

P STAFF

PRESSE

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Art Basel : 7 expositions à voir absolument, de Doris Salcedo à P. Staff

ART 09 JUIN 2023



Alors que l'incontournable foire Art Basel donnera jeudi 15 juin 2023 le coup d'envoi de sa nouvelle édition, découvrez sept expositions à ne pas manquer à Bâle et ses environs, des grandes artistes Shirley Jaffe et Doris Salcedo célébrées respectivement au Kunstmuseum et à la Fondation Beyeler à l'art hypersensible de P. Staff à la Kunsthalle Basel, ou encore les jardins comme laboratoire de création au Vitra Design Museum.

Par Matthieu Jacquet .



P. Staff, "On Venus", Serpentine Galleries, 2019. Installation view. Photo: Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy P. Staff.

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1. L'art hypersensible de P. Staff à la Kunsthalle

Jeune artiste à l'œuvre fascinant, P. Staff capte la fragilité du monde contemporain dans des films, installations, gravures et sculptures hallucinées. Nourries d'énergies et d'images aux portes du surnaturel, ses pièces utilisent la installent différentes atmosphères qui, ensemble, composent une véritable traversée introspective et sensorielle, où se croisent des visages et corps, animaux et vastes paysages, ou encore objets du quotidien. Après sa participation à la **Biennale de Venise** l'année dernière, l'artiste britannique présente à la **Kunsthalle** sa plus grande exposition personnelle à ce jour. Un ensemble d'œuvres irriguées par l'expérience des minorités telles que la communauté transgenre, dont iel fait partie, et hantées par les affres d'une société fluide en pleine mutation sur une planète embrasée.

P. Staff, "In Ekstase", du 9 juin au 10 septembre 2023 à la **Kunsthalle Basel**.

P. Staff's Kunsthalle Basel Show May Burn Images into Your Retina



BY ALEX GREENBERGER June 12, 2023 1:50pm



A typical **P. Staff** film is both disturbing and alluring, a jolt to the senses trouble shaking. *Weed Killer*, their 2017 breakout, found acclaim in New York and Los Angeles museums by invoking Catherine Lord's memoir about her battle with cancer and the impact of chemotherapy. Staff's densely edited film prominently featured high-definition thermal imaging, causing many of the performers to appear in shocking shades of highlighter orange in some memorable shots.

On Venus, a 2019 film that debuted at the Serpentine Galleries in London, likewise received positive notices. With its jarring images of animals whose hormones, semen, and urine are being industrially farmed followed by a poetic meditation on life on Venus, the film has a hypnotic effect. It later appeared at the 2022 Venice Biennale.

Now, Staff has returned with a show at the **Kunsthalle Basel** in Switzerland comprising a five-part holographic installation, a new single-screen film, sculptures, etchings, and more. Titled "In Ekstase," the show contains the same off-putting, gorgeous quality as many past Staff endeavors, along with an emphasis—sometimes implied, sometimes explicit—on bodily agency and trans identity.

Ahead of the show's opening last week, *ARTnews* spoke with the London- and Los Angeles-based artist by FaceTime call during installation. Ahead of the call, Staff sent over a link to a new film in the show, *La Nuit Américaine*, along with an unusual recommendation: "it's best watched on full screen, in the dark, with headphones!"

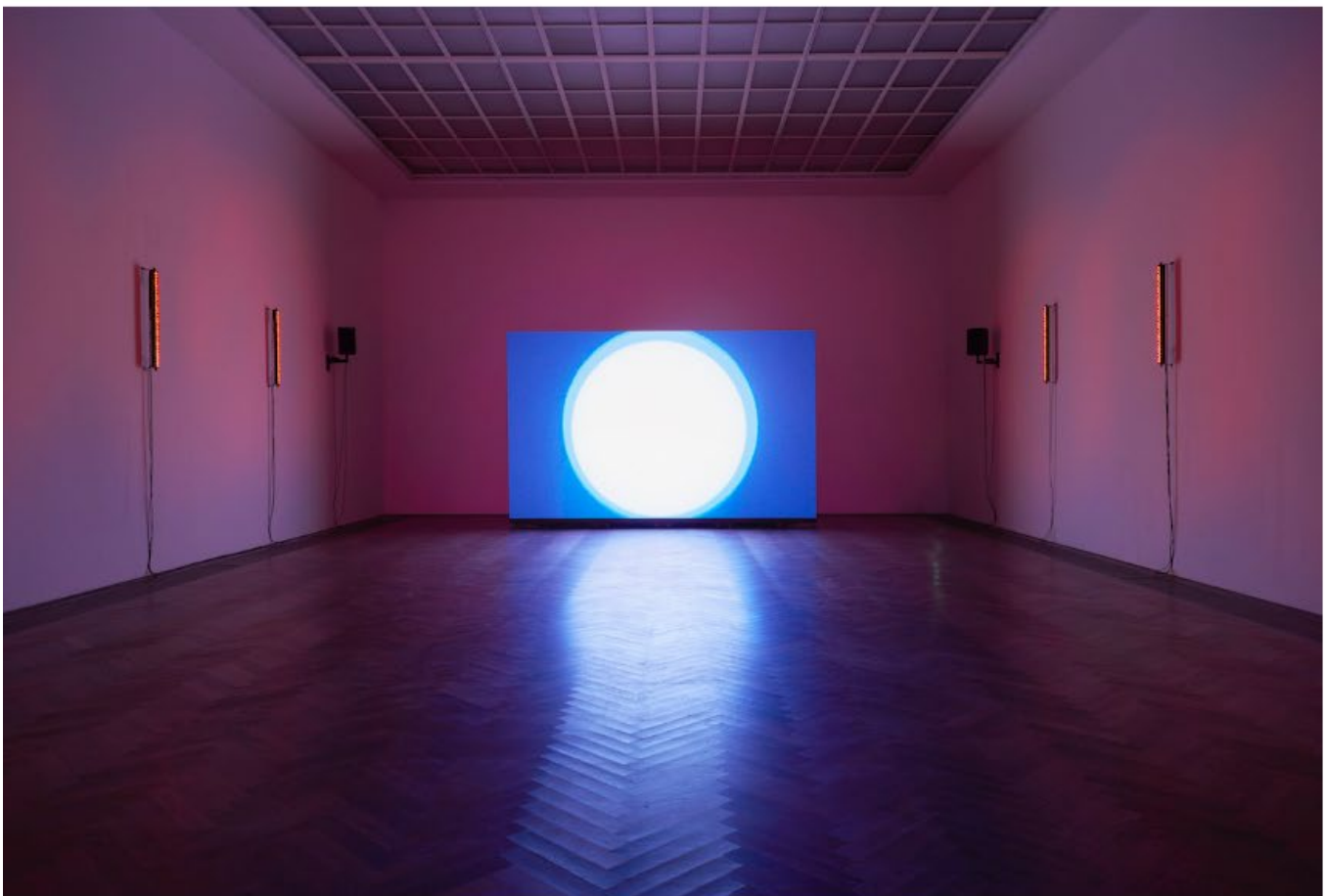
This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

ARTnews: Why did you ask me to watch *La Nuit Américaine* in the dark, with headphones?

P. Staff: I think the reason that I enjoy making film and video for galleries in particular is I'm able to have an influence in the space beyond the screen, to anticipate how you get to the room before you even watch the film. It's a paltry version of that to ask you to watch it in the dark. Although I'm working as a filmmaker, it feels choreographic. It feels corporeal. It's a whole experience. I try to be very specific. If a work is made to be watched on your phone, versus on the side of a building, I want to be as sensitive as possible to the conditions that come with that. If you're going to watch it on your phone, I want to think about your hands that are holding the phone.

It's interesting you say "corporeal," because I'm thinking back to *On Venus*, your film installation at last year's Venice Biennale, where the floors were reflective. They had cracks in them, and there was an emphasis in the sculptural elements on leaks—it was very bodily. How do you envision a space as being corporeal?

I'm the first test subject. I'm patient zero. Sometimes I'm chasing pleasure. Sometimes I'm chasing perversity. I think it's about being a little bit greedy, in a way. I'm sort of playing chicken with the museum and the viewer, seeing how much I can disturb myself first. I don't think I necessarily am working with the desire to shock, but I do want to trouble, not always with a negative connotation, but to just unsettle a little, to move something just enough off its axis. You become more sensitive. Maybe it's about becoming more receptive, kind of weakening resistance before subjecting you to something. Maybe that's about shifting the color of the lights, maybe it's about balancing the space.



Staff, *La Nuit Américaine*, 2023.

PHOTO PHILIPP HÄNGER/KUNSTHALLE BASEL

How does that relate to *La Nuit Américaine*?

This film was made as a self-contained work, but it's positioned in the Kunsthalle show in the final room. In the four rooms that precede it, there's a deliberate sense that by constantly pulling at the body and exploding the body, there's this sort of violent, pleasurable [feeling], like pulling your guts out and putting them back in in the wrong order or something, or like seeing what happens to the body when you push it to its limits. And yet, you don't really encounter actual bodies. There is something about reaching the final room of the show, where suddenly you're watching people in the street, crowds of people, a city infrastructure—these things of the social world. I think it kind of takes on a different weight. You're in the world in some capacity, and you're in this world that is inverted or temporarily sliding out of coherency.

As you're editing a work like this, do you have a plan for how you're going to do it, or do you work more impulsively?

More the latter. I try to become so deeply familiar with the footage, that in a way I could play through all the raw footage in my head. When it comes to editing, it can be intuitive, haptic, accidental. You know, I find that the process of editing is actually so physical. This new film that you just watched doesn't have this so much, but in a lot of the older video works, there are often these heavy cuts to black. I would put in those moments when I wanted to blink. I would often just put in this moment of: Okay, I'm blinking 30 seconds into this shot, so I'm going to put it into the film.

With this new work, I dreamed it in my head so intensively that the process was really intuitive and actually very quick. I'll sit and do this very forensic editing, but then I'll turn off all the lights, put the film on really big, and play it through, try and just be like any other viewer, test my own limits, my own tolerance. With this work, there was a lot of trying to figure out how much you can register an image with how little it's actually shown to you. In those later sections, where the cutting is really one or two frames at a time, I was trying to pull out the ones where the image really burns into your retina, even if you only see it for a split second.

It does create afterimages, almost. This made me think of what structuralist filmmakers were doing by using strobing imagery—most notably Tony Conrad with his flicker films. Are you consciously in dialogue with those works at all?

Oh, completely. I did my undergrad at Goldsmiths in London, and I never wanted to go back to formal education. But I did do what was called the Associate Artist Programme at LUX, which was at the time run by Ian White, Ghislaine Leung, and Mike Sperling. My cohort was Ed Atkins, Laure Prouvost, James Richards, Luke Fowler. We would hang out in the LUX archives, which is essentially the London Film-makers' Co-op archives, and just watch shit. I always felt like I had the least fidelity to film—I chose to do the Lux AAP program, but I was mostly making dance works at that point. But there was obviously something about this relationship between the moving image and the physical, corporeal experience that I was gravitating toward. That's certainly not to say that the other artists in that program were super traditional filmmakers or anything, but I always felt a little uneasy with it. You asked if I'm in dialogue with Tony Conrad or Lis Rhodes, and yes, there is a dialogue, but I don't feel I don't feel like a good student. I can't get comfortable with it, but I'm completely indebted to it.



The film itself is neither alive nor dead too. It's in between.

Exactly. My undergrad thesis at Goldsmiths was about trans figures in films as kind of becoming undead, endlessly alive—you know, animated puppets, but not really living. It was mashing together *Paris Is Burning* with Gothic literature and trying to understand where those might kind of elucidate or complicate each other. Sixteen years later, I'm still kind of prodding at the same court, but it's my own.



P. Staff, *Afferent Nerves*, 2023.
PHOTO PHILIPP HÄNGER/KUNSTHALLE BASEL

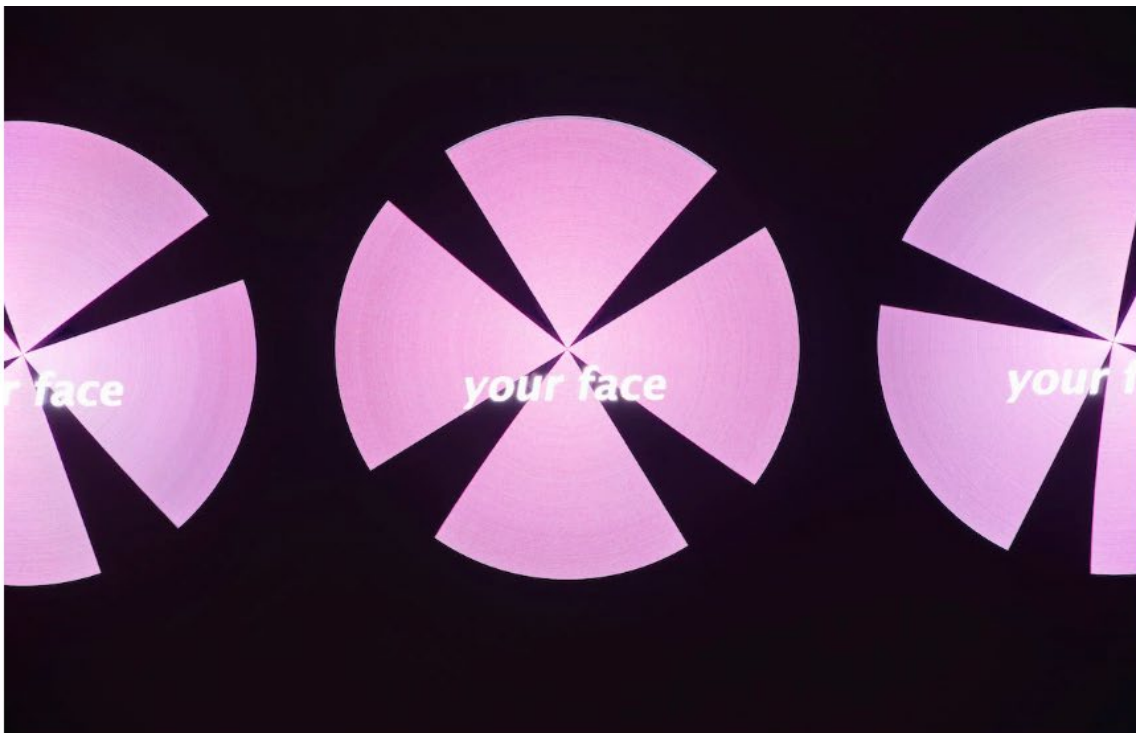
Perhaps it's just because I watched *La Nuit Américaine* on the day that orange smog covered New York, but as I experienced it, I thought about ecological disaster. I also had this thought when I saw *On Venus* in Venice, actually—that it's partly about where we're headed, in terms of climate change. Am I right in thinking that?

I think that it's probably something that people are inevitably going to feel watching the work, and it's a feeling that I have no desire to block or to deny. But do I feel like I'm making ecologically conscious work? Not necessarily. But, you know, I've been living a good portion of the year in LA for almost 10 years, and it's hard not to feel like I'm in dialogue with some version of an apocalypse, you know?

I think *On Venus* and *La Nuit Américaine* both have a relationship to horror. Certainly, with this new film, I was thinking: What could be more terrifying than the sun rising and setting every day? I certainly feel, as a foreigner in the US, that sometimes, the parking lot can be the most terrifying place, just because the world feels overwhelming. It's been fun watching this new film and hearing people comment that it feels like a kind of climate apocalypse zombie film. There's one scene where there's a family on the beach, and then suddenly, the camera pulls up to try and catch the end of a plane flying overhead. Someone here at the Kunsthalle was like, "It's like that family are the last ones left, and that's the last plane leaving." It's a feeling that's in the air right now. I'm happy to channel it.

Works like *Weed Killer*, your 2017 film inspired by Catherine Lord's memoir about her experience with cancer and chemotherapy, are more explicitly rooted in your experience as a queer person. Do you feel like that hangs in the background of this Kunsthalle Basel show?

Yeah, completely. It's about understanding that in being trans, having this queer experience, things hold weight, things have meaning. It's not a singular didactic way of reading the work. It's not the only thing that a person can take away from, and I don't think it's an aspect that people need to be constantly reminded of: "Oh, this was made by a trans person." You know, as much as I think art institutions love that at the moment, there is a part of me that's like, yeah, there are certain images, certain gestures, certain ideas that come with weight. I don't know, it's a kind of accumulated meaning that it might not have for someone else of a different experience. And I like that—I'm happy that that's in there. I'm happy to let those parts of myself bleed into the work or something. And certainly *The Foundation* [a 2015 film about the Tom of Finland Foundation in Los Angeles] is more explicit about that stuff. For me, *On Venus* was a super trans work, and I had conversations with like other transfeminine, trans women, trans friends who were totally on that wavelength. And at the same time, I think it can be totally not that at all, and that's also totally fine by me.



P. Staff, *In Ekstase*, 2023.

PHOTO PHILIPP HÄNGER/KUNSTHALLE BASEL

Tell me a bit about *In Ekstase*, the show's titular piece.

It's a similar setup to the show that I just had at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona. It's five holographic fans in a row on the wall, and it's made and edited just like a five-channel video piece. I work with a brilliant programmer who syncs everything. The one here at the Kunsthalle is kind of more like a video poem, so sort of like that second half of *On Venus*. There's text on screen, but it's also really rooted in a sort of rhythmic visual capacity. It feels really old-fashioned to say video poem, but never know quite what other ways to talk about these works.

By having these five different kinds of floating orbs, they feel kind of like protagonists. The poem jumped between the different screens, with different kinds of lights and color and little bits of handmade animation, for lack of a better word. It's a poem that is groping at trying to articulate this roiling feeling of coming up on drugs, and you don't know if you're gonna be able to handle it or not, these kind of moments where pain and pleasure are kind of sliding into each other and you're trying to figure out if maybe you just submit to the pain that it will stop hurting.

The text really is quite promiscuous with who the protagonist is, what body is being described. The final section is all five of the screens repeating and flashing, saying things like "I am alive and you are dead." It's deliberately ambiguous whether that's me talking to myself or whether that's me talking to you, the viewer, or whether the apparatus has sort of developed its own agency or autonomy and is trying to say like, "We the machines are alive and knew that flesh people are dead." This work is trying to be a bit like, "What is living? What is animation? What is censored?" By applying some of this logic of structuralist film or the flicker film, it's almost like a little private joke with myself that I've scanned film onto a hologram. It collapses disciplines in a way that deliberately resists some of the fidelity that I feel as an artist.

Watching it, I thought maybe less of the zombie stuff and more of films like *Skinamarink*, a recent experimental horror movie about kids trapped in a house that is cast almost entirely in darkness. There's so little light in both that film and yours that viewers must revel in the darkness. You can't really fight it, because at a certain point, what's on screen is mostly just darkness.

That's interesting. Maybe that is there, in a sense. As a viewer, you're left to your own devices. You're left to grope around in the darkness. Your hand's not being held.

Ardor, Attrition

UNPACK REVEAL UNLEASH

P. STAFF

WORDS BY

ALEX BENNETT

*What do you dream of
When life's not given?¹*

Venus crushes. Peony-dense, obliterating human experience in compacted flusters of sheer damage. Rains burn. Sweating, sure. Light straining, an aeriform muscle. Allover orange. Once, the surface water vaporized, tilting and leaking slowly into space: a saline release. Eternally razing, Venus is severe, stellate and denticulate with crunched mountains trembling in unknowable mass. Scrutiny withers into imagination's snowish ether. Scotoma. Its deep-water pressure is denting, disarranging. Penetrative, a load of concentration dilating from inside. Girth, flourish. Clouds of sulfuric acid roil in lead-melting laceration. Sunlight-scattering, they fold heat upon heat into a hard, loaded white. Rotating backward incandescent and shoreless, near-death purls forever. Turbulent, irreducible, brutalizing, and churning ... finally — yes — like feeling.

*on venus
we are neighbours
in nerves /²*

Conjunctions, 2021. Video installation. 41". Installation views at LUMA Arles, 2021. Photography by Marc Damage. Courtesy of the artist; LUMA Arles; and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.



FUCK
THE
CLOCK



On Living, Still IV, 2022, Detail. Acid treated galvanized steel barrel, automotive lacquer, temporary tattoo, and acid etched aluminum frame. 182 × 87 × 4 cm. Photography by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.

The Prince of Homburg, 2019. Video stills. Single-channel HD video, color, sound. 23' 6". Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.



in the precedence of this dissociative engagement does one navigate the fierce, prickly absorbency of Staff's work: a haptic entropy that is acutely organic.

Hayward's thinking about sensorium and space through the energization and incitements of bodily limits aligns with the creative reactions of Staff's materials, namely the use of bodily fluids or synthetic versions of corporeal acids. In *Love Life* (2022) at Sultana Gallery, Paris, with a later iteration, *Love Life II* (2022), at Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Staff filled glass bottles with a simulation of stomach acid: hydrochloric acid, pepsin, and deionized water. Strewn beside walls, the vessels are wasted remainders mellowing in the crapulent afterglow of a previous night, but the wet potential of this residue effects yet more ruination in its volatility. Heavenly hellish like Mars, revelatory like a rosebud, or alarming like an aposematic blush, at Commonwealth and Council the bottles formed part of the red-washed installation *On Gravity* (2022), featuring a sequence of black pedestals with bottles decorating their edges or occupying plush towels. All is efflux: the body beyond its limits, to sensuous infinities. Yet the bottles suggest a closed loop of potential auto-pollution, returning virulent liquid through the system, contaminating in its circulation. Similarly, in the collage series *Piss Boys* (2021), gelatinous resin panels feature photographs of white cisgender men urinating into their own mouths, their self-consuming display — or self-swallowing dick energy — littered with friable debris: hair, ash, seagrass, gold leaf, fingernails, bones. Stretching inversions of pollutant and container, *Love Life II* included the acid-abraded barrels previously shown in *On Venus*, now flattened and flayed to display gradations of corrosion, each *On Living, Still* (2022) marked with temporary tattoos. In these details, between poor vision and scabrous rust, the miniscule silhouette of a mare appears, desiccated and rucked like a flake of skin.

On living, still. The comma in Staff's title snags, holds "a state of unbeing," which in its "still" suggests both a confrontation and continuation. Put simply, life does not begin in the same way, in the same moment;

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Eva Hayward, "Spiderwomen," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (*Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture*): *Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (New York: New Museum; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 255.

8
Hayward, 258.

9
Hayward, 262.

10
Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40.

11
P. Staff, *HEVN*, 2022, video.

there are cosmologies in which life, too, can be continuous with death — a version of life itself. This lapse coheres with Staff's practice, addressing how queer, trans, or disabled being comes into the world under the duress of organized oppression, of putting life in order. Attending to how life lives across such torsion, the work retains suspicion of contemporaneous empowerment discourses of community or solidarity — knowing the subtractive risks of exceptionalizing and "inclusive" tactics. It is in this challenging state that the work is charged: a vitalizing potency alert to the limitations upon a life, including the violences of life within "death worlds," as Achille Mbembe writes of necropolitics: "[a] social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."¹⁰ Across a seemingly everlasting crisis of sexual panic, Staff's work renders (dis) continuous modalities of life and relationality of being under the governance, calculus, and category of death.

*Dream a metal tongue—Pussy Boy*¹¹

Pain is inextricable from pleasure, as suffering is from endurance. Staff's *Love Life* broadens queer desire to consider the *disease* of insisting upon the ungovernability of desire more broadly. The titular series features black-and-white photographic collages, saturated in transparent epoxy resin — prolonged exposure to which can cause inflammation and, later, sensitization. The resin subsumes everything in its lethal preserve, meaning the list of materials might also include "hair" and "insect." This alloying of materiality, including the accidental, is much like fucking's discharge, the ecstatic smattering of sweat and spit, the eruptive rush of cum. But this lucent preservation is also artefactual and investigatory: case studies in which the politics of reading and looking become awkwardly deployed. Some photographs depict piles of skulls, others rats, arrangements of the acid-filled bottles, or cartoonish sketches of distorted tongues. The *Love Life* series generates unstable cyclicity as orifices meet openings, vermin thrive, and bodies skeletonize. Sometimes they break out in hives, surrounded by



Love Life, 2022. Video stills. Holographic fan and video. 3'; ø 42 cm. Edition of 3 + 1 AP. Photography by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Blades, 2019. Archival pigment print on Ilford smooth gloss mounted on Dibond and aluminum frame. 135 × 91 × 5 cm. Edition of 2 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.



Pure Means, 2021. Video still. Two-channel HD video, color, sound. 4' 37". Edition of 5 + 2AP. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.

syphilitic circles or entoptic phenomena, a composition of immiscible liquids nevertheless held together in asynchronous viscosity.

Staff's use of hyper-sensual materials coexists with perversions of clinical technologies. In Staff's video *Weed Killer* (2017), trans activist and veteran Debra Soshoux performs a monologue from Catherine Lord's memoir *The Summer of Her Baldness* (2004), which reflects on the chemically induced suffering of chemotherapy. Placing chemotherapy and sickness in uneasy dialogue with one's transness, the self-narration of *Weed Killer* is compounded by the curative/poisonous embroilment of pharmacology as effected on screen through thermal imaging. In these surveilling visuals, the infrared captures and captivates at once with bodies and faces abstracted beyond the epidermal and irradiated into aching neon pools of heat, liquid, air. Aluminous skins, tenderly strobing. Hair strands of gasoline blues. Opening out these scopic regimes to sensuous force — exploring the experiences of loss and longing in relation to identity at the intersection of gender, illness, and contamination — *Weed Killer* reads the self-determination of endurance and emergence as volatile and always already impure.

This agitation of optical technology is also a reminder of how Soshoux regards the law. When relaying the anecdote in Staff's temporally ruinous *The Prince of Homburg* (2019) — an anti-androcentric and sensorially stumbling revision of Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 play about the revolutionary potential of dreams and dissidence¹² — Soshoux defines the law as "a reflection of the consensus of a body politic at any given point in time." Projective and reactive, the law is akin to a corpus in which any stress upon the surface fortifies the surface as such. The definition recalls Sara Ahmed's analysis of hate, an emotion that circulates

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The video implicitly takes apart the architecture of masculinity as something that is itself invented, if not also dreamed.

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Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

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Ahmed, 24.

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Detail sampled from P. Staff's exhibition "Recent Poems," December 2021–January 2022, Yaby, Madrid.

REVEAL

Pure Means, 2021. Video still. Two-channel HD video, color, sound. 4' 37". Edition of 5 + 2AP. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles / Mexico City.



in an affective economy between signs and bodies, predicated on the *movement* of certain bodies where the emotion attaches, sealing others as objects of hate.¹³ An attachment of sustained expulsion, hate is indelibly intimate.

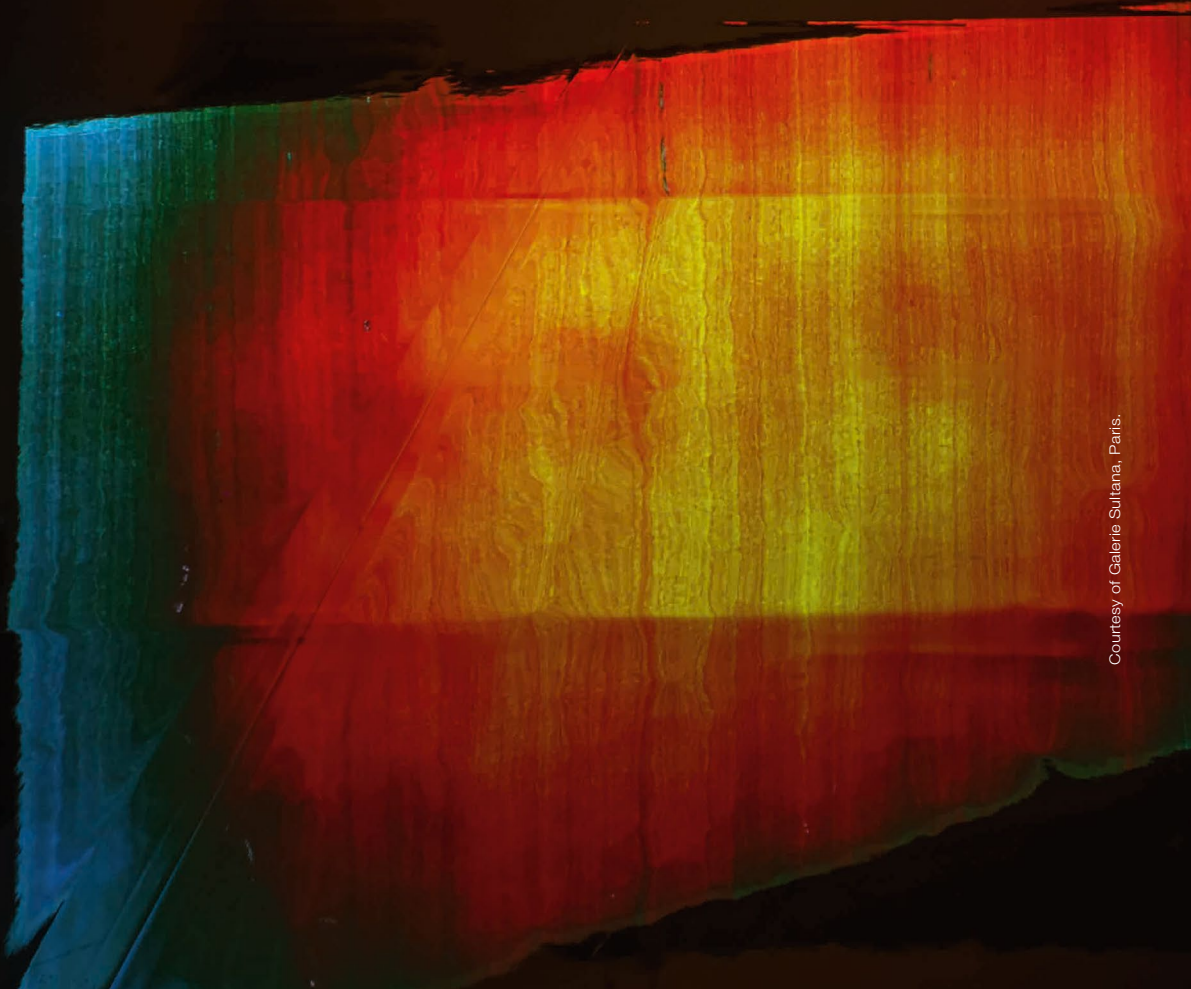
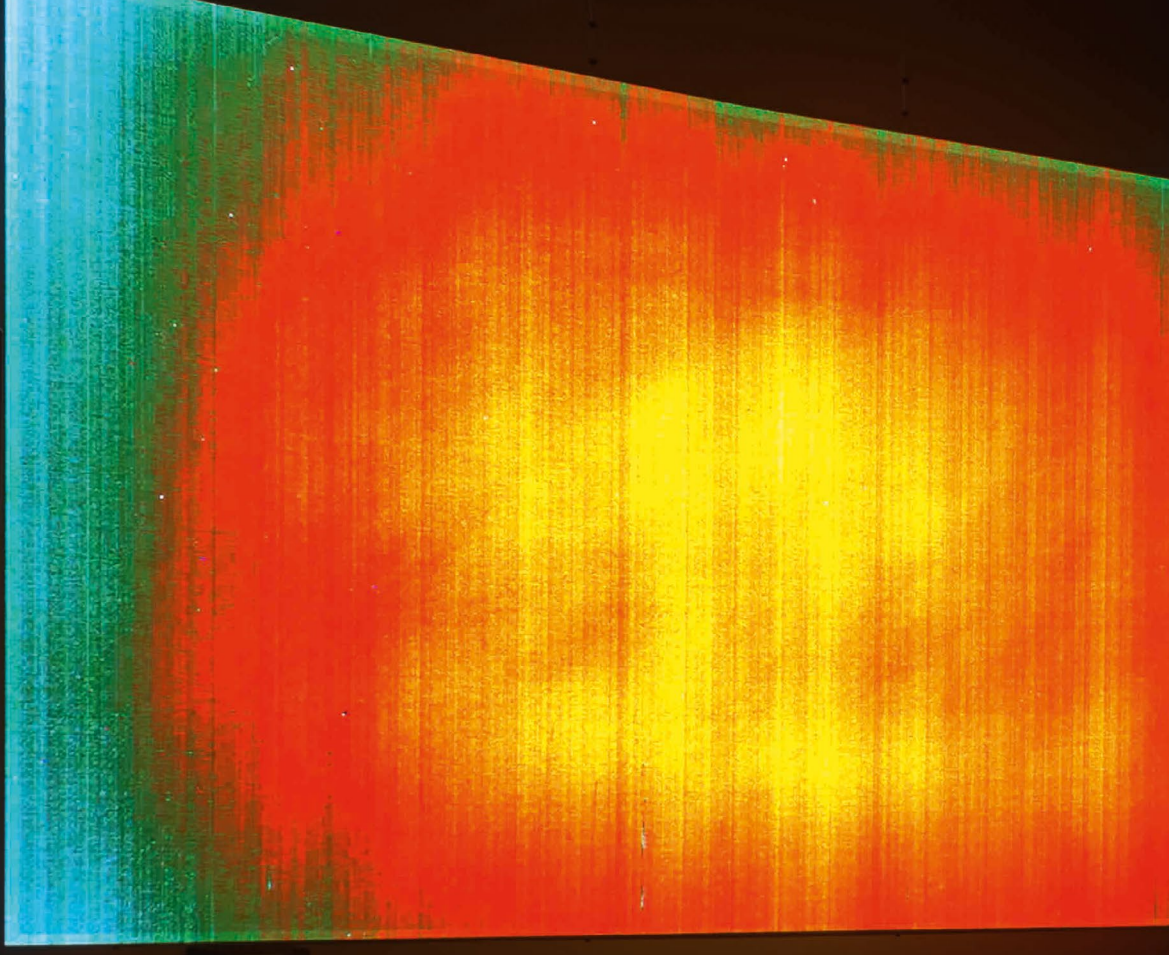
Knife, Scalpel, Blade (2022) comprises photographs of blades, knives, and axes bathed in mellow hues like the gradations of a lighter — yellow, orange, turquoise — irradiated as glowing voids into which irresolute confusions and ambivalences are poured. At times installed as large grids, these morphologies of weaponry are mosaics, mappings, or portraits, where white-hot centers meet coloration in the searing of light. Their intrinsic stress is emanation. They call to mind the vantage point of injury amid myriad versions of living. Where does injury exist in the consistent spectacularization of death? What do discourses of the humane do when relegated to "gratitude" for not being killed? What life exists before the extremely constructed finite event of death? On pain, Ahmed writes of its formative qualities: "It is through the intensification of pain sensations that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, surface, and fixity is produced."¹⁴ Pain encourages the taking of shape while risking the fortification of a border, and yet to heal might require the risk of incremental exposure. Pain accretes a concentration which can be, at times, catalyzing. Healing and injury are constitutive sensations of the surfacing iridescence of a body, which senses the form it needs to endure. On Venus, then, is the imperative to burn immersively and gift an incitement to begin again:

LET THE DEVIL IN
LET THE DEVIL IN
LET THE DEVIL IN
LET THE DEVIL IN

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P. Staff (1987, UK) lives and works in Los Angeles and London. Through video installation, sculpture and poetry, Staff's work explores history, technology, capitalism, and the law, examining how these forces shape and define our physical and social worlds. Solo exhibitions include: Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles (2023, 2018); LUMA, Arles (2021); Institute of Contemporary Art, Shanghai (2020); Serpentine Galleries, London (2019); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2019); and Chisenhale Gallery, London (2015). Group exhibition venues include the 59th Venice Biennale (2022); 13th Shanghai Biennale (2021); Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin (2021); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2019); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2018); and New Museum, New York (2017), among others. The solo exhibition "In Ekstase" is on view at Kunsthalle Basel from June 9 through September 10, 2023.

Alex Bennett is a writer and critic based in London. He is a contributing editor for *Flash Art*, and has written for *Mousse*, *Art Monthly*, *The White Review*, *CURA*, and *Modern Matter*, among other publications. He was co-editor of the compendious journal *Tinted Window*.



Courtesy of Galerie Sultana, Paris.

DOUBLE PAGE PRÉCÉDENTE ET CI-CONTRE VUE DE L'INSTALLATION
VIDÉO *WEED KILLER* (2017).

FR

JE VAIS COMMENCER PAR UNE SIMPLIFICATION FORCÉMENT EXCESSIVE, PARCE QUE RIEN N'EST SIMPLE. Le langage est une composante-clé des œuvres de P. Staff. Dans *On Venus* (2019), un texte poétique s'affiche sur la moitié inférieure des images filmées, généralement réservée aux sous-titres. Mais ici, en l'absence de paroles, les mots font l'effet d'un acte de télépathie, comme s'ils traduisaient le langage planétaire silencieux du soleil – dont l'image, parfois, envahit l'écran. Dans *Depollute* (2018), le texte engloutit le cadre, dans une succession de panneaux intertitres portant de tendres instructions médicales sur comment effectuer une auto-orchidectomie [auto-ablation des testicules], chaque étape s'affichant sur l'écran avec autant de brièveté que d'assurance. Dans *Bathing* (2018), des mots se superposent sur l'image d'un corps ruisselant qui danse frénétiquement dans un espace industriel désert – le texte s'étire, les lettres se déforment, comme des appendices démembrés, disséqués en autant de parties, sanglantes ou délicates.

Voici donc la simplification : l'écriture de Staff – et, par extension, ses images – répercute les sensations d'un corps et la relation de ce corps aux autres, à travers des représentations sensuelles, viscérales. Descriptions de fluides échangés, de pressions appliquées; évocations de plaisir, de douleur, d'inconfort, de soulagement, de mort, de désir. Staff décrit son corps comme une lentille optique à travers laquelle iel réalise son travail. Cela s'illustre par des vidéos éditées au rythme de sa respiration, par des coupes intervenant à l'instant où ses yeux ont cligné. L'idée est de transmettre sa propre expérience somatique du monde en passant par un artefact visuel. La promesse qui sous-tend ce travail n'est cependant ni de décoder ni de performer devant un public l'expérience de son corps queer et trans, mais plutôt de cartographier l'hyper sensorialité d'un corps trans sur une œuvre et sur un regardant. L'universitaire Eva Hayward compare le corps trans à celui d'une araignée, dont les sections sont recouvertes de cils très fins, capables de percevoir le moindre changement dans la direction du vent ou la température. Elle décrit une hyper sensation analogue dans le corps en transition, dont les perceptions visuelles ou haptiques peuvent être augmentées par les traitements hormonaux. Dans le travail de Staff, un corps en transition – sous l'effet des hormones,

EN

P. STAFF

THIS AUTUMN, AFTER THEIR SUBLIME VIDEO *ON VENUS* WAS SCREENED AT THE VENICE BIENNALE, THE ARTIST IS EXHIBITING A MYSTERIOUS SERIES FEATURING KNIVES AT PARIS'S SULTANA GALLERY.

I'll start with an oversimplification: language is a key component in nearly all P. Staff's artworks. Poetry lines the lower half of the screen in *On Venus* (2019), a space usually reserved for subtitles, though here, since there is no speech, the words feel like an act of telepathy, translating the silent planetary language of the sun. In other works, such as *Depollute* (2018), text fully engulfs the frame, like a series of title cards with tender medical instructions to perform a self-orchidectomy, each step flashing rapidly, confidently, on screen. In *Bathing* (2018), words overlay the image of a person, dripping wet and dancing wildly in an empty industrial space; here the text is stretched, letters strewn across the moving image like dismembered appendages, dissected into delicate and gory parts. Here's the oversimplification: Staff's writing – and by extension their images, moving or still – articulate the sensations of a body, and that body's relationship to others, through sensuous, visceral images; descriptions of fluids exchanged, of pressure applied; descriptions of pleasure, pain, discomfort, relief, death, and desire. In several interviews, Staff describes their body as a lens through which they make their work. One practical example of this is videos that are edited to the rhythm of their breath, with cuts made at natural blinking points. Their idea is to translate their own somatic experience of the world into a visual artefact. The undergirding promise of this work, however, is not to decode, or perform the experience of their queer and trans body for an audience, but rather to map the hypersensuality of a trans body into a work, into a viewer. In a text Staff shared with me last month, the scholar Eva Hayward likens the trans body to that of a spider, whose small parts are covered in thin hairs that



CI-CONTRE ET PAGES SUIVANTES POUR SON EXPOSITION PARISIENNE À LA GALERIE SULTANA, P. STAFF PRÉSENTE UNE SÉRIE DE PHOTOGRAMMES COLORÉS DE COUTEAUX COLLECTÉS AUPRÈS DE SES AMI·E·S OU AMANT·E·S, LA PLUPART TRANS ET QUEER. "CE PROJET S'INSCRIT DANS LA CONTINUITÉ DE MON TRAVAIL SUR LES RELATIONS ENTRE IDENTITÉ QUEER ET TRANS, PLAISIR ET DOULEUR, LIBERTÉ ET DANGER", EXPLIQUE L'ARTISTE.

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propre relation – viscérale – à la menace. L'exposition agit ainsi comme un organisme vivant, un parasite qui s'empare de l'espace architectural de son institution hôte.

Dans sa manière de donner vie à cette "chose morte" qu'est un bâtiment, l'artiste la pointe aussi du doigt, la rend visible. Plutôt que de décoder son propre corps dans son œuvre, P. Staff procède au décodage des institutions et des structures d'oppression qu'elles représentent – elles "verrouillent" les corps. Son travail nous parle aussi de la "lente violence des institutions", du mal le plus invisible, le plus insidieux qu'elles infligent à la société. Ce n'est pas sans rappeler la démarche de la Britannique Sandra Lahire, à qui je dois la citation de la phrase précédente, et dont la trilogie *Nuclear Film* a fait l'objet d'une projection co-organisée par P. Staff à Los Angeles. Dans sa présentation du film, Staff établit un parallèle entre les poisons qui parcourent son travail et celui de Sandra Lahire : l'énergie nucléaire, la chimio et les hormones sont à la fois des solutions et des menaces. Les structures sociétales qui régulent et dispensent ces poisons pèsent lourd – les corps qui les utilisent à d'autres fins aussi.

L'œuvre de Staff semble revisiter les comportements queer habituellement cibles de préjugés – parce que perçus comme socialement néfastes – pour les inscrire dans la dimension du plaisir, tout en dénonçant les institutions qui incitent à la marginalisation des corps queer, mais aussi les idées figées du désir – cette espèce de moralisation, souvent indiscernable, que l'on prend pour un fait. Le travail de Staff réfracte de façon déstabilisante la visibilité et le décodage que les institutions exigent des corps queer. Dans *The Prince of Homburg* (2019) – reconstitution vidéo fragmentaire d'une pièce sur la puissance révolutionnaire des rêves et la notion de discipline –, on voit l'ancienne avocate et militante trans Debra Soshoux définir la loi comme "le consensus d'un corps politique à un instant donné". Cette identification de la société à un corpus – et donc, la plasticité de structures que nous concevons comme fixes dans cette société – semble être une autre clé pour comprendre le travail de Staff. Passant par le prisme d'un corps fluide et hyper sensuel, ses œuvres soulignent la rigidité illusoire des structures institutionnelles.

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– Staff had lined the building's piping with a mix of corporeal and chemical acid dripping into designated containers. The viewer's body now contained its own visceral relationship to threat, the exhibition acting like a living organism, a parasite overtaking the architecture of its host institution. This way of animating the "dead thing" that is a building, a structure, an institution, is a way of pointing at it, making it visible. So actually, instead of decoding their own body in their work, Staff is decoding institutions and the oppressive structures they represent, the structures that "foreclose" bodies, to use their own terminology. In this way, Staff's work is also about "the slow violence of institutions," to quote British filmmaker Sandra Lahire. Staff recently co-hosted a screening of Lahire's trilogy *Nuclear Film* in Los Angeles: in their introduction, Staff created links between the various poisons that permeate their and Lahire's work. Nuclear power, chemo, and hormones are both a solution and a threat. The societal structures that regulate and dispense the poisons loom large, but so do the bodies that reappropriate them for other purposes.

Some of the stakes in Staff's work seem to recast the queer behaviors that are commonly prejudiced – read as socially harmful – and convey them as pleasure-filled, all the while exposing the institutions that promote the marginalization of queer bodies as well as fixed ideas of desire—the oft-invisible kind of moralizing that it is taken as fact. Staff's work uncomfortably refracts the visibility and decoding that institutions demand of queer bodies onto themselves. In a sentence that stays with me from P. Staff's 2019 work *The Prince of Homburg* – a fragmentary video restaging of a play on the revolutionary potential of dreams and ideas of discipline – former lawyer, trans activist, and veteran Debra Soshoux defines the law as "a consensus of a body politic at any given time." This understanding of society as a corpus – and the malleability of the structures we commonly understand as fixed in society – feels like a key to Staff's work.



