

On Fire – Vulnerable Footage
at SALTS Birsfelden

11 April – 11 May 2019

Melanie Bonajo, Samira Elagoz, Juliana Huxtable, Carolyn Lazard, Leigh Ledare, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Tobias Madison, Markus&Markus, Shayok Mukhopadhyay, Christoph Schlingensief, Martine Syms, Johannes Willi, Sasha Wortzel with Morgan Bassichis

Curated by Benedikt Wyss with Boris Nikitin (Basler Dokumentartage) and Samuel Leuenberger (SALTS Birsfelden).

Liveliness, disease, and mortality are inscribed in the moving image. Presenting new and older film and video works, the exhibition "On Fire – Vulnerable Footage" investigates human vulnerability as a potential to represent, uncover, cope, interfere.

The exhibition is commissioned by the Basler Dokumentartage 19.

Opening: Thu 11 April 2019, 5pm
with Jannik Giger, Legion Seven and Awet Tesfazgi

Opening hours: 12–14 April 2019 Fr–Su 2–6 pm, after that until 11 May: Fridays 2–6 PM, Saturdays 1–5 pm and by appointment

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Opening night:

Jannik Giger
Mixtape (2019)
SD video, stereo sound

Legion Seven
Safe Passage (2019, excerpt)
The performance is an excerpt of a longer program

Awet Tesfazghi
Bsenki hasabat, eritrean song



Room 1

Tobias Madison

O Vermelho do Meio-Dia (2018)

Digital video, stereo Sound

48 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick

O Vermelho do Meio-Dia is a portrait of an activist group in the center of São Paulo. The production and temporality of the film, which was shot in August 2018 and edited in September and October, corresponds to a shift in political consciousness in Brazil that led to the election of right-wing extremist Jair Bolsonaro.

While during the shooting the possibility of this result seemed very unrealistic, the editing process in Rio de Janeiro was characterized by demoralization as it became clear that Bolsonaro would be Brazil's next president.

O Vermelho do Meio-Dia began as a conversation between the artist, members of the MEXA collective, choreographer Luciana Mugayar and curator Tobi Maier. A container was set up in the form of a film shoot and many other people took part, musicians, cameramen, homeless people and friends, etc.

Translation problems and misunderstandings were integrated into the process. The film became a way to hang around and think about whether it is possible to betray every single picture and still be honest or to give up this idea altogether and instead carry out an anti-fascist program against oneself.

Tobias Madison was born in Basel. He lives and works in New York and Zurich.



Room 1

Melanie Bonajo

Night Soil - Economy of Love (2015)

HD video, stereo sound

32 minutes 47 seconds

Courtesy the artist and AKINCI

Night Soil - Economy of Love is the second part of an experimental documentary trilogy that shows the great separation that most Western people feel from nature.

Economy of Love questions the relationship between body and mind, sensual desires and transcendental aspirations, with the aim of reflecting on the multitude of ways people understand themselves.

The video portrays a Brooklyn-based movement of female sex workers who see their work as an opportunity for women to regain power in a male-dominated pleasure zone; their mission is to rearrange sexual conventions and ideas about intimacy itself.

Melanie Bonajo's point of view is that sex is not obscene, but empowering; not pornographic, but an equally shared experience; Bonajo's vision is a contemporary spirituality and expectations of gender roles through playful, sensual and feminist-driven means.

Bonajo questions the complex relationships that exist inside and outside the natural world and the traditional notions that separate nature, people and technology. It deals with environmental activism and with how this activism is used illegally against global capitalism.

Night Soil—Economy of Love was awarded for the IFFR Tiger Awards (2016).



Room 1

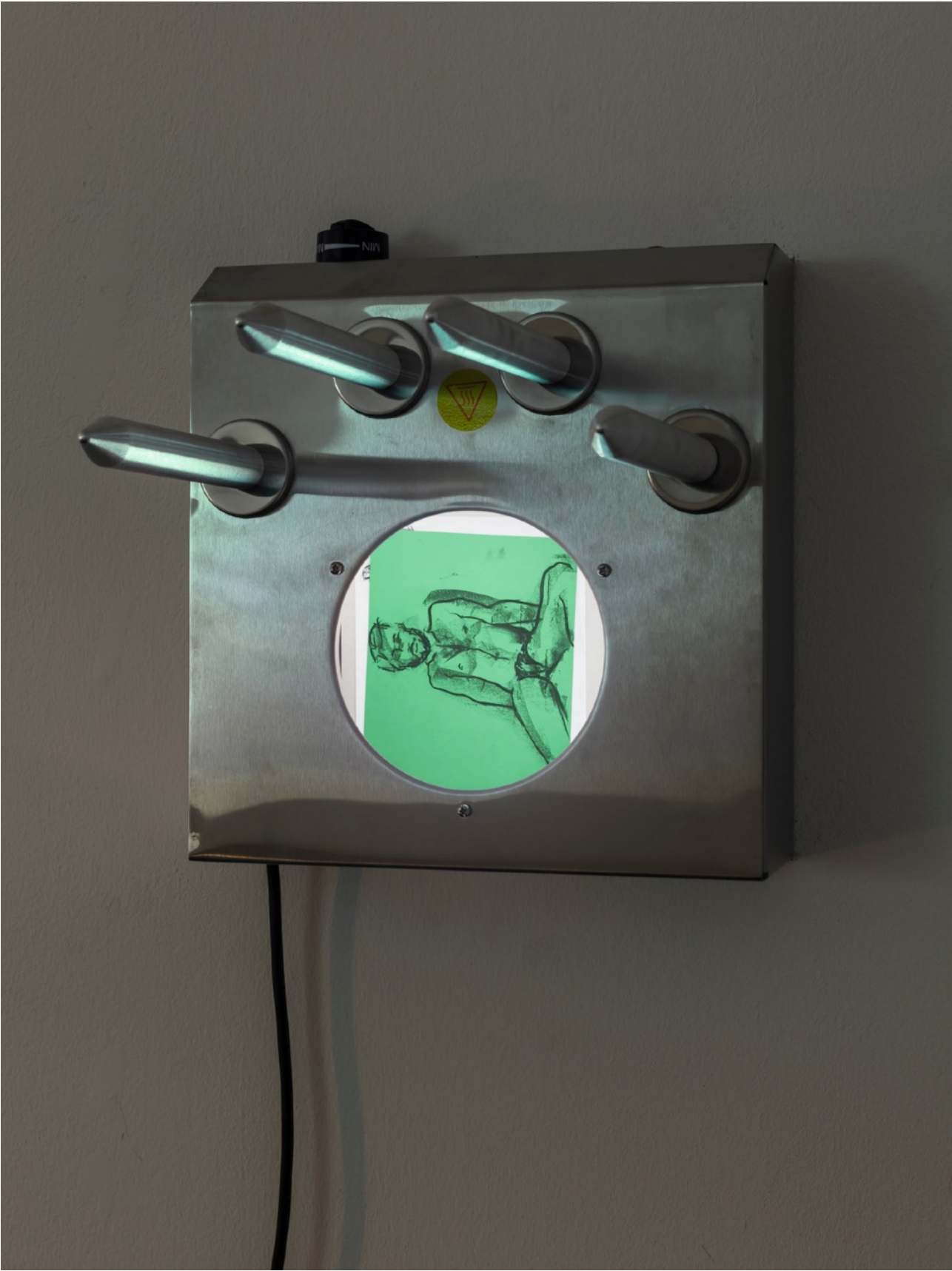
Johannes Willi
Fee Willi (2019)
Hot Dog machine
HD video
Courtesy the artist

Johannes Willi was engaged by the Basel Institute for Art Education to teach a drawing course. The artist offered the following: "I will pose as a nude model in front of the class. The students will draw me and sell me their drawings at the end of the course. Their price corresponds to my salary as a lecturer. The class teacher will guide the students during the course. The acquired drawings will merge into a body of work and become my property under the name *Fee Willi* as a work of which I am the author.

Johannes Willi was particularly interested in the feeling of what it felt like to stand naked in front of his class - to stage, try out and present oneself, as a vulnerable gesture of trust, an offer. Furthermore, *Fee Willi* addresses school mechanisms and plays with the hierarchies between teachers and students, as the artist cites Didier Eribon: "Only a break with the individuals' spontaneous ways of perceiving themselves makes it possible to understand the systematics of voluntary self-exclusion. This is especially true in the case of a self-chosen school career. To show them alternatives of action and perception, so that they not only rethink their role in the world, but even actively reshape it".

The title *Fee Willi* refers to Willi's works *Free Willi 1* and *2*, which also addressed the question of authorship. Through various subjects, from Beethoven's 5th Symphony to a body of work which concentrates on the concept of anthropocentrism, in which Willi worked together with a group of the Basel Carnival – Willi's work explores hidden histories, formal affinities, and secret connections.

Johannes Willi lives and works in Basel.



Room 2

Carolyn Lazard
Consensual Healing (2018)
HD video, stereo sound
13 min.
Courtesy the artist

Replicating simple animations of online EMDR videos used to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the video *Consensual Healing* feeds Octavia Butler's short story 'Bloodchild' (1984).

Consensual Healing allows your brain to go into dream REM states in order to renavigate traumatic memories. Lazard wrote the script as if a character from Butler's story was going through one of these protocols with a therapist.

In the story, humans are refugees on an alien planet, earth was destroyed. They live in refugee camps – allowed to stay on the planet because insect-like creatures called "Tlic" use their human bodies as hosts for growing larvae. The actual story is about a boy (they impregnate the men only) who is about to prepare to be impregnated by a Tlic and all the complicated feelings that come with that.

Octavia Butler, a black american science fiction writer, always insisted that this was a story about love even though everyone reads it as a story about slavery. Lazard uses the story as a metaphor for queer reproduction, slavery and the complexity of entanglement and dependency. These ways of relating can be good, but they can also be toxic.

"I'm interested in how to try to make work about trauma without the image of trauma, without the evidence of the wounded body. And so I wanted to make something that refused to produce an image and I wanted to make something that was about the attempt to repair trauma, not to depict it."

In 2018 Carolyn Lazard screened *Consensual Healing* in two-person exhibition with Juliana Huxtable at Shoot the Lobster, New York.



Room 3

Samira Elagoz

The Young And The Willing (2018)

Video installation, SD video, stereo sound

41 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Tinder is known to be used as a sex-hunting app. Samira Elagoz plays with this idea and turns it into something more innocent, a first kiss.

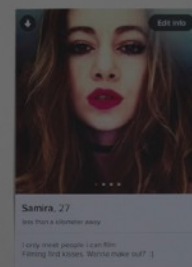
She uses the speed and immediacy of this hookup app and meets boys just for this moment. Age group 18-25 years. They shake hands, exchange names and kiss.

Elagoz' work is very personal and at the same time close to debates of sexual violence, male gaze or loneliness in the digital age. Elagoz does not use actors or performers and all subjects in her works are men.

According to the artist, art history is littered with the classic set-up of the male gaze, in which woman is the passive object/muse of male artists. So she decided to become an artist portraying men.

In recent years Elagoz has built up an extensive collection of first encounters organized through various online platforms such as Craigslist, Tinder and Chatroulette. It quickly became a research on the often ridiculous gender roles.

Samira Elagoz is a Finno-Egyptian artist who currently lives in Amsterdam. She has toured with her works in various international film, art and performance contexts.



Room 3

Lynn Hershman Leeson

*First Person Singular, the Electronic Diaries of
Lynn Hershman* (1984-1996)

Super 8 converted to HD video, stereo sound
75 minutes

Courtesy Waldburger Wouters, Brussels and
Basel

The video *First Person Plural, the Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman* is a long term diary film project. The artist provides an insight into her soul life and the struggle for self-acceptance by means of confessions on scars based on childhood memories, and how she deals with illness, the delusion of beauty, abuse and violence in the family.

Personal experiences are complemented by news reports from the time. In the tradition of feminist performance art of the 1970s, the film plays with the autobiographical construction of identity and questions the truth of one's own representation time and again.

The work is staged as an intimate DIY confession; it questions for whom and by what means we construct our self, where our space ends and where that of another begins. The title *First Person Plural* suggests a schizophrenic division of identity and refers to the multiplication of Hershman Leeson's image on the screen. Whether this multiplication is ultimately to be understood as a symptom of a personal or social trauma, however, remains unanswered.

Lynn Hershman Leeson is a pioneer of performance and conceptual art, new media and film since the 1960s.



Room 3

Leigh Ledare

Shoulder (2007)

Single channel video, sound

8 minutes 54 seconds

The Gift (2007)

Single channel video, sound

9 minutes 13 minutes

The Model (2007)

Single channel video, sound

4 minutes 10 seconds

Courtesy the artist

A part of Leigh Ledare's body of work forms an archive of the artist's relationship with his mother. At the age of fifty, Tina Peterson, former ballerina, and later stripper, approached her son to document her sex life for posterity. Ledare's portraits of his mother show subversive reactions, cases of sexuality and vulnerability – the artist suggests that the complex subjectivity of his mother does not result from the failure to perform a variety of roles, but from the occupation of an abundance of imagined modes, rooted in the performative. The continuous shifts between the performative and the real, and the public and the private are played out in three video works: *Shoulder*, *The Model* and *The Gift* (all 2007), exploring the agency carried as artist/muse, son/mother, archivist/performer.

The Gift was created from existing video footage originally intended for a commercial fetish video shot by Ledare's mother and two family friends. The tapes were sent to the artist on condition that he create something with the otherwise discarded material. Ledare responded by editing out all aspects of the filmmaker's original intention, making visible the real armature for the filmmaker's missing narrative. The video *Shoulder* starts with Ledare's mother casually talking about her current relationship, followed by Ledare offering a shoulder for her to cry on. When Ledare steps out of the frame, we're left with a woman seeming desolate, being left to contemplate what it means for Ledare to exit. In that sense its proposition encapsulates their entire relationship.



Room 4

Leigh Ledare

The Task (2017)

Single channel video, stereo sound

118 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Ledare filmed *The Task* during a three-day Group Relations Conference – a socio-psychological method developed by the Tavistock Institute in London, organized by the artist in Chicago.

Presented in seven chapters, *The Task* focuses on four group meetings, each involving 28 participants, three psychologists ("counselors"), six cameramen, three observers, and Ledare himself.

In addition to leading the film crew, Ledare gathered the participants and secured the collaboration of psychologists trained in the method. During a series of meetings, the group explores its own self-made social structure, an abstract task that allows participants to explore the identities, roles, desires and biases individuals import into the group, as well as the conscious and unconscious group dynamics.

Ledare introduces an important change: the presence of a camera team and the artist as observers and collaborators. This intervention shifts the orientation of the conference by drawing the attention of the members of the group to the effects of external forces. By complicating authority and boundaries between all members, including the artist, Ledare draws attention to power structures that regulate our relations with each other in a society where we are increasingly both observers and observed.

Spectators will be involved as participants negotiate subjective forces beyond the structured limitations of the self-made system.

Leigh Ledare creates work that raises questions of agency, intimacy and consent, transforming the observer into the voyeur of private scenes or situations dealing with social taboos.



Room 5

Christoph Schlingensief

U3000 (2000/2001)

SD video, sound

Courtesy Filmgalerie 451 und Nachlass

Christoph Schlingensief

Folge 1: "Tausend Theorien" – Diedrich

Diederichsen (2000, 43 minutes)

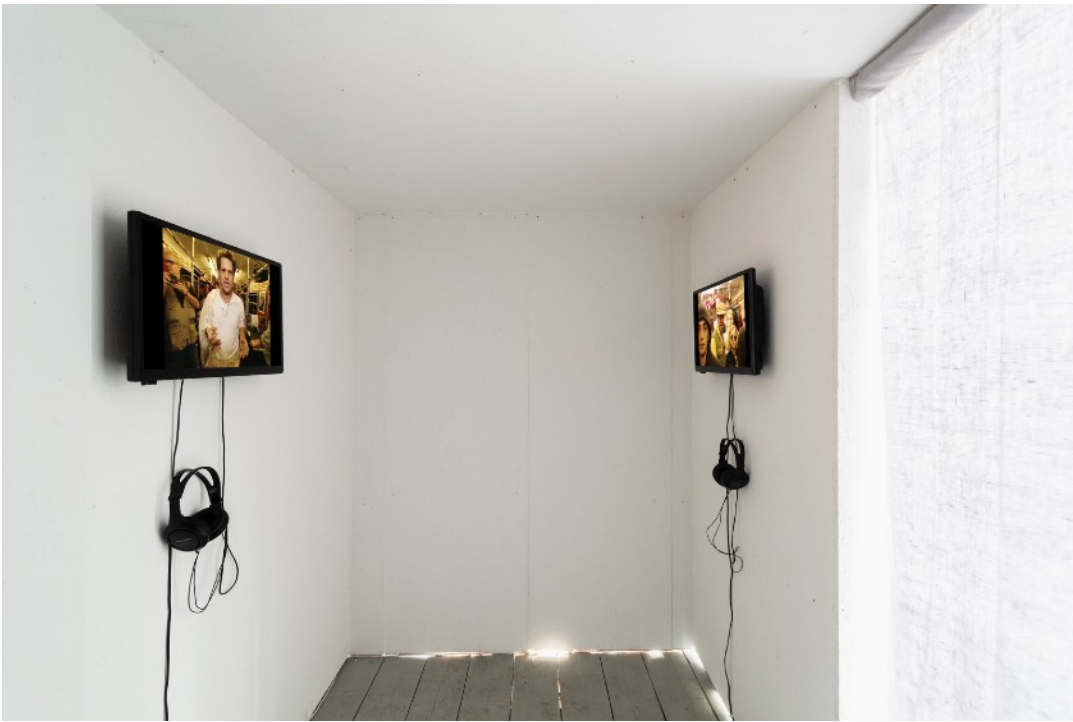
Folge 4: Folge 4: Krieg (2000, 29 minutes)

Folge 7: Afrika (2001, 29 minutes)

From a subway, Schlingensief shows the ugly grimace of the fun society in an eight-part program, broadcast by the music station MTV. Common broadcasting formats are cross-exercised. A socially needy family can qualify for participation by winning the ever-same outside bet, in order to make their private fate public in the moving subway in front of a camera and in the presence of passengers.

Childlike rounds of play give the family the opportunity to improve social welfare, critically watched by a jury made up of handicapped actors from Schlingensief's ensemble. Aged show greats are burned in a talk wagon as visual material and forced to show compassion for victims of the market economy. The bands of the MTV generation play in the dance wagon. "Incidentally," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* noted, "the civilization critic Schlingensief also criticizes television; criticism, for him that always means: showing how it is until it hurts. *U3000* is true reality TV. Schlingensief does not depict the reality of life, but that of television. Without wanting to conceal it, he reveals: This is how TV works. This is how manipulation takes place."

German artist, filmmaker and theater director Christoph Schlingensief moved ceaselessly between genres and disciplines, from experimental film, theater and opera, to installation, performance art, and social projects. Confronting the collective history of his native Germany, political fundamentalism and religious faith and fear, Schlingensief's radical, reactionary oeuvre challenged and critiqued.



Room 6

Juliana Huxtable

A Split During Laughter at the Rally (2017)

HD Video, stereo sound

21 minutes 41 seconds

Courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art

"When I was younger I was excited by the idea of going to a protest or a rally as an act to signify my relationship with or against a certain cause."

In the video *A Split During Laughter at the Rally*, a handful of protestors march through Bushwick and sing "No Trump, no KKK no fascist USA", while Huxtable narrates, in a blue-lipped close-up. Theories about the legacy of rhythm as revolutionary communication within black activism and its theft by vanilla agendas trying to suppress post-occupation protest interweave with speculative fictions about right-wing control of New York nightlife.

A Split During Laughter at the Rally was part of a solo exhibition in which Huxtable explored the delirium of online conspiracy theories, trolling, wild intersectionality, and the viral production of post truth. She developed an aesthetic to reflect the productive chaos of contemporary identity politics, with transsexual and post-generative activism.

"I feel a sense of political unrest, disgust, outrage, but I also feel eclipsed by the lack of clear ways to challenge that. I think protest is important and I go to protest but part of where this show is coming from was a feeling of inefficacy and almost illegitimacy in my ability to believe in the act of protest or something that would manifest. It feels impossible right now. I don't know what a radical aesthetics looks like. I don't know how that would manifest. [...] I don't know what the contemporary aesthetics of leftist movement are, outside of the normal aesthetics."

Juliana Huxtable is an artist, poet, performer and DJ born in Texas, living in Brooklyn, New York.



Room 7

Sasha Wortzel

We Have Always Been on Fire (2018)

HD video, stereo sound

5 minutes 56 seconds

Courtesy the artist

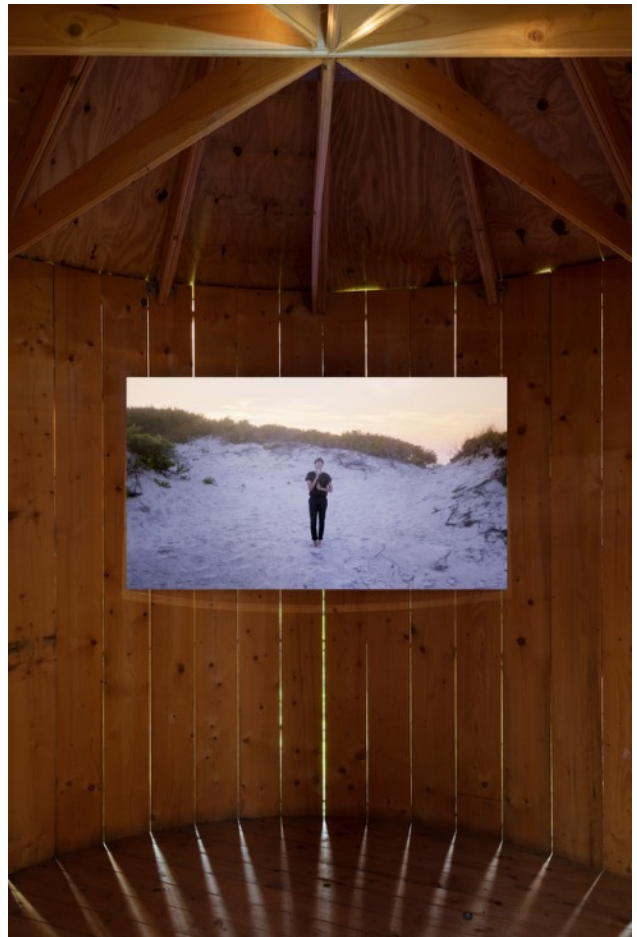
"I hate to talk about Trump, but so many people are thinking that everything is so much worse now. But I think for a lot of us, the veil has just been lifted." Sasha Wortzel

The video *We Have Always Been on Fire* traces a queer lineage and engages with loss. Its repeating lyrics — We have always been on fire / We have always been let down / We have always been an island — assert how the queer community has both always been under attack and existed as a safe haven.

Despite the sense of collectivity in the song, the film opens with Bassichis singing alone in the dunes at Cherry Grove. As the camera moves through the seaside landscape, the lines between past and present blur with an interjection of clips from the late Nelson Sullivan's video of Fire Island from July 4, 1976. Preserving some of the only video recordings of the era's queer nightlife, Sullivan captures Fire Island during the halcyon years right before the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While his full video features beachgoers in their homes, on the boardwalk and in the disco, Wortzel selects solitary moments from Sullivan's trip that echo her contemporary footage.

"The recognition that things have always been bad and might not get better opens space for creativity, imagination, organizing, and maybe even, grounded hope." Morgan Bassichis

Sasha Wortzel is a New York-based artist and filmmaker originally from Florida. Blending documentary techniques and narrative storytelling, her films, installations, and performances explores how structures of power shape our lives around race, gender, sexuality, and place.



Room 8

Shayok Mukhopadhyay

Green Room (2019)

Tarp, roof battens, HD video, stereo sound

4 minutes 33 seconds

Courtesy the artist

We are in the dressing room of the New Conquerors, a gajon troupe. Gajon is a form of travelling theatre popular in rural West Bengal, India. The company puts up 200 performances a year, each night in a different village.

Dressing room and stage are constructed of bamboo and tarp, the stage becomes a bedroom, the covering of a banana grove or darkness suffice as a bathroom. Such conditions make it difficult to involve women; moreover, Gajon deals with issues that would be unacceptable to women, even though they are an enthusiastic part of the audience.

This opens up a space to Gautam and Buddha who have been engaged for female roles. Buddha and his friend have been together for years. Gautam has a wife and a son. When the theatre is travelling, they have opportunities to be unfaithful. It is a struggle to reconcile their two worlds – home and street. They will not find satisfactory solutions for living in a heteronormative society. But they create an ambiguous space for themselves, in a country where gay sex has been a crime since colonial times.

The dressing room is the hub of Gajon life. This is where arguments (over money lent and not repaid, over lines misspoken) start among the actors, where men from surrounding villages crowd to ogle at them, hungry to observe "women" at close quarters that a nominally conservative society does not permit.

Shayok Mukhopadhyay grew up in Kolkata, India and graduated in Documentary Photography at the International Center of Photography in New York.



Room 9

Martine Syms

Incense Sweaters & Ice (2017)

Three-channel video and sound, wall painting

69 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ

Incense Sweaters & Ice follows the movements of Girl, Mrs. Queen Esther Bernetta White, and WB (“whiteboy”) through different phases of watching, being watched and remaining unseen.

Using Hollywood film tropes and the visual languages of social media video platforms like Vine and Instagram, the film follows in the long cinematic history of using camera motion to create the illusion of subjectivity. Intertwining technique and narrative, the film drives at the tension between surveillance and self promotion that pervades our many avenues of self documentation and broadcast.

Shot in cities that reflect the route of the Great Migration (Los Angeles, Chicago, and Clarksdale, Mississippi), the video employs distinct camera techniques that foreground the camera itself as a central character. Each scene marks a shift of viewpoint in relationship to the action, illustrating the impossibility of the neutrality of the camera’s gaze.

We follow Girl closely, watching as she gets ready, waits, kills time, reads, and flirts. In each scene, the camera performs different roles: boyfriend, audience, surveillance camera, documentary maker, director. In one scene, the camera is recast again as Girl relaxes reading in the apartment. In another, a wide, fixed frame transports us to a family dinner and surveils her hotel room as she gets ready.

Martine Syms is an American artist based in Los Angeles who works in publishing, video, and performance. In 2007, she coined the term “conceptual entrepreneur” to characterize her practice. Her self-identified title sustains one of her main ideas: self-determination through a sustainable institution, which stems from her interest in independent music and black-owned businesses.



Room 10

Markus&Markus
Gespenster (2019)
HD video, sound
4 minutes 19 seconds
Courtesy the artists

On the 1st of April Markus&Markus met Margot for the first time. On May 22nd, they were at her funeral. In their theatre work "Ibsen: Ghosts" they worked with a protagonist who planned her own death with a swiss euthanasia organisation. The theatre collective accompanied the 81 year old woman in Düsseldorf during her last days, organizing her things, the last doctor appointments, farewell parties and finally on her way to Basel. All this they captured with their camera.

The video presented in the exhibition shows a new compilation of this material. The soundtrack is a collection of conversations documented in the 80 hour footage. And the pictures show two visits at the cemetery – once with Margot at her future grave, and then once again for her funeral.

"The emotional effect does not arise from the documented fact that an 81-year-old woman has decided to commit suicide or that the viewer watches her lying on her sickbed at the end opening the deadly infusion. Rather that Margot spent her last weeks with a collective like Markus&Markus." Andreas Tobler, theatre critic. But as radically as the artists pursue their goals, they allow themselves to be irritated, touched and wounded along the way. The roles of the fools they passionately play are both a protection from too much emotion and a way of openly admitting weaknesses.

"As long as people talk about me and my story is being told, I am not really dead." (Margot)

Markus&Markus is a German theatre collective. Their work can be described as a form of "guerrilla documentarism" being intimate, obsessive and ironic at the same time. The performance "Ibsen: Ghosts" is part of an Ibsen-trilogy.









Photography:

All exhibition views by Gunnar Meier,

except: Tobias Madison, 3rd photo, and Sasha
Wortzel, 2nd photo, by Nicolas Gysin.