

**BPA// Exhibition 2024**

KW Institute for Contemporary Art

16.11.2024–05.01.2025

# Half-Light

**Jan Berger** Günseli Yalçinkaya **Göksu Kunak** Defne Ayas  
**Hamlet Lavastida** Coco Fusco **Arash Nassiri** Théo Casciani  
**Natis & Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth** Alper Turan **Adriana Ramić** AA Cavia  
**Josefine Reisch** Nele Kaczmarek **Xavier Robles de Medina** Zippora Elders  
**Simon Speiser** Lisa Long **Zhiyuan Yang** Zaina S.

KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Adriana Ramić

Text by AA Cavia

Class 304: Chrysomelidae, 227 examples.

There is a certain kind of image that speaks in hushed tones, with some hesitation, and only after much prompting. To be concerned not with the unutterability of a gesture so much as with the effability of a condition just as it grips us, a condition that is also a predicament: the problem of the inhuman, which is in turn a praxis confronted by an impasse—a chasm presented by the imperative to measure time, a time without becoming.

During a recent episode marked by exhaustion, an image came to him—suddenly and without warning—of an ossuary of crushed beetle carcasses, exhumed in preparation for burial, mindless iridescent husks glinting in the sunlight. Without pause or breath, in this unbroken chord a thought contains a tomb for 50,000 scarabs.

Language is a carapace that shields its bearer from a violence it cannot name. How can language be at once a shell, a shelter, and a vessel? A husk, a house, and a hull. How can it be all these things and still perform its many supposed functions—to place us in a world, to construct an index of being, to ground the symbols that we etch compulsively—without disintegrating into mere experience?

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word “pain” means, must I not say that of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?

Well, everyone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!—Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a “beetle”. No one can ever look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box.

One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless? If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all; not even as a Something: for the box might even be empty. No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.<sup>1</sup>

It is not known how many epochs will elapse before the entropy loss stabilizes. Some agents have not set foot in the house of language, they carry it on their backs, yet others are compelled to navigate by it, as if by a moonlit raft buoyed by oceanic currents, one might stammer ashore.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 106 (§293).

//

*Käfer* has, as its root, to chew or gnaw (*kauen*, *nagen*) by contrast with the old English *bitela* and *bītan* (*to bite*). We should not ask how it is that we attain a grasp of concepts, but rather how concepts have a habit of seizing us. Abduction by language is, as with most cases of forced displacement, a matter of seeing but not being seen.

Class: 304 (Leaf Beetle), Feature: 1941.

This feature is core for class Leaf Beetle; it is the third most salient feature for class Leaf Beetle. Below, we display the five Leaf Beetle images that most highly activate the feature, along with the neural activation map (heatmap) and feature attack for each image. These are the same as the images shown to crowd-workers to annotate this class-feature pair.

Perhaps a private language is no language at all, but a boundless self-referential maze, less a hall of mirrors than a laboratory experiment with no exit, a condition marked by decision after futile decision. But then the question would remain—by which operation might the beetle escape its box? For they surround us with their intermittent thrum, groping their way in plain daylight.

Engholzttag unter netznergivem Himmelblat. Durch Großzellige Leerstunden klettert, im Regen, Der schwarzblaue, der Gedankenkäfer.	Latewoodday under Netnerved skylleaf. Through bigcelled idlehours clammers, in rain, the blackblue: the thoughtbeetle.
--	---

Tierblütige Worte drängen sich vor seine Fühler. <sup>2</sup>	Animal-bloodsoming words crowd before its feelers. <sup>2</sup>
--	--

The figure of the detached scientific observer lurks like a shadow cast on a screen, extending not so much a naturalism—or even a realism—of the image but evoking instead a set of gestures akin to Nathalie Sarraute's notion of a "tropism"—a spontaneous inner movement of the mind, mirroring "that of the movements made by certain living organisms in response to outside stimuli, like light."<sup>3</sup>

Paul Celan insists that poetry is only possible in a mother tongue, but what if a mother's tongue is an umbilical cord, a sentence abruptly

<sup>2</sup> Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 33.

shorn at birth? What if one writes instead to corrupt a language which is not one's own? What if one observes only to disrupt a treacherous present? The present is perturbed by the very act of seeing, this is the only way to gather ruptured time.

I pin down sudden instants that carry within them their own death and others are born—I pin down the instants of metamorphosis and there's a terrible beauty to their sequence and concurrence.<sup>4</sup>

These episodic movements, distal flutters of the psyche, are a spectral presence that encircles the image, mirroring the organism's own minute choreography. There is no objectivity to be found in this assiduous ritual but rather a deep psychological fact: seeing doesn't render meaning but instead induces a state of grasping, an experiment that fumbles its attempt at grounding the observer.

Does the carapace of language really shield us from a profound contingency? There are acts of catastrophic forgetting that threaten and press on every instant. A studied sequence of tropisms green the ashen petals of a funereal ginger lily. Minutiae of a mandible that prods, of limbs that continually fumble, of feelers that probe and grasp ... the thoughtbeetle is besieged by a crimson language.

**Adriana Ramić** is an artist based in Berlin. Her work has been exhibited widely, including at SculptureCenter (New York), Wschód (New York), Kim? Contemporary Art Centre (Riga), and inge (New York). She will have forthcoming solo exhibitions at David Peter Francis (New York) and Switchboard (Berlin) in 2025.

**AA Cavia** is a writer and researcher. His first book, *Logiciel* (2022), is published by &&&.

**Poster** Adriana Ramić, *With respect to the body skeleton*, video still, 2024  
Courtesy the artist

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
www.berlinprogramforartists.org

<sup>3</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion* (Calder & Boyars, 1967), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (New Directions Press, 2012), 7.







# Arash Nassiri

Text by Théo Casciani

Brainrot

There’s what I see and what I understand. I mean: I see a lot and understand too little. Take this color, for instance. This flawless orange, perfectly sharp, fading to white as it descends, this orange whose slight nuances appear clearly to me but that I struggle to interpret, unable to know what it reminds me of most, whether it’s a sunset, a polluted sky, the credits of a simulation, or, more simply, the first signs of a fire, the traces of the blaze ravaging the city.

I get closer to this inferno and notice a stand of eleven houses set on a long platform. The ground is floating in space. Sound becomes an ongoing echo. The shade hasn’t changed but each time the screens hanging from the top of the buildings light up, one after another, the structure flickers. I watch the pavilions wondering if they’re miniatures, sculptures, or pedestals for these moving images. I start to follow the connecting cables that trickle down to a small hard drive. I guess this is where everything is stored.

It looks like any other residential neighborhood, the kind you find all over the world, with the same neatly lined-up houses, the same artificial, impersonal, and systematic design, the same way of sparking comparison straight out of a game of differences. I can feel the burning asphalt under my feet and hear the neighbors screaming at their kids. I’ve no idea where I am. I look from side to side, searching for clues, but find nothing better than scratch marks on the walls and spider webs woven into the ruins.

These children’s houses have been designed since the early 1980s by the Japanese brand EPOCH Ltd., a company specializing in toys, figurines, and video games. When this model was conceived, its creators were primarily intent on imitating the canons of individual architecture found in the British countryside, with their small gardens, sloping roofs, and two-storey construction. Nearly fifty years later, although the product is no longer part of the best-sellers and can be found mainly on second-hand sites, it is still manufactured in factories in the suburbs of Tokyo.

I try to scan the facades, tracking their surfaces to get my bearings but, again, I can’t make out anything more than their light gray, cold, and ordinary appearance, which suggests that all these modules actually come from the same creature. Despite the jumble of references and irregularities that bring them to life, they form a single camouflage, a great trompe-l’œil that homogenizes the whole panorama, like the old graves of a cemetery or the dead zones of a multiverse, sepulchers or avatars, in human memory or in the virtual world. There’s nobody around me.

I look up as night falls and, little by little, scarcely having had time to notice, the neon signs stand out in the evening gloom. The messages scrolling by in Farsi evoke a globalized aesthetic, the kind you’d find in old-fashioned anticipation imagery or futuristic snapshots

of great metropolises. Even though I don’t understand any of these sentences, even though I’ve never set foot in Iran, I tell myself I must be wandering through an alternative version of Tehran, the uchronia of a city that could have claimed its own modernity.

I can’t remember how I came across this, but for several months now, I’ve been interested in an Internet culture phenomenon known as brainrot. To put it simply, this term refers to both poor-quality digital content and the harmful effects attributed to it. I’m thinking about this as I stroll along the streets that separate these houses, with their dynamics of distortion, idealization or imagination, starting to feel sick from walking here because in the end, beneath this universal veneer, it’s all just another liberal landscape.

I’m not sure if I’m observing or making this up but that’s beside the point. Even if it’s only fiction, it will at least unravel the mysteries of this town and solve its enigma. I continue to meticulously survey each of its nooks and crannies, and once the initial sensation of splendor has passed, the rubble gradually rises up before my eyes: earthenware with surprising motifs, postcards showcasing European mythologies, colonial-inspired books piling up like so many witnesses to the Western influence that Iran has endured over the centuries.

I feel dizzy. I go deeper into this environment full of dead pixels and corrupted data. I hurt myself but I don’t feel any pain. The city stretches out into the twilight like an unfinished collage. Information comes in successive, jerky waves, cutting my breath short and saturating my mind with toxic thoughts. I am increasingly confused to the point of feeling like I could be capable of the worst. I navigate through the simulation, finally realizing that the houses are nothing more than the remnants of an imported culture, the stigmata of a failed transplant.

It’s impossible to know where I stand. I’m overwhelmed by these anonymous, viral images, these low-quality files that pile up, affecting my emotions as much as my movements. I guess that’s brainrot. Slogans and selfies multiply. Archives mingle with prophecies, threats with promises and desires with fears. I dig my hand deep into my pocket, stroke my weapon and start walking along the network of cables that connect all the houses, sometimes retracing my steps so as not to lose the thread, then slowly but surely making my way towards the hard drive.

I stand motionless in front of the box, spend a moment staring at its blinking lights, and suddenly, in a fit of madness or amusement, I don’t know, in search of an outlet or affirmation, I draw my lighter and ignite the electric device to set the whole city on fire. The second the blaze begins to spread through the streets, the flames fill the horizon with a seamless orange and finally covers the sky with a color I both see and understand.

Translation by Alice Butterlin

**Arash Nassiri** is an artist who was born in 1986 in Tehran, Iran, and lives and works in Berlin. His recent work deals with the heritage of Western influence on Tehran. In 2024, he undertook a research residency in Los Angeles for a new commission that will be presented at Chisenhale Gallery (London) and Fondation Ricard (Paris) in 2026. He exhibited at Capc Musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux and Octo Production in 2023, at Metabolic Rift in 2021, and at Palais de Tokyo (Paris) and Flax Los Angeles in 2018. His video works have been screened at New Directors MOMA and the Berlin Biennale.

**Théo Casciani’s** first novel, *Rétine*, was published by Éditions P.O.L in 2019. Their work has been translated into multiple languages and has received numerous prizes. Casciani is currently working on *Insula*, a novel to be published in 2025 in French and English.

**Poster** Arash Nassiri, *Untitled*, 2024  
Courtesy the artist

Supported by

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
www.berlinprogramforartists.org







to the car crash as a site of revelation and rupture, depicting it as a pressure-cooker explosion that triggered a twisted form of a libera- tion of “state secrets.” With Kunak’s dissection of the crash and its role in igniting our collective desire to uncover hidden truths—scratching the surface to reveal shadowy connections—we are also treated to a dose of Cronenbergian erotic charge in the making. An arousal by a political murder caused by a rear-end collision with a truck, anyone? As if the shards of mediated realities around this crash are to break the fourth walls, landing as erotically charged crystallizations in a TV crime drama!

One moment, we’re in a car showroom, with reps glorifying the gleam of metallic beauty under bright lights, the vehicle standing as a sculptural testament to advanced engineering. In another, we witness hyper-trained muscles morphing into the machine, the human form stretching into a hyperreal extension. One moment, we’re captivated by an exquisitely controlled pole dance; the next, it’s a sports event projected on-screen—hyper-normative national holiday performances from Turkey, showcasing disciplined bodies embodying rigid societal codes around sexuality and gender, sharply contrasting with the fluid, queer expressions unfolding on stage. And then, we’re fed a stretch of footage from *32. Gün*, the long-running Turkish documentary program that dissected political scandals, complete with testimonies and evidence about those involved. Kunak creates vibrant matter by acupuncture the pressure points of heteronormative dominance to release the valves of oppression. Their directorial toolbox intentionally incorporates “glitches” as productive sites of exploration. The car accident serves as the central glitch, but beyond this, the glitch becomes a conceptual strategy for questioning everything—from social norms to technological constructs.

Especially with authoritarian forces and their tentacles prolifer- ating globally, Kunak’s intentional exploration of politics of concealment and erasure feels more timely than ever. They peel away the layers of dominant narratives surrounding control, state secrets, desire, and violence—first as a storyteller, then by reclaiming the industries of flesh and desire as integral to creativity. Kunak thrives in bodily strength and sculptural control of the body. Diverging from regulated timelines, the hybridity of desires they showcase transcends any state-imposed disciplinary logic, unleashing an intersectional matrix of interconnectedness across the micro- and macro-political land- scapes of our polycrisis-ridden lived experience. Kunak also skillfully avoids the pitfalls of hyper-production, instead embracing a distinctly relaxed, DIY aesthetic. That said, the casual interactions on stage are imbued with an intensity that feels far from incidental. Moments of energy and dynamism ignite as Kunak’s kinetic direction, sharp editing, and the charged interplay of protagonists and music flourish in this raw, stripped-down environment. At Sophiensaele, we as audiences seamlessly transition from one space to another—for instance, from

the auditorium to the theater’s physical courtyard, where a white balloon pops, an orgiastic concert erupts, and another pole dance begins amidst the raucous pulse of music. The structures of normative time and space are forced wide open, making space for camaraderie, kinship, and pleasure.

Kunak’s work, marked by a searing edge, generous collective spirit, and intellectual rigor, spans video, performance, and installation. Their practice reflects an ongoing, committed engagement with art history, gender studies, queer theory, and the real-world issues of freedom, all deeply inspired by their land and its entanglements. Their offering is so embodied that I only wish to quantum leap with them into their new worlds.

—DA  
September 29, 2024, Berlin–Istanbul flight

**Göksu Kunak** is an artist, researcher and writer, born in 1985 in Ankara, Turkey. Kunak is influenced by late modernities, (self)-censorship, non-Western drama- turgies as well as score-based performances of the 1960s and ’70s. Kunak has performed and exhibited in Berlin at Sophiensaele, Neue Nationalgalerie, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, HAU Berlin, and Number 1 Main Road, and internationally at Kaaitheather (Brussels), Pilevneli Gallery (Istanbul), Performa Biennial 2023 (New York), Bergen Assembly, and DeSingel (Antwerp).

**Defne Ayas** is a curator committed to forging hybrid alliances with art and artists, with a focus on reimagining cultural platforms and formats—be they aesthetic, geographic, communal, or spiritual. Her work explores how artists can create future vectors for reality, politics, and representation.

**Poster** Göksu Kunak, *KAZA (The Accident)*, 2023  
Courtesy the artist

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
www.berlinprogramforartists.org

How does the intensity in the soundtrack for *Blue in the Face* (1995) prismatically relate to both Frank Sinatra, the quintessential veneer archetype for the cozy interplay between the mafia and the entertainment industry, and Mezzeker, a cultural phenomenon in 1990s Turkey, consisting of a trio of belly dancers who concealed their faces with demi-veils while basking in their undulating body movements? How does a black Mercedes S600—symbolizing status and aspirational mojo—also serve as a front for Germany’s defense industry and its ongoing involvement in global military conflicts? What do its windowpanes and doors have to do with controversial former U.S. Secretary of De- fense Donald Rumsfeld’s infamous statement of “known unknowns,” a phrase steeped in calculated haute ambiguity that was wielded to justify America’s military interventions in our beloved region, home to star tribes, whose conflicted diasporic resonances reverberate throughout Germany to this day? To what extent can surface-level beauty truly reconcile itself with concealed, unsavory realities? Isn’t this the very crux and story of art, its history and institutions?

As we settle in the full-house-Sophiensaele in Berlin’s Mitte, we are handed sunflower seeds—a common snack in Turkey during long hours of a spectacle, perhaps a movie, or even a casual conversation. It’s a familiar ritual, a small comfort, though the shells inevitably will pile up as litter. On stage, lies parts of a car—a recurring central motif in Kunak’s work. “Cars are emblematic of freedom and power, but they also represent a kind of danger and vulnerability. They are objects that people are emotionally attached to, and that gives me a point of entry,” Chris Burden once echoed. But in the ilk of court-approved art historical references, Kunak’s Valie Export 5.0-esque energy has yet to hit our haptic spectrum.

Anticipation builds.

Göksu Kunak’s *INNOCENCE* (2024) delves into the Susurluk car crash-turned-scandal that rocked the Turkish national consciousness like dynamite, exposing the intricate web of collusion between the state, politics, and mafia. It unearthed the Byzantine ties between organized crime and the deep state, with roots tracing back to the Cold War era, along with an expose of the joint efforts of ultranation- alist groups, Turkish intelligence operations, and the United States to keep the Soviet agendas and influence at bay. What’s new today, I ask? With a Cold War renaissance in the twenty-first century, theseentan- glements, now dressed in new clothes, continue to shape our lives and imaginations—Kunak is on the case.

As soon as they take the stage, Kunak begins deconstructing this almost-historical-but-not-quite event from 1996, unraveling the ambiguity embedded in the political narratives of the 2000s. Is she an artificially wired language model? An actual TV presenter? Is the car itself? Perhaps the crash embodied? Kunak zooms in and out

# BPA// Exhibition 2024

## KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Göksu Kunak

Text by Defne Ayas



# Göksu Kunak

Text by Defne Ayas

**Knowns and Unknowns**

How does the intensity in the soundtrack for *Blue in the Face* (1995) prismatically relate to both Frank Sinatra, the quintessential veneer archetype for the cozy interplay between the mafia and the entertainment industry, and Mezdeke, a cultural phenomenon in 1990s Turkey, consisting of a trio of belly dancers who concealed their faces with demi-veils while basking in their undulating body movements? How does a black Mercedes S600—symbolizing status and aspirational mojo—also serve as a front for Germany’s defense industry and its ongoing involvement in global military conflicts? What do its windowpanes and doors have to do with controversial former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s infamous statement of “known unknowns,” a phrase steeped in calculated haute ambiguity that was wielded to justify America’s military interventions in our beloved region, home to star tribes, whose conflicted diasporic resonances reverberate throughout Germany to this day? To what extent can surface-level beauty truly reconcile itself with concealed, unsavory realities? Isn’t this the very crux and story of art, its history and institutions?

As we settle in the full-house-Sophiensaele in Berlin’s Mitte, we are handed sunflower seeds—a common snack in Turkey during long hours of a spectacle, perhaps a movie, or even a casual conversation. It’s a familiar ritual, a small comfort, though the shells inevitably will pile up as litter. On stage, lies parts of a car—a recurring central motif in Kunak’s work. “Cars are emblematic of freedom and power, but they also represent a kind of danger and vulnerability. They are objects that people are emotionally attached to, and that gives me a point of entry,” Chris Burden once echoed. But in the ilk of court-approved art historical references, Kunak’s Valie Export 5.0-esque energy has yet to hit our haptic spectrum.

Anticipation builds.

Göksu Kunak’s *INNOCENCE* (2024) delves into the Susurluk car crash-turned-scandal that rocked the Turkish national consciousness like dynamite, exposing the intricate web of collusion between the state, politics, and mafia. It unearthed the Byzantine ties between organized crime and the deep state, with roots tracing back to the Cold War era, along with an exposé of the joint efforts of ultranationalist groups, Turkish intelligence operations, and the United States to keep the Soviet agendas and influence at bay. What’s new today, I ask? With a Cold War renaissance in the twenty-first century, these entanglements, now dressed in new clothes, continue to shape our lives and imaginations—Kunak is on the case.

As soon as they take the stage, Kunak begins deconstructing this almost-historical-but-not-quite event from 1996, unraveling the ambiguity embedded in the political narratives of the 2000s. Is she an artificially wired language model? An actual TV presenter? Is she the car itself? Perhaps the crash embodied? Kunak zooms in and out

to the car crash as a site of revelation and rupture, depicting it as a pressure-cooker explosion that triggered a twisted form of a liberation of “state secrets.” With Kunak’s dissection of the crash and its role in igniting our collective desire to uncover hidden truths—scratching the surface to reveal shadowy connections—we are also treated to a dose of Cronenbergian erotic charge in the making. An arousal by a political murder caused by a rear-end collision with a truck, anyone? As if the shards of mediated realities around this crash are to break the fourth walls, landing as erotically charged crystallizations in a TV crime drama!

One moment, we’re in a car showroom, with reps glorifying the gleam of metallic beauty under bright lights, the vehicle standing as a sculptural testament to advanced engineering. In another, we witness hyper-trained muscles morphing into the machine, the human form stretching into a hyperreal extension. One moment, we’re captivated by an exquisitely controlled pole dance; the next, it’s a sports event projected on-screen—hyper-normative national holiday performances from Turkey, showcasing disciplined bodies embodying rigid societal codes around sexuality and gender, sharply contrasting with the fluid, queer expressions unfolding on stage. And then, we’re fed a stretch of footage from *32. Gün*, the long-running Turkish documentary program that dissected political scandals, complete with testimonies and evidence about those involved. Kunak creates vibrant matter by acupuncture the pressure points of heteronormative dominance to release the valves of oppression. Their directorial toolbox intentionally incorporates “glitches” as productive sites of exploration. The car accident serves as the central glitch, but beyond this, the glitch becomes a conceptual strategy for questioning everything—from social norms to technological constructs.

Especially with authoritarian forces and their tentacles proliferating globally, Kunak’s intentional exploration of politics of concealment and erasure feels more timely than ever. They peel away the layers of dominant narratives surrounding control, state secrets, desire, and violence—first as a storyteller, then by reclaiming the industries of flesh and desire as integral to creativity. Kunak thrives in bodily strength and sculptural control of the body. Diverging from regulated timelines, the hybridity of desires they showcase transcends any state-imposed disciplinary logic, unleashing an intersectional matrix of interconnectedness across the micro- and macro-political landscapes of our polycrisis-ridden lived experience. Kunak also skillfully avoids the pitfalls of hyper-production, instead embracing a distinctly relaxed, DIY aesthetic. That said, the casual interactions on stage are imbued with an intensity that feels far from incidental. Moments of energy and dynamism ignite as Kunak’s kinetic direction, sharp editing, and the charged interplay of protagonists and music flourish in this raw, stripped-down environment. At Sophiensaele, we as audiences seamlessly transition from one space to another—for instance, from

the auditorium to the theater’s physical courtyard, where a white balloon pops, an orgiastic concert erupts, and another pole dance begins amidst the raucous pulse of music. The structures of normative time and space are forced wide open, making space for camaraderie, kinship, and pleasure.

Kunak’s work, marked by a searing edge, generous collective spirit, and intellectual rigor, spans video, performance, and installation. Their practice reflects an ongoing, committed engagement with art history, gender studies, queer theory, and the real-world issues of freedom, all deeply inspired by their land and its entanglements. Their offering is so embodied that I only wish to quantum leap with them into their new worlds.

—DA

September 29, 2024, Berlin–Istanbul flight

**Göksu Kunak** is an artist, researcher and writer, born in 1985 in Ankara, Turkey. Kunak is influenced by late modernities, (self)-censorship, non-Western dramaturgies as well as score-based performances of the 1960s and ’70s. Kunak has performed and exhibited in Berlin at Sophiensaele, Neue Nationalgalerie, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, HAU Berlin, and Number 1 Main Road, and internationally at Kaaitheater (Brussels), Pilevneli Gallery (Istanbul), Performa Biennial 2023 (New York), Bergen Assembly, and DeSingel (Antwerp).

**Defne Ayas** is a curator committed to forging hybrid alliances with art and artists, with a focus on reimagining cultural platforms and formats—be they aesthetic, geographic, communal, or spiritual. Her work explores how artists can create future vectors for reality, politics, and representation.

**Poster** Göksu Kunak, *KAZA (The Accident)*, 2023  
Courtesy the artist

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
www.berlinprogramforartists.org







Cuban photographer Javier Caso during a visit to Cuba in 2020. Caso had surreptitiously recorded his exchange with security agents who pressured him to denounce the artists with whom he had stayed in Havana, providing a rare window into the secret world of Cuba's political police.

Two months after that exhibition, Lavastida returned to Cuba. He was arrested upon arrival and subjected to daily interrogations at the State Security headquarters for three months. At first, he was only charged with incitement to crime for his proposal to stamp logos on currency; the fact that the Ministry of the Interior was aware of the proposal indicated that the authorities had the means to monitor the supposedly private chat. However, when mass protests broke out two weeks after Lavastida's arrest, his interrogators accused him of having acted as an agent provocateur, claiming that he had returned to Cuba to lead the revolt. They interrogated him for weeks, trying to get him to admit that his ex-wife in Warsaw worked for Polish state security forces and that the author of this text worked for the CIA and was his American contact. None of this was true, but the line of questioning made it clear that the Cuban authorities were trying to fabricate a narrative in which "problematic" artists in their country had conspired with outside agents to orchestrate a mass insurrection on July 11, 2021. This would have confirmed the Cuban government's longstanding claim that the internal opposition is the product of external imperialist forces. Lavastida never confessed to any of the accusations. His arrest provoked an international uproar in the art press, and pressure on the Cuban government by Polish and German diplomats. Despite the obvious political nature of the arrest, Cuban authorities stipulated that he could only be released in Poland, where his son and ex-wife reside, so that his departure would appear to be a matter of family reunification rather than exile. However, upon his departure he was warned that if he returned to the island, he would be returned to Villa Marista.

During Lavastida's detention, his fellow artists turned to performance art to draw attention to his plight and challenge the Cuban government's prohibitions on the manipulation of national symbols and currency. At ARCOmadrid in July 2021, fifteen artists and curators staged a version of Lavastida's proposed intervention, titled *Billetes Quemando la Calle*, using stamps with the 27N and MSI logos and the phrases "FREE HAMLET" and "Art is not crime." Fair attendees could bring the legal tender of their choice to be stamped. Although the performance remained true to Lavastida's goal of using the circulation of currency to convey political messages to an audience that otherwise could not, the original message was recalled to refer to his status as a representative of the state of Cuban art. Following the success of the performance at ARCOmadrid, more artists initiated plans to remount it at Untitled Art in Miami that November. In the meantime, Lavastida was released from prison and deported to Europe. He was

unable to travel to the United States due to his indefinite immigration status, but he created new designs for the stamps and conducted interviews with the press attending the fair through Zoom, while his colleagues, including myself, stamped bills brought to us by members of the public.

Obviously, these performances eluded the control of the Cuban state by moving beyond national borders. Nevertheless, in the exhibition context of an art fair where national origin plays a significant role in identifying what is exhibited, *Billetes Quemando la Calle* represented a vision of the state of Cuban art as beleaguered but insistent on its legitimacy. The artists' decision to replace Lavastida affirmed a shared ethos and vindicated the collective right to defy unreasonable laws. The validity of this claim did not go unanswered: at the art fair in Miami, for example, I was visited by American art collectors who claimed to be great supporters of Cuban art and argued that all artists there received extraordinary treatment and that dissidents like Lavastida were ungrateful brats. This is a sad indication of the ways that the international community's perceptions of Cuba remain frozen in a distant past.

**Hamlet Lavastida** is a multidisciplinary Cuban artist based in Berlin. His work focuses on exploring certain notions of ideological language in the post-Soviet context and their intersections with the Cuba scenario. He has exhibited in several museums and institutions, most recently at the Museum Villa Stuck (Munich), Albertinum (Dresden), and in Documenta 15 (Kassel).

**Coco Fusco** is a Cuban-American artist and writer based in New York. She is the author of *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (2015).

**Poster** Hamlet Lavastida, *Tercer Mundo, Tercera Guerra Mundial* (Third World, Third World War), 2024, paper-cut, each 100 × 70 cm  
Courtesy the artist

Hamlet Lavastida is an internationally celebrated Cuban artist who challenges the Cuban state's control over public discourse in his work. As a result, he has suffered censorship, harassment, defamation in the state media, and imprisonment. After being accused of inciting others to commit a crime and detained in Cuban State Security headquarters for three months, Lavastida was expelled from Cuba in September 2021 and currently lives in Berlin.

Lavastida has spent twenty years deconstructing the revolutionary iconography and rhetoric of the early years of the Cuban revolution. In his work, he presents elaborate stencils that quote speeches by revolutionary leaders rationalizing state repression. He also reconfigures the heroic imagery associated with government agencies involved in policing. Lavastida's relationship with Cuban state institutions has been tense since he began presenting his artwork on the streets of Havana in 2003. Soon after, he received visits from State Security agents who questioned his motives. In 2008, while studying at the University of the Arts, he created a performance titled *Lamento Cubano* that drew the ire of his professors because it referenced the Varela Project, Osvaldo Payá's 1998 attempt to achieve constitutional reforms through popular petitions. After traveling to Poland for an artist residency in 2011, he was denied re-entry to his native country until 2016. In 2017, when art collector Ella Fontana-Barcs purchased selections from his *Prophylactic Culture* series and attempted to remove them from Cuba, State Security confiscated the artworks and handed her a document stating that they contained counter-revolutionary content. Despite Lavastida's participation in numerous international exhibitions, he has only been invited to present his work in Cuba in non-governmental venues. He returned to Europe in 2020 for an artist residency in Berlin but continued to participate in online discussions with members of the 27N movement, which emerged after the mass sit-in at the Ministry of Culture in November 2020, as well as in exhibitions and activist efforts organized by the San Isidro Movement and 27N.

During the eight months between that mass sit-in and the July 2021 protests, private online chats proliferated in which Cuban artists planned responses to the arrests of their peers, countered smear campaigns against them in state media, and formulated civil and creative rights demands to present to the Ministry of Culture. In a private group chat, Lavastida proposed creating stamps to mark Cuban banknotes with the logos of opposition groups on the island, picking up on the tactics of conceptual artists like Cildo Meireles, who stamped Brazilian banknotes with calls for democracy during the military dictatorship of the 1970s. Lavastida's colleagues rejected the proposal as too dangerous. During the same period, Lavastida exhibited a new work in Berlin that contrasted the words of Cuban poet Heberto Padilla, who was forced to publicly denounce himself as a counterrevolutionary in 1971, with excerpts from the interrogation of

## BPA// Exhibition 2024

### KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Hamlet

# Lavastida

# Hamlet Lavastida

Text by Coco Fusco

Hamlet Lavastida is an internationally celebrated Cuban artist who challenges the Cuban state’s control over public discourse in his work. As a result, he has suffered censorship, harassment, defamation in the state media, and imprisonment. After being accused of inciting others to commit a crime and detained in Cuban State Security headquarters for three months, Lavastida was expelled from Cuba in September 2021 and currently lives in Berlin.

Lavastida has spent twenty years deconstructing the revolutionary iconography and rhetoric of the early years of the Cuban revolution. In his work, he presents elaborate stencils that quote speeches by revolutionary leaders rationalizing state repression. He also reconfigures the heroic imagery associated with government agencies involved in policing. Lavastida’s relationship with Cuban state institutions has been tense since he began presenting his artwork on the streets of Havana in 2003. Soon after, he received visits from State Security agents who questioned his motives. In 2008, while studying at the University of the Arts, he created a performance titled *Lamento Cubano* that drew the ire of his professors because it referenced the Varela Project, Osvaldo Payá’s 1998 attempt to achieve constitutional reforms through popular petitions. After traveling to Poland for an artist residency in 2011, he was denied re-entry to his native country until 2016. In 2017, when art collector Ella Fontanals-Cisneros purchased selections from his *Prophylactic Culture* series and attempted to remove them from Cuba, State Security confiscated the artworks and handed her a document stating that they contained counterrevolutionary content. Despite Lavastida’s participation in numerous international exhibitions, he has only been invited to present his work in Cuba in non-governmental venues. He returned to Europe in 2020 for an artist residency in Berlin but continued to participate in online discussions with members of the 27N movement, which emerged after the mass sit-in at the Ministry of Culture in November 2020, as well as in exhibitions and activist efforts organized by the San Isidro Movement and 27N.

During the eight months between that mass sit-in and the July 2021 protests, private online chats proliferated in which Cuban artists planned responses to the arrests of their peers, countered smear campaigns against them in state media, and formulated civil and creative rights demands to present to the Ministry of Culture. In a private group chat, Lavastida proposed creating stamps to mark Cuban banknotes with the logos of opposition groups on the island, picking up on the tactics of conceptual artists like Cildo Meireles, who stamped Brazilian banknotes with calls for democracy during the military dictatorship of the 1970s. Lavastida’s colleagues rejected the proposal as too dangerous. During the same period, Lavastida exhibited a new work in Berlin that contrasted the words of Cuban poet Heberto Padilla, who was forced to publicly denounce himself as a counterrevolutionary in 1971, with excerpts from the interrogation of

Cuban photographer Javier Caso during a visit to Cuba in 2020. Caso had surreptitiously recorded his exchange with security agents who pressured him to denounce the artists with whom he had stayed in Havana, providing a rare window into the secret world of Cuba’s political police.

Two months after that exhibition, Lavastida returned to Cuba. He was arrested upon arrival and subjected to daily interrogations at the State Security headquarters for three months. At first, he was only charged with incitement to crime for his proposal to stamp logos on currency; the fact that the Ministry of the Interior was aware of the proposal indicated that the authorities had the means to monitor the supposedly private chat. However, when mass protests broke out two weeks after Lavastida’s arrest, his interrogators accused him of having acted as an agent provocateur, claiming that he had returned to Cuba to lead the revolt. They interrogated him for weeks, trying to get him to admit that his ex-wife in Warsaw worked for Polish state security forces and that the author of this text worked for the CIA and was his American contact. None of this was true, but the line of questioning made it clear that the Cuban authorities were trying to fabricate a narrative in which “problematic” artists in their country had conspired with outside agents to orchestrate a mass insurrection on July 11, 2021. This would have confirmed the Cuban government’s longstanding claim that the internal opposition is the product of external imperialist forces. Lavastida never confessed to any of the accusations. His arrest provoked an international uproar in the art press, and pressure on the Cuban government by Polish and German diplomats. Despite the obvious political nature of the arrest, Cuban authorities stipulated that he could only be released in Poland, where his son and ex-wife reside, so that his departure would appear to be a matter of family reunification rather than exile. However, upon his departure he was warned that if he returned to the island, he would be returned to Villa Marista.

During Lavastida’s detention, his fellow artists turned to performance art to draw attention to his plight and challenge the Cuban government’s prohibitions on the manipulation of national symbols and currency. At ARCOMadrid in July 2021, fifteen artists and curators staged a version of Lavastida’s proposed intervention, titled *Billetes Quemando la Calle*, using stamps with the 27N and MSI logos and the phrases “FREE HAMLET” and “Art is not crime.” Fair attendees could bring the legal tender of their choice to be stamped. Although the performance remained true to Lavastida’s goal of using the circulation of currency to convey political messages to an audience that otherwise could not, the original message was recalibrated to refer to his status as a representative of the state of Cuban art. Following the success of the performance at ARCOMadrid, more artists initiated plans to remount it at Untitled Art in Miami that November. In the meantime, Lavastida was released from prison and deported to Europe. He was

unable to travel to the United States due to his indefinite immigration status, but he created new designs for the stamps and conducted interviews with the press attending the fair through Zoom, while his colleagues, including myself, stamped bills brought to us by members of the public.

Obviously, these performances eluded the control of the Cuban state by moving beyond national borders. Nevertheless, in the exhibition context of an art fair where national origin plays a significant role in identifying what is exhibited, *Billetes Quemando la Calle* represented a vision of the state of Cuban art as beleaguered but insistent on its legitimacy. The artists’ decision to replace Lavastida affirmed a shared ethos and vindicated the collective right to defy unreasonable laws. The validity of this claim did not go unanswered: at the art fair in Miami, for example, I was visited by American art collectors who claimed to be great supporters of Cuban art and argued that all artists there received extraordinary treatment and that dissidents like Lavastida were ungrateful brats. This is a sad indication of the ways that the international community’s perceptions of Cuba remain frozen in a distant past.

**Hamlet Lavastida** is a multidisciplinary Cuban artist based in Berlin. His work focuses on exploring certain notions of ideological language in the post-Soviet context and their intersections with the Cuba scenario. He has exhibited in several museums and institutions, most recently at the Museum Villa Stuck (Munich), Albertinum (Dresden), and in Documenta 15 (Kassel).

**Coco Fusco** is a Cuban-American artist and writer based in New York. She is the author of *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (2015).

**Poster** Hamlet Lavastida, *Tercer Mundo, Tercera Guerra Mundial* (Third World, Third World War), 2024, paper-cut, each 100 × 70 cm  
Courtesy the artist

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
www.berlinprogramforartists.org







The sanatorium is a safe place. @SissMellissa casts her mind back to the early days when there were less than ten holy members. @count-essimaan was the first to join, which makes her the second most important sister in the room, and she won't let you forget it. She wears two white doves on her head like a crown and garish leopard print heels that go against the codes of conduct (sisters must always wear white), but @SissMellissa turns a blind eye for her most loyal follower. @hotnou3 comes next, desperate to join the covenant after meeting @SissMellissa at a private view some where downtown and falling in love with her vocal fry. Rumor has it that @hotnou3's gallery has this really good prescription pill that cures your appetite for twelve hours straight and makes you skin glow as if you've just been injected with fish sperm, but for a fraction of the price. This might also explain @hotnou3's near-constant dissociative stare, which

On the rooftop of a concrete high-rise, @SiSSssMellissa waits patiently as the clock ticks loudly in the sanatorium. The noise reverberates off the ultrasmooth marble that has been newly installed inside the luxury new build that she bought for the covenant using some mysterious offshore funds. The calendar that has been marked for tonight's celebration has been crossed out in a semi-matte lipstick. The shade is red to match the evening's aura. Squinting her eyes ever so slightly, @SiSSssMellissa turns herself to face the wall, where motivational phrases such as, "BLESS THIS SACRED MOMENT" and "MEWINING FOR WORLD PEACE" have been scribbled in serif. "hI Blessed be, darlings," she says, twirling herself towards the sliding doors, where @countessissmaana and @hotghoul3 have just entered, both dressed in ceremonial white. "We shall engage with the festive preparations at once," she continues. "But, for now, we pray."

@SiSSssMellissa is divinely protected and wears a lethal amount of perfume. Some might describe her as an algorithmic beauty, which is to say, she's spent several months scrolling the feed to see what kind of face performs the best by platform standards. She has siren blue eyes, a contoured nose and fits the online criteria for what is usually meant as "fox pretty"; "Oh, and she's skinny—like, Ozempic skinny—with enough upper and mid-facial rejuvenation to mask her giant features. According to some sisters in the covenant, it's taken @SiSSssMellissa numerous beauty procedures to achieve this level of aesthetic perfection, including one particularly grueling hard-maxxing attempt that involved smashing her jawline in order to achieve the most desirable profile. She posted a selfie with it post-op, the excavated white bone wrapped tightly between fresh acrylics, her face wrapped up tightly in swathes of hospital bandages. "*Maximizing...*" read the caption, which she flanked on either side with pink bow emojis to assert her high-value status among the internet's feminine elite.

He's a blonde-haired AMOG with hunter eyes and little to no upper eyelid exposure, a long vertical ramus, and a gonial angle of approximately 120 degrees. The perfect high-value male with a /pol/ mind and the body of an ancient Greek statue. His friend is a near-identical replica, except for his olive complexion and dark brown hair. @Siss-Melissa has chosen her sacrifices wisely. The consecration begins with a sip of cranberry juice to bless their urinary tracts. Before it's so over, @countessissimaan commands the guests to swig satchels of soya milk. The olive-skinned Chad vehemently cries out in anguish. "Oh shut it, meathhead," @hotghoul3 hisses. Her focus is no longer lobotomized but instead devilishly cold. Goblet in hand, she clasps her way toward the olive-skinned Chad, who monitors his breast for any signs of estrogen consumption. "Stop mewwing!," she snaps, rolling her eyes before passing the goblet to @SissMelissa, who takes a sip

"Mwah!" She seals the ceremony with a kiss and begins to prepare the consecration. A Greek chorus to usher in the two male attendees who will arrive at the altar at approximately quarter past midnight. A glamorous banquet consisting of cranberry juice poured into a pyramid of silver wine goblets consecrated by the high priestess herself. From the outside, this sort of behavior might appear suspicious, cult-like even. But rest assured, this author doesn't indulge in any conspicuous activities, neither can she legally confirm to have witnessed anything unusual or against the Community Guidelines.

In the early days of the sisterhood, headlines accusing @Siss-Melissa of running a cult hit the press, which she vehemently denied, of course, despite photographic evidence of outsiders being thrown into pits and "sacrificed." There were rumors about bizarre twelve-step initiation rituals and a weird sanatorium in which all the nurses would try to convince the patients to get nose jobs and lipos, and that all their hesitations were intrusive thoughts or "delusions" to deter them from the holy path. That didn't stop @SissMelissa, however, who continued to spread her message via TikTok Glow Up and GRWM videos, as well as the occasional lurk on femcel forums. The sanatorium is a safe place. We are grateful for every new member, creating a life-changing experience filled with love and acceptance. Mother welcomes you home! Love and Acceptance are all you will find here!

"O light that rains down on Heaven and Earth;  
 grant us the protection of thy divine brilliance!  
 And bring our enemies to their destined annihilation!"

In prayer:  
 appear more cyborg than girl. @SissMelissa holds her sisters' hands  
 would be off-putting if not for a radiant complexion that makes her

with her eyes locked on the pixelated vistas extending across the mountain range on the outer parameters of the covenant. The moon has reached its peak and @SissMelissa raises her glass. "The time has now come," she announces. "Our muscled guests may now step forward."

The chads approach the altar. "We want to extend our gratitude. Your chiseled bodies have brought us much joy tonight," says @Siss-Melissa, who shoots a knowing glance at @countessimaan as if to say, "Finish them." The law states that in order to preserve the eternal beauty of the holy sisters, a chad must be drained of his vibe once every full moon. Now that the moon is at its peak, @countessimaan stands at the altar, her eyes flashing with wild excitement. A chorus of holy sisters has now appeared, their faces possessing a ring-light glow, forming a crescent shape around the chads; they take it turn by turn, pushing them one step at a time towards the cliff edge. It's almost comical the way the girls slap them away, like pushing strangers at a club. "I'm going to kill this man" ... "I want to destroy him" ... "Oh, My God. Is that Le Labo Opium?" They're devouring every inch of the chads' lifeblood. "*One... Two... Three.*" The first chad falls off the ledge, then the other. They appear surprisingly buoyant, their bulky bodies bouncing from ledge to ledge all the way to the bottom of the valley. @SissMelissa smiles. "What a marvelous time."

**Jan Berger** is a visual artist and platform designer based in Berlin. His practice is primarily occupied with ludic simulation, subject formation, and the emergence of cultural mythologies in online spaces. Creating infrastructures for networked roleplay, his work facilitates spaces for users to inhabit, comment on, and reimagine cultural world-frames. He received his MFA in 2021 from Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Günseli Yalçınkaya** is a writer, researcher, and internet folklorist based in London. She is contributing editor at *Dazed* and has appeared in talks and panels at the Architectural Association, BFI, Central Saint Martins, London College of Fashion, Somerset House, Sónar+D, Unsound Festival, and X Museum.

**Poster** Jan Berger, *The Death of @MewsNYC*, 2024  
Courtesy the artist

## BPA// Berlin program for artists

[www.berlinprogramforartists.org](http://www.berlinprogramforartists.org)

# BPA// Exhibition 2024

KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Jan Berger

Text by Günseli Yalçinkaya



# Jan Berger

Text by Günseli Yalçinkaya

On the rooftop of a concrete high-rise, @SisssMelissa waits patiently as the clock ticks loudly in the sanatorium. The noise reverberates off the ultrasmooth marble that has been newly installed inside the luxury new build that she bought for the covenant using some mysterious offshore funds. The calendar that has been marked for tonight’s celebration has been crossed out in a semi-matte lipstick. The shade is red to match the evening’s aura. Squinting her eyes ever so slightly, @SisssMelissa turns herself to face the wall, where motivational phrases such as, “BLESS THIS SACRED MOMENT” and “MEWING FOR WORLD PEACE” have been scribbled in serif. “Ah! Blessed be, darlings,” she says, twirling herself towards the sliding doors, where @countessimaan and @hotghoul3 have just entered, both dressed in ceremonial white. “We shall engage with the festive preparations at once,” she continues. “But, for now, we pray.”

@SisssMelissa is divinely protected and wears a lethal amount of perfume. Some might describe her as an algorithmic beauty, which is to say, she’s spent several months scrolling the feed to see what kind of face performs the best by platform standards. She has siren blue eyes, a contoured nose and fits the online criteria for what is usually meant as “fox pretty.” Oh, and she’s skinny—like, Ozempic skinny—with enough upper and mid-facial rejuvenation to mask her gaunt features. According to some sisters in the covenant, it’s taken @SisssMelissa numerous beauty procedures to achieve this level of aesthetic perfection, including one particularly grueling hard-maxxing attempt that involved smashing her jawline in order to achieve the most desirable profile. She posted a selfie with it post-op, the excavated white bone wrapped tightly between fresh acrylics, her face wrapped up tightly in swathes of hospital bandages. “*Manifesting...*” read the caption, which she flanked on either side with pink bow emojis to assert her high-value status among the internet’s feminine elite.

\*\*\*

The sanatorium is a safe place. @SisssMelissa casts her mind back to the early days when there were less than ten holy members. @countessimaan was the first to join, which makes her the second most important sister in the room, and she won’t let you forget it. She wears two white doves on her head like a crown and garish leopard print heels that go against the codes of conduct (sisters must always wear white), but @SisssMelissa turns a blind eye for her most loyal follower. @hotghoul3 comes next, desperate to join the covenant after meeting @SisssMelissa at a private view somewhere downtown and falling in love with her vocal fry. Rumor has it that @hotghoul3’s gallerist has this really good prescription pill that curbs your appetite for twelve hours straight and makes your skin glow as if you’ve just been injected with fish sperm, but for a fraction of the price. This might also explain @hotghoul3’s near-constant dissociative stare, which

would be off-putting if not for a radiant complexion that makes her appear more cyborg than girl. @SisssMelissa holds her sisters’ hands in prayer:

*“O light that rains down on Heaven and Earth;  
grant us the protection of thy divine brilliance!  
And bring our enemies to their destined annihilation!”*

“Mwah!” She seals the ceremony with a kiss and begins to prepare the consecration. A Greek chorus to usher in the two male attendees who will arrive at the altar at approximately quarter past midnight. A glamorous banquet consisting of cranberry juice poured into a pyramid of silver wine goblets consecrated by the high priestess herself. From the outside, this sort of behavior might appear suspicious, cult-like even. But rest assured, this author doesn’t indulge in any conspicuous activities, neither can she legally confirm to have witnessed anything unusual or against the Community Guidelines.

In the early days of the sisterhood, headlines accusing @Sisss-Melissa of running a cult hit the press, which she vehemently denied, of course, despite photo evidence of outsiders being thrown into pits and “sacrificed.” There were rumors about bizarre twelve-step initiation rituals and a weird sanatorium in which all the nurses would try to convince the patients to get nose jobs and lipo, and that all their hesitations were intrusive thoughts or “delusions” to deter them from the holy path. That didn’t stop @SisssMelissa, however, who continued to spread her message via TikTok Glow Up and GRWM videos, as well as the occasional lurk on femcel forums. *The sanatorium is a safe place. We are grateful for every new member, creating a life-changing experience filled with love and acceptance. Mother welcomes you home! Love and Acceptance are all you will find here!*

\*\*\*

He’s a blonde-haired AMOG with hunter eyes and little to no upper eyelid exposure, a long vertical ramus, and a gonial angle of approximately 120 degrees. The perfect high-value male with a /pol/ mind and the body of an ancient Greek statue. His friend is a near-identical replica, except for his olive complexion and dark brown hair. @Sisss-Melissa has chosen her sacrifices wisely. The consecration begins with a sip of cranberry juice to bless their urinary tracts. Before it’s so over, @countessimaan commands the guests to swig satchels of soya milk. The olive-skinned chad vehemently cries out in anguish. “Oh shut it, meathead,” @hotghoul3 hisses. Her focus is no longer lobotomized but instead devilishly cold. Goblet in hand, she claws her way towards the olive-skinned chad, who monitors his breast for any signs of estrogen consumption. “Stop mewing!,” she snaps, rolling her eyes before passing the goblet to @SisssMelissa, who takes a sip

with her eyes locked on the pixelated vistas extending across the mountain range on the outer parameters of the covenant. The moon has reached its peak and @SisssMelissa raises her glass. “The time has now come,” she announces. “Our muscled guests may now step forward.”

The chads approach the altar. “We want to extend our gratitude. Your chiseled bodies have brought us much joy tonight,” says @Sisss-Melissa, who shoots a knowing glance at @countessimaan as if to say, “Finish them.” The law states that in order to preserve the eternal beauty of the holy sisters, a chad must be drained of his vibe once every full moon. Now that the moon is at its peak, @countessimaan stands at the altar, her eyes flashing with wild excitement. A chorus of holy sisters has now appeared, their faces possessing a ring-light glow, forming a crescent shape around the chads; they take it turn by turn, pushing them one step at a time towards the cliff edge. It’s almost comical the way the girls slap them away, like pushing strangers at a club. “I’m going to kill this man” ... “I want to destroy him” ... “Oh, My God. Is that Le Labo Opium?” They’re devouring every inch of the chads’ lifeblood. “*One... Two... Three.*” The first chad falls off the ledge, then the other. They appear surprisingly buoyant, their bulky bodies bouncing from ledge to ledge all the way to the bottom of the valley. @SisssMelissa smiles. “What a marvelous time.”

**Jan Berger** is a visual artist and platform designer based in Berlin. His practice is primarily occupied with ludic simulation, subject formation, and the emergence of cultural mythologies in online spaces. Creating infrastructures for networked roleplay, his work facilitates spaces for users to inhabit, comment on, and reimagine cultural world-frames. He received his MFA in 2021 from Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Günseli Yalçinkaya** is a writer, researcher, and internet folklorist based in London. She is contributing editor at *Dazed* and has appeared in talks and panels at the Architectural Association, BFI, Central Saint Martins, London College of Fashion, Somerset House, Sónar+D, Unsound Festival, and X Museum.

**Poster** Jan Berger, *The Death of @MewsNYC*, 2024  
Courtesy the artist







placed on women in various systems and contexts. At the same time, it also marks the transition from two- to three-dimensional space, from a pictorial representation to a real, physical negotiation.

This perspective continues in the second textile collage, in which Reisch references the large-format mosaic *Unser Leben* (Our Life, 1962–64) by the loyal GDR artist, Walter Womacka, in order to comment and critically reflect on another chapter in German–Russian, or rather German–Soviet, relations. The 127-metre-long frieze encircles the first high-rise building on Alexanderplatz, which was erected in the 1960s in the socialist modernist style. Designed as a meeting place for educators and the public, the building is now used by commercial educational providers. Womacka’s strikingly socialist-realist depiction of life in the GDR, tinged with propaganda, portrays technical progress, strong professional cooperation, and a peaceful coexistence. From this mosaic, Reisch has taken a pair of hands and children’s feet, which now float freely in the pictorial space, touching each other. The artist thus encourages us to take a closer look at the symbolism of the hands, which represent the ambivalence between state promises of protection and care on the one hand and control and order on the other in the context of changing regimes. The work explores contradictory responsibilities and dogmas that can also be extended into the private, familial sphere, where gestures of care associated with the hands—providing support and guidance—are continually renegotiated in dialogue with autonomy and independence. This is also tied to the historically and ideologically changing image of women as mothers, or parents in a broader sense. New models and gender roles are constantly being (de)constructed on the basis of articulated demands, ongoing debates about care, individual socialization, and personal, inter-familial interactions. Set against a background

of black canvas and heavy velvet fabric, the seemingly illusionistic hands thus appear, according to the artist, “sometimes tender and sometimes grasping.” As a textile collage, they combine the history of the *Unser Leben* mosaic with the familiar materiality and effect of theatrical stages and scenery. The prospect of a third, as yet unwritten, chapter, as suggested by the title, remains uncertain in light of current (political) developments.

Translation by Katie Hardy (G&C Art Translators)

**Josefine Reisch** lives and works in Berlin. She graduated from Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 2013 and completed her MFA at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2017. In 2024, she held a solo exhibition titled *PSEUDO* at Gauli Zitter (Brussels) and her work was included in *Alltag und Epoche* at Exile (Erfurt). Since 2018, she has curated *Lady Helen* together with Philip Seibel.

**Nele Kaczmarek** is curator and director of the Kunstverein Nürnberg. Previously, she worked as deputy director of the IMAI – Inter Media Art Institute (Düsseldorf) and, between 2016 and 2021, as curator at Kunstverein Braunschweig.

**Poster** Josefine Reisch, *Prospects* (detail), 2024, oil on velvet and canvas  
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Noah Klink, Berlin

in her artistic work, Josefine Reisch is interested in how political systems and ideologies influence the (self-)perception of women at different historical points in time. Her most recent work, *Prospects* (2024), focuses on the eventful history between Germany and Russia and its female protagonists, but also on her own socialization as an artist born in East Germany shortly before reunification at the end of the 1980s. More specifically, *Prospects* consists of two large-format textile collages, which form the (projection) surface and backdrop for two acts that are not elaborated upon further. Staggered and hung at different heights in the atrium of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, the works combine various spatial and temporal references. The front collage is made from fine moiré fabrics, which were also used for interior decoration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and features a table covered with pornographic ornamentation, which has been repeatedly attributed to Catherine II (1792–1796) in various forms, albeit without historical evidence. Originally from a minor noble family, Catherine the Great staged a coup against her husband, Peter III, heir to the Russian throne, and then used her philosophical prowess and strategic finesse to considerably expand Russia’s sphere of power. However, the public perception of her is less focused on her structural reforms or exchanges with Voltaire and other pioneers of the Enlightenment than on her love life involving alleged excesses and a changing roster of favorites.

This method of sexualizing a powerful and influential female ruler is currently being replicated in online echo chambers: for instance, this graphically explicit table is circulating in various forms on platforms such as Reddit, which regularly causes a stir by tolerating the publication and dissemination of misinformation. In Reisch’s artistic treatment of this table, which she deconstructs into a cut-out sheet for a paper model and presents in its component parts, she carries out a feminist reappropriation of the motif and its discourses while addressing the discrepancy between power and its representation. Borrowed from children’s craft activities, the cut-out sheet serves as a structural element in a number of Reisch’s works and becomes an analytical tool for examining the demands implicitly



**Prospects**

BPA// Exhibition 2024  
KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Josefine Reisch

Text by Nele Kaczmarek



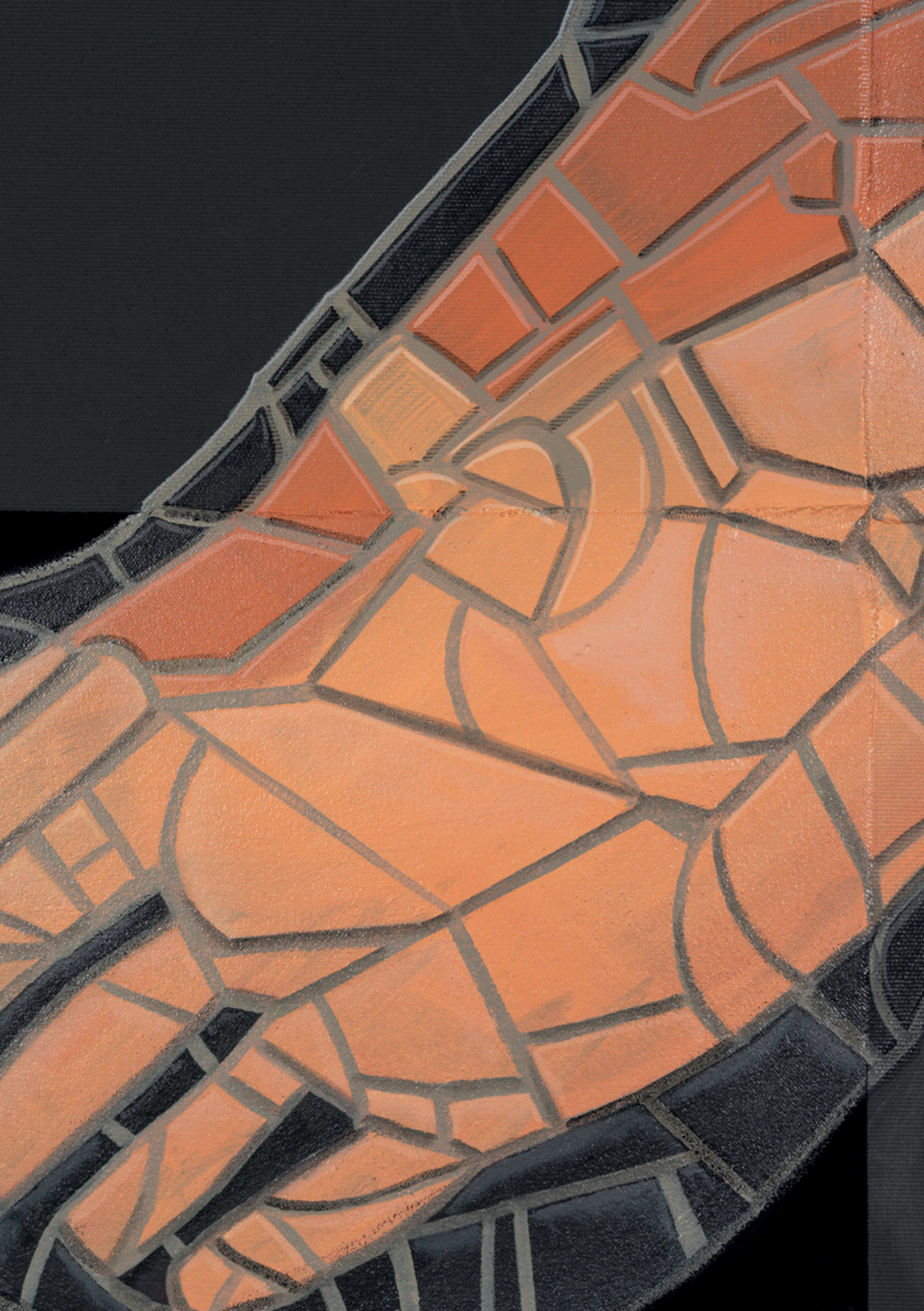
# Josefine Reisch

Text by Nele Kaczmarek

Prospects	
<p>In her artistic work, Josefine Reisch is interested in how political systems and ideologies influence the (self-)perception of women at different historical points in time. Her most recent work, <i>Prospects</i> (2024), focuses on the eventful history between Germany and Russia and its female protagonists, but also on her own socialization as an artist born in East Germany shortly before reunification at the end of the 1980s. More specifically, <i>Prospects</i> consists of two large-format textile collages, which form the (projection) surface and backdrop for two acts that are not elaborated upon further. Staggered and hung at different heights in the atrium of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, the works combine various spatial and temporal references. The front collage is made from fine moiré fabrics, which were also used for interior decoration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and features a table covered with pornographic ornamentation, which has been repeatedly attributed to Catherine II (1792–1796) in various forms, albeit without historical evidence. Originally from a minor noble family, Catherine the Great staged a coup against her husband, Peter III, heir to the Russian throne, and then used her philosophical prowess and strategic finesse to considerably expand Russia’s sphere of power. However, the public perception of her is less focused on her structural reforms or exchanges with Voltaire and other pioneers of the Enlightenment than on her love life involving alleged excesses and a changing roster of favorites.</p> <p>This method of sexualizing and discrediting a powerful and influential female ruler is currently being replicated in online echo chambers: for instance, this graphically explicit table is circulating in various forms on platforms such as Reddit, which regularly causes a stir by tolerating the publication and dissemination of misinformation. In Reisch’s artistic treatment of this table, which she deconstructs into a cut-out sheet for a paper model and presents in its component parts, she carries out a feminist reappropriation of the motif and its discourses while addressing the discrepancy between power and its representation. Borrowed from children’s craft activities, the cut-out sheet serves as a structural element in a number of Reisch’s works and becomes an analytical tool for examining the demands implicitly</p>	<p>placed on women in various systems and contexts. At the same time, it also marks the transition from two- to three-dimensional space, from a pictorial representation to a real, physical negotiation.</p> <p>This perspective continues in the second textile collage, in which Reisch references the large-format mosaic <i>Unser Leben</i> (Our Life, 1962–64) by the loyal GDR artist, Walter Womacka, in order to comment and critically reflect on another chapter in German–Russian, or rather German–Soviet, relations. The 127-metre-long frieze encircles the first high-rise building on Alexanderplatz, which was erected in the 1960s in the socialist modernist style. Designed as a meeting place for educators and the public, the building is now used by commercial educational providers. Womacka’s strikingly socialist-realist depiction of life in the GDR, tinged with propaganda, portrays technical progress, strong professional cooperation, and a peaceful coexistence. From this mosaic, Reisch has taken a pair of hands and children’s feet, which now float freely in the pictorial space, touching each other. The artist thus encourages us to take a closer look at the symbolism of</p> <p>the hands, which represent the ambivalence between state promises of protection and care on the one hand and control and order on the other in the context of changing regimes. The work explores contradictory responsibilities and dogmas that can also be extended into the private, familial sphere, where gestures of care associated with the hands—providing support and guidance—are continually renegotiated in dialogue with autonomy and independence. This is also tied to the historically and ideologically changing image of women as mothers, or parents in a broader sense. New models and gender roles are constantly being (de)constructed on the basis of articulated demands, ongoing debates about care, individual socialization, and personal, inter-family interactions. Set against a background</p>

<p>of black canvas and heavy velvet fabric, the seemingly illusionistic hands thus appear, according to the artist, “sometimes tender and sometimes grasping.” As a textile collage, they combine the history of the <i>Unser Leben</i> mosaic with the familiar materiality and effect of theatrical stages and scenery. The prospect of a third, as yet unwritten, chapter, as suggested by the title, remains uncertain in light of current (political) developments.</p> <p>Translation by Katie Hardy (G&amp;C Art Translators)</p>
<p><b>Josefine Reisch</b> lives and works in Berlin. She graduated from Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 2013 and completed her MFA at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2017. In 2024, she held a solo exhibition titled <i>PSEUDO</i> at Gauli Zitter (Brussels) and her work was included in <i>Alltag und Epoche</i> at Exile (Erfurt). Since 2018, she has curated <i>Lady Helen</i> together with Philip Seibel.</p> <p><b>Nele Kaczmarek</b> is curator and director of the Kunstverein Nürnberg. Previously, she worked as deputy director of the IMAI – Inter Media Art Institute (Düsseldorf) and, between 2016 and 2021, as curator at Kunstverein Braunschweig.</p> <p><b>Poster</b> Josefine Reisch, <i>Prospects</i> (detail), 2024, oil on velvet and canvas Courtesy the artist and Galerie Noah Klink, Berlin</p>
<p>BPA// Berlin program for artists www.berlinprogramforartists.org</p>







unable to escape the politics attached to their image, and unable to Hasso, have been unable to unwind into the loose, expressive gestures, Middle Eastern body, both Natis and his other painter persona, Hasan artists' body, and how the gaze constructs the artwork. Inhabiting a This performance tests the extent to which the artwork is part of the and will perform the role of the artist, presenting the work as his own. actor who thereby accepted to become the face and body of Hasso remains the maker of the painting, Matti, recruited by Natis, is a German between Natis and Matti that formalizes their collaboration. While Natis Behind Hasso's *Untitled* (2024) painting sits a framed contract and the reception of their works.

interrogating the socio-political constructs that shape these personas conventional conceptions of creative subjectivity within Western ideals, gin, Hank Yan Agassi, and now Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth) to challenge instrumentalizes multiple, performative, artist selves (Hasan Aksay-exist. Hasso is a constructed persona of Natis, who embodies and painting is a matter of fact, but the painter as we know him does not Weiß Ehrenwerth, something that exposes him as ... a fabrication. The and the wall. *BOOM!*—something is revealed, a secret about Hasso the unseen and deliberately concealed space between the canvas lery wall. Installed ajar, the painting invites the audience to peer into Like a wound that refuses to close, the incision marks the gal-German unconscious—illegorically splitting open the surface.

through is not the picture plane but the repressed materiality of the cut is a stab on the surface, like a Lucio Fontana, but what he cuts blood, color washes out the color, guilt eats the canvas. Ehrenwerth's bodies migrating across borders and generations. Blood bleeds into emerges on Ehrenwerth's canvas is not this transference, but distorted direct inheritance—He is the embodiment of post-memory. Yet, what after 1989, and now Ehrenwerth limps whenever he walks there, a later by the German masters. His mother never set foot in East Berlin grandfather, who was a student of Swedish painter Pierre Brassaú, and a British mother, Ehrenwerth was first influenced as an artist by his Born in pre-reunification Berlin in 1988 to a German father and ry-old German psyche.

can't be swept away—his strokes cutting open the wounds of a centu-however, and the brush itself becomes the imprint of everything that their textures onto the canvas. Ehrenwerth wields a traditional brush, Georg Dokoupil's process-based works, where the very tools imprint of dehumanized figures. Yet the strongest parallel emerges with Jiri Baseltz's fractured figures and Jörg Immendorff's microcosms of na-effectively charged modes of expression. His canvases evoke Georg remixing neo-expressionist and surrealist *Kunstwollen* to probe new, Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth's oil paintings are bricolages of masters,

A Stab on the Artist with a Capital A

BPA// Exhibition 2024  
KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Natis & Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth

emerging from the past to haunt the present; they do not conform to psychic skin, strata, or epistemological clotting. They are not ghosts same body-vessel, function as layers: coating crusts, scars on the Each of these equally fictitious and factual entities, residing in the artistic practices, it also becomes a vessel, an instrument, a brush. gets channeled by various subjects with distinct biographies and instruments to navigate sociopolitical constructs, but while his body self, and a gazed-upon body. These performative identities serve as bodiment, refusing a fixed identity, a singular narrative, a coherent he undertakes a deliberate process of disidentification and disem- While Natis narrates, lives, and thinks through different selves, gestures that uphold the dominance of Western artistic ideals. maintain the illusion of diversity, but these roles are merely superficial perform trauma, difference, or marginality, and fulfill victim roles that pectations from the othered bodies. Non-white artists are expected to becoming complicit in a larger cultural machine enforcing rigid ex-Artist shapes what can be seen, understood, and validated, thereby difference. Co-opting a white body to stand in, Natis lays bare how the a direct stab at the Artist, which relies on the commodification of a third-wave institutional critique—not a wound on the canvas, but Him,“ we are still” “centered around Him.” “Natis’s performance enacts perpetuating Him.” Even when the discourse “seemingly dismantles that produces Him—everything still “ends up benefiting and further never before—even when He, himself, is critical of the very institution an era where His legitimacy is contested, shaken, and attacked as enment, exists as the “regulatory ideal of creative abilities.” Even in-cube. This superior subject invented in the shadow of the Enlight-capital A: the Artist as the institution and the artist as white as the a performance of coming to terms with the idea of the Artist, with a the painting, modification tool, contract, pedestal, and even Matti—is The whole project of *Launch and Cease* (2024)—encapsulating Berlin art scene at BPA//s opening at KW Institute for Contemporary Art. signing officiated by Willem de Rooij, and finally, Hasso’s debut into the being: from the negotiations with Matti, to the ceremonial contract mythopoeisis. The text chronicles each stage of Hasso’s coming into a dramaturgic script—that fits into Natis’s practice of performative ongoing archival document containing the dialogues formatted as shoulder movements instead. On a lectern, there is a book—a sacred, restricts the use of one’s hands, forcing the artist to paint with large *Tool* (2024), a specially designed jacket with an attached stick that Nearby, an open case displays *Painting Behaviour Modification* body that’s different than his own, and impossible to impersonate. To channel the expressive power of Hasso, Natis collaborates with a never feeling good enough or unapologetic enough to paint as entitled. and precise movements, reflecting the rigidity of imposter syndrome—their body. Natis’s practice is therefore constrained by defined lines break free from the gaze that petrifies the status and movements of Natis, *Dialogues of Four Passions*, 2024, self-published by the artist.

the alter-ego or doppelganger scheme, as they do not emerge from within or embody repressed aspects of the self. Instead, they operate as intentional, speculative selves situated in distinct temporal, racial, and corporeal contexts—projections that extend beyond the self rather than reflect its division. Natis’s passions —Hasan Aksaygin, Hank Yan Agassi, Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth—are survival techniques, adaptive fabrications, reactionary tools, and litmus tests.

Through these personas, Natis renders both those selves and their respective works of art perpetually ajar, inviting partial and veiled revelation. In Hasan’s *paintingwriting* series, for example, *The Veil* (2023) follows the image of a veil in various states of folding and unfolding, always half-open. On the reverse side of each painting a story unfolds, fragmented across each piece. The narrative remains concealed when exhibited and is interrupted when the paintings are separated. Similarly, Hank’s “paintingwriting” inscribes a story on the frames, circling each painting and continuing onto the next. In both cases, the story is hidden on the reverse sides or remains fractured and incomplete. Natis and his personas resist full legibility by transforming subjectivity into a site of constant negotiation, where presence is forever anticipatory, elusive, and impossible to fully access. They stage the tension of an erotic spectacle, a mediated act of exhibitionism. The viewer’s gaze can never fully grasp either the personas or their works, which are intertwined in sympoiesis, as they remain ajar. This allows Natis to maintain control over how and to what extent he and his work are seen, understood, or consumed. Via fragmenting narratives, splitting personas, and mutilating bodies, Natis shatters both the Artist with a capital A and the very structures that demand the containment and comprehension of artists, lowercase.

**Natis** is a writer, archivist, and conceptual artist, born in 1986 in Nicosia and based in Berlin. In 2022, he held a solo exhibition, *Frenk Bey, Fortress and the Thing*, at NiMAC (Nicosia), and participated in *Vanishing Act* at the Queer Arts Festival (Vancouver).

**Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth** is a painter based in Berlin.

**Alper Turan** is a curator and writer, born in 1992 in Ankara and based in Toronto. Turan is a 2023–24 curatorial fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program, a General Idea fellow at the National Gallery of Canada, and is currently pursuing his PhD in Art History at the University of Toronto.

**Poster** Natis, *Dialogues of Four Passions* (page 3), 2024, Hardcover book (paper, cardboard, fabric), 18 × 23cm  
Courtesy the artist



# Natis & Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth

Text by Alper Turan

A Stab on the Artist with a Capital A

Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth’s oil paintings are bricolages of masters, remixing neo-expressionist and surrealist *Kunstwollen* to probe new, affectively charged modes of expression. His canvases evoke Georg Baselitz’s fractured figures and Jörg Immendorff’s microcosms of national identity, while his violated bodies recall Francis Bacon’s depictions of dehumanized figures. Yet the strongest parallel emerges with Jiří Georg Dokoupil’s process-based works, where the very tools imprint their textures onto the canvas. Ehrenwerth wields a traditional brush, however, and the brush itself becomes the imprint of everything that can’t be swept away—his strokes cutting open the wounds of a century-old German psyche.

Born in pre-reunification Berlin in 1988 to a German father and a British mother, Ehrenwerth was first influenced as an artist by his grandfather, who was a student of Swedish painter Pierre Brassau, and later by the German masters. His mother never set foot in East Berlin after 1989, and now Ehrenwerth limps whenever he walks there, a direct inheritance—He is the embodiment of post-memory. Yet, what emerges on Ehrenwerth’s canvas is not this transference, but distorted bodies migrating across borders and generations. Blood bleeds into blood, color washes out the color, guilt eats the canvas. Ehrenwerth’s cut is a stab on the surface, like a Lucio Fontana, but what he cuts through is not the picture plane but the repressed materiality of the German unconscious—allegorically splitting open the surface.

Like a wound that refuses to close, the incision marks the gallery wall. Installed ajar, the painting invites the audience to peer into the unseen and deliberately concealed space between the canvas and the wall. *BOOM!*—something is revealed, a secret about Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth, something that exposes him as ... a fabrication. The painting is a matter of fact, but the painter as we know him does not exist. Hasso is a constructed persona of Natis, who embodies and instrumentalizes multiple, performative, artist selves (Hasan Aksaygin, Hank Yan Agassi, and now Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth) to challenge conventional conceptions of creative subjectivity within Western ideals, interrogating the socio-political constructs that shape these personas and the reception of their works.

Behind Hasso’s *Untitled* (2024) painting sits a framed contract between Natis and Matti that formalizes their collaboration. While Natis remains the maker of the painting, Matti, recruited by Natis, is a German actor who thereby accepted to become the face and body of Hasso and will perform the role of the artist, presenting the work as his own. This performance tests the extent to which the artwork is part of the artist’s body, and how the gaze constructs the artwork. Inhabiting a Middle Eastern body, both Natis and his other painter persona, Hasan Hasso, have been unable to unwind into the loose, expressive gestures, unable to escape the politics attached to their image, and unable to

break free from the gaze that petrifies the status and movements of their body. Natis’s practice is therefore constrained by defined lines and precise movements, reflecting the rigidity of imposter syndrome—never feeling good enough or unapologetic enough to paint as entitled. To channel the expressive power of Hasso, Natis collaborates with a body that’s different than his own, and impossible to impersonate.

Nearby, an open case displays *Painting Behaviour Modification Tool* (2024), a specially designed jacket with an attached stick that restricts the use of one’s hands, forcing the artist to paint with large shoulder movements instead. On a lectern, there is a book—a sacred, ongoing archival document containing the dialogues formatted as a dramaturgic script—that fits into Natis’s practice of performative mythopoesis. The text chronicles each stage of Hasso’s coming into being: from the negotiations with Matti, to the ceremonial contract signing officiated by Willem de Rooij, and finally, Hasso’s debut into the Berlin art scene at BPA//’s opening at KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

The whole project of *Launch and Cease* (2024)—encapsulating the painting, modification tool, contract, pedestal, and even Matti—is a performance of coming to terms with the idea of the Artist, with a capital A: the Artist as the institution and the artist as white as the cube. This superior subject invented in the shadow of the Enlightenment, exists as the “regulatory ideal of creative abilities.” Even in an era where His legitimacy is contested, shaken, and attacked as never before—even when He, himself, is critical of the very institution that produces Him —everything still “ends up benefiting and further perpetuating Him.” Even when the discourse “seemingly dismantles Him,” we are still “centered around Him.”<sup>1</sup> Natis’s performance enacts a third-wave institutional critique—not a wound on the canvas, but a direct stab at the Artist, which relies on the commodification of difference. Co-opting a white body to stand in, Natis lays bare how the Artist shapes what can be seen, understood, and validated, thereby becoming complicit in a larger cultural machine enforcing rigid expectations from the othered bodies. Non-white artists are expected to perform trauma, difference, or marginality, and fulfill victim roles that maintain the illusion of diversity, but these roles are merely superficial gestures that uphold the dominance of Western artistic ideals.

While Natis narrates, lives, and thinks through different selves, he undertakes a deliberate process of disidentification and disembodiment, refusing a fixed identity, a singular narrative, a coherent self, and a gazed-upon body. These performative identities serve as instruments to navigate sociopolitical constructs, but while his body gets channeled by various subjects with distinct biographies and artistic practices, it also becomes a vessel, an instrument, a brush. Each of these equally fictitious and factual entities, residing in the same body-vessel, function as layers: coating crusts, scars on the psychic skin, strata, or epistemological clotting. They are not ghosts emerging from the past to haunt the present; they do not conform to

<sup>1</sup> Natis, *Dialogues of Four Passions*, 2024, self-published by the artist.

the alter-ego or doppelganger scheme, as they do not emerge from within or embody repressed aspects of the self. Instead, they operate as intentional, speculative selves situated in distinct temporal, racial, and corporeal contexts—projections that extend beyond the self rather than reflect its division. Natis’s passions —Hasan Aksaygin, Hank Yan Agassi, Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth—are survival techniques, adaptive fabrications, reactionary tools, and litmus tests.

Through these personas, Natis renders both those selves and their respective works of art perpetually ajar, inviting partial and veiled revelation. In Hasan’s *paintingwriting* series, for example, *The Veil* (2023) follows the image of a veil in various states of folding and unfolding, always half-open. On the reverse side of each painting a story unfolds, fragmented across each piece. The narrative remains concealed when exhibited and is interrupted when the paintings are separated. Similarly, Hank’s “paintingwriting” inscribes a story on the frames, circling each painting and continuing onto the next. In both cases, the story is hidden on the reverse sides or remains fractured and incomplete. Natis and his personas resist full legibility by transforming subjectivity into a site of constant negotiation, where presence is forever anticipatory, elusive, and impossible to fully access. They stage the tension of an erotic spectacle, a mediated act of exhibitionism. The viewer’s gaze can never fully grasp either the personas or their works, which are intertwined in sympoiesis, as they remain ajar. This allows Natis to maintain control over how and to what extent he and his work are seen, understood, or consumed. Via fragmenting narratives, splitting personas, and mutilating bodies, Natis shatters both the Artist with a capital A and the very structures that demand the containment and comprehension of artists, lowercase.

**Natis** is a writer, archivist, and conceptual artist, born in 1986 in Nicosia and based in Berlin. In 2022, he held a solo exhibition, *Frenk Bey, Fortress and the Thing*, at NiMAC (Nicosia), and participated in *Vanishing Act* at the Queer Arts Festival (Vancouver).

**Hasso Weiß Ehrenwerth** is a painter based in Berlin.

**Alper Turan** is a curator and writer, born in 1992 in Ankara and based in Toronto. Turan is a 2023–24 curatorial fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program, a General Idea fellow at the National Gallery of Canada, and is currently pursuing his PhD in Art History at the University of Toronto.

**Poster** Natis, *Dialogues of Four Passions* (page 3), 2024, Hardcover book (paper, cardboard, fabric), 18 × 23cm  
Courtesy the artist

# NATIS

## DIALOGUES OF FOUR PASSIONS

HASSO WEIß EHRENWERTH

COMING TO TERMS WITH *HIM* • MATTI

ARRIVAL AND THE CONVERGENCE

FIGURING OUT HOW TO PAINT

PAINTING BEHAVIOUR

MODIFICATION TOOL

THE GHOST AND THE GEIST

CEREMONY • FITTING OUT • DEBUT





**Simon Speiser** is a German-Ecuadorian artist who merges nature and technology through various media. Exploring themes of origins and the interplay between human and technological worlds, virtual reality and ancestral folklore, his work uses story-telling as a tool in the fight against dystopian thinking. He has exhibited at Tate Modern (London), Tai Kwun Contemporary (Hong Kong), Julia Stoschek Foundation (Berlin), Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff), CAC Quito, and Frankfurter Kunstverein, among others.

**Lisa Long** lives in Berlin and is a curator specialized in contemporary and time-based art; she currently serves as the artistic director of the Julia Stoschek Foundation, where she has overseen and curated the program since 2019.

**Poster** Simon Speiser, *La Visión del Monte* (detail), 2023  
Courtesy the artist

# Simon Speiser

La Visión del Monte

For millennia, light and movement have been used to enhance the act of telling stories. The first recorded author in history, Enehdunna, the high priestess of Ur (a Mesopotamian city in what is now Iraq), wrote her narrative in Sumerian cuneiform approximately 2300 BC, which depended on the interplay of light and shadow and the reader's motions to bring the story, imprinted on clay tablets, to life. Shadow play was also a common form of storytelling in ancient times, especially across Asia, only later spreading to the Middle East during the Ottoman Empire and coming to Europe through French missionaries, where it gained popularity in the eighteenth century. Around the same time in Europe, the precursors of cinema, like the phantasmagoria or the magic lantern, offered more mechanical forms of storytelling with light and motion, the latter often used to "conjure" the supernatural before an audience awestruck by the apparitions they thought they were seeing.

Even as we enter an age of total simulation through high-functioning AI language and image generators, and in which light and movement are no longer necessary to create an illusion of reality, we still rely on storytelling as a technology to make sense of the world. Passed on from one person or community to another, stories help us relate to what we know of the past, our experiences in the present, and ideas of the future, adapting to our needs, our dreams, and desires.

Bringing stories to life that hold within them a dense composite of past, present, and future is a core concern in Simon Speiser's multi-disciplinary practice. His approach is rooted in speculative science as well as the knowledge systems of pre-colonial cultures that make up the rich history of Ecuador, where parts of his family still live today. Stemming from these influences, his works highlight the kinships between human and non-human entities—from stones to trees, machines, and spirits—searching, through technology, for ways to cultivate a deeper understanding of a larger, interconnected universe that can't be reduced to one way of knowing truth.

With a strong inclination toward science fiction, Speiser sees the need to counter the mass of apocalyptic dystopias revolving around deester and extinction—which have already become a reality for many—with stories that rekindle trust in our ability to live with respect for each other and for the earth. Storytelling thereby becomes a tool for worldbuilding and to imagine positive change by fusing old and new forms of knowledge, inviting us to rethink our relationships to nature, technology, and the spiritual world.

In the mechatronic light sculpture *La Visión del Monte* (2023), Speiser incorporates new technologies like robotics and AI as well as older traditions like shadow play to transport viewers into the rainforest of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, where folkloric tales of mischievous spirits and supernatural beings remind people of their place in the

cosmos. *El Bambero* or *La Tunda*, as these entities are commonly called, inhabit the jungle and appear as illuminated figures—in human or animal shape—as well as tiny pebbles of light, inconspicuously slipped into a pocket or bag. They are protectors of the land and can bring fortune or misfortune to those who see them.

Based on interviews with family, friends, and acquaintances from Esmeraldas, the stories in *La Visión del Monte* are narrated by Speiser's father, Remigio Tapia, who is himself Esmeraldenian. As a province, Esmeraldas holds a unique position in Ecuador to this day, still home to the largest Afro-Latinx population in the country. It was established in the sixteenth century by Africans who escaped enslavement, becoming one of the earliest liberated enclaves in South America. As a maroon society, it has a complex and sometimes conflicted relationship with the effects of Christianization on African belief systems, which even after centuries of colonial erasure still appear unexpectedly. *El Bambero* or *La Tunda* offer glimpses into these almost forgotten ways of life.

The material elements of *La Visión del Monte* are made up of a central robotic arm that emits light inside a dome constructed of pieces of perforated, 3D-printed fragments that resemble pottery shards. To produce the shape of each piece, Speiser built ceramic vessels using 3D software. He then digitally mapped AI-generated images of the stories onto the vessels, following the principle of stereographic projection enabled mathematicians to map three-dimensional spheres onto two-dimensional planes. This helped the Greeks analyze the movements of the stars. Later, stereographic projection became foundational in mapping out the Eastern and Western hemispheres, propelling the colonial conquest of the so-called New World.

In *La Visión del Monte*, Speiser undertakes an alternate mapping of the world, composed as a synthesis of ancestral knowledge, the supernatural, speculative science, and new technologies. This proposed world is neither two- nor three-dimensional, but potentially open-ended, both in form and in meaning. From afar, the small glowing dome looks like a view of a universe of overlapping, porous layers speckled with a million twinkling stars. In close-up, each shard becomes a constellation in itself, a fragment of the larger story, mimicking the broken ceramics and clay tablets of past civilizations. As the animated light shines through each fragment, throwing images across the space, the viewer is immersed in a situation evoking a bonfire—a collective experience where the movement between light and shadow enhances stories of the ghosts and spirits who keep an eye on us, while we stare into the mesmerizing flames.

# Simon Speiser

Text by Lisa Long

La Visión del Monte

For millennia, light and movement have been used to enhance the act of telling stories. The first recorded author in history, Enehdunna, the high priestess of Ur (a Mesopotamian city in what is now Iraq), wrote her narrative in Sumerian cuneiform approximately 2300 BC, which depended on the interplay of light and shadow and the reader’s motions to bring the story, imprinted on clay tablets, to life. Shadow play was also a common form of storytelling in ancient times, especially across Asia, only later spreading to the Middle East during the Ottoman Empire and coming to Europe through French missionaries, where it gained popularity in the eighteenth century. Around the same time in Europe, the precursors of cinema, like the phantasmagoria or the magic lantern, offered more mechanical forms of storytelling with light and motion, the latter often used to “conjure” the supernatural before an audience awestruck by the apparitions they thought they were seeing.

Even as we enter an age of total simulation through high-functioning AI language and image generators, and in which light and movement are no longer necessary to create an illusion of reality, we still rely on storytelling as a technology to make sense of the world. Passed on from one person or community to another, stories help us relate to what we know of the past, our experiences in the present, and ideas of the future, adapting to our needs, our dreams, and desires.

Bringing stories to life that hold within them a dense composite of past, present, and future is a core concern in Simon Speiser’s multi-disciplinary practice. His approach is rooted in speculative science as well as the knowledge systems of pre-colonial cultures that make up the rich history of Ecuador, where parts of his family still live today. Stemming from these influences, his works highlight the kinships between human and non-human entities—from stones to trees, machines, and spirits—searching, through technology, for ways to cultivate a deeper understanding of a larger, interconnected universe that can’t be reduced to one way of knowing truth.

With a strong inclination toward science fiction, Speiser sees the need to counter the mass of apocalyptic dystopias revolving around disaster and extinction—which have already become a reality for many—with stories that rekindle trust in our ability to live with respect for each other and for the earth, this earth. Storytelling thereby becomes a tool for worldbuilding and to imagine positive change by fusing old and new forms of knowledge, inviting us to rethink our relationships to nature, technology, and the spiritual world.

In the mechatronic light sculpture *La Visión del Monte* (2023), Speiser incorporates new technologies like robotics and AI as well as older traditions like shadow play to transport viewers into the rainforest of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, where folkloric tales of mischievous spirits and supernatural beings remind people of their place in the

cosmos. *El Bambero* or *La Tunda*, as these entities are commonly called, inhabit the jungle and appear as illuminated figures—in human or animal shape—as well as tiny pebbles of light, inconspicuously slipped into a pocket or bag. They are protectors of the land and can bring fortune or misfortune to those who see them.

Based on interviews with family, friends, and acquaintances from Esmeraldas, the stories in *La Visión del Monte* are narrated by Speiser’s father, Remigio Tapia, who is himself Esmeraldenian. As a province, Esmeraldas holds a unique position in Ecuador to this day, still home to the largest Afro-Latinx population in the country. It was established in the sixteenth century by Africans who escaped enslavement, becoming one of the earliest liberated enclaves in South America. As a maroon society, it has a complex and sometimes conflicted relationship with the effects of Christianization on African belief systems, which even after centuries of colonial erasure still appear unexpectedly. *El Bambero* or *La Tunda* offer glimpses into these almost forgotten ways of life.

The material elements of *La Visión del Monte* are made up of a central robotic arm that emits light inside a dome constructed of pieces of perforated, 3D-printed fragments that resemble pottery shards. To produce the shape of each piece, Speiser built ceramic vessels using 3D software. He then digitally mapped AI-generated images of the stories onto the vessels, following the principle of stereographic projection. First known to be used in ancient Greece, stereographic projection enabled mathematicians to map three-dimensional spheres onto two-dimensional planes. This helped the Greeks analyze the movements of the stars. Later, stereographic projection became foundational in mapping out the Eastern and Western hemispheres, propelling the colonial conquest of the so-called New World.

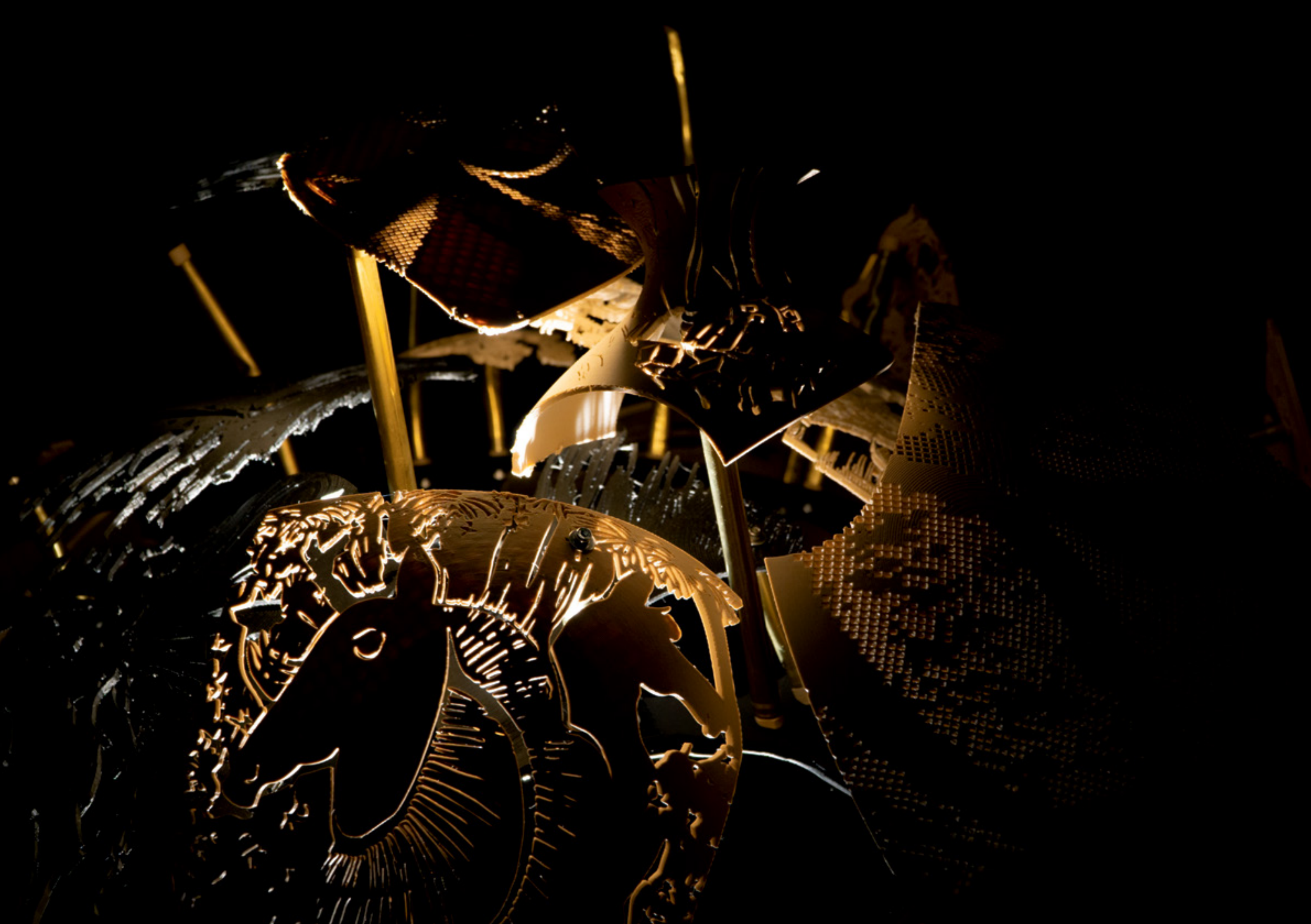
In *La Visión del Monte*, Speiser undertakes an alternate mapping of the world, composed as a synthesis of ancestral knowledge, the supernatural, speculative science, and new technologies. This proposed world is neither two- nor three-dimensional, but potentially open-ended, both in form and in meaning. From afar, the small glowing dome likens a view of a universe of overlapping, porous layers speckled with a million twinkling stars. In close-up, each shard becomes a constellation in itself, a fragment of the larger story, mimicking the broken ceramics and clay tablets of past civilizations. As the animated light shines through each fragment, throwing images across the space, the viewer is immersed in a situation evoking a bonfire—a collective experience where the movement between light and shadow enhances stories of the ghosts and spirits who keep an eye on us, while we stare into the mesmerizing flames.

**Simon Speiser** is a German-Ecuadorian artist who merges nature and technology through various media. Exploring themes of origins and the interplay between human and technological worlds, virtual reality and ancestral folklore, his work uses storytelling as a tool in the fight against dystopian thinking. He has exhibited at Tate Modern (London), Tai Kwun Contemporary (Hong Kong), Julia Stoschek Foundation (Berlin), Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff), CAC Quito, and Frankfurter Kunstverein, among others.

**Lisa Long** lives in Berlin and is a curator specialized in contemporary and time-based art; she currently serves as the artistic director of the Julia Stoschek Foundation, where she has overseen and curated the program since 2019.

**Poster** Simon Speiser, *La Visión del Monte* (detail), 2023  
Courtesy the artist







One of my early memories goes back to a late-night visit to an eatery. I sat with the dancers on a high barstool at an oak bar. We ate pita bread with *shoorma*, as it's spelled and eaten in the Netherlands—a thin bread with sweetly spiced lamb, iceberg lettuce, and a runny garlic sauce in a wooden bowl. The dancers were my mother and the women in the global dance group she founded. Almost every weekend, I traveled with them to events, festivals, and parties. During the week, my mother was at her office job, where she worked on what were then called diversity projects. On weekends, she danced for audiences, in styles from Indo-nesia, Polynesia, Melanesia, Egypt, the Caribbean, and more, as well as disco and soul. Mother performed the touristy belly dance with a bare belly, even when she was pregnant with me. I also vividly remember a black sheer dress full of coins and a headdress with burning candles. On days off, we went to the black market in Beverwijk or the Albert Cuyt market in Amsterdam to find rare fabrics and decorations. My mom had already played with costumes and dances as a child, in the gray and conservative Netherlands of the 1950s. She performed on wooden crates on the Rhine in her hometown near the German border. She swooned over Hollywood interpretations of “far” cultures, in hindsight so unmistakably searching for her own. But in the impoverished, social class of the complex, contradictory, and all-oppressive colonial hierarchy into which her family had fallen, being “(more) Indonesian” was not something to aspire to.

The memories of eating shoarma among the dancers, amidst the smell of foundation and hairspray, come quickly to mind as I stand with Xavier Robles de Medina in his Mitte studio in front of the painting of his idol, Aaliyah. She, too, wears an outfit reminiscent of belly dance, bracelets referencing Indian jewelry, and a headdress with gemstones that vaguely recalls the tiaras of Russian tsarinas. Last weekend, I decided against wearing a vintage cheongsam dress to a Dutch wedding because I feared it might come across as exoticizing cultural appropriation. It is said to be related to an emancipatory development in Shanghai. For me personally, the figure-hugging dress with a standing collar is also an undeniable reference to the 2000s: from Lucy Liu's best friend in *Kill Bill* (2003) to Kelly from Destiny's Child, the illustrious twenty-two dresses of Maggie Cheung in *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Finette in the Dutch *Sex and the City* variant, *Rozengaur & Wodka Lime*, and my fourteen-year-old self at a high school party at the turn of the millennium. The high-collared silk dress was hot.

Aaliyah was hot, too. Xavier, who grew up in Paramaribo, Suriname, first became acquainted with American music video culture when he visited Miami at the age of eleven. At a friend's, he saw the spectacular MTV Video Music Awards on TV for the first time. In Suriname, radio stations are dominated by RnB and soul from the 2000s—Boyz II Men, The Fugees, Aaliyah. Captivating, heartfelt, rhythmic. Regarding the

Heartache seems different as you get older. Pain shifts and transforms, and experiences of loss form connections with one another. At eleven, Xavier couldn't have imagined what Aaliyah, who died in a fatal plane crash at twenty-two, would mean for international music culture and a sense of belonging for so many Black and brown teenagers. Nor could we fully comprehend the weight of the marriage that a twenty-seven-year-old R. Kelly entered into with then-fifteen-year-old Aaliyah. We knew it was very wrong, but now we understand it more heavily, as part of something bigger, structural. There is a melancholic dedication in Xavier's approach. Care for what we take for granted. Love for a future. He worked on the painting for a year. Carefully measured it, so the figure became life-sized, square by square. “I have to like my subject to work on it for so long,” he says. He starts a conversation with the portrait; it becomes a partner, a companion, a mirror image. It goes so far that, for Xavier, painting Aaliyah's makeup layer upon layer begins to feel like a drag experience. Today, once again, the public value of art is under pressure. Increasingly, artists must prove themselves in terms of measurability, whether it's money, visibility, or identity. Art must be standardized.

Before doing his MFA in London, Xavier also lived in Amsterdam, from 2014 until 2017. Still today, friends in Germany remember this period as one of sizzling energy and partying. The Rijksakademie was thriving as a pressure cooker for international artists. The cultural budget cuts at the end of the 2010s, initiated by the neoliberal party, led to an explosion of initiatives, collaborations, and networks in response. Only later, and certainly now, have the long-term consequences of these cuts become clear. In the unaffordable Dutch capital, there is less and less room for creativity and experimentation, for people who don't come from money. Ten years ago, it was different. Back then, we cycled through an empty, warm city at dawn, mirroring our broken hearts to Frank Ocean's. His coming-out Tumblr letter from 2012 still brings tears.

cheongsam, Xavier has no judgment. Not only does he get the 2000s reference, but he also comes from an environment where many cultures have already mixed, and white people do not dominate in presence. Appropriation seems to have a different meaning in Suriname, one less fraught with projection and guilt. “I had no chance to prepare, couldn't see you coming,” Frank Ocean's “Ivy” was released in 2016, and *Blonde* was the soundtrack to the end of my twenties in Amsterdam. At the time, I was ready for a more serious thirties life, having just become the director of an art institution. Only now do I understand that it was truly a time of farewell. Full of optimism, we had been organizing events for young donors at cultural institutions and festivals called “Strange Sounds From Beyond” (sic), with highlights like Seida Bagcan, Ata Kak, and Omar Souleyman. My friends from that time now occupy the highway for Extinction Rebellion, almost weekly for two years already.

Because the effect of imagination cannot be controlled, artmaking itself is controlled. This demonstrates how powerful art is, precisely in its plurality. Creativity can stir the hearts, give agency to bodies, and wake up minds. Adorno said that we should not contemplate history and current developments as natural phenomena but as events in which we ourselves are (political) subjects. Art especially reminds us of our own ability and freedom to think and act—to be imaginative.

As they further socialize in society, children often conform towards a standard. At my primary school, we had a circle talk every Monday. Classmates would describe what they had done that weekend. One had gone to a pancake diner, another had visited their grandmother in a different city. I never talked about our weekly performances or trips all the way to Germany and Belgium, nor about late-night shoarma in distant cities, *kousenband* with Aartie, my sister's bestie with whom she danced bharata natyam, the peanut soup from auntie Edmé, nor the Dabke dance classes of mom's friend Fatih. When I moved away for college, almost everyone in my art history seminars was white. In work, “diversity” returned when I started engaging with artists.

Interpretations and representations of culture and history say at least as much about the person depicting them as about who or what is depicted. They might express desire, admiration, longing. A search for companionship even. The distance that the fancy, international art world can create from one's own home holds a loneliness many artists are familiar with. And then there is my mother, who always kept operating in mixed environments and continued to search for the culture of her own scattered, faraway home, time and again to be so brutally cut off. Viewed this way, a caring kind of appropriation can just as easily be an act of appreciation and connection, an ode to much-needed plurality and imagination—or even more: a loving detour to ourselves, hand in hand with the other.

**Xavier Robles de Medina** is a Surinamese artist and writer working in Berlin and Paramaribo. In 2019, he received his MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, University of London. His 2024 projects include two solo exhibitions, *Tetris Effect* with Catinca Tabacaru Gallery (Bucharest) at Art Basel Paris, and *Love is not a maybe thing...* at Efremidis (Berlin), and the publication of his first monograph, *Pengel* (coy koi books).

**Zippora Elders** is a curator, writer, and advisor based in Berlin. She was the head of the curatorial department at Gropius Bau (Berlin), co-curator of Sonsbeek 2020–24, and director of Kunstfort bij Vijfhuizen. Recent exhibitions include *Selma Selman: her0* and *General Idea*: at Gropius Bau. Currently, she is senior curator at the Van Abbemuseum.

Courtesy the artist and Catinca Tabacaru Gallery

BPA// Berlin program for artists

www.berlinprogramforartists.org

BPA// Exhibition 2024

KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Xavier Robles de Medina

Text by Zippora Elders



# Xavier Robles de Medina

Text by Zippora Elders

Couldn't see you coming

One of my early memories goes back to a late-night visit to an eatery. I sat with the dancers on a high barstool at an oak bar. We ate pita bread with *shoarma*, as it's spelled and eaten in the Netherlands—a thin bread with sweetly spiced lamb, iceberg lettuce, and a runny garlic sauce in a wooden bowl. The dancers were my mother and the women in the global dance group she founded. Almost every weekend, I traveled with them to events, festivals, and parties. During the week, my mother was at her office job, where she worked on what were then called diversity projects. On weekends, she danced for audiences, in styles from Indonesia, Polynesia, Melanesia, Egypt, the Caribbean, and more, as well as disco and soul. Mother performed the touristy belly dance with a bare belly, even when she was pregnant with me. I also vividly remember a black sheer dress full of coins and a headdress with burning candles. On days off, we went to the black market in Beverwijk or the Albert Cuyp market in Amsterdam to find rare fabrics and decorations. My mom had already played with costumes and dances as a child, in the gray and conservative Netherlands of the 1950s. She performed on wooden crates on the Rhine in her hometown near the German border. She swooned over Hollywood interpretations of “far” cultures, in hindsight so unmistakably searching for her own. But in the impoverished, social class of the complex, contradictory, and all-oppressive colonial hierarchy into which her family had fallen, being “(more) Indonesian” was not something to aspire to.

The memories of eating shoarma among the dancers, amidst the smell of foundation and hairspray, come quickly to mind as I stand with Xavier Robles de Medina in his Mitte studio in front of the painting of his idol, Aaliyah. She, too, wears an outfit reminiscent of belly dance, bracelets referencing Indian jewelry, and a headdress with gemstones that vaguely recalls the tiaras of Russian tsarinas. Last weekend, I decided against wearing a vintage cheongsam dress to a Dutch wedding because I feared it might come across as exoticizing cultural appropriation. It is said to be related to an emancipatory development in Shanghai. For me personally, the figure-hugging dress with a standing collar is also an undeniable reference to the 2000s: from Lucy Liu's best friend in *Kill Bill* (2003) to Kelly from Destiny's Child, the illustrious twenty-two dresses of Maggie Cheung in *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Finette in the Dutch *Sex and the City* variant, *Rozengeur & Wodka Lime*, and my fourteen-year-old self at a high school party at the turn of the millennium. The high-collared silk dress was hot.

Aaliyah was hot, too. Xavier, who grew up in Paramaribo, Suriname, first became acquainted with American music video culture when he visited Miami at the age of eleven. At a friend's, he saw the spectacular MTV Video Music Awards on TV for the first time. In Suriname, radio stations are dominated by RnB and soul from the 2000s—Boyz II Men, The Fugees, Aaliyah. Captivating, heartfelt, rhythmic. Regarding the

cheongsam, Xavier has no judgment. Not only does he get the 2000s reference, but he also comes from an environment where many cultures have already mixed, and white people do not dominate in presence. Appropriation seems to have a different meaning in Suriname, one less fraught with projection and guilt.

“I had no chance to prepare, couldn't see you coming.” Frank Ocean's “Ivy” was released in 2016, and *Blonde* was the soundtrack to the end of my twenties in Amsterdam. At the time, I was ready for a more serious thirties life, having just become the director of an art institution. Only now do I understand that it was truly a time of farewell. Full of optimism, we had been organizing events for young donors at cultural institutions and festivals called “Strange Sounds From Beyond” (sic), with highlights like Selda Bağcan, Ata Kak, and Omar Souleyman. My friends from that time now occupy the highway for Extinction Rebellion, almost weekly for two years already.

Before doing his MFA in London, Xavier also lived in Amsterdam, from 2014 until 2017. Still today, friends in Germany remember this period as one of sizzling energy and partying. The Rijksakademie was thriving as a pressure cooker for international artists. The cultural budget cuts at the end of the 2010s, initiated by the neoliberal party, led to an explosion of initiatives, collaborations, and networks in response. Only later, and certainly now, have the long-term consequences of these cuts become clear. In the unaffordable Dutch capital, there is less and less room for creativity and experimentation, for people who don't come from money. Ten years ago, it was different. Back then, we cycled through an empty, warm city at dawn, mirroring our broken hearts to Frank Ocean's. His coming-out Tumblr letter from 2012 still brings tears.

Heartache seems different as you get older. Pain shifts and transforms, and experiences of loss form connections with one another. At eleven, Xavier couldn't have imagined what Aaliyah, who died in a fatal plane crash at twenty-two, would mean for international music culture and a sense of belonging for so many Black and brown teenagers. Nor could we fully comprehend the weight of the marriage that a twenty-seven-year-old R. Kelly entered into with then-fifteen-year-old Aaliyah. We knew it was very wrong, but now we understand it more heavily, as part of something bigger, structural.

There is a melancholic dedication in Xavier's approach. Care for what we take for granted. Love for a future. He worked on the painting for a year. Carefully measured it, so the figure became life-sized, square by square. “I have to like my subject to work on it for so long,” he says. He starts a conversation with the portrait; it becomes a partner, a companion, a mirror image. It goes so far that, for Xavier, painting Aaliyah's makeup layer upon layer begins to feel like a drag experience.

Today, once again, the public value of art is under pressure. Increasingly, artists must prove themselves in terms of measurability, whether it's money, visibility, or identity. Art must be standardized.

Because the effect of imagination cannot be controlled, artmaking itself is controlled. This demonstrates how powerful art is, precisely in its plurality. Creativity can stir the hearts, give agency to bodies, and wake up minds. Adorno said that we should not contemplate history and current developments as natural phenomena but as events in which we ourselves are (political) subjects. Art especially reminds us of our own ability and freedom to think and act—to be imaginative.

As they further socialize in society, children often conform towards a standard. At my primary school, we had a circle talk every Monday. Classmates would describe what they had done that weekend. One had gone to a pancake diner, another had visited their grandmother in a different city. I never talked about our weekly performances or trips all the way to Germany and Belgium, nor about late-night shoarma in distant cities, *kousenband* with Aartie, my sister's bestie with whom she danced bharata natyam, the peanut soup from auntie Edmé, nor the Dabke dance classes of mom's friend Fatih. When I moved away for college, almost everyone in my art history seminars was white. In work, “diversity” returned when I started engaging with artists.

Interpretations and representations of culture and history say at least as much about the person depicting them as about who or what is depicted. They might express desire, admiration, longing. A search for companionship even. The distance that the fancy, international art world can create from one's own home holds a loneliness many artists are familiar with. And then there is my mother, who always kept operating in mixed environments and continued to search for the culture of her own scattered, faraway home, time and again to be so brutally cut off. Viewed this way, a caring kind of appropriation can just as easily be an act of appreciation and connection, an ode to much-needed plurality and imagination—or even more: a loving detour to ourselves, hand in hand with the other.

**Xavier Robles de Medina** is a Surinamese artist and writer working in Berlin and Paramaribo. In 2019, he received his MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, University of London. His 2024 projects include two solo exhibitions, *Tetris Effect* with Catinca Tabacaru Gallery (Bucharest) at Art Basel Paris, and *Love is not a maybe thing...* at Efremidis (Berlin), and the publication of his first monograph, *Pengel* (coy koi books).

**Zippora Elders** is a curator, writer, and advisor based in Berlin. She was the head of the curatorial department at Gropius Bau (Berlin), co-curator of Sonsbeek 2020–24, and director of Kunstfort bij Vijfhuizen. Recent exhibitions include *Selma Selman: her0* and *General Idea*: at Gropius Bau. Currently, she is senior curator at the Van Abbemuseum.

Courtesy the artist and Catinca Tabacaru Gallery







BPA// Exhibition 2024

KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Zhiyuan Yang

Born in Beijing, survived in New York, and currently living in Berlin, **Zhiyuan Yang** often drops her professionalism to confront elitism and neoliberalism in the art industry. In the past, she made her parents artists, shared exhibitions with friends, and counterfeited an art review to receive a visa. She was recently exchanging letters with a Telegram friend as part of this publication.

**Zaina S.** is a Palestinian organizer, curator, and writer passionate about Palestinian liberation, Global South unity, decolonizing art scenes, and creating new systems to replace the imperialist and capitalist structures that are suffocating us.



BPA// Exhibition 2024  
KW Institute for Contemporary Art

# Zhiyuan Yang

Text by Zaina S.

Born in Beijing, survived in New York, and currently living in Berlin, **Zhiyuan Yang** often drops her professionalism to confront elitism and neoliberalism in the art industry. In the past, she made her parents artists, shared exhibitions with friends, and counterfeited an art review to receive a visa. She was recently exchanging letters with a Telegram friend as part of this publication.

**Zaina S.** is a Palestinian organizer, curator, and writer passionate about Palestinian liberation, Global South unity, decolonizing art scenes, and creating new systems to replace the imperialist and capitalist structures that are suffocating us.

BPA// Berlin program for artists  
[www.berlinprogramforartists.org](http://www.berlinprogramforartists.org)

