspect of reality do not reproduce reality itself"⁴, he proclaims in an apodictic tone which might well be somewhat remote from Gabriela Löffel. But Brecht's open renouncement of the logic of depiction where the representation of reality is concerned seems to be a shared maxim. The transformational approach to the conventions of documentation which generally characterizes Gabriela Löffel's methods, works against our will to see reality simply as a given.

...



Exhibition "Inside" Cacy 2020

Photo : Claude Cortinovis

IT MIGHT HURT, BUT NEVERTHELESS On some aspects of Gabriela Löffel's artworks

The notion of alienation has faded into the background for quite a long time now. Once a powerful tool of social and cultural critique, it is rarely mentioned today, let alone analytically deployed to understand the world in which we live. And yet, alienation is what first comes to mind when we encounter the works of Gabriela Löffel.

Above all it shows itself in a certain claustrophobic atmosphere that surrounds her video installations. In fact, their dark spaces already create an uncanny feeling of enclosure. The screens, even when the projected videos are full of light or, much less often, when they display movements, do not really offer themselves as windows to an outside: be it the world of social life, history, politics, the realm of nature, or the sublime universe of aesthetic values. On the contrary, in the world of Gabriela Löffel's artworks we seem to be doomed to stay enclosed, with no prospect of breaking out. Her videos convey a total impression of interior, or better, an impression of total interiority. In addition, this world looks entirely artificial with no traces whatsoever of nature, and what is more, with no documentary experience of real human life either. Those men and women we see in the videos are in fact only roles performed by real humans in staged actions, even when they play themselves. One could easily replace them with robots without losing touch with reality. No wonder: there is no dirt, no waste whatsoever in this world. Everything is meticulously tidied up, clean, cold, almost sterile. It looks like a perfect order that has cleansed and purified itself from anything that does not comply with it.

The titles of two of Löffel's videos explicitly evoke the impression of enclosure, but, at the same time, reveal its rather ambivalent character: *Inside* (2019) and *The Easy Way Out* (2010). The first has a main character and a coherent story. In fact, it is this main character who makes the story coherent by simply doing her job. Her name is Ti Wang and she is an interpreter of Mandarin Chinese into English. The video connects two sites of global trade: the Free Trade Zone in Shanghai, or more concretely – within the Zone, the “International Artwork Exchange Center” that was at that time under construction – and The Geneva Freeport. The conversations in Mandarin Chinese recorded by the artist in Shanghai are retold in Geneva by the interpreter in English. The link between these two places, established through a twofold displacement – firstly, of a body in space and, secondly, a linguistic one, from one language to another – activates the real meaning of the story. The artist explores and reconstructs the logic of the functioning of global trade, finance and, in more general terms, the global economy, using the example of so-called free ports for art. This logic, however, implies – or shall we say, is based on – a secret. In her research Löffel discovers that she is not allowed to access the interior of these structures. Thus, the notion of “free” has nothing to do with free access. On the contrary, it points out a closure, a boundary to certain spaces. It excludes, it locks us out. The artist gives voice to judicial experts who disagree on the legal meaning of this boundary. It might mark an extrajudicial space, obviously a precondition for the functioning of the neoliberal global capitalism. Or it might demarcate more than a merely temporarily tax-free zone.

The story, however, does not end in the contradictions of so-called expert knowledge. Löffel reconstructs in virtual reality the space that experts are unable to properly define, and that the artist is prevented from entering, and lets the interpreter walk and talk throughout it. And yet, it would be completely wrong to understand this turn to VR as an artificial compensation for a failure in reality. It is true, this excessive amount of artificiality looks like overkill, like reification at its utmost – a space of geometrical bodies, shadows, structures of a perpetual construction – but the body and the voice of the interpreter are real and they dominate the space. So there is, nevertheless, a way out of the total inside. The labour of translation has not simply found this way, it is *itself* this way out.

In *The Easy Way Out* (2010) the labour of translation is explicitly placed in the limelight. This is, however, not its “proper” place, at least according to the commonsensical understanding of translation and even for much linguistic theory. Both, in fact, see translation as an auxiliary form of linguistic practice that takes place in the outer fringes of a language, where it meets other languages, or more precisely, over the abyss between two languages, with the task of bridging it. This is why translation is seen as something marginal and why translators and interpreters are supposed to do their job in the shadow of the “real” and “proper” use of language, in the humblest yet somewhat heroic manner. Eventually, they bring people together who have been fatefully separated by different languages, as the biblical myth of the tower of Babel wants us to believe. Or, they restore a broken communication, as is claimed by linguistic theories, which, echoing the Babel-trauma, blindly follow the paradigm of communication.

Nothing similar happens in Gabriela Löffel's artworks. The three-channel installation *The Easy Way Out* (2010) retells a conversation that took place between three people – an American soldier, a hotel owner and a car dealer – outside a US army training camp in Bavaria. This exchange is, however, retold by the three interpreters whom we see working on the three screens. But these screens are in fact windows akin to those found in cabins for interpreters, and usually installed at the sides of conference halls. They allow the interpreters to look out into the “real event” and also, most probably, to calm down their claustrophobic feelings. But Löffel displaces this gaze outside of the cabin and turns it into its inside. It is now the “real event” that looks into the inside of the labour of translation. Moreover, there is no “real event” outside of these cabins. It takes place within. Translation does not retell a story, it is the story being told.

But again: where does this tension between an “inside” and a “way out”, made explicit in the titles of the artworks, actually come from? It seems to indicate a predicament deeper and more traumatic than the feeling of being excluded which, in fact, can be, however imperfectly, explained by judicial experts and compensated for in virtual reality. And what finally is the role of translation here? If it is the story of the artwork, what does it actually tell us?

When in 1972 Fredric Jameson published his classic work *The Prison-House of Language* (with the subtitle: *A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*), its readers, impressed by the strong metaphorical meaning of the title, understood it – as many still do nowadays – in terms of language being a sort of prison. Those, however, who read the book more carefully, realized that the carceral metaphor in the title is never directly addressed in the text itself. The notion “The Prison-House of Language” is in fact taken from a wrong translation of the Nietzsche's aphorism, which Jameson used as the opening epigraph of his book: “We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit ...”¹ The problem is that in the German original the prison-metaphor does not appear at all. It rather reads “in dem sprachlichen Zwange” which was originally translated (by Walter Kaufmann) as “under the constraint of language”.² Jameson obviously adopted the notion “prison-house” from a secondary source without checking the original or the “official” translation. However, a mistranslation, as well as an over-translation, is still a translation.³ As such it encounters, on the one side, the limits of language – or the constraints, as in the Jameson's metaphor, where it hits the walls of its prison-house – for instance in the guise of the untranslatable. Yet on the other side translation facilitates what Deleuze and Guattari called the line of flight (*ligne de fuite*), the line of alteration, mutation, multiplication, or, what the authors of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* also call deterritorialization. It is not simply an act of fleeing incarceration but rather a radical opening to an outside – an act of ungating and unbordering of language that makes it flow freely into a new unlimited territory, beyond its mono- and homo-lingual enclosure. Language becomes again what it essentially is – a praxis and not an enclosed, autonomous entity, not a “dead, thing-like shell”. This is what Bakhtin called a discourse that got caught and reified in grammatical structures.⁴ It is like returning life to language, in a sort of continuation of its life. Here, it should be remembered that Walter Benjamin understood translation as *Fortleben*, a forthlife, or forelife of the original. For Emily Apter, translation is a medium in which Nietzsche's *sprachlicher Zwang* (constraints of language) manages to transcend itself, which is what makes translation “something of a jail-breaking trope.”⁵

“The way out”, which is searched for and found in the artworks of Gabriela Löffel, might be called “easy” because it is omnipresent in her artistic expression. Translation in the strict linguistic sense is only one of many lines of escape. But watching her videos we cannot help but constantly look for and find them. In the three-channel video installation 5.752.414.468 (2020-2021), which explores a legal case between the Swedish energy company Vattenfall and the Federal Republic of Germany, we hear a casting director telling one of the potential actors:

– “Really, do it with a Dutch accent. I think it changes things. Because it is a bit weird and not clear why he is speaking like that.”

Indeed, it is not clear and it is weird because the opacity cannot be completely erased from our linguistic praxis and because an absolute transparency – a perfect communication – is an illusion of a language understood as an enclosed, autonomous entity, the utopian ideal of a meta-language, not the reality of our natural languages. But again, this minor linguistic difference, this accent, is important. It might change things, it might become the way out, “an easy way out,” since it is a mere accent, a little effort of the tongue. It reminds us of our ability to outdo “the constraints of language”. And even more than that.

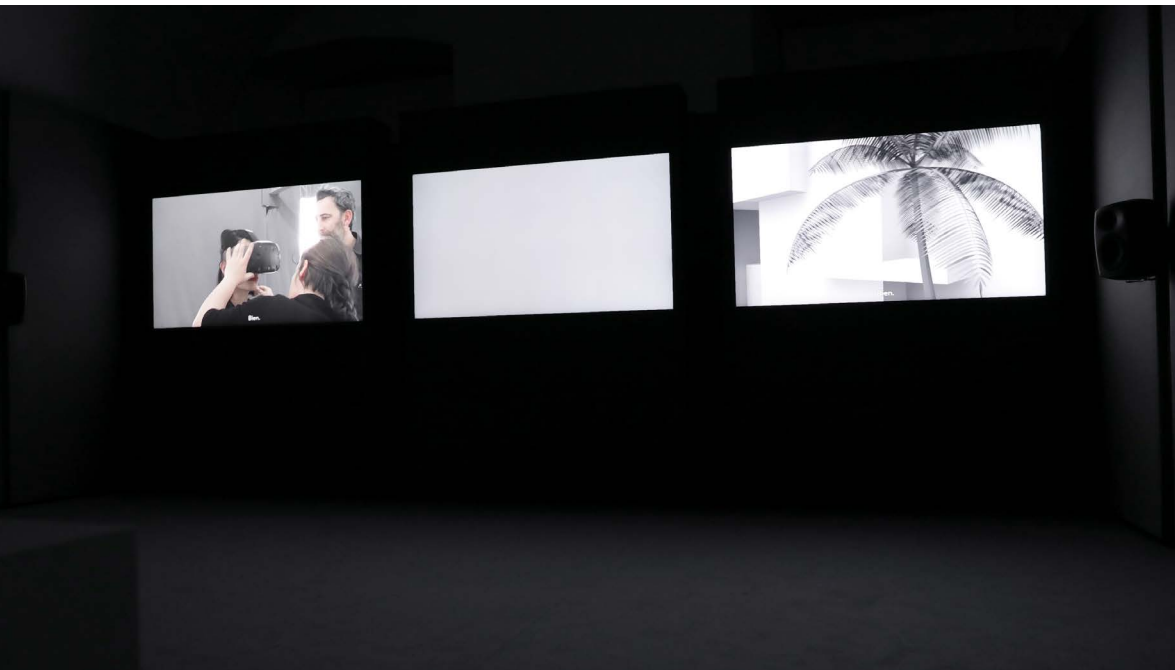
What is at stake in Fredric Jameson's critique of the structuralist “prison-house of language” is history itself. History is where the way out, whether easily found or not, leads to. And history, too, is where the art of Gabriela Löffel wants to bring us to. Out of the totalizing interiority of the existing form of life, which is killing us; out of the hermetically enclosed territory of post-historical-necessity, which neither sees nor can think of any alternative; out of our fatal alienation from both, from nature and ourselves; out of the prison-house in which we have incarcerated our languages and with them ourselves. Either we translate us into the future or the future will find its translation – its forthlife – without us.

Finally, the question we cannot avoid: who is the one who is bringing us these alarming messages? Who in fact is Gabriela Löffel? Is she an artist? And nothing else? Or, is she also a political activist, a linguist, a translator, a cultural critic, a theorist, a thinker ... yes, she is all of that and more. And what does she want of us? She wants to confront us with history, which is, for sure, not a pleasant experience. On the contrary. “History is what hurts,” as Fredric Jameson once wrote.⁶

"In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire" Kochi-Muziris Biennale India, 2022/2023

Exhibition text by **HERA CHAN**, curator and writer, Hong Kong/The Netherlands

The inside is cold and calculated, not made for living people nor artworks. Secrets guard the gate. Opacity is its governance structure. What cannot be imaged and is hardly imagined is the central focus of Löffel's work *Inside*. During a 2018 Pro Helvetia residency in Shanghai, Löffel sought to insert herself into the then-under construction International Artwork Exchange Center, part of the Pudong Free Trade Zone, in order to explore art storage and markets, global finance and special economic zones.



Exhibition "Inside"
Photo : Erika Irmeler

Later, the artist drew links between the Pudong Free Trade Zone and the Geneva Freeport – a sister port for the storage of art and valuable goods in Switzerland, the country where she was born. Löffel made audio recordings around both free ports. Working with the Mandarin-English simultaneous interpreter Ti Wang, the work channels the voices of numerous lawyers and historians from China and Switzerland to provide a glossary of terms such as 'territory', 'transit zone', 'economy', 'storage', 'cloud', 'investment' and 'technical'. Löffel was prohibited from filming in the free ports, and as the experts speak we hear Wang's voice, softly transferring this information between languages as she walks in a fictional free port, created in virtual reality. Each scene she walks into mirrors an abstraction of the defined term, with the Free Port hovering as a challenge to our representational values in filmmaking.

As the artist's interlocutor, Zian Chen, posits: 'This is the dual character of the freeport: both as a mountain fortress (Geneva) and as an oceanic harbour (Shanghai).' Between the mountain and sea are containers which we cannot help but want to peer inside of.

Andrea Cinel

«Avec le cinéma
on parle de tout,
on arrive à tout».

Quelques réflexions
autour du travail de Gabriela Löffel

en page 41

“Through
cinema we can
discuss every-
thing, achieve
everything.”

Reflections
on the work of Gabriela Löffel

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Reflections on the work of Gabriela Löffel

For more than ten years, Gabriela Löffel has been putting together a body of work through which she confronts her viewers with issues including the representation of violence, the trivialisation of war and the manipulation of debates for economic and political ends. Löffel is interested in situations where reality rubs shoulders with fiction and she manipulates cinema's codes and techniques to expose our society's contradictions. Always critical, yet not limited to one single political reading, her work teases out the layers of narrative and cites multiple references so as to create space for reflection. In this sense, the installations *Offscreen* (2013) → S. 2–23 and *Setting* (2011) → S. 24–39 are perfect examples of the complexity and commitment of her approach.

Setting enfold us in a spatiotemporal environment: its split screen alternates the absence of images – darkness – with sequences featuring sounds created using a wide range of techniques and objects by professional sound engineer Daniel Hug. An array of loudspeakers emits these sounds or soundscapes that he has put together; there is a loudspeaker at the centre of the installation, but more important is the voice recounting an extra's experience.

We are not on a film set here; instead, we are in Bavaria, immersed in the largest American military camp outside the United States, where soldiers train prior to leaving for Iraq or Afghanistan. Opened in 1910, the Grafenwöhr site was used by the German army until the end of the Second World War. After 1945, it became an American territory, whose location was of strategic importance during the Cold War. Today, this camp is particularly known as a place where conflict situations are staged by *civilians on the battlefield* – that is, extras hired to play Arab civilians – to train soldiers for combat.

After interviewing this extra, the artist called on a narrator to interpret her testimony. The narrator relates her experience in the camp: depending on the scenario, the extra might play the role of an Afghan or Iraqi woman, perhaps in an everyday situation, or perhaps during a simulated insurrection. However, the moment the helicopters and tanks join the action, the fear becomes tangible, almost real, even though this is a fictional war. These helicopters

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Andrea Cinel

trigger something in our minds which goes beyond factual reality and is more concerned with filmic memories. Remember for a moment the opening sequences of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, where the noise of the helicopter engines and – metaphorically speaking – the fan plunges us into the frenzied Vietnam War. Similarly, by drawing on the audio vocabulary of war films, the sound engineer weaves a second story which is integrated into what we see and what we hear between the audiovisual experience and our memories of film.

In contrast, *Offscreen* makes use of three projections and two audio tracks: the loudspeakers play an abstract soundtrack in dialogue with the images while a wireless headset enables the viewer to concentrate on the narrator's voice and stroll through the installation. Two screens show a series of projected cinema sets – interior ones using a green screen or a replica aeroplane, for example, and outdoor sets such as the reconstruction of Berlinerstrasse used by Polanski in *The Pianist*. Between the two screens, a wall projection follows a team of stuntmen rehearsing sequences taken from the narrator's story.

Löffel listened to a young Swiss man who, in 2011, took part in an all-inclusive package tour to Afghanistan and Iran: his trip demonstrates a new sector in the tourism industry, namely holidays in conflict zones. Again, the narrator's interpretation fictionalises the account and shows the power of storytelling. Accompanied by a guide and a bodyguard, this traveller discovers a curious reality: a notable feature of his trip through countries at war was a visit to a landmine museum. He stays in the highest-security hotels, yet also explores the most incredible landscapes that these countries have to offer. All the same, there is a moment in the narration where reality regains the upper hand over pretence and the story becomes history: our tourist finds himself at Bagram just as the operation to assassinate Bin Laden is launched.

From the design to the production to the creation of these installations, Löffel uses duplication and fragmentation. She fragments and multiplies viewpoints by interweaving narrative and personal accounts, created and evoked sounds, and direct recordings

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juxtaposed with images of film sets, so as to muddy the waters and encourage viewers to ask questions.

In this way, Löffel enquires into a documentary and fictional approach while starting from direct testimony to create an edited and scripted work that sets the narrator's interpretation alongside images and sounds. The artist uses the constant two-way flow between the subjective experience and a universal understanding of war to show us how difficult it has become to distinguish between the categories of reality, truth and fiction as we muse on current wars and the ways in which they are represented. In contrast to the—televised—Vietnam War and the—*imageless*—Gulf War, the artist chose not to show the 21st century wars, but to recount them indirectly, using the experiences of the tourist and the extra, via the narrators' disembodied voices—*voices off*. This refusal is an in-depth investigation into the value of mass-media images, and also a device that Löffel uses to criticise the ideological and economic aspects inherent in their production.

Her oblique and political representation of war is reminiscent of the installations *Raw Footage* (2006) by Aernout Mik and *Serious Games* (2009–2010) by Harun Farocki. The first of these revisits images of the war in the former Yugoslavia not broadcast by the media: Mik shows how extremely serious situations are intertwined with the *unstressed beats* of everyday life and criticises the spectacularisation of war. In *Serious Games*, Farocki took an interest in the new technologies used to train soldiers for combat: like video games, they use digital models to shape reality. Löffel's approach shuns the spectacular and analyses the devices used to prepare for war. She reveals the way in which our perception of war is born of fiction: somewhere between those who believe in objective photographs and those who see all images as a *fabrication*, she chose to film abstract sequences which forge links with the world of cinema.

In this respect, the *civilians on the battlefield* on the Grafenwöhr site are literally entertainment workers who evolve in response to a scenario, which is itself akin to an American blockbuster. These fictional people are the perfect symbol of the idea of *People Exposed*, *People as Extras*, because they are a metonymic representation of Arab populations, victims of

interventions by foreign armies. In effect, as Didi-Huberman puts it, people today are simultaneously *over-exposed*—as a result of mesmerising spectacularisation and media attention—and *under-exposed* thanks to the censorship practiced by the same media. In our opinion, Setting is a precise reminder that “under-exposure deprives us, quite simply, of ways of seeing that which should be at issue”.¹ In *Offscreen*, on the other hand, the trip reveals the Disneyfication of the contemporary world, the commodification and theatricalisation of every sector of the economy. Like Alice, bored by her sister reading a book *with no pictures or conversations*, the young Swiss man craves adventure and no longer distinguishes between the real world and the absurd: ultimately, his trip is a kind of cinematic experience in which the Iranians and Afghans he meets are the extras.

All the same, Löffel's relationship with the cinema is further-reaching than this. The two installations reprise such Hollywood elements as the studio and sets. They also draw on the work of film technicians and create something genuinely collective with them. In this respect, the sets at Babelsberg Studio take us on a journey into times and places that major American productions have made familiar to us. Berlinerstrasse reveals quite literally that cinema is all about façades. At the same time, the interior sets compel us to reflect on the resources and techniques used in film production: the *green screen* is the quintessential non-place in which all worlds are possible and can exist. By contrast, the replica aeroplane examines the clichés and the homogeneity of scenarios in film. Moreover, the sound engineer in *Setting* plays on the fictional pact that we live out at the cinema when we perceive the sounds accompanying the images on screen as real. In the same way, the stuntmen in *Offscreen* rehearse scenes taken from the young man's story against a minimalist set made up of cardboard boxes which could represent all sorts of objects.

Offscreen also uses cinematographic techniques: long tracking shots alternate with short sequences, overviews with details and fixed shots with reverse-angle shots: the editing defines the rhythm of the whole, which—as Coppola put it—is the true essence of cinema. We must go beyond

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*. *L'Oeil de l'histoire* 4, 2012, p. 15.

visual editing in Löffel's work, however, because the role played by audio arrangements is probably even more important here. In fact, despite appearances, the sound and original music in these installations are never incidental or used as padding; instead, they are compositions in constant dialogue with the narrators' voices and the on-screen images, or even sources that multiply the layers of narrative and critique.