

Polyphonic Approaches

By Vanessa Joan Müller

A display is a component intended for visualization. It refers on the one hand to formal qualities and forms of presentation, while at the same time structuring the interface between the work and the location in which it is shown. The display is thus a constitutive element within a material space that develops a meaning or allows it to be experienced in a new way. It exhibits, but also puts things up for debate and focuses on the interaction between the object and the subject, the exhibited object and its being exhibited. The display as a mode of interaction plays an important role in the work of Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout, for it links various elements that can be understood as visual arguments to form a dialogical whole, enabling the contextual legibility of what exists. By way of the coexistence and adjacency of works in various media, installation contexts emerge that confront the complexity of our present and place them alongside one another with various perspectives without flattening their difference.

Be it the visual representation of the production of social space, a reckoning with colonial history and one's own family involvement in that history, or the visualization of dates inscribed in a geographical terrain: the works of Eden & Lernout generate an aesthetic space that is always already a political one to the extent that it includes the beholder as an addressee and initiates a positioning. In this spatial dispersion, subjects like the foreign (exemplarily recurring in their engagement with Albert Camus), hospitality, or the contrary directions of tourist and migrant routes across Europe take on a visualization that avoids a facile clarity in favor of a multi-perspectival approach. They are not representative works in the sense that they reflect a reality or make such a depiction the basis of their interpretation or critical analysis. The artistic practice of Eden & Lernout is instead a quite abstract one using form and material, the display of collected objects, or the preparation of language as oral history. It follows previously established instructions, a concept, and serves primarily to visualize complex structures of space and time: the movement of bodies along borders in their historicity and their currency, the inscription of economic processes in large areas or the shift of lines and territories within what we call Europe. This practice processes data, but also compares it with one's own experience of the paths that this data inscribes. In a sense, at issue is an expanded or very free form of a documentary approach that inserts the artistic subject as a statistic imprecision in the data. The installations of Eden & Lernout thus appear as models of experiencing knowledge and as sites of social communication. We could also speak of modular backdrops that create an open stage—in a positive sense that is not precisely defined—for dialogue with the beholders of the works, which for their part speak of reality and its urgencies without limiting themselves to statements of assertion.

A recurring element of these spatial situations are paintings that at first glance recall constructivist compositions and their crystalline color structures. Like a spanned web, lines in increasing density cross the image, which presents itself as a landscape but as such only shows an appropriated representation of reality. Shots from Google Maps are transferred as frottage to the canvas and spread out as geometric-abstract triangular formations. The landscapes selected are real cities and territories, but at the same time emblems of geopolitical involvement and economic, political interests. The Ghawar Desert in Saudi Arabia, for example, presents itself on the one hand as a desert, but at the same time the oil fields found there, the largest on earth, make it a striking expression of the linked implications, from resource abstraction to newly globalized capitalism. The picture *o.T. (goma.66.100.13.diptych)*, created in 2013 as part of research on Congo, is based in turn on an urban landscape of Goma. A grid of streets and corrugated metal roofs forms the geometric starting point for the "overpainting." Stijn Lernout travelled to Goma in 1991 and witnessed

the growing conflicts between the Hutu and Tutsi, a conflict that spilled over from Rwanda to the country known as Zaire at the time (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The Tutsi genocide took place in Rwanda three years later, in 1994. The border town of Goma was also seriously affected by the eruption of the volcano Nyiragongo in 2002.

These “landscapes” and “city views” are not abstractions of reality, but in fact process metadata that makes them emblematic representations of geopolitical constellations.

As visual clusters, they inspire a visual thinking that can be understood as thinking about pictures, but also as thinking with the help of pictures. The use of Google Maps serves to open data structures and thus makes legible complex geostrategies that are not necessarily reflected in landscape spaces but are associated with them. The engagement with political-social issues in space is here directed towards the space as it can be seen in satellite views. In this way, it appears to be real and abstract at the same time and becomes a model of a fundamental approach to complexity by way of its appropriation and defamiliarization. At issue here is not painting, but the representation of select territories beyond the traditional Western concept of the landscape.

By way of such thematic treatments, every exhibition—being publicly accessible—creates a political-aesthetic space. That is to say, the works of Eden & Lernout are always already artistic approaches to the format of the exhibition that they understand as a discursive and viewing space, as a social space of interaction and a space of possibility of imagining abstract and virtual places, analyzing the present and in its potentiality pointing toward things in the future. By bringing subjects to the public by way of various corresponding works and their display, they engage with the context of the objects exhibited and the place of presentation that contextualizes these objects as an expression of the Other and makes them visible—as an expression and presence of the voice of an Otherness as appears in Jacques Derrida’s sketch of various figures of the “foreign” and manifests itself paradigmatically in his distinction between absolute and unconditional hospitality. “Absolute hospitality,” Derrida writes, “requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) . . .”¹ Against this backdrop, Eden & Lernout’s approach to spaces of our own and the foreign, the creation of spatial relationships between ourselves and the Other reveals itself as a constantly new surveying and adjusting of their own economic, social, cultural, political perspective in light of what presents itself as the unknown.

The multi-layered project *We Want the World (And We Want It)* from 2013 combines various perspectives on the same city, Istanbul. Conversations and interviews with refugees of various origins who have found a temporary home in the city sketch Istanbul from the perspective of those who live in illegality and thus inexorably perceive the urban space as regulated and fragmented. From their descriptions, a text condenses that highlights certain places, outlines territories, and describes the city space as a fluid zone of different encounters. This resulted in a shooting script about the places described by the migrants, which in turn formed the point of departure for the search for the place on site. With the necessarily Western, touristic perspective that the artists take on, this marked an antipode. The selection of photographic impressions was understood as an attempt to visualize both longing and the subjective

1 Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000). 25.

imagination of migrant experience. That this perspective is not authentic, that it instead reflects a European, if not to say even Eurocentric notion of migration, is inscribed in the project as a contradiction. Making visible the impossibility of viewing a location that is not one's own from a perspective other than the always already touristic and ultimately also colonial perspective: herein lies the potential of the project that is aware of the numerous implications of the subject in the historicity and political reality of a place, a country, and the Global South. The abstraction of the place descriptions present only as text in contrast to the photographic visualization of the topography of the city as experienced by the artists shows the discrepancy in the

perception of the "foreign" place as an expansion of one's own world of experience: as a privilege of the gaze.

In the wake of the enduring debates about migration and integration, Eden & Lernout initiated the project *Bujrum* in 2017. The term *bujrum* comes from the Turkish and means simply "Go ahead!" or "You're welcome to join us!" It is a word that has made its way into several other languages, like Croatian and Bosnian. For a period of four months, they used an empty former bar in Vienna's Seventeenth District as a classroom for a German course for refugees that Irena Eden held for three months. It also served as the location for three "banquets" to which participants in the course as well as people from the artists' own circle were invited. What emerged was a flexible space with furniture serving various functions that could be used and designed jointly and was open for learning a language, for getting to know one another, for individual exchange, for what one might call social participation.

The banquet as the epitome of hospitality presented foods from various cultures that attested to the mutual influence of countries and regions on one another. They were served on tableware that Eden & Lernout had purchased in 2014 on a trip along the outer borders of Europe from the Bulgarian town of Lesovo to Berlin in six different countries. (The small town of Lesovo is located directly adjacent to the fence along the border to Turkey completed in 2017. Already in 2014, local activists formed a movement to support refugees against arbitrary state power. The picture *o.T. (blue.1421.1000.17)* works with the data inscribed on this city as a micronarrative of the "Fortress Europe.") *Bujrum* combines artistic and social action in a very direct way. It also reflects upon central considerations that play a role in Derrida's exploration of the concept of hospitality. In a European understanding, generosity and hospitality always involve conditions. One must own a space and indirectly also control it to be able to invite guests. Hospitality thus also means a call on new arrivals to abandon their foreignness and thus themselves. Derrida asks, "Must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies . . . would the foreigner still be a foreigner?"² The right of the foreigner ultimately entails the right to remaining foreign and other. How could a space look where the arrival of the foreigner does not threaten our own? In French, being at home is "être chez soi." In contrast to the English concept of being "at home," where the house and being there are directly linked to one another, the French formulation implies that even when one is alone one is "chez soi," that is, "with" someone and thus also the guest of somebody, and even if that is ourselves. We are never identical to ourselves, but always host and guest at the same time. According to Derrida, only the arriving foreigner makes it possible for the host to truly feel at home. This experience of hospitality is an aporia that is not necessarily negative.

“Without the repeated enduring of this paralysis in contradiction, the responsibility of hospitality . . . where we not yet know, nor will ever know, what that means, [hospitality would have] no chance of passing, of crossing the threshold, of coming, of being welcome.”³ In this sense, a term like *bujrum* is an expression of a productive contradiction in which the refugees receive their hosts and were able to jointly develop rules.

The aporia as a figure is as a whole a characteristic element of Eden & Lernout’s art, a “perplexity,” or actually rather an “inescapability” or more precisely a “pathlessness”—an inherent difficulty or impossibility that results or emerges when one arrives at different contrary and opposite results. These contrary and opposite results lie quite fundamentally in the perspective taken, which is per se different than that of the viewed subject and those involved. Borne by a wanting to know how it looks beyond our own gaze, without wanting to appropriate it, these projects proclaim an openness that is accompanied by the search for a path that can prove to be a dead end. At issue is nothing less than art’s ability to engage with other cultural spaces and practices without making a diagnosis, privileging our own point of view, or proposing a hypothesis: allowing the other to take place and to find a way.

When in *Congobos* (2019) Belgium’s colonial past is explored, this takes place from a perspective in which the biographic overlaps with official history and focuses precisely on those zones where no congruence emerges, but contradictions surface. *Congobos* deals with nothing less than the family history of Stijn Lernout in relation to the history of the former Belgian colony of the Congo, which has only in recent years been truly subject to an extensive, critical examination. Interviews with his own aunts, uncles, cousins, and great uncles and aunts, who lived during the colonial period in the Congo or later in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and grew up there in part, resulted in an installation of videos and frottage that focuses on a place in Flanders.

The center of the project is a large format view of a forest hung on a scaffold of copper bars in the space. The extremely enlarged photographs mounted next to one another recall the rainforest of the Congo in their intense colors and opulent vegetation. But actually, the pictures depict an area of forest near the Flanders town of Geluwe known as Congobos. A missionary who had returned from the Congo opened a restaurant named Café Congo, thus giving the nearby forest its name. Video shots in two projections show the Belgian forest without commentary over the course of a spring day. On an additional monitor, an interview runs with Lernout’s great uncle Ward Lernout: initially an unsuccessful artist, due to frustration about his social situation in Belgium he became an administrator in the Belgian Congo. After returning in 1961, Lernout became a respected Belgian painter. Small format frottages show portraits of those people who were directly linked to the colonialization of the Congo, its independence, and recent history: from Leopold II to Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Kongo-Müller, and Joseph Mobutu. Micro-history and macrohistory overlap with one another, while the traces of the colonial become visible beyond official representation politics. The oft suppressed interweaving of our own narrative with historical narrative, the inadequate reckoning with the history of colonialism, and the persistence of the historical Congo in Belgian everyday life stands opposed to subjective embeddedness in it, without giving up embeddedness in a polyvocality.

3 Jacques Derrida, “Die Gesetze der Gastfreundschaft,” in: *Metaphora. Journal for Literary Theory and Media. EV 3: Flüchtling*, ed. Martina Süess, 2018. Online version <http://metaphora.univie.ac.at/volume3-derrida.pdf> (last accessed: May 25, 2021).
Translator’s note: to our knowledge, this article was only published in German translation; this is my translation of the German.

Such a location in a larger heterogenous whole also takes place in *Circle Surface Sun*, a publication project from 2020 on the Global South, where the exhibition took the form of a book presenting a polyphony of voices from the Mediterranean. Authors from Gibraltar, Spain, France, the states that once made up the former Yugoslavia, the Levante, and North Africa wrote in their own language about what they all have in common: the light. Daylight, sunlight, the light over the sea from the perspective of the country in question, of their respective sea is captured and depicted in prose, poetry, and abstract reflection. Photographs of sunbeams sparkling on the surface of the sea taken by Eden & Lernout illustrate this testimony and are just an abstract approach to what Albert Camus calls “Mediterranean thought”: an emphatic plea for the Global South. Roland Barthes called Camus’ philosophy a “solar” one that forms no system, but serves as a tool to find a “life art for catastrophic times.” This idea also repeatedly surfaces in the works of Eden & Lernout, which in their materiality, the combination of various forms of media and textiles and the display as a site of dissemination, are often almost unexpectedly atmospheric, if not sensual.