

ENGLISH

JEAN-ULRICK
DÉSERT:

CONSPICUOUS
INVISIBILITY.
WORKS
1997-2023

16.06.—16.07.2023

COLLABORATION & FUNDING The project is generously supported by AKB Stiftung.

S A V V Y CONTEMPORARY
THE LABORATORY OF FORM-IDEAS


AKB STIFTUNG
STIFUNG DER FÜRSTEN-PAUL-REISE-GRÜNDUNG



O N S H O W 16.06.–16.07.2023 Thursday–Sunday 14:00–19:00

S A V V Y T O U R S I N S A V V Y T O N G U E S

22.06.2023 18:00 I N E N G L I S H With Mokia Laisin
29.06.2023 18:00 I N G E R M A N With Mokia Laisin
06.07.2023 18:00 I N E N G L I S H With Hubert Gromny
09.07.2023 16:00 I N P O L I S H With Hubert Gromny
13.07.2023 16:00 I N E N G L I S H With Kelly Krugman
16.07.2023 15:00 I N E N G L I S H With the artist Jean-Ulrick Désert and the artistic director Renan Laru-an

A second part of this exhibition will be on view from 6.7.–6.8.2023 at Titatink Galerie in Turku, Finland, curated by Mirjami Schuppert.

T E A M

ARTISTIC DIRECTION Renan Laru-an
CURATION Renan Laru-an with Hubert Gromny and Mokia Laisin
CURATORIAL ADVISORS Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung Mirjami Schuppert
CURATORIAL RESEARCH Mokia Laisin
EXHIBITION DESIGN Hubert Gromny
PRODUCTION Hubert Gromny Mokia Laisin
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GRAPHIC DESIGN Juan Pablo García Sossa
TRANSLATIONS Anna Jäger
SAVVY.DOC Onur Çimen Sagal Farah Ingrid Jones
INTERNSHIP Sara Vallis Ingrid Jones
XR TECH Elisabeth Thielen
ART HANDLING Waylon D'Mello Ayham Kayal Roberto Uribe Castro Herman Abiyah Santiago Doljanin
Nancy Naser Al Deen Anna Fasolato Nicolas Mastracchio
LIGHT Emilio Cordero
TECH Bert Günther

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CONSPICUOUS INVISIBILITY

INTRODUCTION BY Renan Laru-an

Jean-Ulrick Désert is the inaugural recipient of Wi Di Mimba Wi :: The AKB & SAVVY Contemporary Commission Prize. Jean-Ulrick Désert's body of work is impressive in its breadth and ingenuity. His decades-long work in Germany has made and shaped spaces for crucial questions and practices. We acknowledge his ongoing practice and body of work with this award and the show entitled CONSPICUOUS INVISIBILITY. WORKS 1997-2023:

This solo exhibition is one of the rare occasions that gather Jean-Ulrick Désert's artistic and intellectual practice as it collides with his itineraries, biographies, and adventures in thought, feeling, and history. Charting a trajectory enlivened in diaspora and animated by the eros and pathos of race and ethnicity, the first monographic exhibition of Désert in Germany comprehends a structure of displacement, "unvisibility," and shame in a selection of the artist's creative output that he has produced since 1997. The show is abundantly delightful, confrontational, and almost shy – not all at once, but in a palpating orchestration of storytelling and critique, humor and intelligence, or fabulation and investigation: as iridescent materials for making artistic positions visible. Désert calls it "conspicuous invisibility."

CONSPICUOUS INVISIBILITY. WORKS 1997-2023 features "The Archive/ a work in progress," a new interactive commission using augmented reality to access colonial artifacts from the West African collection of the Ethnologisches Museum in Dahlem. Criss-crossing the impulse for opacity and transparency, Désert gives form to a theory of permanence and the task of presencing contaminated objects among objects in today's discursive industry – deliberating on the ethico-political impact of decolonization in museology, art and knowledge production, and culture at large. "The Archive/ a work in progress" annotates impressive commitments, such as restitution and abolition, through personal, incidental encounters with intoxicating experiences of gold, smiles, fetishes, stares, kinks, laughter, and other pleasures from recreation or even public entertainment. In all angles, without touch or pressure, the force in Désert's archival exposure reassembles how colonial bodies could emerge from current constellations of judgment and analysis and invite scales of poetics and visibility.

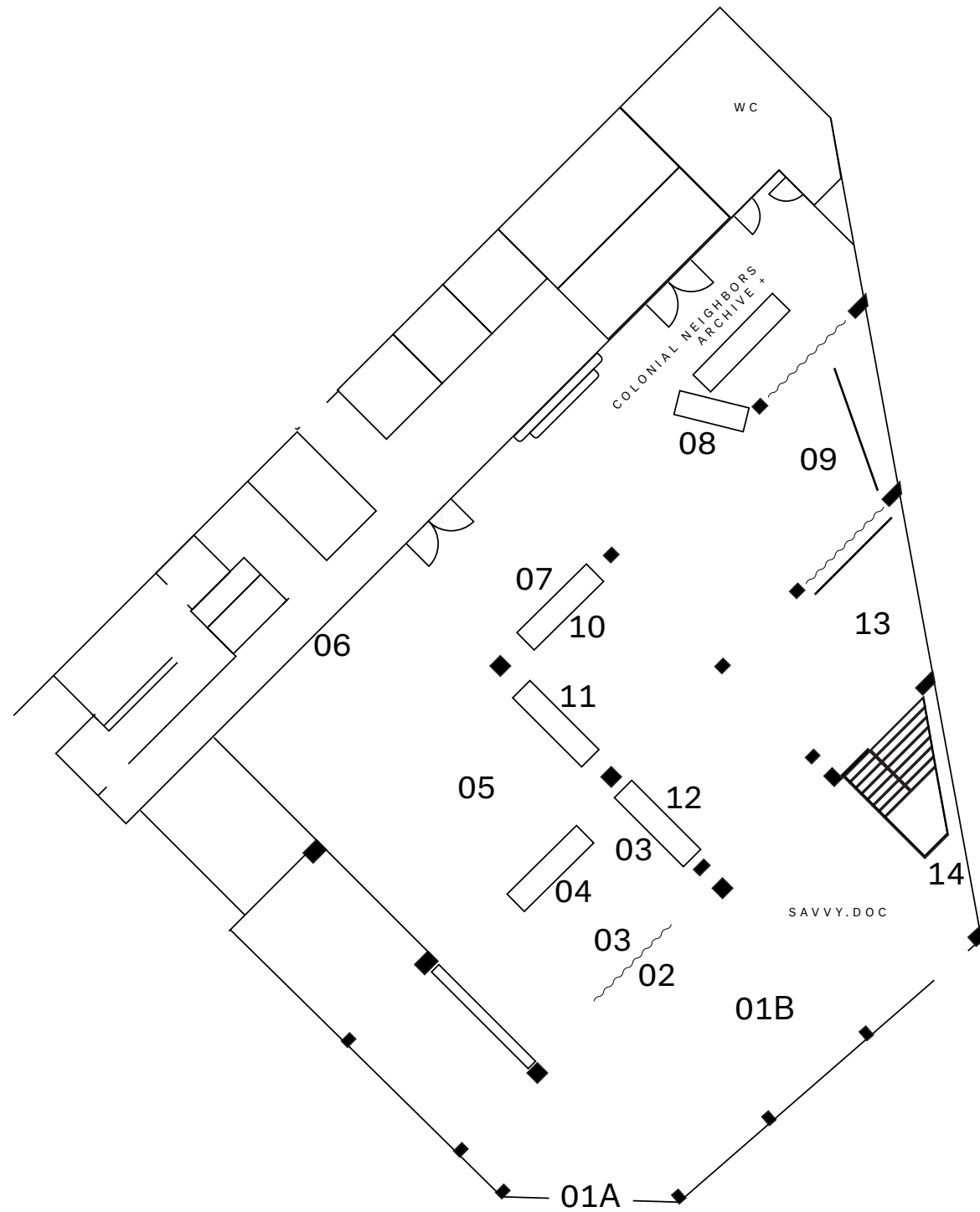
Curated by Renan Laru-an together with Hubert Gromny and Mokia Laisin, the exhibition follows Désert in timelines that collapse the artist's relationship with several vectors, overlapping passages: a beginning, the N-word, queer varieties, death/darkness. It is a sanctuary for the emotional, where viewers are immersed in an ecology of things and surfaces that Désert has drawn from his conceptions of the Black, archipelagic Caribbean. Expected taxonomies developed throughout modernity have been avoided to privilege relational configurations that bind the artist, the audience, and the artwork together. Works of art previously circulated in various art circuits find renewed vitality in juxtapositions and triangulations of their affective gravitas for the audience to be guided by an empathy in looking. Additional interventions from the holdings of SAVVY Contemporary's growing library/ documentation center and the ongoing Colonial Neighbors archive punctuate the exhibition space, to ease possible discomfort and to supplement viewers with related references. Every contact with aesthetic language, socio-historical condition, and moral content in the exhibition situates Désert's concerns as contemporary public issues. For Désert who intuits the agency of ugly feelings, CONSPICUOUS INVISIBILITY chooses the indictment of dominant cultures through the tactic of imperceptible teases: to be the alluring, troubling, and flirtatious wink in difference.

JEAN-ULRICK DÉSERT is a Haitian born conceptual and visual artist based in Berlin, Germany. Désert's artworks vary in form: public billboards, actions, paintings, site-specific sculptures, video and art objects. They emerge from a tradition of conceptual work engaged with social and cultural practices.

Well known for his provocative as well as poetic projects, he has exhibited widely at venues such as The Grand Palais in France, The Brooklyn Museum, The Studio Museum of Harlem and Walker Art Center in the USA, The Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Bunkier Sztuki in Poland, The Haus der Kulturen der Welt, SAVVY Contemporary in Germany and in galleries and public venues in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Ghent, Brussels, Dakar and Havana Biennials. He is the recipient of awards, public commissions, private philanthropy, including LMCC (USA) the Villa Waldberta-Munich,

Kulturstiftung der Länder (Germany) and Cité des Arts (France). He received his bachelor and masters in architecture at the Cooper Union and Columbia University (New York) and has been an invited lecturer and critic at universities in the United States (Princeton, Yale, Columbia), Germany (Humboldt University in Berlin) and in France (at the École supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris). He previously advised and taught for Trans Art Institute (based in New York). Désert was selected by the Minister of Culture as the solo artist to represent the Haiti pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019) in Venice Italy.

F L O O R P L A N



01 *Silence Will Not Protect You*
2019
Installation, concrete canaries, bricks,
LED text-board, various dimensions

02 *The Love of God (Beggars Painting)*
2019
Letter painting on reflective textile and gold acrylic, 183 x 154 cm.

03 *The ABCs of my Private Life*
(A, B, C, D) 2005
(M, N) 2021
Drawings, inks, pencil, watercolor on vellum paper, A, B, C, D:
A5 (reproductions); M, N: 42 x 30 cm (originals)

04 *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*
2017
Xerography on vellum paper, hand-embellished (pearlescent
acrylic paint, inks, watercolors), 9 panels, 183 x 275 x 3 cm.

05 *The Archive / A work-in-progress*
2023
XR (Mixed Reality) Installations of five cultural objects
from the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer
Kulturbesitz, Ethnologisches Museum, Fachreferat Afrika
Est.1838, golden rescue blanket, constellation maps on
plastic, various dimensions.

Please download the app to access the Archive installation:

APPLE



ANDROID



06 *Sky Above Port-au-prince Haiti 12 January 2010, 21:53 UTC /
The Goddess Constellations*
2012
Mixed media, embossed metal foil, velvet-paper, styrofoam,
300 x 300 cm.

07 *Codex Testimoniorum Amoris / The Book of the Witnesses of
Love*
2006
Two-color digital prints on assembled vellum papers, carpet,
chairs
70 x 100 cm per panel – 3 out of an original series of 8
Initially commissioned by the Arts Council of Munich /
Kulturreferat der Landeshauptstadt München.

08 *Die Hosen Runter Lassen*
2003-2004
Photography, analogue C-Prints, 29 x 20 cm.

09 *Shrine of the Divine Negress Nr.1 / The Goddess Projects*
2009
Installation, PVC, acrylic paint, colored gels, textile ribbon,
400 x 275 cm.

10 *GLORIA*
2017
1-channel video, 13 mins looped.

11 *BLING*
2017
1-channel video, 12 mins looped.

12 *Missing*
2008
From the Leviticus drawings series
Drawing/ Collage, Vellum papers, ink, watercolor, glitter, 40 x 60 cm.

13 *NH2K*
1997–ongoing
Selection of multi format artworks as c-print photography,
collages, billboard installation, beer coasters, diary postcards,
variable dimensions.

14 *Good Morning Prussia series
MORGENSGLÜCK (Morning Happiness)*
2009
Handmade Cyanotype print from digitally-collaged negatives
on Bütten-Ingres paper, 31 cm x 49 cm.

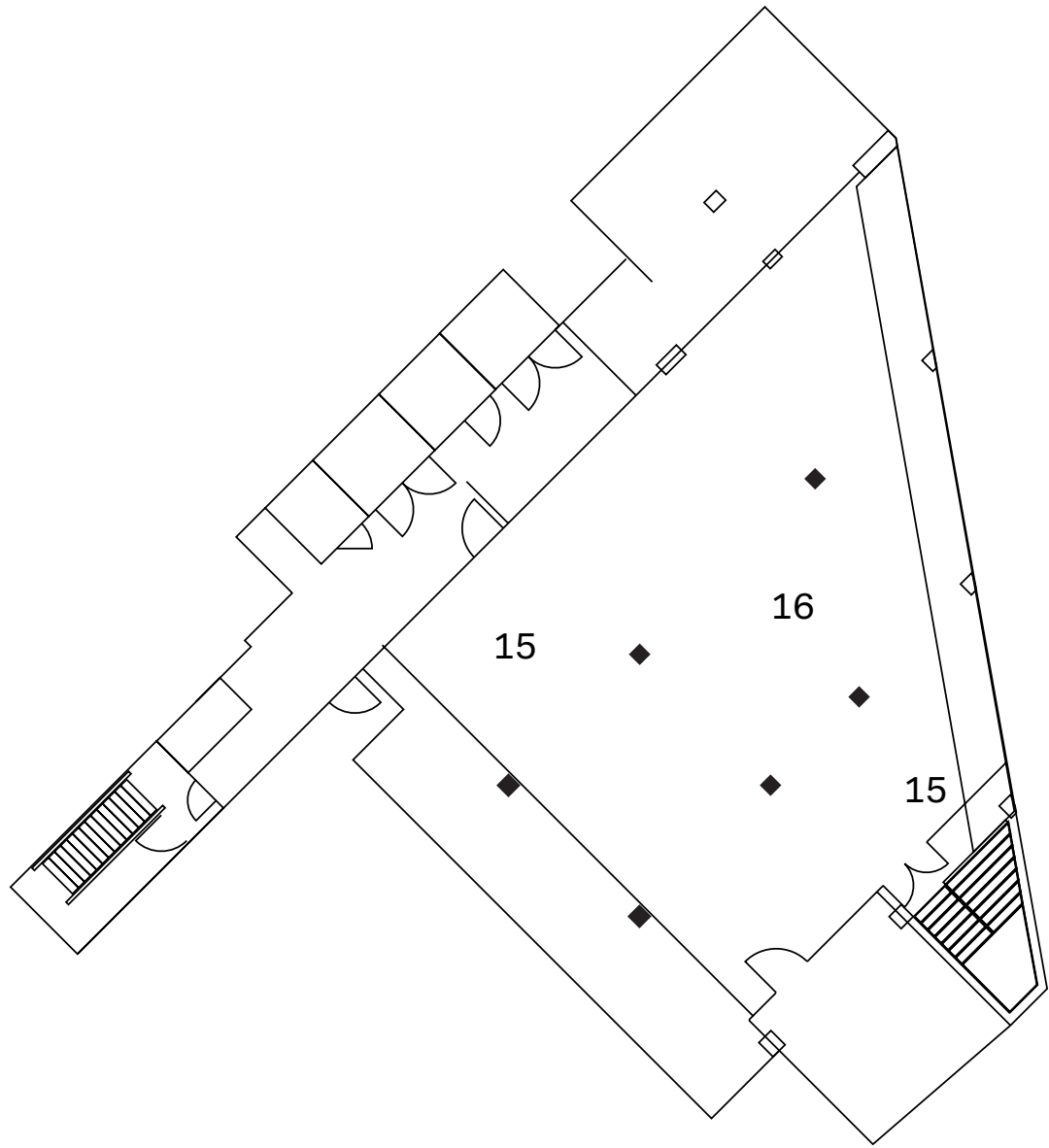
PREUSSICHES SCHICKSAL (Prussian Destiny)
Handmade Cyanotype print from digitally-collaged negatives
on Bütten-Ingres paper, 24 x 32 cm.

REFLEXIONSBECKEN (Reflection Pool)
Handmade Cyanotype print from digitally-collaged negatives
on Bütten-Ingres paper, 24 x 32 cm.

SAVVY.doc selection
A selection of publications echoing the issues and questions
ringing through the exhibition.

*Colonial Neighbours Archive and Jean-Ulrick Désert's personal
collection*
A selection of everyday items from the Colonial Neighbours
Archive and reproductions of photos from Jean-Ulrick Desert's
private collection.

FLOOR PLAN



15 *Dear John*
2019
Sound installation, 1-channel, two speakers, German robot voice and English robot voice, approx. 15 mins.

16 *Neque Mittatis Margaritas Vestras Ante Porcos*
2016
Installation, biblical text ("Do not throw pearls before swine", Matthew 7:6) as party-garlands in five Caribbean based languages/dialects, laser cut plastic with acrylic paint, 450 pearlescent balloons, silver chains, variable dimensions.

WORK DESCRIPTIONS

BY MOKIA LAISIN

01 *Silence Will Not Protect You* 2019

Installation, concrete canaries, bricks, LED text-board, various dimensions

This work was originally commissioned for Volume IV of Unfinished Histories at the Klosterruine in Berlin-Mitte, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. The initial floor installation consisted of 33 fine grain concrete birds laid to rest upon concrete/beton blocks.

The artist's use of a dead bird leans into what is referred to in some contexts as an "idiom of distress". In this work, Désert calls attention to psychosocial distress not just in the form of a discomfited cry, but as a warning and perhaps even an illustration of a warning ignored. He draws an allusion to the proverbial "canary in a coal mine" with a difference in acknowledging the pre-existence of a critical social situation. The birds, in their plurality of appearance further drive home Audre Lorde's assertion that:

"[Speaking] is never without fear; of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgement, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now, that if I were to have been born mute, and had maintained an oath of silence my whole life for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die."¹

02 *The Love of God (Beggars Painting)* 2019

Letter painting on reflective textile and gold acrylic, 183 x 154 cm.

In *The Love of God / El Amor de Dios*, Jean-Ulrick Désert revisits a sign he happened upon in Madrid, December 2018. Along with artist Jorge Pineda, he observed a beggar with a sign which contained the text used in this artwork. The original text in Spanish, reads: "hermanos por el amor de dios, les ruego que me ayuden con alimentos o lo que buenamentos o lo que buenamente puedan para mantener mis cuatro hijos. saben ustedes lo duro y triste que es para mi tener que es para mi tener que hacer esto, pero la necesidad me obliga a rogarles una limosna. gracias que dios se lo pague" (in English:

Brothers, for the love of God, I beg you to help me with food or whatever you can to support my four children. You know how hard and sad it is for me to have to do this, but necessity forces me to beg you for charity. Thank you, may God repay you.)

Désert read this plea through the lens of his home country, Haiti – a country perceived by many to have the monopoly on begging. It is a work which calls attention to the existence and growth of "anti-austerity" movements throughout the so-called developed world and in particular, Spain's "Indignados" movement. The parallels are intentionally drawn to Haiti, a country living under imposed austerity for the best part of two centuries.

03 *The ABCs of my Private Life* (A, B, C, D) 2005 (M, N) 2021

Drawings, inks, pencil, watercolour on vellum paper, A, B, C, D: A5 (reproductions); M, N: 42 x 30 cm (originals)

In four pages, Jean-Ulrick Désert revisits the four places that shaped his personal experience: Port-au-Prince, Brooklyn, Paris, and Berlin. *The ABCs of my Private Life* take on pedagogical appearances while delineating the histories and experiences of the artist's migratory experience. Désert appropriates his own family archives as a first entry into the autobiographical in order to allow us access to an immediate point of reference. In doing so, the work extends the role of autobiography in its latent communication to a community of people with a shared experience of uprootings, dislocations and language hybridities.

Creolization is a recurring theme in Désert's work, and in this, there is also the realisation which will be familiar to most who inhabit a similar migratory experience. He explores Creole, not just as a linguistic form, but as an expression of his own hybridity; a lack of identitarian specificity which is teased out with respellings of old words, and creations of new ones: "Ayiti"(Haiti), "abondonner"(abandonment + abundance).²

¹ Lorde, Audre, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, London: Silverpress, 2017.

04 *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya* 2017

Xerography on vellum paper, hand-embellished (pearlescent acrylic paint, inks, watercolors), 9 panels, 183 x 275 x 3 cm.

Quisqueya, according to the Taíno people indigenous to the many islands of the Caribbean, is the "mother of all lands". What are the limits of a mere geographic representation of a land with such a burden of responsibility? What is disremembered in relation to its maternal identity and its ancestral history? The waters of Hispaniola, when understood as belonging instead to Quisqueya, allow us a greater ease in exploring what is in fact a living entity. Désert's diffractive technique invites us to flit seamlessly between the human and non-human, the natural and the mystical, the past and present; water, land and air.³

In nine panels of handmade embellishments using pearlescent acrylic paints, inks and watercolors on either embossed or stamped vellum xerography paper, Jean-Ulrick Désert postulates the legitimacy of opacity in cartographic representations. It is an intentional departure from the insidiously transparent and inviting depictions of foreign lands in transatlantic renaissance cartography. In this opacity, Désert allows us the freedom to interpret the dark shadows, giant squids, water goddesses and serpents freely and even humorously as dissuasive elements of a distant land. He juxtaposes this leitmotif against an apparent insistence of colonial and neocolonial temerity – galleons, aeroplanes, palm trees, coffee beans.

05 *The Archive / A work-in-progress* 2023

XR (Mixed Reality) Installations of five cultural objects from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, golden rescue blanket, constellation maps on plastic, various dimensions.

This work-in-progress is a study on loss, and toxicity. Loss of cultural heritage and displacement of people have been the concomitant woes of the Yoruba diaspora in the Atlantic world. These works, in their absence, are illustrative of a history of displacement and loss as well as a nod to their contemporary state and homelessness. These are, in the artist's words, "digital ghosts" – trapped in a perpetual state of non-belonging and perpetually inheriting a "toxicity" which blurs the lines between the natural, chemical and spiritual.

² Philogene, Jerry. 2014. "Dyaspóra All Up in the Mix: Jean-Ulrick Désert, Mapping Fragmented Archaeologies", *MELUS*, Vol. 39: 2, 2014, 208–210.

³ See: DeLoughrey, Elizabeth & Tatiana Flores. "Submerged Bodies", *Environmental Humanities*, 12, 2020, 132–166.

⁴ Chomsky, Noam & Paul Farmer, "The Uses of Haiti", MIT Tech Culture Forum, 2022, accessed online via: youtube.com/watch?v=VjMX7QArwnw (12.06.2023).

For decades, the European ethnological method to store these artifacts has been a chemical process which has resulted in a compositional ambiguity. The chemical roots of this toxicity can be observed, but with a history this cavernous and obscured, many of these roots remain concealed to us.

Please download the app to access the Archive installation:

A P P L E



A N D R O I D



06 *Sky Above Port-au-Prince Haiti 12 January 2010, 21:53 UTC / The Goddess Constellations* 2012

Mixed media celestial map, embossed metal foil, velvet-paper, styrofoam, 300 x 300 cm.

Ah! Qui me rendra mon pays
Haiti
C'est toi mon seul paradis
Haiti
Ah! Dieu me rappelle
Tes forêts si belles
Tes grands horizons
Loin de tes rivages
La plus belle cage
N'est qu'une prison
Oui!! Mon désir, mon cri d'amour
Haiti

– Josephine Baker, *Haiti* (1934)

In *Sky over Port-au-Prince Haiti 12th January 2010*, Jean-Ulrick Désert illustrates through astrological re-enactment an archeological study of a man-made disaster. It is a call to the pre-history of the 7.0 magnitude earthquake which struck 15 miles from the capital and resulted in the deaths of approximately 250,000 people, the injury of hundreds of thousands more and the destruction of an already desolate national infrastructure. It was an apocalyptic scene which owed its direction to the neo-liberal "structural adjustment" of the French and the North Americans. A subjugating economic programme which predates the structural adjustment programmes proffered upon the newly "independent" states of the 1950s and 1960s. As Noam Chomsky noted, for centuries, Haiti has been paying for its crime of self liberation.⁴

This artwork is also inadvertently a tale of two earthquakes, similar in magnitude, yet categorically dissimilar in their impact. 7.0 registered on the Richter scale in Haiti on Tuesday, the 12th of January, 2010 and 8.8 registered in Chile a month and a half later, with official tallies for the latter at approximately 500 casualties. What results is a portrait of a sky, cardinal red, over an island – one half green, one half brown. Approximately 750 embossed portraits of Josephine Baker “the Goddess” on white foil appear as white interruptions on a red sky. It bears an uncanny resemblance to an accumulation of white blood cells and seems to denote a malignancy and calls to a pre-existing condition. It questions the role of nature in the “natural disaster” and demands answers without particular discretion for their sources or inclinations – cosmic, religious, scientific, spiritual.

07 *Codex Testimoniorum Amoris / The Book of the Witnesses of Love*
2006
Two-color digital prints on assembled vellum papers, carpet, chairs
70 x 100 cm per panel – 3 out of an original series of 8
Initially commissioned by the Arts Council of Munich / Kulturreferat der Landeshauptstadt München.

In this work, Jean-Ulrick Désert calls attention to the oft-neglected, yet essential fixture on the balance sheets of the prostitution economy, the John (the client). The artist presents the wants, wishes, desires and experiences of the John in an ecclesiastical style against a backdrop of a society assured of their moral superiority and in the context of the murder of a prominent German socialite at the hands of an Iraqi immigrant.

Codex Testimoniorum Amoris is arranged in a manner which invites study. Particular care is taken to explore a series of issues deemed contentious within the catholic region of Bavaria. The artist allows the viewer to fill in the gaps and imagine for themselves what might have stood in place by purposefully removing all sexually explicit words, names or acts. The artist draws on the *Barberini Faun*, a marble sculpture by Giuseppe Giorgetti on view at the Glyptothek in Munich, as a motif and as a wink to the absurdity of a culture, profusely hypersexual and yet latent in its acknowledgment of that sexuality.⁵

08 *Die Hosen Runter Lassen*
2003–2004
Photography, analogue C-Prints, 29 x 20 cm.

Désert situates *Die Hosen Runter Lassen* within the discourse around Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic depiction of his lover, Milton Moore – a black man wearing a three piece suit while having his penis exposed. Critics of the work focused their rage on

the photograph’s overt (homo)sexuality. Désert shifts the discourse instead from the reductive and erotic essentialising aspects of Mapplethorpe’s initial work to a question of what Désert refers to as the “poetics of the banal and coincidental readings of cultural signs”.

He seeks answers from Fanon’s meditations on the black male condition in a white world and of existence through the eyes of the “othering” other. Fanon speaks of the insistence of the white male gaze as a force which when impressed upon a black man essentializes the physical and in doing so, dismembers and dehumanizes. Homi Bhabha, reflecting on Fanon’s work, questions our capacity to build a functioning society against this continued reduction of who is and isn’t fully human.

“From within the metaphor of vision complicit with a Western metaphysic of Man emerges the displacement of the colonial relation. The black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood; its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the Socius; its present, dismembered and dislocated, will not contain the image of identity that is questioned in the dialectic of mind/body and resolved in the epistemology of ‘appearance and reality’. The White man’s eyes break up the Black man’s body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed.”⁶

09 *Shrine of the Divine Negress Nr.1 / The Goddess Projects*
2009
Installation, PVC, acrylic paint, colored gels, textile ribbon, 400 x 275 cm.

Désert’s take on the image of the *Black Madonna* and the *Divine Feminine* is expressed with a motif of Josephine Baker – a recurring inspiration for the artist whose “interests lie less with Josephine Baker, the person, but rather with Baker as an iconic symbol that allows for a collective imagining.” *The Shrine of the Divine Negress* belongs to a series of works titled the “Goddess Constellations”. This particular piece, created initially for installation at the Fortress of San Carlos de la Cabana at the 10th Havana Biennale, elevates Baker yet again. Surrounding her likeness are twelve butterflies – perhaps emblematic of the twelve children she adopted during her lifetime. It can also be interpreted as invoking a quote from Kofi Annan, in his address for the receipt of the nobel prize in 2001: “Scientists tell us that the world of nature is so small and interdependent that a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon rainforest can generate a violent storm on the other side of the earth.”

⁵ Herring, Amanda, “Sexy Beast: the Barberini Faun as an Object of Desire”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 25:1, 2016: 32–61.

⁶ Bhaba, Homi: “Remembering Fanon”, foreword in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox, 2008 [1952], London: Pluto Press.

10 *GLORIA*
2017
1-channel video, 13 mins looped.

The video *GLORIA* presents, in the artist’s own words, “hunger, embodied as lips.” The personal cost of refuge is a type of capital and tactic where dignity is traded as a strategy of survival. A stage where the bureaucracy and the German “Schlachtplatte” are actors.

Despite his appropriation of the “Flaneur” aesthetic in previous works, in *GLORIA*, there is a delay in Jean-Ulrick Désert’s assimilation to bourgeois society. In this image of a man being fed all manner of the finest German cuisine, the artist situates us in a room which observes a pleading mouth. There is not much you can tell about the mouth, and much less about who it belongs to, but what is apparent is that it has a need, and this need is being addressed. The mouth needs food, and when it no longer has the food, it needs the food more. The mouth, then, divorced of its person is simply a mouth.

It no longer serves to critique the humanitarian position for its apoliticality. There is a violence inherent to what Antonio de Lauri termed the “politics of humanitarianism”⁷ – it accepts as static, the conditions and symptoms engendered by an unjust world order. It is insidious in its outwardly altruistic appearance and control of its own narrative of charitability.

11 *BLING*
2017
1-channel video, 12 mins looped.

“I am Narcissus, and I want to see reflected in the eyes of the other an image of myself that satisfies me.” – *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon

The “Blackamoor” figure appears gradually within Désert’s ethnographic study. The scene resembles a standard sequential police line up. It is a narrative which negotiates questions of agency, control and coercion. There is a decidedly anti-identitarian thoughtline which flows through this work. With this “Blackamoor” figure, he questions the roots of identitarianism and its ideological beginnings. He observes its instrumentalisation and attaches a problematic to the proliferation of a black, queer identitarian ideal and its essentialising and exclusionary potential. With the depiction of a white hand delivering the materials to a black man, Désert characterises this imposed appearance as aesthetically uninteresting and dangerously reductive.

⁷ De Lauri, Antonio (Ed.), *The Politics of Humanitarianism. Power, Ideology and Aid*, 2016, London: I.B. Tauris.

Artist’s note: This diptych was originally intended as a triptych where the final video would have referenced the final part of the proverbial “See no evil – speak no evil – hear no evil.”

12 *Missing*
2008
From the Leviticus drawings series
Drawing/ Collage, Vellum papers, ink, watercolor, glitter, 40 x 60 cm.

Jean-Ulrick Désert’s return to biblical reference retains a poignance less apparent in his previous works. In his Leviticus series, he addresses the calamitous reality of a post 9/11 world. It is a work inspired by artists belonging to the “Neue Sachlichkeit” or Germany’s new objectivist art movement of the post-war period. A movement characterised by its dispassionate view of the romantic and idealised expressionism of the modern era often depicted its subjects as seen on the streets of this very city in the period following the first world war – disfigured. Désert’s approach can be viewed in the immediate context of 9/11 as an expression inspired by the anti-nationalist, anti-war band of the new objectivists.

Parallels can be drawn between this series by Désert and Jean Michel Basquiat’s *Riding with Death* (1988). The skeletal figures of man and horse appear similarly. Désert situates this particular work in relation to a discussion of what was at the time a rising malcontent towards the expression of US military might in the Middle East.

13 *NH2K*
1997–ongoing
Selection of multi format artworks as c-print photography, collages, billboard installation, beer coasters, diary postcards, variable dimensions.

NH2K are documentations of a public performance. Fitted with a self-made pair of Lederhosen, constructed in intentional resemblance to pinkish white skin, and occasionally also fitted with a blond wig and cowbells to signal his presence, the artist allowed himself to be documented by onlookers, and passersby.

The work is equal parts a performance of displacement on the part of the artist, and a nod to the absurdity of the human condition and the never-ending search for acceptance and belonging. This work is a portrait of an ethnographic study as healing in which the artist contemplates the experience of racist abuse against a fleeting and unjustified optimism in the dawn of a new millennium. He confronts these experiences of dislocation and alienation with their incredibly awkward, yet ever present cousin, yearning for acceptance. He caricatures his experience in light of the demands of

the colonial world's insistence that we must “turn white or disappear”⁸ while reversing the white European gaze upon itself.

His “Black Flaneur” transgressively and intuitively calls to the unspoken un-naturalness of his presence in white German spaces.⁹ As a result, he appears to us cartoonishly, or as a Disney character might, were one to encounter them in real life. You can't really imagine where he might be going, who he might belong to, and if he had ever worn anything else.

Simultaneously, Fanon's study of racism as a two-sided process of dehumanizing is relevant here: “Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, it is this other who remains the focus of his actions. His human worth and reality depend on this other and on his recognition by the other. It is in this other that the meaning of his life is condensed.”¹⁰

14 *Good Morning Prussia series*
MORGENSGLÜCK (Morning Happiness)
2009

Handmade Cyanotype print from digitally-collaged negatives on Büttgen-Ingres paper, 31 cm x 49 cm.

PREUSSICHES SCHICKSAL (Prussian Destiny)
Handmade Cyanotype print from digitally-collaged negatives on Büttgen-Ingres paper, 24 x 32 cm.

REFLEXIONSBECKEN (Reflection Pool)
Handmade Cyanotype print from digitally-collaged negatives on Büttgen-Ingres paper, 24 x 32 cm.

Good Morning Prussia (Guten Morgen Preussen) is a series of handmade cyanotype photographs. It is the story of a “little Nubian boy”, August Sabac el Cher, who was given as a “gift” to a German noble due to his musical talents. The portraits were exposed in the style of the cyanotype in order to honour a specific “Prussian blue”. It intentionally confuses an original depiction in Emil Doerstling's *Prussian Love Happiness* (1890), in which Gustav Sabac el Cher, the son of August Sabac el Cher and Anna Maria Jung (also shown in this series) was portrayed by a painter we can only presume to have been overly fixated on the young man's blackness so as to over-exaggerate it. The original photograph of this painting can be found among the books presented by S A V V Y .doc. Gustav Sabac el Cher, who would later become a soldier and lead conductor of the Prussian imperial band, is portrayed here with his likeness playfully superimposed on Emil Doerstling's original painting.

Morgensglück is a portrait of Gertrud (née Perlig) and Gustav Sabac el Cher at the Muskau Park in then-Prussia, *Preussisches Schicksal* shows Gustav Sabac el Cher and the German Emperor on horseback, and *Reflexionsbecken* is a portrait of August Sabac el Cher in Prince Pückler's gardens.

15 *Dear John*

2019

Sound installation, 1-channel, two speakers, German robot voice and English robot voice, approx. 15 mins.

“Have you ever really fallen for someone? You don't realise how far out of yourself you can actually find yourself.” This was written on a morning in which sanity and insanity intertwined into perfectly mad lucidity. Written with no practical concern for length, diplomacy or sense.

16 *Neque Mittatis Margaritas Vestras Ante Porcos*

2016

Installation, biblical text (Do not throw pearls before swine, Matthew 7:6) as party-garlands in five Caribbean based languages/dialects, laser cut plastic with acrylic paint, 450 pearlescent balloons, silver chains, variable dimensions.

In this work, Désert teases the above mentioned excerpt from Matthew 7:6 and renders it in the form of festoons draped across the room. The texts, exhibited in Kreyol, Papiamentu, Spanish, Sranan Tongo, and Patois, sit underneath balloons which characterise the pearls we are warned of wasting on undeserving recipients. The full bible quote however advises us not to be hypocritical judges, yet we must be able to discern the swine, lest we cast our pearls before them.¹¹

This is a work which is first and foremost an effort to negotiate issues of identitarianism, and the regulatory or dictatorial power of religious language and its role in the subjugation of queer Caribbean communities.¹² The artist insists and questions the underlying premise of some beings characterized as less deserving than others. Who are the swine in this analogy and what do our “pearls” represent? Why is it a waste to cast our pearls before the swine?

The texts exhibited are:

- Kreyol (Haitian) = PA JÉTÉ GRENN PÈL DEVAN KOCHON, Mat 7:6,
- Papiamentu (Caribbean/ ABC islands) = NO TA TIRA PERLANAN DILANTI E PORKONAN, Mat 7:6,
- Spanish (Carib/ Dominican) = NO ECHEN PERLAS A LOS PUERCOS, Mat 7:6,
- Sranang Tongo (Surinamese) = ÈN, NO TROWE PARELKRARA GI AGU, Mat 7:6,
- Patois/Patwa (Jamaican) = "NO TEK UNU GUD GUD PORL DASH GI PIG. Mat 7:6"

S A V V Y .doc selection

The S A V V Y .doc collection presented in concert with Jean-Ulrick Désert's expansive solo exhibition reflects the many themes explored in the artist's works. From questions of pedagogy, including how the scholarship and livelihoods of the colonized are disseminated and often anthropologized, to the problematization of the Black body through over-policing and the double standard of justice encountered in the form of anti-Blackness. Désert's poignant works also explore the mythical, exploratory and joyful and in response, we include in this selection works such as Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Alberto Toscano's *Cartographies of the Absolute* and Kunstmuseum Stuttgart's *I Got Rhythm* with nods to Josephine Baker's epic contributions to the jazz genre.

Colonial Neighbours Archive and Jean-Ulrick Desert's personal collection

This display presents a selection of objects from S A V V Y 's Colonial Neighbours archive and prints from Jean-Ulrick Désert's personal collection. Everyday items and commercial products such as coffee boxes, comic books and cookbooks are juxtaposed with images of white German family life. In reaction to the Colonial Neighbours archive, the artist decided to visualise the racialised dimensions of familial and domestic spaces. Emphasising the quotidian and intimate character of racial conditioning, Jean-Ulrick Désert reflects on the prerequisite of violence towards people of color in the industrialized capitalist world.

Colonial Neighbours is a participatory archive and research project initiated at S A V V Y Contemporary in order to investigate the colonial history of Germany, including its ongoing impacts upon the present.

8 Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Richard Philcox, 2008 [1952], London: Pluto Press.
9 Philogene, Jerry, "Meditations on Traveling Diasporically: Jean-Ulrick Désert and Negerhosen2000", *Radical History Review*, 2013 (115): 184-193.
10 Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Richard Philcox, 2008 [1952], London: Pluto Press.
11 Bible Commentary, see: https://www.preceptaustin.org/matthew_76#7:6 (accessed 12.06.2023)
12 Philogene, Jerry "Diasporic Queering and Intimacies of the Creole Being", *Caribbean Queer Visualities: A Small Axe Project*, curated by David Scott, Erica Moiah, James Nijah Cunningham, 2016, smallaxe.net/cqv/issue-01/pdfs/CQV-001%20fullCATALOGUE.pdf (accessed 12.06.2023)

THE WINK, AFTER

CURATORIAL NOTE BY Renan Laru-an

Reverie insulates the artistic history of Jean-Ulrick Désert. Sociologically, his practice has been interpreted in discussions of opacity, Blackness, intersectionality, the Diaspora, and numerous keywords associated with most non-Western artists. Désert's identity is inevitably paired with Haiti, the Caribbean, Creole, the Global South, or even extended hyphenations with "America", as in the US, as well as being tethered in the past decades to "Europe," specifically Germany and Berlin; he belongs to a community of artists and thinkers who are perennially articulated in many heritages they wish to have dissolved. In art history, Désert could appear in comparative studies, then via curatorial work, in exhibitions that sample his works in geographies of cultural production. Many artists resist this condition at various intervals of their career, as it can result in a dispersal of commitments that do not necessarily cohere around their own schema of interpretation. For the lucky ones, the work of their art gives them the allowance to refuse external readings that reclaims the power to describe their aesthetic imagination. Betwixt: the artist could lament for a chance to offer a counterpoint. As in mourning in the hopes of living, desiring, and working contrapuntally in attemptedly predetermined realities. It is like the morning after an assault, after a loved one's death, or a break-up, when the force of revenge, resistance, and resentment recedes. The artist improvises neither a sequel nor a chapter, but the preposition where one can locate time and direction. Perhaps, for Désert, this is about inching his toes towards the edge of the waves: What is artistic life when life itself is always at bay?

C O N S P I C U O U S I N V I S I B I L I T Y is an attempt to configure the artist Jean-Ulrick Désert at this juncture. Stitched together by thresholds, the exhibition of art over 12 projects from the period of more than two decades shows the artist integrating his heterogeneous forms of language into the shape of various mediums: mixed-media installation, illustration, performance, text, photography, and video. Arduous in finding settlement with these formats, Désert introduces the natural efficacy and technical allure of materials that he has gathered in his mobility. Such a collision of form, idea, and ecology of things invents new surfaces and unexpected textures that understand and honor the inherent quality of materials to carry meaning. Integrity is one word that Désert often evokes in his relationship with materiality: this is the guiding principle of the exhibition.

The timeline of Désert's solo show is more emotional than analytical. Chronology restrained through refrains. The juxtaposition of works envisions how sudden, unexplained interruptions of mood course through the sameness, or nearness, of emotions despite their ideological sources, individual causes, or anachronisms. C O N S P I C U O U S I N V I S I B I L I T Y restructures the recurrence and relapse of feelings: unruly, and oftentimes, embarrassing. How do we "view" the artist's public communication of his personal experiences and internal struggles in our own disclosures? As artworks slip into another time or space – however incongruent they may be with our own or in the artist's body of works, how do we walk across another lifeworld, without interrupting the chronicity of their, or our shared experience? The ethical measure of the exhibition is the rhythm of C O N S P I C U O U S I N V I S I B I L I T Y, a term that Désert uses in defining his practice to be coterminous with the quality of his appearance and existence in the world.

While conceptual practice in art has increasingly divorced itself from illustration, Désert demonstrates the urgency of clarity in building competing metaphors. Metaphor as a collage of contexts. The exhibition illuminates the social-scientific facts of identity and politics, as well as of trauma and repair, in the presence of quotidian references, accessible to the sensibility of intimate encounters. Metaphor as an album. Désert has a pictorial milieu that turns an image from its photographic value into something as potentially innocuous as a household or a best friend's memorabilia. Because Désert's metaphors are not formed as substitutes to the unspoken, difficult, or obscene, Désert permanently sketches the contours of a situation, an event, or a snapshot that un-and-re-archives gazes and positions of shame, guilt, and discomfort. In one photograph, Désert pairs his portrait taken by a Caucasian boy with the boy's image that he took, with his own annotations on each side: the two of them are seen together in the exhibition, and yet the assigning of interpretation ceases in the residues of old signifiers and in the growing associations of meaning. C O N S P I C U O U S I N V I S I B I L I T Y accumulates an argument for the moral remit and responsibility of metaphors.

Désert once mentioned the wink in a meeting about the exhibition. To receive a wink is different from witnessing it; or, to wink is not the same as to be winked at. It does not happen at the same time. Instead of being indexical to bodily conduct, it is a relational language that we can participate in. What is the most appropriate response to a *conspicuously invisible* wink?

WI DI MIMBA WI

Jean-Ulrick Désert is the inaugural recipient of Wi Di Mimba Wi :: The AKB & S A V V Y Contemporary Commission. AKB Stiftung and S A V V Y Contemporary have teamed up to launch this new and long-term commission grant for artists of colour based in Germany.

ABOUT THE PRIZE

In addition to celebrating and rewarding an artist's outstanding work, this grant is an invitation to relate, to collaborate and to create together – according to the philosophies and practices lived by S A V V Y Contemporary. Our intent with this initiative is to build a strong relationship and support for artists of colour towards a richer and more diverse cultural landscape.

Thanks to the generous support of the AKB Stiftung, the selected artist receives a one year working grant of 30.000 EUR, as well as funds to support the creation of a new artwork and curatorial support. It is planned that the new piece or body of work will be exhibited at S A V V Y Contemporary and other venues.

The grant is open to artists of colour based in Germany of all backgrounds, media, ages, stages of career. Candidates were nominated by a board of advisors and selected by a five-member jury. This programme is a long-term engagement to build sustainable support structures in the art world. The grant will be awarded every two years.

The AKB Stiftung is a foundation based in Einbeck, Germany. Established by Carl-Ernst Büchting in 1998.

STATEMENT BY THE JURY

Jean-Ulrick Désert was shortlisted together with Karimah Ashadu, Ana Paula Oliveira Martins dos Santos and Lerato Shadi, and was selected by a jury of five members: Bassam El Baroni (curator, art critic, lecturer), Karina Griffith (artist and film maker), Otobong Nkanga (artist), Mirjami Schuppert (curator, and coordinator of WDMW for AKB Stiftung) and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung (S A V V Y Contemporary):

Jean-Ulrick Désert's body of work is impressive in its breadth and ingenuity. His decades-long work in Germany has made and shaped spaces for crucial questions and practices. Before most of us have begun working in the city of Berlin, Jean-Ulrick was already here and doing the work without which most of us

would not be able to do our own work. We acknowledge his ongoing practice and body of work with this award.

Complex and multi-layered, the way his works nest particular locations, events, and histories within the cosmic and the cosmic within the earthly and everyday, highlights the philosophical and poetical depth of Désert's approach to artmaking and traverses an incredible number of registers: from the political to the spiritual, and from tragedy to comedy. Désert figuratively pokes, prodes and tickles the grotesque characters he plays on screen and in public places to provoke lingering affective responses to Black experiences in Europe.

This award goes to Jean-Ulrick Désert for his deep engagement with his social/cultural practices. His work has the power to activate the viewer in engaging ways, to connect and reveal intertwined histories. His concern around digital technologies brings to the surface the complex nature of the entanglement of politics with society.

Désert's practice, be it site-specific public installation or museum display, enters into dialogue with surrounding cultural traditions, poignantly commenting on the social relations the artist observes around him. Désert has shown an admirable dedication to research, whilst at the same time demonstrating a deeply personal investment in his projects. His practice, which stretches several decades, is continuously relevant in its examination of identities and identity politics, of gender and race.

We are very excited to see which format Désert's practice will take for the Wi Di Mimba Wi commission, and the path it will lead us on. The commission will also see his works travel to other venues and countries, finding new contexts of display and engaging further audiences.

JEAN - ULRICK DÉSER T

“May I convey my most sincere gratification to the Wi Di Mimba Wi jury for this affirming news and for putting their trust in me as the inaugural recipient of this new prize. I am aware of the responsibility that it entails and I look forward to the creators that will follow in my steps from this point forward.

The prize arrives for me at a critical time – in my art-practice and for us collectively. We are in a moment where we have reached a global pivoting point. A fulcrum hinged on a virus and our options for collective actions of creative production and experiences. Outside of crisis, I am often reminded of the concrete advice given to me thirty years ago by the late Okwui Enwezor: 'Create relevant work.' And during crisis, as we are in now, the cultural works fulfill their critical function in the social framework.

I bridge through artistic experience the material archives and the immaterial archives during the latter period of our anthropocene. I thank the Wi Di Mimba Wi jury for their encouragement to have me explore, discover and extract from these critical archives.” — Statement by the artist upon receiving the award

EXHIBITION IN TURKU FINLAND

LÄSNÄ / RADIANT INVISIBILITY

OPENING 06.07.2023 18:00

OPENING HOURS 07.07.–06.08.2023

Tuesday–Friday 12:00–18:00 & Saturday–Sunday
12:00–16:00

AT Titanik, Itäinen Rantakatu 8 in Turku, Finland

WWW titanik.fi

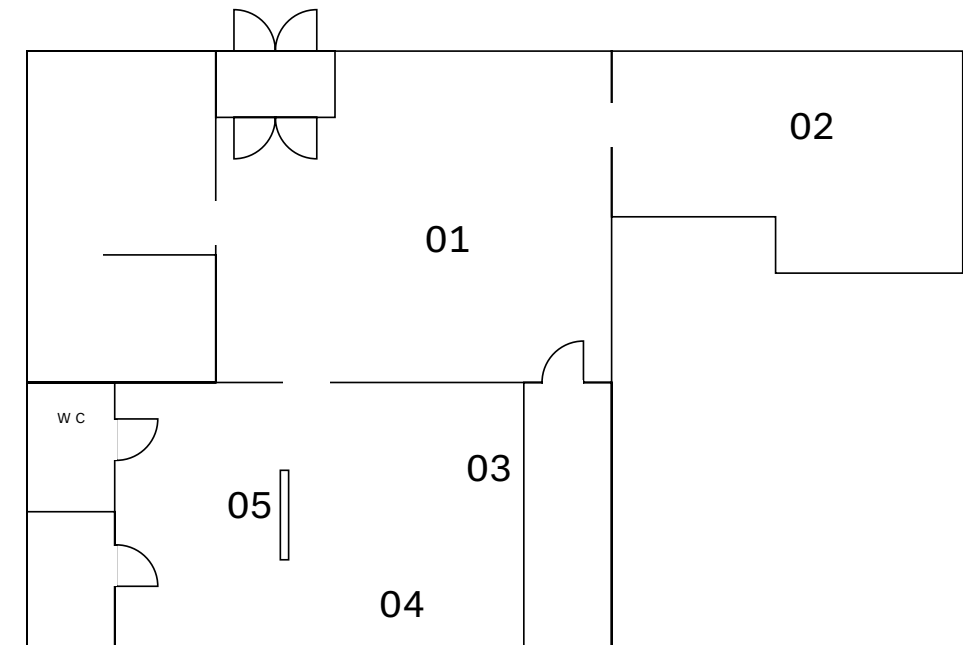
CURATED BY Mirjami Schuppert

The exhibition **LÄSNÄ / RADIANT INVISIBILITY** presents works from the Haiti-born, Berlin-based artist Jean-Ulrick Désert, who is the inaugural recipient of **Wi Di Mimba Wi :: The AKB & SAVVY Contemporary Commission Prize**. The exhibition brings Désert's works in various media for the first time to Finland, providing a glimpse into his decades-long practice, the older body of works accompanying and contextualising the most recent ones.

The interactive work “The Archive/ a work in progress” gives, with the help of augmented reality, the audience an opportunity to view items from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Germany. It provides access to artefacts from the West African collection, challenging the viewer to actively contemplate on the ethical dilemma of displaced cultural objects, question of access, knowledge production and the ongoing refugee crisis. The prevalence of the impacts of colonialism is a recurring notion in Désert's practice, bringing together personal experiences and the political.

When facing hatred and persistent racism, Désert refuses to take a passive role. His works, born as a response to mundane encounters and observations of the surrounding society, probe and provoke, making visible – sometimes subtly, other times in an exaggerated way – the deep-rooted attitudes towards perceived otherness. Critical interventions and commentaries are veiled as amusements, offering starting points without conclusions. His practice visualises “conspicuous invisibility,” that which is ever present, but refuses to be seen, or to be acknowledged.

The exhibition, conceived in collaboration with **SAVVY Contemporary**, runs parallel to Désert's first monographic exhibition in Germany, **CONSPICUOUS INVISIBILITY. WORKS 1997–2023**.



List of works:

- 01 *The Archive*, AR Installation, 2023
- 02 *Dear John*, ceramic plates and audio, approx. 14 min., 2019
- 03 *GLORIA*, video projection, 15 min 37 s., 2018
- 04 *BLING*, video projection, 11 min 34 s., 2018
- 05 *NH2K*, slideshow, 1997–2019

Outside: *Hip Decadence of Seductive Glamour*, print on polyester, 152,4 cm x 91,4 cm, 2000

TITANIK

MORE INFORMATION

savvy-contemporary.com

facebook.com/savvyberlin

S A V V Y Contemporary – The laboratory of form-ideas is an artistic organisation, discursive platform, place for good talks, foods and drinks – a space for conviviality and cultural plurilog. S A V V Y Contemporary is a public and independent organism in perpetual becoming, animated by around 25 members and a network of collaborators, co-creating community and communities it breathes with. Founded in 2009, S A V V Y Contemporary situates itself at the threshold of the West and the non-West to understand their conceptualisations, ethical systems, achievements, and ruins. It develops tools, proposes perspectives and nourishes practices towards imagining a world inhabited together. The space was founded in 2009 in Berlin-Neukölln by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, S A V V Y 's artistic director until 2022. From 2023 onwards, the space – located in Berlin-Wedding since 2016 – is under artistic direction by Renan Laru-an alongside the executive directors Lema Sikod and Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock.

S A V V Y Contemporary is Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock Christèle Baonga Alunga Bona Bell Cecilia Bien Onur Çimen Bilge Emir Sagal Farah Billy Fowo Raisa Galofre Manuela García Aldana Juan Pablo García Sossa Hubert Gromny Hajra Haider Karrar Daniellis Hernandez Anna Jäger Kimani Joseph Aditi Kapur Laura Klöckner Lisa Kolloge Kelly Krugman Mokia Laisin Renan Laru-an Rafal Lazar Lia Milanesio Nancy Naser Al Deen Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung Abhishek Nilamber Matthias Rademacher Lema Sikod Meghna Singh Lili Somogyi Ola Zielirńska

D E S I G N Juan Pablo García Sossa

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