

Compassion Fatigue Is Over

Exhibition Guide
Galerie Rudolfinum, Praha



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COMPASSION FATIGUE IS OVER

"We find ourselves today connected to vast repositories of knowledge, and yet we have not learned to think. In fact, the opposite is true: that which was intended to enlighten the world in practice darkens it. The abundance of information and the plurality of worldviews now accessible to us through the internet are not producing a coherent consensus reality, but one riven by fundamentalist insistence on simplistic narratives, conspiracy theories, and post-factual politics. It is on this contradiction that the idea of a new dark age turns: an age in which the value we have placed upon knowledge is destroyed by the abundance of that profitable commodity, and in which we look about ourselves in search of new ways to understand the world."

James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, 2018

"You cannot take what you have not given, and you must give yourself. You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere."

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 1974

"Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question of what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do – but who is that 'we'? – and nothing 'they' can do either – and who are 'they' – then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic."

Susan Sontag,
Regarding the Pain of Others, 2003

"Don't lies eventually lead to the truth? And don't all my stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusion? Don't they all have the same meaning? So what does it matter whether they are true or false if, in both cases, they are significant of what I have been and what I am? Sometimes it is easier to see clearly into the liar than into the man who tells the truth. Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the contrary, is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object."

Albert Camus, *The Fall*, 1956

For many generations, the past year has brought with it the unimaginable. Something many dream about. Others have lost a great deal of sleep over it. While the remainder has so far continued to believe in a steadfast status quo. About a year ago, the world as we know it suffered a shock of seismic proportions, an earthquake that continues to generate wave after wave of aftershocks. The world economy has undergone one of the greatest downswings in modern history and the repercussions are expected to be long-term and only possible to overcome with great difficulties. Radicalised populism is shattering the international relations that have been built since the end of the Second World War. The new grand narrative for the twenty-first century is being defined by social disintegration, the loss of confidence in authority and attempts to find an escape in the rabbit holes of fantastic theories whose own principles deny all reality. In the meantime, as individuals we are dashed by this wild wind from one rocky cliff to another, looking for anything that could provide a handhold and reference point. Mental health, whether we are willing to admit its state to ourselves, or not, is suffering beyond the limits of what is bearable. Every new tomorrow brings only more uncertainty and a futile search for a safe haven, where one could successfully drop anchor. What will the world be like a few years from now? No doubt everything will all blow over, as it has always done in history thus far. But what kind of consequences will the current situation have beyond the limit of one generation? A new unification of society around shared problems, or an even deeper rift?

We are not just talking about the pandemic, but also about the way we perceive it and how we construct our own interpretations of the situation. We are also talking about addressing the issue of the information channels we choose and allow to create our notions of reality. Channels with whose assistance we form our political convictions and consequently guide us when we cast our papers at the ballot box, should we be lucky enough to live in democratic systems. Compassion Fatigue is a clinically defined psychological state, a combination of secondary traumatic stress and burnout. Most sufferers come from professions that require empathy and care for others who are in difficult situations, be it nurses, fire fighters, journalists, teachers, social workers or family members living with a person afflicted by a long-term illness or disability. Excessive stress and the need to be constantly empathic leads to a loss of compassion as well as the ability to grasp the problems around us. At a time when we are actively supplied with digitalised, twenty-four-hour news reports, when we no longer absorb information about the outside

merely from the morning newspaper and the evening news but are constantly inundated with notifications that cover the entire displays of our telephones, the possibility of compassion fatigue is extending to every single one of us. How many news items about terrorist attacks, forest fires, melting icebergs, newly extinct species or unsettling bits of news about world politics are we actually capable of fully grasping emotionally? Degrees of attentiveness and focus differ, but every individual has their clear-cut limits, beyond which all that remains is vital self-preservation.

Contrary to the proclamation in the title of this exhibition, compassion fatigue is far from over. We are all still exhausted. Some deal with the fatigue by becoming outraged, others through meditation, for example. The show *Compassion Fatigue Is Over* offers an alternative, temporary solution. An opportunity to be calm and fully attentive. The space of the Rudolfinum is being transformed into a series of projection rooms and, as with every cinema, here too we are asking you to turn off the ringers on your telephones, although we additionally recommend putting them on in airplane mode, or at least do not disturb or night shift modes so as to temporarily mute the flow of notifications from the rest of the world. The films on show do not present the kind of undemanding, recreational content provided by an evening of unwinding with Netflix. Each one shows a historical or contemporary perspective on onerous social issues and the way they are rooted in a broader context. Here, artists act as researchers, collaborating with experts from all manner of professions and developing their narrations either literally, or with an added measure of abstraction, to levels at which general media are incapable of communicating, given the pace at which they work that approaches the speed of light. At first glance, *Compassion Fatigue Is Over* will merely become an addition to the already turbulent information flood that is with us everywhere we go. However, by focusing our attention, gradually calming us down and providing a way of detaching us from the world outside the gallery walls, it offers suitable conditions for perceiving what we commonly overlook. It will provide an opportunity to re-discover our lost ability to experience each individual story on an emotional level, without the need to immediately move on to another one. Additionally, free entry to the gallery gives visitors the chance to return to the artworks and find time in their busy schedules to re-examine an already familiar milieu and submerge themselves each time in a different narrative. The monochromatic fields of colour

that float across the space will serve as points of reference, as empty screens available for the projection of our own readings of the different themes.

There is no room in the Rudolfinum for compassion fatigue. In the ideal case, the flow of narratives, switching from one to another, stopping for a bit of rest, coming back repeatedly, or simply making the decision to absorb the entire flow in one visit and then ignore it, all those are ways that indicate the possibility that one may function better even after leaving the gallery. We all have a very demanding year behind us and a long stretch ahead of us before things “go back to normal” – that will entail the need for a great deal of patience, but at the same time also the need to be attentive and circumspect, rather than just carelessly believing the information flows on the profiles of our social networks. An inclination towards unsentimental, active compassion naturally belongs to this complex equation that has far too many unknowns.

CANDICE BREITZ *Sweat* (2018)

Contemporary society continues to view the provision of sexual services in a highly ambivalent light. Even so, several fundamental shifts of perspective regarding this issue have taken place over the course of history that are also to a large degree related to the type of language we use.

The derogatory term “whore”, employed for anyone deemed to have infringed upon Christian morality and overstepped the formal boundaries of the bond of matrimony, was replaced at the end of the nineteenth century with the institutionalised term “prostitute”. In public discussions in the US during the mid-1970s, and later on a global scale, the word “prostitute” was in turn replaced by the collocation “sex worker”, an umbrella term referring not only to direct physical contact, but also to the most diverse forms of stimulation: visual, verbal, textual, as well as referring to pornography and the infrastructure keeping the sex industry up and running. By merely glancing at a map showing the legal status of direct physical sex work in various countries, we can see that in most of the world this type of service is legally prohibited, yet even so we could probably not find a single place where it does not exist.

The discussion about legalisation and activities against keeping sex work illegal is very much alive. Arguments for legalisation include fears regarding child prostitution, the excessive spread of sex services or the concern that the term sex work itself normalises the abuse of women. By contrast, the opposing position explains that criminalising these services places their providers in much greater danger, whether their bodies be those of women, men, transgender persons or persons that are gender nonconformist. If the profession is illegal and its workers become victims of violence, they have to overcome great difficulties when appealing to institutions for help. Additionally, the image of the role of the police with regard to sex work is most unflattering: excessive numbers of arrests of persons merely giving the impression of sex workers are an everyday occurrence, as is the abuse of police powers of authority, whose officers demand these services as a form of hush money. The pragmatic, economically motivated argument asserts that sexual services cannot be suppressed and investments into their elimination could be better used elsewhere. In most of the world, sex workers also lack entitlement to any kind of social benefit or health insurance. On a more general level, emphasising free will, that is to say the

right for everyone to use their own bodies as they wish, also plays a role here.

Over the long-term, the work of Candice Breitz, a South African artist based in Berlin, has been critically investigating and interpreting society-wide issues such as the discrimination and objectification of women, present-day migration or the theme of sex work itself, through the prism of the attention economy that is a part of the reality of contemporary media and popular culture. In order to communicate the problems at hand, she often employs the element of identifying with fictional characters or uses generally recognisable celebrities. An appropriate case in point is her 2016 seven-channel video installation *Love Story* where she lets Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin tell the story of immigrants forced to leave their homes for reasons of direct political oppression through the words of the migrants themselves. By identifying unknown refugees with internationally popular celebrities, she calls into question the general inability to take notice of the individual stories of those socially marginalised as a result of their political circumstances.

The film *Sweat* presented at the exhibition takes its name from the organisation “Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce”. This South African activist group founded in 1996 is devoted to organising sex workers, defending their rights and providing them with education, as well as educating the broader public. Based on a series of complex interviews with members of SWEAT who are themselves providers of sexual services, the video is a presentation of short statements and stories of each one of them, shot using a static, fixed closeup of their moving lips that gives a monumental impression. The selected framing thus prevents the objectification of their bodies and makes the viewer able to focus on the narration. Breitz later presented the interviews in their entirety in a complex installation entitled *TLDR* made in 2017.

Candice Breitz was born in 1972 in Johannesburg, Republic of South Africa; she lives and works in Berlin. Breitz has held solo exhibitions of her work for example at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Kunsthau Bregenz, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Toronto's The Power Plant, Amsterdam's De Appel Foundation or Stockholm's Moderna Museet. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including biennials in Johannesburg, São Paulo, Istanbul, Taipei, Gwangju, Tirana, Venice, New Orleans, Gothenburg, Singapore and Dakar.

ANNA DAUČÍKOVÁ

On Allomorphing (2017)

Thirty-three Situations (2015)

In the *documenta 14* catalogue, the transgender theoretician, philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado wrote the following about Anna Daučíková: “After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, she moved to Moscow in the 1980s – when everybody was trying to travel in the opposite direction. She didn’t do it for politics, she did it for love: she was following a woman to a country where, according to its government, homosexuality did not exist. (...) She travelled often to Ukraine, visiting outcast painters and dissident intellectuals.”

With an exceptional sensitivity, Daučíková’s work follows the way dominant social and political systems shape individual identity and personal expression. On this basis she then delimits a space where commonplace social conventions lack their ostensibly unshakeable authority. Besides adroitly moving between the media of painting, photography, collage and sculpture, Daučíková’s practice also uses the moving image. The camera work in her videos reminds us of the inquisitive gaze of human eyes, almost as if the camera formed part of her body, becoming a natural prosthesis, rather than just a recording instrument.

It is with this kind of attentive examination that her three-channel film *On Allomorphing* absorbs cultural references relevant to her own biography. She inquisitively scans the surfaces of library shelves and titles of books on art history, political theory, philosophy or critical novels, stopping at places where framed photographs of historical figures such as Jonathan Swift, Nikolaj Gogol, Rosy Luxemburg, George Orwell or Philip K. Dick, for example, have been placed in front of the books. Their faces are often mirrored in the titles behind them. The space of the carefully curated libraries is disrupted by seemingly unsettling high-heeled shoes, placed on the shelves in a slapdash manner, while the accompanying voice-over casts doubt on conventional gender roles and gender as stipulated at birth, as already indicated. Shots from the library alternate with views of architecture, while the narrator, Daučíková herself, tells us that her body is like a building, an edifice that it is possible to reconstruct. For Daučíková, the transgender state does not only question deep-rooted truths, but also constantly disrupts them, going beyond the boundaries taken as given.

Standing out from the artist’s personal narration is the story of the Ukrainian artist Valerij Lamach and his journey by train from Kiev to Moscow in the 1970s. The destination of

Lamach’s trip was the Lenin State Library, at the time the location of probably the only publicly accessible copy of the monograph of Piet Mondrian. Lamach spent several weeks there, copying the entire book with obsessive precision using tracing paper and adding notes on each colour applied to Mondrian’s canvases. This anecdote seems almost absurd at a time when by merely saying the key word “Mondrian” out loud to one’s smartphone, its virtual assistant will search out an endless flood of illustrative images, as well as recommending that you order the most popular publication about the artist from Amazon, even providing expected delivery times. For Daučíková, however, it serves as a symbolic image of an inner need, the opening of oneself up to one’s own subjectivity as well as the possibility of an internal and external transformation.

The feature-length TV-format video *Thirty-three Situations* uses similarly anthropomorphic camera movement, the shot always being a single take, the camera passing through the domestic environments of various apartments with each individual scene featuring a short, printed script fixed to a window. The transparency of the office paper when struck by the daylight on the other side of the window reveals the fabric of the material and offers the viewer – at this point the reader – the opportunity to empathise with Daučíková’s personal experiences, or those passed-on to her by others, from the time when she lived in the Soviet Union. Daučíková herself describes the anecdotes from each scene as something between a police report, a medical record and a stigmatic screenplay for various situations. These often violent, absurd, at other times almost banal stories offer an insight into the tactics of surviving the absurdity of a totalitarian system.

Anna Daučíková was born in 1950 in Bratislava, Slovakia; she lives and works in Prague. Daučíková has presented her artworks for example at Chicago’s Neubauer Collegium, the Galerii CarrerasMúgica in Bilbao, *documenta 14* in Athens and Kassel, Prague’s Futura Gallery, the Kiev Biennial/ School of Kiev, Manifesta 10 in Petrograd, Warsaw’s Zacheta National Gallery of Art, MuMoK in Vienna and the National Gallery in Warsaw.

HARIS EPAMINONDA *Chimera* (2019)

The perception and processing of media information functions on an identical basis as everyday memory, that is to say selectively and associatively, especially from a long-term perspective. The subjective, prioritising system chooses fragments that it stores as an active backup, while pushing others deep into the subconscious.

The Cypriot artist Haris Epaminonda, based in Berlin, works in an analogous manner. The ostensible randomness and ephemerality of found connections, as well as the most carefully crafted objects in her installations and films, gives rise to a literally tangible fabric of meanings, couplings and contexts that do not necessarily make sense at first glance. But that is also the artist's aim. By placing a Japanese ceramic vase next to a precisely adjusted photograph of an antique figurine from a found art history publication together with a palm leaf, she provides an opportunity for free associative interpretation and a space to reflect upon the material presented. There is no room for errors in Epaminonda's practice, every millimetre plays a key role for her and for this reason her artworks give the impression of an almost unsettling perfection that is, however, at the same time refuted by their openness to interpretation.

Her film *Chimera*, first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2019, takes its name from a mythical creature, a female fire-spewing monster comprising a lion's head, the body of a goat and a snake's tail. Much like the chimera herself, the film is composed using a multitude of various source materials, such as records of journeys through deserts, art history museums where time seems to have stopped in the 1970s, fragments of architecture, animal skins, old nautical and astronomical maps, historical monuments, engravings, as well as modern urban structures. The individual elements of the film are mutually interconnected not only by the visuality of the analogue Super 8 film employed, but also by the ambient electronic music of the artist Kelly Jayne Jones with whom Epaminonda collaborated on the film. With each frame, the apparently disparate source material gives rise to a unified whole that does not attempt to inform viewers, or share a specific message with them, instead allowing the mind to flow freely on the waves of rich imagery, countless references and themes which in each viewer open up their own subjective reality. Within the framework of the exhibition, *Chimera* functions as a catalyst initiating the process of absorbing the different artworks. Its placement in its

own screening room to the side of the main passageway through the gallery hints at the difference of the material and its specific role within the entire exhibition.

Haris Epaminonda was born in 1980 in Nicosia, Cyprus; she lives and works in Berlin. Epaminonda has presented her work in museums and galleries all over the world, for example MoMA in New York, Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle, London's Tate Modern, Zürich's Künstlerhaus Zürich, the Kunsthalle Lissabon in Lisbon and Malmö's Konsthall. She represented Cyprus at the 52nd Venice Biennale and was part of the main exhibition at the 58th Venice Biennale. She has exhibited her artwork as part documenta 13 in Kassel, at the 2nd Athens Biennale and the 5th Berlin Biennale.

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN Tripoli Cancelled (2017)

The first of Mohaiemen's films not constructed around real events is a fictional and deeply poetic story of a man abandoned at an empty airport terminal. This removal from the real world into a situation where it is impossible to cross the boundaries of a spatially limited heterotopia may bring to mind situations from the novel *The Wall* (1963) by the Austrian writer Marlen Haushofer or Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) where in both cases the protagonists are locked up in one place for no rational reason.

Mohaiemen's lead character is freely inspired by the story of his father who lost his passport and was forced to spend nine long days at the Ellinikon airport in Athens in 1977, wandering aimlessly through the halls and corridors constructed in the late modernist style by the architect Eero Saarinen in the 1960s. The airport itself has been in disuse since 2001 when Athens, in preparation for the upcoming Olympic Games, invested in the construction of a new terminal meeting current standards. At the time of the peak of the refugee crisis, the airport became a temporary shelter for migrants waiting for official permission to step onto European soil. Despite attempts to revive the entire area, the airport remains abandoned to this day, allowing Mohaiemen to transform his father's story into a film using the real backdrop of his original experience. The film provides a gradual familiarisation with the daily routine of the nameless man, following him on his walks, as he takes a rest stop for a cigarette, writes letters, assembles scenes using mannequins from deserted duty-free shops or reading a found copy of the dark children's novel *Watership Down* (1972) penned by the British writer Richard Adams.

The feature film format provides the intimate story with a monumentality akin to the spatial airiness of the airport's architecture. Its gentle pace then stands in direct contrast to the commonplace perception of an airport as a transitory no-place intended to be an accelerated transport hub corresponding to the rapid nature of our times. *Tripoli Cancelled* has currently acquired another meaning in reference to the current state of deserted airport halls at the time of the pandemic.

Two Meetings and a Funeral (2017)

A centuries-old and deeply rooted vision built on the notion of Western dominance stemming from the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome, the glory of the Renaissance, as well as the entire project of colonialism leads to a clearly oriented, elevated perspective of history as if looking from inside somewhere out onto the surrounding world.

This is the model according to which we learn to perceive the world from an early age, as if all that is going on in the world had its centre in Europe and over the course of modern history also in the US. For quite some time now, the tendency to decolonise our thinking and viewpoint has been resonating across artistic practices on a global scale. In the past few years, however, it is getting much more intensive attention. Naeem Mohaiemen was commissioned to make a new film for documenta 14. His main starting point was to look for a different perspective to the Euro-American one. Among other things, *Two Meetings and a Funeral* and similarly focused work earned Mohaiemen a nomination for the prestigious British Turner Prize.

This feature-length three-channel film follows the events of the 1970s which led to the progressive disintegration of the vision of the Non-Aligned Movement; an organisation of the nations of the global South that had tried to balance out the scales of power on the global political scene by attempting to unify around a single left-wing ideology. The audience is guided through the film by the Indian historian and journalist Vijay Prashad, while the scenography and at the same time the main elements of his historical analyses consist of expressive monuments of late architectural modernism, buildings designed by Oscar Niemayer, Luigi Moretti and Le Corbusier, for example, constructed in Algiers, Dhaka and New York. Representative architecture as a symbolic materialisation of systems of power and its distribution becomes a part of the storyline, besides such figures as Muammar Kaddafi, Fidel Castro and Indira Gandhi, for example, and shows the fleeting and vast nature of notions of a balanced world politics.

Mohaiemen combines found material from period speeches and interviews with politicians linked to the Non-Aligned Movement together with the interpretative narrations of Vijay Prashad and the camera's inquisitive views of the different edifices. It thus offers an explication of a formative moment of modern history whose implications deeply intersect our current political reality. It focuses attention on

the need to read our current time contextually with regard to its historical prerequisites that cannot merely be viewed from inside Western space, looking onto the rest of the world, but must necessarily also be seen from the other direction.

Naeem Mohaiemen was born in 1969 in London, UK; he lives and works in New York. In the last few years, he has presented his work at solo exhibitions for example at the Mahmoud Darwish Museum in Ramallah, MoMA PS1 in New York, Toronto's The Power Plant, the Kunsthalle Basel, Culcatta's Experimenter, the Cue Art Foundation in New York and the Gallery Chitrak in Dhaka. He has also participated in several international art shows, for example documenta 14, the 56th Venice Biennale, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the Sharjah Biennial 10, the Dhaka Art Summit, as well as group exhibitions at London's British Museum, the LUX Artists' Cinema in London and the Queens Museum of Art in New York. Besides his visual practice, Mohaiemen also regularly publishes essays.

JEREMY SHAW I Can See Forever (2018)

At least since the times of the industrial revolution we have perceived the present as the first stage of a stably developing future guided by the notion of steady and unstoppable progress. This has also shaped utopian visions of the days ahead. Regardless of critical assessments of new technological achievements, few doubted that the pace of development would not be maintained. Nonetheless, Paris still looks Haussmannesque, rather than resembling the vision of Jules Verne, or Le Corbusier. Flying cars are still a dream of the future. In 2001, we did not look inquisitively at a mystical extra-terrestrial monolith while sitting in the comfortable armchairs of an orbiting space station and listening to Strauss. And in 2019, there were no pyramids reaching above the clouds or enslaved replicants in Los Angeles. The new iPhone looks like its older version from eight years ago and we have no option but to wait for the moment when Elon Musk gets us to Mars, but we already know that there will probably not be much time or peace and quiet there to listen to "The Blue Danube" waltz. The genre describing visions of the future has become more sceptical and pragmatic. The only thing we have actually outdone in terms of the boundaries of imagination in the past is Orwell's Big Brother.

The *Quantification Trilogy* by Canadian artist Jeremy Shaw, living and working in Berlin – of which the exhibition presents the final, cathartic episode – in reverse chronological order progressively introduces visions of three moments in the future. The first takes place five hundred years from now, the second is set in a time three generations from now and the concluding section is situated a mere forty years from today. In terms of its visuality, Shaw's future heads to the past, using analogue film material that feels like something from the 1950s and 1970s and video that immediately returns us to how we watched the TV screen in the 1990s. Attention is focused on the human body and mind, rather than spaceships or holographically controlled interfaces. Shaw examines shifts in perceptions, states of ecstasy, faith, religious fervour, escapist fantasies and extremes of subjective experience.

Shaw's use of a documentary format approaching cinema vérité, accompanied by interviews or a voiceover that sounds like it has been taken straight from a BBC programme, blurs the boundaries between what we can consider to be original, source material and the segments shot by Shaw himself, just

as it blurs the boundary between possible reality and fiction. From this point of view, *Quantification Trilogy* presents a precise picture of the production of facts by contemporary media culture influencing public opinion and generating the general political climate where a sophisticatedly selected presentation format dominates over the need to look for the truth and the real meanings of the messages between the lines.

Part one of the trilogy, entitled *Quickeners* (2014), follows a society of quantum humans of the distant future connected into a single unit by an unspecified digital entity called The Hive and their awakening from a state of collective consciousness through the so-called Human Atavism Syndrome.

The next instalment entitled *Liminals* (2017) presents the life of a marginalised community believing that humankind will be saved by interconnecting human and machine DNA in an effort to renew lost spirituality.

The trilogy's final episode, *I Can See Forever*, is closest to our own time and describes the story of a man who is the result of an unsuccessful government experiment to synthesise a combination of a human and a machine. Twenty-seven-year-old Roderick Dale is not interested in escaping to the dominant virtual world and instead he submerges himself in deep transcendental states through dance.

In any historical period, the science-fiction and fantasy genre reflects upon and develops the conditions of the time when it is created in order to show the possible future consequences and echoes of the contemporary situation; as a result it offers the potential of being directly or indirectly critical. Shaw thus develops and emphasises the direction of society that is more and more actively deepening its dependence on virtual space, through which on the one hand it looks for a new collectiveness, and on the other it is losing connections with, and an understanding of, its surroundings through an often very one-sided submersion into social bubbles representing similar or identical ways of thinking, regardless of the greater whole.

Jeremy Shaw was born in 1977 in North Vancouver, Canada; he lives and works in Berlin. In recent years, Shaw has shown his work at solo exhibitions for example at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, MoMA PS1 in New York, Berlin's Schinkel Pavillon, Toronto's MOCA and the Frankfurter Kunstverein. He has also taken part in several international art shows, for example the 57th Venice Biennale or Manifesta 11.

HITO STEYERL November (2004) Lovely Andrea (2007)

Today, the films *November* and *Lovely Andrea* may be seen as classics in Hito Steyerl's artistic practice. They were made at a time when Steyerl was still working with the medium of documentary film, rather than fine art, as we now know her practice through her complex scenography and monumental installations in which she has included her moving images since the start of the 2010s. Although today we associate Steyerl's work with cutting-edge technical image quality and a deliberate playful tinkering with its inadequacies using pixelated closeups, we might be surprised by the natural age of both the films on show, presenting recordings on VHS, as well as Super 8 and other analogue film formats. In Steyerl's case, individual sources of combined signals of highly diverse precision are always selected on the basis of a carefully considered objective, clearly illustrating their specific purpose and thus navigating the archaeology of reproduceable media.

This means that in terms of form, *November* and *Lovely Andrea* have not aged at all and their content is as urgent today as it was when they were made. At the same time one can clearly recognise her strategy of syncretic, analytical interconnection of seemingly unrelated themes and visuals, extending from a stark documentary style, through found historical material, scientific studies and ingenious fictions, all the way to popular culture and the vulgarity of the language of advertising.

Both films are linked by the figure of Andrea Wolf, Steyerl's friend from when she was growing up, a political activist and member of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a revolutionary organisation active during the conflict between Turkey and Kurdistan. Wolf died tragically during the fighting in 1998 and became a symbol of the Turkish oppression of the Kurds. A poster with a portrait of Wolf, appearing in both films, presents her as a martyr. While *November*, named in reference to the month of the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917 that was followed by a period of post-revolution loss of illusions, to a certain extent we can consider it to be a biographical testimony about Wolf's life and the Kurdish struggle, *Lovely Andrea* relates to Wolf in the form of an ambivalent homage much more freely.

November works with footage from Steyerl's first, unfinished amateur film work, showing a group of young girls fighting for their rights and their scuffles with all the men they meet on their peregrinations, full of kicks and

punches as a reference to B-movies featuring fighting and martial arts. The protagonists include Steyerl herself and Andrea Wolf. The material is combined with interviews with members of the PKK, scenes from samurai films, action blockbusters with Bruce Lee, footage from demonstrations, manifestations or authentic documented military campaigns. The entire collage contemplates the role of solitary fighters, martyrs, the use of violence for political ends and the authenticity thereof. She weighs up the legitimacy of death against its futility.

Lovely Andrea feels like a detective documentary. Steyerl plays the role of a background protagonist, accompanied by a young Japanese translator; she visits photographic studios in Tokyo specialising in photographs and videos of traditional Japanese bondage in order to find a picture for which she modelled as a young film student in the mid-1980s. The search for the photograph is not only an excuse to analyse bondage itself and its related industry, she also looks for their historical roots as part of the martial arts when used as instruments for torturing captives, as well as the changes of restrictions and perceptions of this form of depiction in the soft-porn genre of the last two decades. Through the moment when a model is elevated, freeing her from the earth's gravity at the cost of having her movements limited by tightly fastened ropes, it is possible to return to the fate of Wolf as well as a general contemplation of political activism. When Steyerl and her team actually find the desired picture, the camera pans down, showing us the title "Lovely Andrea".

Hito Steyerl was born in 1966 in Munich, Germany; she lives and works in Berlin. Steyerl's visual artworks are regularly shown in museums and galleries around the world, for example MoMA in New York, London's Chisenhale Gallery, E-flux in New York, the Artist Space in New York, the KOW in Berlin, Madrid's Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario. Besides her exhibition work, Steyerl is also a recognised, widely published essayist contributing to various periodicals, newspapers and anthologies. Her last collection of writings was published in 2017 under the title *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*.

ALEXANDRA VAJD The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations (2019)

The only artworks included in the exhibition outside of the boundaries of the medium of the moving image are on display throughout the gallery space and form a natural backbone, axis or framework for presenting the different films and videos on show. Their basis consists of a series of photograms by the Slovenian artist Alexandra Vajd with the title *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*.

The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations take their title from the eponymous text of the French writer Georges Polti, active at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, who while continuing with the important tradition of literary analysis going back all the way to Aristotle's *Poetics* asserted that every narrative work can only contain thirty-six basic types of situations, or combinations thereof. During the twentieth century, Polti's opus, originally published in 1916, was the subject of a great deal of critical appraisal and its list was subsequently enriched with additional possible scripts. Regardless of the later resonance of Polti's authoritative solution, the resoluteness and consistency of his attempt to systemise the richness of literary storylines into a concrete schematic is admirable.

The minimalistic nature of the monochromatic surfaces of each photogram hints at the individual dramatic situations. Generally, we perceive the photogram as an art form associated with the peak of modernism used for experimental artworks by such artists as Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy and Pablo Picasso; it consists of a technical image taken without the use of a camera by merely exposing light-sensitive material in a dark room – the photogram preserves the traces or shadows of concrete objects placed on the paper.

Among other things Vajd was the head of the photography studio at Prague's Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design and her practice is built around the critical investigation of the medium of photography at the time of the turning point between analogue and digital photography. Today's media reality has undergone a radical transformation since the time of this shift that may now be considered part of history. We absorb visual inputs with every step we take. Especially in the boundless flow that springs from the displays of the telephones we hold firmly in the palms of our hands, telephones fitted with constantly improving cameras. These circumstances led Vajd to change the focal point of her interest,

abandon her analyses of realistic depiction and make the decision to examine the images behind images and their socio-political meanings through abstract formulation in the form of non-illustrative photograms.

The surplus of “truths” on Instagram or TikTok thus turns into an abstract language for accentuating the need for new visual literacy and the ability to navigate through the endless flow of images. For Vajd, the return to a historical photographic medium is the appropriate catalyst for a possible re-evaluation of our contemporary loss of orientation.

Alexandra Vajd was born in 1971 in Maribor, Slovenia; she lives and works in Prague. Her artworks and collaborative projects with the visual artist Hynek Alt have been presented for example at the Astrup Fearnley Museet in Oslo, Glasgow's Street Level Photoworks gallery, the CASK Gallery in Larissa, Greece, Kyoto's Zuiun-an-Art Project Space, the City Gallery in Ljubljana and the < rotor > centre for contemporary art in Graz. Vajd has also participated in several photographic festivals and biennales, including the Photo Festival in Krakow, Leipzig, Liège and the 9th Triennale of Contemporary Art U3 in Ljubljana.

ALEXANDRA VAJD & ANETTA MONA CHISA

A moment is never truly lost just because it ceases to exist (2020)

The joint artwork by Alexandra Vajd and Romanian artist Aneta Mona Chisa is based on Vajd's original series of photograms. While the starting points for Vajd lie in reflecting upon the medium of photography, Chisa touches subjects beyond politics and the current context. She thus accentuates the nature of materials, substances, their history and their mutual bonds creating the environment of our technological reality through analysing language and the ways that its specific use co-creates and manipulates reality itself.

By jointly contemplating the messages and methods of narration of the films on show, Vajd and Chisa have come up with a possible manual for their interpretation by layering the different information acquired from them or by using the opportunity for the free projection of their own subjective interpretations in the form of colour surfaces and shapes. A series of hanging curtains, organically and geometrically shaped pedestals and Vajd's photograms themselves are displayed throughout the space of the gallery and may be viewed as a monumental, multiple artistic installation as well as the architecture of the exhibition. The very oscillation of the work on the boundary between design and fine art is what offers the possibility of intersecting with other creative disciplines, whether they be film or theatre, for example. Each pedestal could function as a stage full of actors, every drape provides the opportunity to contemplate and put into play the content behind it. Just like all technical photographs offer the potential for countless images, so the photograms – or actors, if you will – fill the imagination with endless permutations, almost like moves on a chessboard or variations on Polti's thirty-six situations.

The inputs into the gallery provided by Vajd and Chisa create a tension between its own architecture and new shapes that may remind us of an archaeological excavation bearing fragments of an extensive idea awaiting reconstruction and a meaning provided by an experienced expert. But just as modern archaeology prefers to leave the Forum Romanum or the Parthenon in ruins rather than trying to create a semblance of their original form, so the individual elements of the thirty-six dramatic situations provide space for imagination and associative thinking.

Through its dialogue with projected light, this new, site- and context-specific artwork enables us to watch the individual films on show, as well as deliberating on the connections between the static and the moving image, between a specific statement and abstraction, light and darkness, and as a result it shows that the potential for dynamic transformation does not merely require the medium of film, but may for example be set off by the performative act of walking through the exhibition by each and every visitor. Unlike Polti's clearly delimited boundaries of drama, the thirty-six situations by Vajda and Chisa are a call for dialogue and critical thinking, rather than a fixed and given dictate.

Alexandra Vajd was born in 1971 in Maribor, Slovenia; she lives and works in Prague. Her artworks and collaborative projects with the visual artist Hynek Alt have been presented for example at the Astrup Fearnley Museet in Oslo, Glasgow's Street Level Photoworks gallery, the CASK Gallery in Larissa, Greece, Kyoto's Zuiun-an-Art Project Space, the City Gallery in Ljubljana and the < rotor > centre for contemporary art in Graz. Vajd has also participated in several photographic festivals and biennales, including the Photo Festival in Krakow, Leipzig, Liège and the 9th Triennale of Contemporary Art U3 in Ljubljana.

Anetta Mona Chisa was born in 1971 in Nadlac, Romania; she lives and works in Prague. Her own work and collaborative projects with the Slovak artist Lucie Tkáčová have been presented for example at Berlin's n.b.k, MoCA in Miami, Vienna's MuMoK, The Power Plant in Toronto, Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle, as well as at the Taipei Biennale, the Moscow Biennale and the 54th Venice Biennale.

Compassion Fatigue Is Over

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