

READINGS FROM BELOW

Curatorial Statement

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Artists today, more than ever before, are working with archive documents, research, information, and data, processing their material in innovative ways and opening it up to our collective memory for retrieval and reinterpretation. *Readings From Below* explores how artists engage us in new readings of our complex present by making use of the virtual potentials of archives. While the traditional institution of the archive is still characterized by a sense of permanence and timeless solidity as well as by its architecture and physical location, in today's world of digitized information, archives are becoming radically temporalized, multimodal, and detached from any specific space in line with a dynamic user culture. Any materials retrieved from these heterogeneous archives can be reused, recontextualized, or restaged, with the possibility of reconfiguring them in any conceivable arrangement. At the same time, with storage space, data, and information expanding at a tremendous pace that defies any classificatory logic, the question now arises as to what actually constitutes a document and what should be regarded as archival material and therefore a representative example of cultural heritage.

Designed to facilitate the preservation and storing of knowledge, the archive's structure and the criteria it applies for evaluating artifacts has also been a byword over time for exclusion and ideological imbalance. With this in mind, Allan Sekula draws on Walter Benjamin in his 1983 text "Reading an Archive," reminding us that the archive is not "innocent" and should be "read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced or made invisible."¹ The title *Readings from Below* alludes to artistic practices that are able to track down what has been suppressed in the archive or in everyday life and focus their attention on our surroundings. By means of artistic gestures, the space outside, located on the margins or between the categories of "the official house of memory,"² is illuminated, allowing precarious, hidden, and recalcitrant knowledge to be unearthed.

In this process, art takes advantage of the relationship between the archive and its users, as is foregrounded, for example, in Derrida's notion of the archive. With each fresh usage—i.e., with each new question and interaction—the archive and its discourses are overwritten. It is the performativity inherent in the archive and its window to the future that makes it so attractive as a conceptual context

¹ Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capitalism (1983)", in: *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp 443-452.

² Lawrence Liang, "The Dominant, the Residual and the Emergent in Archival Imagination", in "Ecologies of Change," *Spheres: Journal for Digital Culture* 2 (2015): 8, https://spheres-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/spheres-2_Liang.pdf.

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and framework for artistic practices. The instability associated with this is acceptable if its flipside is the mobilization of the dynamic relationship between past, present, and future. Thus, ultimately, the present too—which the artists featured in this exhibition approach via their practices—is anything but fixed: “The now is elusive; rather than a transparent reality that we lack the will to confront, the now is a text: dense, opaque and laden with a yet-to-be-known historicality.”³

Accordingly, the artists in this exhibition are mostly “unreliable archivists.”⁴ Rather than working with fixed knowledge structures, disciplines, and categories, they operate with the precursors of verified knowledge, with gestures and assertions, with speculative narratives, focusing on details and subtleties or on subjectivities and identities that are provisional and fragile. Here, they do not remove themselves from historical or current realities but rather elaborate what is recalcitrant and contradictory in them. Even the structures of knowledge and readability are called into question when, for example, language becomes performative or is replaced by other categories of non-verbal expression, of images that tell a very different story.

The exhibition would then be motivated by the following questions: What language do we express our experiences in? Do they evade language? Is it possible to find a way of speaking polyphonically in a variety of languages in proximity to the official archive and its categories of knowledge⁵—a way of speaking that “emerges from the complexity of life”? And, last but not least, how do we fashion experience out of the communications that determine our present, which are high on information but low on actual experience?

The exhibition begins with multi-part works by Lawrence Abu Hamdan and artist duo Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader in the outdoor space of the Times Art Center. These works continue on the ground floor, where *The Currency* by Elom 20ce, Musquiqui Chihying, and Gregor Kasper can also be heard. Taking the form of experiments with time-based media, these works put the physicality, nature, and communicative value of documents, language, and information to the test. Narrated sound and performed language, readability and unreadability, and themes such as the impact of the future on the past combine to create a playful exploration of contradictions and polyphonic voices.

***The Currency* by Elom 20ce & Musquiqui Chihying & Gregor Kasper** is a vinyl record made in conjunction with the exhibition (published by Sternberg Press), whose gold color brings to mind a

³ Ellen Rooney, foreword to Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987; Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), xxvii.

⁴ *The Unreliable Archivist* is also the title of a web project started in 1998 by Janet Cohen, Keith Frank, and John Ippolito.

⁵ See Doréen Mende, “The Undutiful Daughter’s Concept of Archival Metabolism,” *e-flux journal* 93 (2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215339/the-undutiful-daughter-s-concept-of-archival-metabolism/>.

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wafer, one of the thin silicon discs used in the production of microchips. The rap song of the same name on the A-side is a collaboration between artists Musquiqui Chihying (Taipei, Taiwan/ Berlin) and Gregor Kasper (Berlin) together with rapper Elom 20ce (Lomé, Togo), who positions himself as a griot, a traditional West African storyteller, oral historian, and singer. The lyrics in French, Mandarin, and German offer a poetic take on various aspects of contemporary cultures and economies that are blocked out and go almost unnoticed: the entanglement of digital payment services in China (WeChat and AliPay) with the everyday lives of their users, whose every movement and action becomes visible to the state and the market and can thus be monitored; the new currency ECO, which is set to replace the current CFA franc in eight West African countries at the end of 2020, representing a first step toward monetary independence for these countries; the widespread belief in a clean, free, and fair digital cloud that relies on a systematic disregard for its material foundations, such as the industry geared to the production of wafers and other electronic hardware and the working conditions that prevail in it. The B-side contains the sound piece *The Hubs*, a conversation with Togolese architect, anthropologist, and FabLab founder Sénamé Koffi Agbodjinou, accompanied by music composed by Elom 20ce. In the *The Hubs* “open hardware” workshop in Lomé in Togo, Agbodjinou introduced an alternative digital barter currency that relies on social activities and local service as a medium of exchange.

A Convention of Tiny Movements is a sound installation by **Lawrence Abu Hamdan**, consisting of a photograph and five loudspeakers ranged around the inner courtyard of Brunnenstr. 9 and on the ground floor of the Times Art Center. Five short sound samples play back strangely distorted voices and sounds (in very different ways). They are based on recordings with a “visual microphone,” a surveillance device developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that has yet to find a specific use. The technology relies on the reflection of sound waves, such as the human voice, from objects in our environment. The vibrations that the waves produce on material surfaces can be captured by video recordings and used to reconstruct these sounds and voices. The most diverse things, such as a bag of chips, a glass of water, a potted plant, or a box of cosmetic wipes, thus become a means of surreptitious surveillance. Taking a supermarket as an example, the accompanying photo shows the products that can be used as potential surveillance tools. These are shown in color. The black-and-white areas, on the other hand, can probably be regarded as “safe” from surveillance, as the surfaces of these products are less effective as sound reflectors. It is not clear to what extent this technology predicts the future of surveillance in everyday life or, as the artist puts it, “a future in which objects themselves get to speak,” each with their own individual tonality and timbre.

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Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader have explored American Sign Language (ASL) in a number of video performances, examining, in the roles of “native speaker” and “language learner,” the signs formed with the hands, facial expressions, physical posture, and oral gestures. Like German Sign Language (DGS), ASL is an autonomous language that has nothing to do grammatically with the language spoken around it. It is also frequently used for international communication and learned as a second language. In the two-part work ***Palm Reader*** that was created for the exhibition, Kim and Mader look at a group of ASL gestures that connote state and institutional authority. They consist of the first letter of a phonetic word formed with the hand and an up-and-down movement of the fist on an open palm, like using a stamp. In an animation projected on the wall, this movement is demonstrated with the signs for terms like state, law, rule, constitution, etc. Kim and Mader use playful methods to offer their audience a new sense of the intricacies of sign language—which few people know about—and its relationship to the dominant spoken language. They remind us of how language is shaped by social power relations and, more importantly, of how the deaf community is infantilized by mainstream society. But they also put emphasis on speaking as an act and an aspect of our behavior—including the possibility of deviating from the dominant mode of speaking. With this in mind, the drawing on the façade of the Times Art Center Berlin simulates a game that turns the initial letters of the signs suggesting authority into the starting point for a playful way of creating different, novel words, placed, as it were, in the hands of the audience.

The basement of the Times Art Center Berlin is showing works by Trin Thi Nguyen, Hao Jingban, Yau Ching, and Yuichiro Tamura that put forward unconventional suggestions as to how to read our world. Starting out from a subjective perspective, an everyday environment, a particular location, or a specific detail, they involve us in broader social and political constellations and convey a feeling of “being out of place and out of time.”

The three films that run simultaneously in **Trinh Thi Nguyen’s** installation ***Everyday’s the Seventies*** enact the story of Vietnamese refugees who, in the period from the late 1970s to the 1990s—initially prompted by the Vietnam War—left their homes to emigrate to Hong Kong. A large number of them were of Chinese descent. In many cases they were forced to live in camps segregated from the rest of the population until 1997. The image and sound montage demonstrates the possibilities of restaging and recontextualizing images and sounds through the juxtaposition of three different categories of film material: historical footage garnered from news agencies, films made in Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s, and an interview recorded by the artist with the owner of a vinyl store in Hong Kong. The film archive is here brought up to date as a constant string of new connections are forged between the different narrative levels of personal memory, the (pop) culture version, and the account presented by the official news images. Yet the gap between the three cinematic experiences is always

center stage. The different temporal and narrative levels collapse into a condition that has “slipped out of space and time,” a reminder of the transnational situation of many emigrants. The record store owner himself, who is supposedly the protagonist of the narrative, is all but invisible on-screen, yet the confined space in the overcrowded vinyl shop promises another way into the (hi)story: through music.

The film *We Are Alive* (2010) is the fruit of a participatory media project devised by **Yau Ching** and conducted with adolescents in three closed institutions (reform institutes) in Hong Kong, Macau, and Sapporo, Japan. As part of a series of workshops that took place between 2002 and 2005, the teenagers were guided into a creative engagement with video, photography, and sound recording: they were asked to experiment with forms of authorship and ways of addressing themselves, other participants, and—on the back of the film’s subsequent release—a broader public. The teenager’s contributions were cut together and, based on what was said and unsaid, the resulting montage conveys an image of struggling with role models, with external ascriptions of shame and stigmatization, perpetuated once again by their confinement in closed accommodation and the “moral panic” (as Yau Ching puts it) that prevails in the institutions. The young people feel themselves liberated by the strength they derive from their generation’s pop culture (e.g., the songs of pop idol Aya Matsuura), which is presented in short clips, and from the workshop series itself: from experimenting with different formats of confession and self-reflection in front of the camera, shortly before the popularization of social media.

Inspired by Felix Gonzales-Torres’s *Perfect Lovers*—the two clocks set to the same time that slowly fall out of sync—*Opus One* by **Hao Jingban** takes up the idea of the possibility, or impossibility, of synchronizing two different historical and cultural contexts. Two young dancers enthuse about the improvisational, social power of Lindy Hop and other swing dances from the school at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem in the 1930s, probably also as it represents a departure from the commercial world of contemporary China and mainstream international pop culture. The detailed study of YouTube clips showing historical recordings of dancers like Norma Miller, Al Minns, and Frankie Manning as well as more recent, kitschy imitations of the Harlem ballroom atmosphere on TikTok, the painstaking rehearsal of dance figures and acrobatic exercises, and the search for vestiges of the dance in modern-day Harlem do not seem for now to lead to the desired approximation to the historical original or the revival of its supposed subversive potential. The mix of research, fandom, persistence, and technical skill that Hao delineates with excerpts from dance rehearsals coupled with archive material and voice-overs, remains in rehearsal mode and, right to the end, never comes together into a final performance capable of bridging for a moment the historical and cultural divide.

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In the theatrical form of *Mugen Noh*, a type of Japanese Noh theatre, the stories circle between the world of spirits and a past that overhauls present events. **Yuichiro Tamura**'s artistic practice often begins at a particular location, using local anecdotes, historical information, and verbal wit to develop a narrative about the present. In the new work ***Eisenbrunnen*** (Iron Well), which he created for the exhibition, he takes the history of the mineral spring (a fountain of youth) that Brunnenstrasse once led to and interweaves it with the story of the building of the Times Art Center Berlin at Brunnenstrasse 9 —on the ruins of a failed construction project dating from the early 1990s—and elements of a well-known *Mugen Noh* drama. To start with, the work consists simply of a poster and some props that have been installed in the basement of the exhibition building. From there, visitors to the exhibition can access an animated narrative using a QR code. The story is available as a virtual artifact and yet has a spectral connection to its place of origin. Moving your smartphone away from the presentation spot alters the speed of the narrative.