Portfolio

Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout

Exhibition Views | last updated March 2025

o.T. (Sonne_1240.820.15)
2K paint on powder-coated aluminum, on steel
124 x 82 cm
2018

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 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' 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 apolyvocality.
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.

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

(2) Ibid., 15.

(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.

Exhibition View ›

Visoko
Marstall Ahrensburg
Ahrensburg, DE
2008

o.T. (380.700.180.20)
Plaster, acrylic paint and pencil on HDF board
38,0 x 70,0 x 18,0 cm
2020

Blue

By Anamarija Batista

o.T. (circle.surface.sun_650.530.380.12)
Plaster, acrylic paint and pencil on wooden board
65,0 x 53,0 x 38,0 cm
2012

The sun no longer burned as of five in the afternoon. In the 1980s. There was no need to fear getting a sunburn. On the contrary. The gentle sunrays caressed the body in an enjoyable way. This part of the world moved gently into the evening.

The bench in front of the post office that the building shares with the school and the travel agency was framed by two large cypress trees. The bench was green, so were the cypresses. The bench was used when we were waiting for the tourists to arrive. Protected from the blaze of the sun, we looked at the kiosk opposite, around which the sun circled. We kept awake by reading graphic novels. You could hide from the sun, but you couldn't escape it.

The work From Somewhere in the Mediterranean (2020) by Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout directs its focus, as the title suggests, at a geographic space that is held together and at the same time divided by the sea. The cosmos of the Mediterranean, rich in geographic variety, is further fragmented and colored by national borders and political-economic differences. This brings us into a hodgepodge of historical facts and current processes of transformation. Social events like the Arab Spring, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, or the economic crises of capitalist societies in recent decades shaped and changed this space, and subsequently raised questions about the form of property and the role of the state in controlling production and redistribution.

The idea of "luxury for all" was already formulated in a manifesto written by artists and craftsmen at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871; the idea of a collective control of goods and property and an improvement of social living circumstances was abandoned in the last decade of the twentieth century.[1] The goal was to improve living conditions of people in cities and villages to create a more comfortable working and living environment for all. Another important actor in these processes of social transformation was the public and/or collectively administrated company (see Keynesian economic policy,[2] the self-administered Yugoslavian model,[3] etc.). With this, the market was not the sole motor for the distribution of goods, the form of collective property and the resulting communities were to play an active part. The social mission was to develop the best possible conditions for "all." Progress was seen as the idea of individuals and groups constantly contributing to social freedom. This important development was also to become an aesthetic and creative practice.
One entered the sea where the sun broke the surface. The sea covered and immersed one in the reflecting beams of the sun. One's own body was moved along with it.

The method of layering is an essential practice of the painterly process of Eden & Lernout. The artistic duo covered the "topographies" beneath with new geographical nets that are then further distended by the application of paint. In that the structures beneath come partially to the surface, the process of transformation itself becomes visible. A surveying of the space is carried out by way of geometric shapes and the application of paint.

In the framework of the installation From Somewhere in the Mediterranean, the space of the Mediterranean is surveyed on the one hand in terms of the wealth of facets of its natural forms and the resulting atmospheres. On the other hand, it is examined in terms of its cultural and social characteristics, their intersections and linkages.
The central element of the work is a circular construction shaped of steel hanging from the ceiling. From a height of 2.5 meters, the circle hangs down to an anchor point found in the floor. The form suggests movement, a revolving. Textiles, which were dyed blue by way of a cyanotype technique, are draped on the fragile construction. The sunlight in the artists' Vienna studio left its mark on the pretreated material. If you pull apart the textiles, they can form a kind of membrane. A constructed outside/inside. A protection, a limit, a paravent, behind which something can be hidden. An entrance, an interface, a micrcosm.
In the Yugoslavian Adriatic, travelers from the Warsaw Pact could meet travelers from the NATO countries. As a child, I never thought about that, or the political division was something I wasn't aware of. Today I ask myself: Did one then talk so extensively about the question of the other, as is today so often the case?
The transformation of socialism into capitalist private property is based on the assumption that the state or the collective is economically rather sluggish and not really in the position to achieve the best possible life conditions for the population, taking mass consumption from the second half of the twentieth century as a paradigm.[4] In Western Europe as well, there was an increasing belief in the economic efficiency of private property, for in these parts of Europe public property was also increasingly privatized. In the private economy, large corporate structures formed that led to the creation of oligopolies on the markets. A somewhat paradoxical situation when we assume that the premise of capitalist competition is a high number of actors in a landscape rich in variety.[5] The ideology of market growth brought on globalization and the standardization that accompanied it. Markets were surveyed anew and covered with new structures. This process advanced rapidly, both as regards privatization and the introduction of new brands and products.
The maps in the atlas that once showed how many coal plants, tobacco and chocolate factories there were, disappeared from geography class. The nation-state turned to questions of identity politics. Who lives in a country, who is the majority, who is the minority, who migrates, who enjoys the privilege of the freedom of mobility, who is a guest, who is merely tolerated. There was now less faith in the economic innovativeness of the state and more on that of major companies, less in the power of collective action and its role in the context of shaping social freedom. Privately organized companies that act on the free market were attributed the ability to "awaken" needs and then to be able to conceive the relevant products. This conviction led to stronger trends toward marketing, that created new relationships between individuals and groups. As Silvia Federici puts it: "On the one hand, we experienced the downfall of a statist concept of revolution, which for decades claimed the power of radical movements that struggled for an alternative to capitalism. On the other hand, the neoliberal efforts to subject all forms of life and knowledge to the logic of the market made us aware of the danger that we might one day live in a world in which we no longer have access to the seas, trees, and animals or to our fellow humankind that is not mediated by money."[6]

How is the question of public access to the ocean conceived? When Yugoslavia still existed, access to the Adriatic Sea was a public good, and in Croatia this is still largely the case. But in the meantime, it is now possible to acquire a permit that allows privatizing part of the public access. When I visited Klagenfurt in the late 1990s and realized that access to the Wörthersee was partially blocked to me since it was private, I was shocked—and somehow I still am. It's puzzling. How can access to water be exclusive? The sea, the lake, the river are places of longing that belong to everyone. Aren't they? After all, they are places that bring us to a state of floating. Places of informal conversations and our own preferences.

What would a world look like in which human relations are of a purely monetary kind? One, in which there are no longer any public goods, in which there is no longer redistribution, where everyone is responsible for their own survival?

The earth's resources are ultimately a common good, as long as they are not divided by way of borders and then traded. Controlling their use via monetary units means transforming our world into a kind of numeric carousel that translates all kinds of energy into numbers and subjects our actions to a norm of interests and business relationships. First comes calculation, then action. One sees oneself compelled to work on a matrix of numbers and desires. It is difficult to escape this, unless one has already gathered enough capital to afford the luxury of "non-productivity" in this sense. Someone who has time to engage with activities like observing, immersing, reading. That seems in the meantime to have become a privilege of the successful.

How do we conceive a world today in which it is possible to not think about self-gain and existential needs and still to work and live freely?

Modernism once sought the appropriate mechanisms to achieve the axiom "luxury for all" and thus to grant the individual a certain freedom. With an eye on the Bauhaus program, Walter Gropius, for example, emphasized that the fusion of artistic practice and craftsmanship should enable a sensible functioning of everyday life. The standardization of practical life striven for by the Bauhaus did not intend a new enslavement and technification of the individual, but a freeing of life from unnecessary ballast, so that the individual could develop in a more uninhibited, in a richer fashion.[7] Another idea was to establish standard dimensions in the field of architecture. Le Corbusier, for example, worked on the development of a Modulor, a rule that translated human proportions to mathematical quantities that could serve as the source for spatial order. These spatial orders were then to be serially produced.
"It's necessary to create the mindset of the series: the mindset of constructing serial housing, the mindset of living in serial housing, the mindset of conceiving serial housing."[8]
Very soon, the idea of such standardization was seen as too rigid and hierarchical and was subject to critique as of the 1960s. Even if an improvement of life quality in comparison to earlier times could be achieved to a certain extent, there was a longing for processes that did not posit the premise of thorough planning. The inclusion of experimentation and chance was to adapt the normed world "created" in this way to the situation-based human dimension. Serial planning could not do justice to the variety of human conditions, natural spaces, and webs of relations. One longed for moments of improvisation, of trying things out, for an end that was not predictable, a collage of different parts that could enter into relationship with one another on several levels, but could also do without them.

The second central element in the installation From Somewhere in the Mediterranean consists of narratives about the light and the sea that we hear from a radio. Eden & Lernout asked authors who lived around the Mediterranean—M. G. Sanches, Lauro Ferrero, Thomas Vinau, Igiaba Scego, Anja Golob, Olja Savičević-Ivančević, Senka Mari, Dragana Tripković, Arian Leka, Jazra Khaleed, Efe Murad, Nora Nadjarian, Valérie Cachard, Marwa Melhem, Mazen Maarouf, Anat Einhar, Wagdy El-Komy, Najwa Binshatwan, Antoine Cassar, Kamel Riahi, Salah Badis, and Soukaina Habiballah—to write a text about the light in "their" part of the Mediterranean from their perspective.[9] Each author writes in the language in which they feel most at home. Shaped with subjective experiences, the writers describe the local contexts of the Mediterranean Sea and the reception of light in these places by describing facets of their own encounters. The stories were then read by the actors Maria Lohn and Jesse Inman, whose voices can be heard in the exhibition space. In English translation, they include memories of the mole in Gibraltar Harbor, the "frozen" time inside the house during the summer heat, Venice and Senegal as two sides of the same coin, women selling souvenirs, a father who is convinced that light comes from the sea . . .

This radio also recalls the pirate broadcaster From somewhere in the Mediterranean, we are The Voice of Peace that also served as an inspiration for the exhibition title. This broadcaster was founded by Abie Nathan in 1973 and for twenty years made a contribution to ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The ship was located in international waters near Tel Aviv.[10]

It was bathed in sun day in, day out.

The sun, according to Georges Bataille, is able to effortlessly generate the excesses of life. It is an energy that loses itself.[11] Or like the activism of Nathan, who understood his project as a peace mission, promoting mutual understanding and a solution to the conflict. One that did not accumulate energy, but gave it away.

Near the circular steel object, as a third element in the installation a block of stacked (Euro) shipping palettes can be seen leaning with banners lying upon them. A blue banana lies on top of the ensemble. In 1989, Roger Brunet analyzed European spaces and divided them into active and passive spaces. The regions whose topographies formed the shape of the Blue Banana, are the places in which in the last decades and centuries an accumulation of capital has taken place: London, Manchester, Brussels, Amsterdam, Frankfurt am Main, Zurich, Milan, etc. The sea flows around the banana.[12] The sea now shares its earlier significance as one of the most important transit routes with the road and the rail. It still connects countries that spend more energy with those that collect more capital. For the focus was and is placed on optimizing production and the greatest possible output, so that growth, both in terms of production as in numbers, can be guaranteed. The consequences of these mechanisms are in the meantime visible. The environment and its balance are in danger. Animals, plants, people as part of it. The metaphor with the banana no longer works. The sun burns more intensely.
"When the end is absolute . . . it is possible to go so far as to sacrifice others. When it is not, only oneself can be sacrificed."[13]
Albert Camus discussed the concepts of "absolute freedom" and "absolute justice," saw them as competing with one another. If this consideration is transferred to the space of the Blue Banana, one might say that the absolute freedom of trade, without reflecting on the place and accessibility of the resources, makes a mockery of justice. We are already noticing the ecological consequences.
The implementation of absolute justice as an ideal could regulate the freedom of exchange so strongly that it would contradict it in the end. The normative of the plan would largely ignore situation-based contexts. And yet, we need to think about the justice of today's constellations of trade and work. We are living in a world in which the same work, despite what Maurice Dobb predicted, does not receive the same pay around the world, but in one of multiplying asymmetries.[14] We also do not find ourselves in a situation in which we are required to do increasingly less work, as John M. Keynes had predicted,[15] but in one where wage labor is equated with self-realization.
"I saw the sun at the bottom of the sea,"[16] wrote Albert Camus.

A series of 24 drawings is the fourth element of the installation. They are the views of light reflecting on the Mediterranean reproduced in the publication Circle Surface Sun that are here transferred using frottage technique to handmade paper. The sea supports. Eden & Lernout process its topographies, measure it using geometric shapes, cover it, defamiliarize it. In a similar gesture to the large and small format paintings and diptych objects that hang in the exhibition space on the wall. The prism-like shapes overlap one another. They are in part transparent and the process of painting becomes visible.

Operating with various colors awakes the appearance of refraction. Just as light refracts at the transition between the air and the sea. Light makes things visible, it remembers. But the experience of space is not just configured through light, but also through its shaows. In reference to the work The Stranger by Albert Camus and the duality of light and darkness, the artist duo composed o.T. (circle.surface.sun.500.700.20.diptych), 2020, an acrylic frottage on powder-coated aluminum on HPL, two halves linked to one another. A dark one and a lighter one, on which sentences are represented (printed in frottage technique) from Camus' The Stranger, in which the sun operates as a subject. The beholder needs to get their orientation from the light to be able to read the text. Thinking in antagonisms characterizes Camus' oeuvre, as Christoph Kahn writes in "Albert Camus—ein Cartesianer des Absurden?" "Already in pre-Socratic thought, as in Heraclitus and Parmenides, light and darkness are posited as two complementary realities that, each negating the other, are still tied together and rely upon one another."[17] These contrasts sketch on the one hand tension and conflict, while at the same time a balance is generated in these interactions, the balance of the transition from one mood to the next, one condition to the next.
Creating relationships in order to trace, to experience, to think.

The work From Somewhere in the Mediterranean gathers various narratives about the Mediterranean that both reflect individual experiences and political-economic interactions. Formal practices like layering, overpainting, covering are combined with the format of the series. The techniques used enable the formation of a span linking the temporal processes and structural transformation. These become a horizon of experience in that a relational space is spanned between individual stories and the geographic space of the Mediterranean.

The spoken texts draw in the visitors to the world of emotion and thus create a "personal" realm of the exhibition. This realm is expanded and structured through visual narratives that create rhizome-like structures by way of geometric surfaces. Systemic and yet individual perspectives are placed adjacent to one another. In this way, possibilities of abstract and subjective viewpoints are generated. These help to recognize the shape of one's own and "foreign" perception in the context of systemic choreographies and to recognize potentials therein.

(1) Kristin Ross, Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune (New York: Verso, 2015).
(2) John Maynard Keynes, General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1936).
(3) Branko Horvat, The Political Economy of Socialism (New York: Routledge, 2020). Edvard Kardelj, "Socialist Self-Management in Yugoslavia," in: International Review of Administrative Science (June, 1976).
(4) Dragomir Vojnić, Ekonomija i politika tranzicije (Zagreb: Ekonomski Institut/Informator, 1993).
(5) Markt und Moral. Colin Crouch im Gespräch mit Peter Engelmann (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2014).
(6) Silvia Federici, "Der Feminismus und die Politik der Commons," in: Aufstand aus der Küche (Münster: edition assem blage, 2012). 88.
(7) Walter Gropius, Bauhausbuch 12: Bauhausbauten Dessau (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1930).
(8) Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture, 1925, 187. Online version: https://www.mondotheque.be/wiki/images/d/d4/Corbusier_vers_une_archi tecture.pdf.
(9) Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout, Circle Surface Sun: From Somewhere in the Mediterranean (Vienna: Schlebrügge Editor, 2020).
(10) The Voice of Peace, https://thevoiceofpeace.co.il/ (last accessed: July 22, 2021).
(11) Georges Bataille, The Accursed Share (New York: Zone Books, 1988).
(12) Roger Brunet, "Lignes de force de l'espace européen," in: Mappemonde 66, (2002), 14–19.
(13) Albert Camus, The Rebel, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin, 1971 [1953]), 233.
(14) Maurice Dobb, Wages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).
(15) John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren (1930)" in: Essays in Persuasion (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), 358–373.
(16) Albert Camus, "Das Meer" (Bordtagebuch, 1953), in: Literarische Essays, Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg 1959, 187.
(17) Christoph Kann, "Albert Camus—ein Cartesianer des Absurden?," in: Albert Camus oder der glückliche Sisyphos/Albert Camus ou Sisyphe heureux, ed. Willi Jung (Bonn: V & R unipress, 2013), 60f.

Exhibition View ›

From Somewhere in the Mediterranean
Kunstverein Konstanz
Konstanz, DE
2020

‹ Performance View

COMMON GROUNDS
Thomas Arzt / Public Space. 10th District
Vienna (AT)
2021

The Commonplace I Sing

By Anne Faucheret

"THE COMMONPLACE.
The commonplace I sing:
How cheap is health! how cheap nobility!
Abstinence, no falsehood, no gluttony, lust;
The open air I sing, freedom, toleration,
(Take here the mainest lesson—less from books—less from the schools.)
The common day and night—the common earth and waters,
Your farm—your work, trade, occupation,
The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all."
— Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, 1891–1892[1]

"We are so shaken by the changes our regions are undergoing, and
the lack of any serious political perspective is so glaring, that we fail
to stand up calmly and focus on what truly matters for each individual,
for the ecology of collectives and communities. [...] The ecology of
knowledge should encompass our daily experiences and be decisive
for our choices about where we want to live and what kind of experience
we want to share as a community. We must be critical of this
idea of humanity as a homogeneous whole, where consumption plays
a decisive role in relationships."
— Ailton Krenak, Ideas to Postpone the End of the World, 2019[2]

"Can we imagine reconstructing our lives around the centrality of
our relations with other humans and with animals, waters, plants,
rather than letting them be destroyed by the invasion of robots and
the dream of a technological overcoming of all our limitations? This
is the horizon that the discourse and politics of the commons open for
us today: not the promise of a return to the past but the possibility of
recovering our collective power to determine our life on this earth.
This is what I call the re-enchantment of the world."
— Silvia Federici, Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons, 2018[3]

A dual threat looms over all forms of life and shared existence today: the resurgence of fascism and the danger of a global environmental catastrophe. It is as vast as the entire apparatus of globalization, which, through political decisions, economic mechanisms, and medical-technicalindustrial constructs, drives the plunder of natural resources, the exploitation of human and nonhuman labor, the commodification of life, and the destruction of the environment. This late capitalist apparatus creates connections down to the smallest ramifications, yet it also produces isolation: globalized communication, networking, and logistics paradoxically lead to an impoverishment of social relationships, making them fragile and limiting them to a few unavoidable areas of life, primarily the family and businesses. Moreover, neoliberal capitalism robs people of their agency and awareness of shared responsibility for the world by marginalizing the historical solidarity between humans and other species and the forms of care that emerged alongside the trade economy from systems of giving and taking. Representative democracy, wherever it exists, together with the dominant system, conveys the illusion of relationships based on responsibility and meaning.

How can we re-establish social connections?
How can we (re)build or revitalize the commons?
How can we reinhabit the world?
What ideas and approaches exist to postpone the end?

The horizon opened by these questions demands a radical change of direction, which can only be initiated by civil society and independent organizations, as the philosopher and theologian Ivan Illich previously stated. He had noted that the educational, cultural, and social institutions created and managed by the state and public bodies, which should foster the emergence of a social fabric, in reality only produce commercial relationships and structures of dominance (4). Economic degrowth, coexistence in society, and ecological solidarity, supported by civil society—particularly by artists and activists—offer tools for dismantling a deadly system by combining concrete social and artistic approaches based on broadly conceived reform methods. These aim to foster the emergence of new forms of creativity and circular economy, sharing and management, debate, and responsibility. Such temporary forms are developed by Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout with their project Common Grounds, a series of nine public events in Vienna that took place in September 2021 between two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plural title refers to the multifaceted linguistic meaning of the term and the artists' willingness to explore it. In the singular, common ground most commonly refers to a shared basis in a discussion, a foundation on which a debate can be conducted, even with differing viewpoints. More broadly, common ground denotes a shared understanding in an almost anthropological sense—the ability to live in a community, which is both a prerequisite for our survival and an unattainable ideal. Finally, in a literal yet poetic sense, common ground is the ground beneath our feet that we share, the Earth, what Walt Whitman calls the commonplace [1].

The Common Grounds project is based on all these meanings and many more. For each event in the series—which may take the form of a discussion, film screening, performance, or reading—a keyword was chosen to represent a theme or approach defined collaboratively by the audience and the artist duo. Ultimately, a subjective, non-exhaustive, yet no less meaningful constellation emerges around the concepts of common grounds and commons: resistance, space/living[6], fragility[14], being on the move[12], solidarity[5], change[13], cooperation[7], closeness[8], fear[9]. This thematic constellation is accompanied by a spatial one, with each event taking place in a different district of the Austrian capital.

The artists took care to select spaces such as larger and smaller squares that people pass through but also linger in—spaces free from consumption pressure, located on the fringes of commercial areas. The diversity of formats, themes, locations, and profiles of participants—artists, architects, sociologists, dramaturgs, and researchers—enables a multidisciplinary yet nonsystematic, pluralistic yet always subjective, organized yet not prefabricated approach at the project level. This creates an open space for the horizontal circulation of knowledge, varied forms of participation, serendipity, and surprises. The goal is not to invite experts to enlighten or politicize but to enable a polyphony of individual voices and let the chemistry work—or not. A simple and generous framework, along with an equally open dramaturgy, supports the interventions, where hospitality and conviviality are central to the project. The mobile kitchen and its seating furniture, designed by the duo, shape a space where the shared meal, cooked on-site by Stijn Lernout, is a key moment, as is the intervention and the discussion that sometimes follows. Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout create autonomous, temporary spaces for shared experiences and the conditions for intentional or chance encounters between organizers, contributors, and a diverse audience, which, depending on the evening, may consist of interested individuals, local residents, the curious, or perhaps people in precarious situations or isolation. The project counters prevailing indifference and disinterest with newly formed connections. These connections arise from the awareness of inhabiting a place rather than merely passing through it, as Silvia Federici describes when she speaks of the ability to form "communal relationships" and the need to live on "this human earth" not as a stranger or intruder, as capitalism desires, but as if at home[3; 11]. The urban space is the quintessential space for communal life. Yet, for decades, it has been under attack from commercialization, privatization, and fragmentation, transforming it into an abstract space of transit and consumption.

The Common Grounds project is an impetus to reshape relationships in public space by attempting, for one evening, to revive neighborly bonds or resistance against isolation and to let solidarity take shape at the local level of the neighborhood. Lived solidarity in neighborhoods, as opposed to the often invoked discourse of national social cohesion, is one of the themes explored by sociologist and researcher of social and anti-racist movements Niki Kubaczek[5]. Two projects address how urban space is occupied—by individuals or groups, in the past or future—depending on whether the space is private or public, associated with a home or an institution. A dialogue between architecture and sociology with Simon Andreas Güntner and Christiane Feuerstein seeks to assess the impact of space appropriation on the structure of social relationships—particularly in neighborhoods—and on how urban spaces are inhabited and designed (6). Anthropologist Elisabeth Oberzaucher, in a lecture on evolutionary biology, questions what spatial survival strategies we must adopt in light of future challenges—climate crisis and social precarity—particularly rethinking cooperation and coexistence in public spaces[7]. By creating temporary real-space alternatives and collectively imagining possible future spaces, Common Grounds invites us to build new places, reshape standardized encounter patterns in specific spaces through interaction with other bodies and objects, and recognize that seemingly isolated problems or conflicts share a common root. How do we inhabit and create space on a basis other than passivity and dispossession? This is one of the questions running through the Common Grounds project and is also addressed by Marxist and existentialist sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his examination of the urbanization of society and the alienation of contemporary forms of life. In his view, abstraction, fragmentation—the division of space into marketable parts—and the homogenization of space, where market value overrides use value and levels it, contribute in capitalism to the transformation of everyday life into a site of carefully monitored exploitation and societal passivity, losing its capacity to create space. Lefebvre proposes reshaping the "use of space" and "images of space" through "alternative spatial imaginations", where artistic activities and approaches, free from dominant orders and discourses, can challenge existing social relationships and create a space for new ones to emerge[15]. Alternative spatial imaginations belong to the realm of the imaginary, the speculative, memory, and the transformation of perception. They appear as a line of flight traced above the existing capitalist space. The film *First Landscape # Mirka* by Miriam Bajtala attempts, through narration and memories, to align images of the external world with inner landscapes and explore the interplay of collective and individual memories[8]. Hannah Binder's performance reactivates childhood fears and questions narcissistic drives, herd instincts, capitalist individualism, and existential loneliness[9]. Behind these projects, new ways of inhabiting the city and the world emerge—not to save ourselves personally, but to support the emergence of a radical, forward-moving imaginary and build resistance against pervasive standardization and commercialization.

Since the early 20th century—and especially since the late 1960s—politically engaged art has been a pillar of the speculative and, at times, political protest. This situation changed in the

1990s when artists left their studios and situated their projects in the social space, opening them to collaboration and participation. With their participatory approach in Common Grounds and their artistic practice in general, Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout pursue a reshaping of the traditional aesthetic relationship between artist, work, and audience, allowing others to contribute and intervene in reality. They see themselves as artists in the role of those who initiate, enable, support, but also explore, map, and observe situations. Their works are fragmentary or discontinuous projects that emerge through travels, explorations of terrain, and collaborations that may span longer or shorter periods but are, in their spatial arrangement—aside from publications—ephemeral, as they are the punctual result of the convergence of various forces and agencies in a given context. The audience no longer merely observes but contributes to the creation or, a posteriori, becomes readers. Participation not only dissolves the classical situation of reception but also dismantles structural aesthetic categories like autonomy, non-interference, and artistic distance.

The participatory art practiced by the duo seeks to reinvent new forms of togetherness and community as an assembly of individual personalities, resulting from collaboration between artists and participants, not pre-existing it. It is not based on conventional criteria of identity or cultural belonging but on forms of inclusion of particularity, situations, and chance. The work Common Grounds represents both an artistic and a political approach—political because it proposes a specific, temporary structure of the collective and because it engages in politics differently, as participation is a catalyst for forming independent organizational models[10].

Self-organization is one of the touchstones of practical and theoretical approaches in the realm of the commons, however diverse they may be. The commons encompass both material and immaterial resources, experiences, emotions, and affects, as well as new organizational forms that offer alternatives to the regulatory mechanisms of private property, market economy, or nation-states. They have a long history but emerged prominently a few decades ago as a counterstrategy to systems of individualization and neoliberalization. Through new forms of selforganization, self-governance, and collaboration with the world and its life forms, they became an instrument in the fight against political and economic plunder. Rather than mourning (nearly) lost commons and a supposedly "natural" and "original" connection between people, spaces, and resources destroyed by the movement of enclosures and appropriation, the Common Grounds project modestly focuses on various temporally limited forms and scales of shared experience, generating a sense of togetherness. These approaches include overtly political attempts to redefine the commons and future shared challenges or to inhabit spaces. They also form the basis for shared experiences that lead to conviviality in the etymological sense of "joining together." Such experiences include eating together, watching films, listening to music, or sharing traumas, suffering, or emotions that evoke compassion in the truest sense of "feeling with someone"—within interventions that address stress, resilience, fear, and vulnerability[13; 9; 14]. These practices of shared experience contribute to identification and the emergence of a shared meaning while simultaneously transforming common values and giving rise to specific spatial and social relationships. The shared use of spaces, goods, time, and knowledge leads to new forms of taking responsibility as citizens, alternative ways of living, and even designs for (counter-)power. Common Grounds undoubtedly created critical awareness and perhaps also sparked a desire to collectively build future worlds. More importantly, it enabled the exchange of ideas and experiences and created the conditions for people to engage, at least temporarily, with their shared concerns and desires. The project neither fills a gap in representation nor forms an organization—it explicitly and consciously avoids being critical agitation, situating itself instead in the moment of collectively forming common grounds, in the moment of recognizing differences as differences.

"We are not the same, and that is wonderful; we are like constellations. The fact that we share spaces, that we travel together, does not mean we are the same; it means, however, that we are more likely to be drawn to each other by our differences than by the fact of a status of shared belonging to this idea of humanity."
— Ailton Krenak, Ideas to Postpone the End of the World, 2019[2]

"The common world must be built, it's as simple as that. It is not already there, hidden somewhere in nature, in a universalism, concealed under the crumpled veils of ideologies and beliefs that one supposedly only needs to push aside to reach agreement. It must be worked on, created, and anchored."
— Bruno Latour, Multitudes 45, no. 2 (2011): 38–41[16]

"We must today nurture the hope for a shared life, whose cornerstones we have yet to invent, but whose richness we can already recognize. Social cooperation, the circulation of knowledge, the sharing of resources, the productivity of interconnected intelligence—in short, everything that is the opposite of bare life itself: a politically and socially valuable life, the invention of ourselves and others, the invention of ourselves through others—this is something that can be realized everywhere. It is only a matter of deciding who will govern the enormous amount of value we collectively produce and what future institutions will look like. Perhaps in the form of a Pascalian wager: a wager on a new universality that must be fully constructed, a wager on a politics of the commonality of all that is also an ethics of differences."
— Judith Revel, Construire le commune. Une ontologie, 2011[17]

(1) Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, 1891–1892.
(2) Ailton Krenak, Ideas to Postpone the End of the World (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), trans. Anthony Doyle (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2020).
(3) Silvia Federici, Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons (Oakland: Kairos / PM Press, 2018).
(4) Ivan Illich, Tools for Conviviality (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
(5) SOLIDARITY: "Urban Undercommons and the Struggle for Transversal Connections," Niki Kubaczek, Hernals (17th District).
(6) SPACE | LIVING: "When the Living Room Becomes an Office," Simon Andreas Güntner in conversation with Christiane Feuerstein, Simmering (11th District).
(7) COOPERATION: "Homo urbanus—The Urban Human," Elisabeth Oberzaucher, Floridsdorf (21st District).
(8) CLOSENESS: "Inner Landscape, Processes of Narration and Memory," with a screening of the film First Landscape # Mirka, Miriam Bajtala, Donaustadt (22nd District).
(9) FEAR: "(++Advanced Plus++)," Hanna Binder, Liesing (23rd District).
(10) As exemplified by British artist Jeremy Deller, who describes his practice as initiating social situations through participatory public art. See, e.g., Deller's projects like We're Here Because We're Here or interviews in Art Review.
(11) In the sense of the English verb "populate", implying active habitation or creation of shared spaces.
(12) BEING ON THE MOVE: "The Conquest of the City," sound performance by Collective Weiter (Alexandra Pāzgu, Florian Kmet, and Roman Blumenschein), Penzing (14th District).
(13) CHANGE: "Stress as a Means of Adaptation," Virginie Canoine, Döbling (19th District).
(14) FRAGILITY: "Transpositions," Iris Dittler, Hietzing (13th District).
(15) Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
(16) Bruno Latour, "There Is No Common World: It Must Be Composed," Multitudes 45, no. 2 (2011): 38–41.
(17) Judith Revel, Construire le commun. Une onthologie, transversal 08/2011: inventions. http://transversal.at/

‹ Performance View

COMMON GROUNDS
Kollektiv WEITER / Public Space. 14th District
Vienna (AT)
2021

Exhibition Views ›

Congobos
KUK Gallery,
Cologne, DE
2019

„Congobos“ – the story of a Congolese forest in Belgium

by Aline Lenzhofer

„What story would you tell a stranger? Your great-grandfather's, who was a colonial official? (...) Your grand cousin's, who worked himself to death on a plantation? That of your godfather, who proselytized foreign peoples?“[1]

The Afro-German curator and editor Yvette Mutumba poses these questions at the beginning of a text on the interdependencies of one's own family history with colonialism and the overlapping of „one's own“ and „foreign“. As questions, they show that the processing of one's personal history is always accompanied by a questioning of one's own position and its contextualization in a metanarrative.

In their art-installation „Congobos“ (Eng. Congo forest) Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout put an unpleasant story in the foreground. They address – in a formal visual language using the media of installation, video and large-format frottage works – the interweaving of personal stories of the Belgian and Congolese population, which was intensified by colonialism. In an ethnographic manner, these rarely discussed family references are processed based on the case study of Stijn Lernout's family history. Research using interviews with great-uncles, aunts and cousins who were in the Congo during Belgian colonial rule and an intensive examination of this story, including various literary sources, resulted in a work with both an atmospheric and abstract character.

In a video installation, the artist duo shows several shots of a forest that are spatially linked in their disposition. In addition to the video installation, the large-scale frottage works also refer to the „Congobos“ and show greatly enlarged views of this forest. On a superficial level, one could – also with regard to the title of the work – believe that this is a piece of the Congolese rain forest. In reality, however, they are detailed shots of a forest near Geluwe. The question arises as to what connection this small town in the municipality of Wervik in Flanders has to the Congo. The connecting element is reflected in the naming of the forest. When a Belgian missionary returned from Congo, he opened Café Congo, which led to the nearby forest also being named by that name.

Positioned around the video installation, the frottage works take the history of Congolese-Belgian relations to another level. While the video installation and the large-format works on the Congo forest show the network of relationships between the inhabitants of a small village in Belgium and the former colonial state in an atmospherically reduced way, other frottage works present portraits of people - from Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Mobutu to Congo -Müller and Leopold II - they all play a role in the public perception of the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

With “Congobos”, Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout subtly address the relationship between Belgium and the former colonial territory of the Congo, a history of entanglements and relationships that is often avoided in both political and social contexts. Cross-border relationships and relationship connections are themes that Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout take up again and again, and so the project „Congobos“ fits into this approach to artistic exploration. Here a story is told that pleads for coming to terms with Belgian colonial rule and deconstructs the boundaries of dual categories of “foreign” and “own” through the depiction of family ties.

(1) Yvette Mutumba, *The stories you wouldn't tell a stranger*, Ware & Wissen. Frankfurt: diaphanes: 2014. 15.

o.T. (140.195.18)
Toner, acrylic paint and pencil on canvas
140 x 195 cm
2018

Exhibition View ›

Places Named After Numbers
KUK Gallery
Cologne, DE
2015

Places Named After Numbers

By Juliane Feldhoffer

What about our relationship to the stranger and to strangers? What is our attitude towards people who hope to find refuge with us? And how well do we actually know the economic and political context, the distribution of roles and their effects on flight and migration? The general understanding of hospitality - according to Heidrun Friese, the „everyday relationship to the other, to the stranger" (1) - has undergone a clearly noticeable change in recent months in view of the rapidly growing number of asylum seekers. Émile Benveniste refers to the common stem of the word guest (Latin hospes) and enemy (Latin hostis) and thus to the culturally deeply rooted ambivalence that is felt towards the foreign. (2)
So it's a choice we make, how we approach someone, how we look at things, a space of possibility in which we move and take responsibility. The exhibition "Places Named After Numbers" could be described as an abstract compression of this space of possibilities. The pictures, objects and installations by the artist couple Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout do not formulate any fixed points of view, but combine themselves and the themes they deal with to form an open aesthetic and content-related reference system that challenges us as viewers to decide what and how we should see thinking and thus position themselves in this structure. Between painterly abstraction and expansive fragments of everyday life, Eden/Lernout develop a sensitive artistic dialogue about the complex subject matter of migration, political, economic interests and ecological and humanitarian consequences. „untitled (Ghawar 300.190.15)" The large-format painting is formally reminiscent of constructivist painting: crystalline network formations spread out on the picture surface, sometimes condensing, sometimes fading out. As a "landscape picture", as categorized by the artist couple, it does not abstract our visible reality, but rather reflects what eludes our direct observation: the literal painting ground consists of a satellite image of the Ghawar desert in Saudi Arabia with the world's largest oil fields. Depending on your point of view, it is a photographic image of a desert area or a symbol of global geopolitical interest networks and exploitative power structures. Eden/Lernout use the associative meta-level of the painted network composition, which slides between the viewer and the „actual" picture, to visually bring the discrepancy between seeing and knowing to the fore.

The currently very controversial international debates about „the understanding of social ties and solidarity, giving and exploit, proximity and distance, territory and borders, private and public space, ethical and moral requirements, political affiliation, citizenship, rights and exclusion, in short: (...) the basics of living together" (3), shows how emotional, but above all fragile, the intercultural common property of hospitality is constituted. The erection of border fences on the edges of Europe shows how quickly things can change. Eden/Lernout respond to this fading sense of obligation to selflessly help with the expansive installation Hommage to Angel Kanchev II. On several nested and stacked tables, as one finds at flea markets, stacks of different crockery are arranged as if for sale. For this work, Eden/Lernout made a journey from the Bulgarian border fence to Germany in 2014, a journey that generations of guest workers, migrants and refugees have already made on their way through Europe.
The crockery was collected on the way through the six countries crossing. The laid table as a symbol of hospitality and the care of people is given a presence here in a preliminary stage, the offer of the „material" that one would need for such an event - we are not invited here, but should take action ourselves . The tables are assembled into a constructive and interrelated but also unstable structure. A plumb bob hanging from the ceiling and penetrating the tables alludes to Jacques Derrida's question in his essay „On Hospitality" as to whether and which parameter of hospitality is ultimately irrefutable (4). Neither the philosopher nor the artist couple provide an answer, but pass the question on to us. A blacked-out page from Derrida's essay ensures that we don't shy away from it. To make sure that we start the conversation, it asks us a simple question and thus makes us responsible: "What's your name? ".

(1) Heidrun Friese, Grenzen der Gastfreundschaft, Bielefeld 2014, S. 28.

(2) Emil Benveniste, Indo-European Languages and Society, Coral Gables 1973, S. 71

(3) Vgl. Anm. 1

(4) Jacques Derrida, Von der Gastfreundschaft, Wien 2001, S. 112.

In a loose constellation, ceramic objects on metal frames and on the floor, a garden hose, five acrylic paintings on the outer wall of the exhibition space, three framed cyanotopias, a knot made of pieces of rope and a work on hdf (hard fibre board) are brought together in a reduced installation. In the smaller room at the back of the gallery, a larger acrylic painting is on view, related to the duo's preoccupation with the Mediterranean region. In 2020, Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout published the artist's book ‚Circle Surface Sun-From Somewhere in the Mediterranean' together with the Kunstverein Konstanz, which includes a series of photographs of light reflections on the surface of the sea and 23 texts on the theme of light by authors from countries bordering the Mediterranean. Last year, the artist duo focused on a recently discovered phenomenon in marine science. Before bleaching completely, corals react to temporary changes in their biotope (temperature, etc.) and the resulting migration of algae by reviving the usual symbiosis between organic (algae) and inorganic (calcareous skeleton) by releasing colour pigments. Meanwhile, they are in a state of bridging and transformation.
(In the depths of the oceans, in international waters, there are large deposits of manganese nodules, gas hydrates, cobalt crusts, massive sulphides and sulphide muds.
Black smokers' are among the most species-rich and sensitive ecosystems in the deep sea.
Based on scientific research and a playful approach to the material clay, Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout have produced a larger series of ceramic works. They have produced several of these ceramics by barrel firing. A process in which organic materials (banana peels, coffee grounds, eggshells and various dried grasses) and inorganic substances (sulphites, mineral aggregates, etc.) are added to the ceramics and fired in a converted oil drum. The symbiosis of these substances creates strong colours under heat, which are preserved on the surface of the ceramics after firing.

Installationview ›

a time of the surface
XIAN, Art Space
Vienna, AT
2024

o.T. (400.400.80.12)
Plaster, acrylic paint and pencil on hdf board
40,0 x 40,0 x 8,0 cm
2012

o.T. (circle.surface.sun_300.200.20)
acrylic paint, toner and pencil on canvas
300 x 200 cm
2020

o.T. „Neue Sterbe für den Prater

By KÖR, Kunst im öffentlichen Raum, Vienna

As the Praterstern area is redesigned and redefined, Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout let something radiantly new emerge and yet remain connected to the name and the historical urban planning idea: Three new stars shine in the underpass and refer in their derivation and shaping to both the past and the future.

Stars originate from vast gaseous nebulae that contract and condense in the universe because of their own mass. It is a process that Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout have translated to a wall painting which, like an inner skin, stretches across the entire underpass and visually expands the architectural space.

In cities, "star" is a name given to nodal points where several traffic axes intersect. Already in the late 18th century, several avenues and boulevards came together on Praterstern. Until 1918, the Northern Rail Station, which opened here in 1838 and is one of the oldest train stations in Austria, remained the largest and most important station of the Habsburg monarchy. Today, the public square still is—above ground and underground—one of the city's most important transportation hubs, with a traffic circle where seven streets converge, with two subway lines crossing, and with bus, tramway, suburban and regional train stops. An underpass that was built 1954/55 connects Praterstern with the recreational green Prater area.

It is this overall urban situation—the historical as well as the most recent redesigning and the redefinition of the area—and its significance that the two artists relate to. They survey and transfer it into a new dimension, a reflexive system that they use to open up the space and immerse passers-by in a star-studded cosmos of its own.

Installation View ›

ursa major
Public Space
Petzenkirchen / Lower Austria (AT)
2017

‹ Exhibition View

o.T. (Neue Sterne für den Prater)
Public Space
Vienna (AT)
2022

ursa major

By Cornelia Offergeld

A legend in Petzenkirchen says that a knight once swore that he would build a church if he managed to survive an encounter with a bear in a forest nearby unharmed (Petz is the name of a bear in a fairy tale and kirchen means "church"). However, the name of the town can probably be traced back to the congregation's founder, Bishop Berengar, who transformed the town into an influential parish in 1014. [1] With their installation Ursa Major , Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout refer to the constellation of the Big Dipper (or the Great Bear) in their project intended to create a communicative space that the community can also identify with. In their work, the constellation Ursa Major is projected onto the newly remodeled main square using 16 complex light columns that they developed together with light specialists. [2] This way, they create a visible connection between this small town in Lower Austria and the macrocosm. Far from indulging in pathos, the result seems gently poetic. The installation consists of metal tubes that are somewhere between four and six meters high. All stand at a slight angle, resembling other spatial structures the artist duo have produced in the past. When the sun goes down, the tilted upper ends of the tubes cast beams of light onto the square that mark the stars that shape the constellation. The light is cool and clearly defined in analogy to the electromagnetic radiation of the stars in the Ursa Major constellation, which serves as an important point of orientation for localizing the North Star in the Central European night sky.

What from a distance by day looks like a spatial drawing in the air is actually the result of many precise calculations. The constellation was first transferred to a field 5x10 meters in size, then flattened on a grid, and finally projected back into the third dimension to define the exact positions of the lights. This process of projection and re-projection is a prime example of how Eden and Lernout prefer to use many different methods. In their works, the two artistic poles of abstraction and communicative practice act as cornerstones of a reflexive system revolving around measuring and transferring. This reflexivity is also apparent in their installation in Petzenkirchen in the double projection that is both method and theme at the same time. The base of each light column is embedded in a concrete circle in which herbs are growing. Attached to three of the light beams are also radial benches that face the main access points of the square. In their exploration of how certain spaces evolve in their works, Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout regard space as a geographic, physical, and naturally a societal idea. As in many of their projects, the installation Ursa Major therefore not only refers to the story of the town's origin; it is also creates an active space that opens up many opportunities to communicate. As the artists once said, "Establishing this and making the square come alive with and for people is one of the fundamental ideas of the design."

[1] The name Berengar comes from the Old German bero ("bear") + ger ("spear").

[2] Ursa Major is Latin for a large female bear

o.T. (110.180.19)
Acrylic paint and pencil on canvas
110,0 x 180,0 cm
2019

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