

# ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2020

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

WHERE WE'RE AT:  
VIEWS FROM ALL OVER

STEVEN PARRINO

CARCERAL AESTHETICS:

NICOLE R. FLEETWOOD

TALKS TO RACHEL KUSHNER

STANLEY WHITNEY



The interest was in the gesture and in the trace. Referential meaning and even intentionality are dispensable. So is classical compositional organization. What counts is weightlessness, suspense. As Bowie phrased it, channeling his Major Tom: “I’m floating in a most peculiar way!”

With a certain mysterious detachment, Haller tries to prevent us from figuring out her creative logic. “Knights” needed no *Texte zur Kunst*. A xeroxed leaflet sufficed. It consisted of eight repetitions of the phrase “I’m trying to write a sentence with a mouse,” borrowed from a text by artist Christoph Bruckner. Art and language were here reduced to a scrawl, contesting the authority and professorial presumption of experts. And yet Haller does not hesitate to insert allusions to canonical works of art into her work: The black square inevitably evokes Malevich. But these are not quotations, as the gallery’s Christian Meyer assured me, nor statements, but rather symptoms. And, as they say, thou shalt love thy symptoms as thyself.

—Brigitte Huck

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

## BERLIN

### Georges Adéagbo

BARBARA WIEN

Georges Adéagbo is a one-trick artist. But the outcome of that trick is endlessly variable. His method consists of making assemblages of objects: mostly books, magazines, newspaper articles, record covers, and wooden sculptures, but also the occasional pair of underwear. These items are pinned to the wall, as in a teenager’s bedroom, with what looks like a contrived messiness: Everything’s askew, with no apparent relation between one thing and another. So open does Adéagbo’s structure appear that for a second you might think you can just pick anything up, perhaps even take it home. But then it is art, after all, and so you start to look for distance, permanence, design.

The exhibition’s title, “*L’Abécédaire de Georges Adéagbo: la civilisation parlant et faisant voir la culture’ . . . !*” (“The Alphabet of Georges Adéagbo: the civilization is talking and making culture visible” . . . !), was a reference to *L’abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, Claire Parnet’s landmark 1989 series of television interviews with the French philosopher. Over nearly six hours, Deleuze worked his way through the alphabet, offering his two cents on *A* for *animal* and *B* for *boisson* and so forth. In *C* for *culture*, he explains his hatred of the subject, saying he engages with it only in the hope of encountering an idea that allows him to get out of it again. Escaping art through art also seems to be the point of Adéagbo’s trick. Every object gestures to an exit, an unexpected connection to other things, elsewhere.

Each iteration of Adéagbo’s art speaks to the times and the places that framed its production. In this case, the places were Germany, Japan, South Korea, and the artist’s native Benin. The time is the present, evidenced in a magazine cover of Harry and Meghan and in renderings of the spiky Covid ball. Other elements seemed less temporally specific. A story about Jennifer Aniston “finally happy again,” for instance, could have been from any point during the past fifteen years. One wondered about what lies behind all this hoarding. Does Adéagbo share my preoccupation with the outfits of the French first lady or with queer-interest films such *Carol* (2015) and *The Danish Girl* (2015), or was the occurrence of these references a matter of chance, meaning that I forged these paths through his alphabet myself? Could these assemblages accommodate any and every narrative, or was there some hidden design?

Both were the case, it seemed. Taking a few steps back, you realized there was symmetry to the scatter. Each wall had the outline of an altar,



View of “Georges Adéagbo,” 2020.

with the knickknacks unfolding from the center. The floor-based groups, often organized on and around a rug, likewise invited a devotional attitude. These vaguely religious formats pointed to Adéagbo’s construction as a cosmology, a self-conscious world-building exercise, the result of which was something very close to an immediate imprint of life itself in all its confusing, multifarious mundanity.

At the center of this cosmos was a thesis on how stuff comes together to testify to the geographical and historical situatedness of subjectivity, as well as to its transience. But this subjectivity was, as it turned out, not that of anyone in particular. Rather, as you wandered through the nine installations making up the exhibition looking for Adéagbo and the meaning you assumed he’d planted there, what you found was some warped and elusive reflection of yourself. Likewise, locations and temporalities melted and fused into something both shared and deeply intimate. Deleuze sought to escape culture through what he called encounters, and, as he told Parnet, “one has encounters with things and not with people.” Judging by Adéagbo’s alphabet, Deleuze was right.

—Kristian Vistrup Madsen

### Sophie Reinhold

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

The title of one of Sophie Reinhold’s paintings here, *Gewöhne dich nicht daran*, 2019—referencing an anti-drug addiction slogan of the German Democratic Republic and translating as “Don’t get used to it”—might also apply to her purposely elliptical practice. The Berlin-based artist frequently works up pale paintings on a ground of jute and marble dust, with pieces of canvas cut out and stitched onto their surfaces to create ghostly figurations, like shallow reliefs on a facade. In this show, “*Das kann das Leben kosten*” (That Could Cost You Your Life), the chimerical expanse of the opening painting, *Courtroom*, 2020, was fashioned that way, with a small spectral face—judge? defendant?—floating within it. The canvas beside it, *R U concerned?* (*Eiermann*), 2020, was much brighter and tighter. A melancholy Humpty Dumpty or, as the subtitle would have it, egg man—maybe referencing the twentieth-century German architect Egon Eiermann—

wanders lost and exhausted amid the rainbow contours of a modernist stripe painting, toting the minor enigma of an unidentifiable blue book. The show also included a shaped canvas, text-driven works such as *Gewöhne dich nicht daran*, cartoonish sexualized scenarios, and more.



Sophie Reinhold, *Das kann das Leben kosten* (That Could Cost You Your Life), 2020, oil on marble powder on jute, 55 × 43 3/4".

The initial effect was of energetic misdirection, reflex swerving without anything very tangible behind it.

Yet a breadcrumb trail slowly became manifest. In *I know I have the right to remain silent, but I want you to know I am a screamer*, 2020, a busty redhead in heels and miniskirt being ticketed by a goofy-looking patrolman thrusts her butt toward his crotch as she leans over the trunk of a car. Across the room was *Poli*, 2019, a blaring white-on-blue text painting nodding to early Ed Ruscha, its wording clearly a cropping of POLIZEI. *Das kann das Leben kosten*, 2020, spells out another GDR-era apothegm in dirty pastel tones, an antic monkey perched on the second word. (Reinhold, born in 1981, lived her childhood in that vanished world.) A repeated motif of travel, of getting from A to B—or not getting there because the cops

pull you over—sometimes twists toward the absurd. In *Mann mit Wurst* (Man with Sausage), 2020, a tiny, suited man clings to a sausage with horsy legs that, like an unstoppable bucking phallus, tugs him through an empty brown landscape. *BVG*, 2019, a taut graphic canvas featuring interlocking black and yellow forms, refracts the bumblebee colors of the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe, the city's transport system.

The show's vectors, then, seemed to include a travelogue of its host city over the course of the artist's life, the shifting shape but eternal presence (and gendering) of authority and judgment, and the perpetual problematic of converting such themes into art with a light touch. Several works here alluded impatiently to active looking and conversely to being observed: In the vaporous, pinky-orange *Untitled*, 2020, a disembodied hand grasps a fringed circle that contains an eye, and floating eyeballs were secreted, *Where's Waldo* style, within many of the other compositions. In the pallid tropical landscape *The truth, a cave (allegory of the cave)*, 2020—the final work if you read the show clockwise—Reinhold goes full Plato to retroactively detach what's envisioned from what might actually be there.

"*Das kann das Leben kosten*" scanned as a fractured essay on the decorum of sociohistorical assertion. In a handout, the apparent neutrality of Reinhold's method was compared to that of Rachel Cusk's in the novelist's much-admired *Outline* trilogy (2014–18), wherein the narrator is more lacuna than presence. But rather than lacking an authorial viewpoint, Reinhold's show felt populated by many, as she mixed diverse signals into something approaching disheveled equilibrium.

—Martin Herbert

## DÜSSELDORF

### siren eun young jung

KUNSTVEREIN FÜR DIE RHEINLANDE UND WESTFALEN

It all started with a photograph of a wedding party. There was nothing unusual about the scene at first glance: the bride and groom, the family. . . . Yet as South Korean artist siren eun young jung examined the picture more closely, it gradually dawned on her that the people depicted in it were all women, including those whom one might initially

have thought were men. They were members of a troupe of performers of *yeoseong gukgeuk*, a variant of traditional Korean opera sung exclusively by women. Established in South Korea in the 1940s, the art form remained popular until the 1960s. Delving into its history, jung found herself enchanted. She met surviving participants, dug up historic footage, conducted interviews, and supplemented the material she had gathered with excerpts from a musical starring Korean drag king Azangman. The resulting works make up her ongoing "Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project," 2008–, which was also the starting point for her recent exhibition "Deferral Theater." The videos on view showed, for instance, actress Lee Ok Chun's transformation into a man in the makeup room and nonagenarian Lee Soja—who acted in male roles throughout her career—commenting on her life and struggles. More than just documentaries, they are dramatic works in their own right.

Yeoseong gukgeuk has its roots in the Korean musical storytelling genre of *pansori*, which boasts a long tradition of subversion vis-à-vis social hierarchies. By performing the parts of men, women established a distance from time-honored gender roles and made a critical perspective possible through a kind of alienation effect. And so jung rightly asks: "What are the implications of the discussion surrounding yeoseong gukgeuk and its potential to be considered in the position of a 'contemporary' performance?"

Jung took the inquiry into gender roles further in the three-channel audiovisual installation *A Performing by Flash, Afterimage, Velocity, and Noise*, 2019, with which she represented Korea at that year's Venice Biennale. Again featuring Azangman, as well as transgender electronic musician Kirara; lesbian actress Yii Lee; and Seo Ji Won, who leads a Seoul-based disabled women's theater group, it probes the question, prominently raised by Judith Butler, of the performative nature of gender—and other—roles. Accentuated by lighting and sound effects, the projection makes a rousing case for a community life founded on the celebration of difference.



Yeoseong gukgeuk fell victim to the "modernization" of Korean society pushed through by Park Chung-hee's military government in the 1960s. An "audience that had already become part of modernity that sought after 'Western' values as its ideal," the artist notes, saw this type of theatrical performance as outmoded. Her assertion points to another dimension of this outstanding project: In deeply moving images, jung champions not only a diversity of gender expressions, but also another kind of diversity, that of the manifold cultural traditions threatened by today's Western-dominated globalization.

—Noemi Smolik

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

siren eun young jung, *A Performing by Flash, Afterimage, Velocity, and Noise*, 2019, three-channel HD video projection, color, sound, 27 minutes 36 seconds. Installation view.