(Re-)reading History. On Aesthetic-Critical Art Practices for Creating Vis-ability

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Petra Köhle, Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin,
At Your Earliest Convenience. Institutional Memory: Politics of the Gift at the Palais des Nations
(Zurich: edition fink, 2023), pp. 11–20.

You may perhaps remember… this was one of the first gifts offered… some time ago… a gift by the government… a present for the new assembly hall… un ameublement pour la salle no. 2… un don de… un don pour… pour la salle no. 9… for room no. 10… for the office of… a gift by… a gift of…[1]

So speaks a voice at the beginning of the ten-minute video essay *It remains to be seen if […] and if it will be* (2021) by Petra Köhle and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin. The work begins and ends with quotes such as these from documents of the archive of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, where the United Nations is seated today. The quotes are enunciated in different ways – in whispers, softly, thoughtfully, clearly, reservedly – and accompany various movements of the camera that slowly scans this highly representative location. The quotes are mixed with different noises and sounds, like the humming of technical installations, but above all with the elegiac sound of a viola that lends the video the tonality of an aesthetically subtle inquiry into this charged site of international politics.

The Palais des Nations was built between 1929 and 1938. From 1933 to its dissolution in 1946, the building complex served as the headquarter of the League of Nations which had emerged as an international organisation from the Paris Peace Conference after the First World War. The League of Nations failed in its ambition to ensure lasting global peace through the arbitral settlement of international conflicts and through international disarmament as well as arms control. The United Nations, founded after the Second World War, replaced the League of Nations on 18 April 1946 and factually counts as the successor institution. Besides the headquarters in New York, the Palais des Nations in Geneva is one of the three seats of the United Nations and has been serving as its European headquarter since 1966.[2]

The formulations used in the video essay are excerpts of archived correspondences that reflect the at times very protracted agreement processes related to the acceptance of gifts offered by the member states[3] for the interior furnishing of the building of the former League of Nations. Through these planned gifts, aesthetic notions mingle with political ones, giving rise to questions

1 Petra Köhle and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, "It remains to be seen if […] and if it will be", *INSERT. Artistic Practices as Cultural Inquiries*, Zonen der Gegenwart – Praktiken der Annäherung, issue 1 (2021), https://insert.art/ausgaben/zonen-der-gegenwart-praktiken-der-annaeherung/it-remains-to-be-seen-if-and-if-it-will-be (accessed: 10 June 2023).

2 In addition to New York and Geneva, the United Nations have seats in Nairobi and Vienna.

3 Correspondences concerning the gifts can be found in the archives of the League of Nations relating to the following member states: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, Free City of Danzig, Germany, Greece, Great Britain, Guatemala, Hungary, India, Iraq, Iran, Irish Free State, Japan, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Mexico, New Zealand, Netherlands, Norway, Panama, Peru, Poland, Queensland, Siam, Spain, South African Union, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, USSR, Uruguay, Venezuela, Yugoslavia. See Köhle/ Vermot 2021 (note 1).

such as: Which country may gift the lectern? On whose chairs should the members sit during sessions? What materials should be used for the carpets, walls, and curtains that line the meeting rooms and corridors?

One problematic aspect of the gifts is the fact that they were indeed also associated with different political expectations and demands, and therefore with the competition that existed between the member states. As can be impressively heard in the voice of the video piece, the gifts manifest themselves in the many details of the aesthetic and material-related decisions that were made within this globally significant institution, where the gifts were used to raise (national-) representative claims. The spoken formulations from the archived documents have one thing in common: they are characterised by the intention of conducting the correspondence and presentation as correctly as possible in formal terms:
I think we must be very tactful in negotiating for any modification, although it is quite true that the offer has never been definitely and officially accepted. Their telegram is a little bit ambiguous.[4]

The artwork passes such vague-sounding formulations from the documents on to the viewers, simultaneously bringing them to life through different intonations and seeking to reveal the way in which political issues were negotiated. The formulations are thus charged with potentially meaningful dimensions and the historical documents are reread in an aesthetic-critical way.

Fictionalisation as a Necessity to Make History Negotiable

The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. […] It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction. It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction.[5]

Thus writes Jacques Rancière on the fictionalisation of history, grasping fictionalisation not just as an option but as a necessity of history.
Even if the archived documents, to which *It remains to be seen if […] and if it will be* refers, purport to reflect a certain, factually unambiguous, so-called true correspondence, the artistic search for traces explores their reverse side: namely, the insecurities regarding the handling of the gifts inherent in the otherwise well-practised form of conducting official correspondences.

4 Transcription from the video of Köhle/Vermot 2021 (note 1).

5 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (London/New York: continuum, 2004), p. 39.

Yours sincerely…
Yours faithfully…
Yours very truly…
Yours…[6]

The documents, as they can be found in the archive of today's United Nations in Geneva and which the artist duo came upon during its research, actualise their own documentary context and claim. In order to produce such documents, particularly efforts of precision are necessary. But what are the preconditions, functions, and implications of these practices of precision? What information and what knowledge that should be as exact as possible (along with its limits) play a role? These questions are directly linked to the institution of the archive, since its practices and politics are what ultimately determine our notion of what counts as and constitutes a document and the way it is used. A history conveyed through documents must therefore be understood as a represented reality. Philipp Messner argues:
The objects of historical knowledge, then, should also *be understood as effects of discursive structures. The structures that create them can be historically situated; they possess a social contour and are bound to specific media.*[7]

The choice of what should be archived, the sorting of material artefacts, and the modes of their storage and accessibility largely prefigure the way they are handled. At the same time, a material context is established that lays the groundwork (which is not always revealed) for their evaluation. Therefore, a corresponding selection of the archived media always implies a transformation. *It remains to be seen if […] and if it will be* by Köhle/Vermot, or more specifically the extensive artistic research of looking for traces in the Palais des Nations, makes something visible that goes beyond the boundaries of the archive. By copying, transcribing, and (re-)reading the documents, and connecting them with a current time relationship and its visual appearance, a history is reconfigured. The archived documents can thus be questioned in regard to their ostensible stability. This fictionalising reconfiguration performed with artistic means simultaneously inscribes itself into the archive. This kind of art grasps the documentary moment processually – which it equally utilises visually through photographic and filmic scanning as well as through conversations with responsible persons of the archive – and sharpens our understanding of archival records by presenting them not as a closed unity of defined objects, but as a complex of media artefacts that are closely linked to their rewriting in the course of their use.

6 Köhle/Vermot 2021 (note 1).
7 Philipp Messner, "Das Archivische. Konfigurationen zwischen Kunstdiskurs, Geschichtswissenschaft und Verwaltungspraxis", *Informationswissenschaft: Theorie, Methode und Praxis*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2014), pp. 283–303, here p. 284 (emphasis in original, translation by Karl Hoffmann).

Köhle/Vermot's artistic approach to the subject matter is concerned with maintaining a certain documentary distance. Through its fictionalising composition, it simultaneously provides an essential view to the world of the United Nations as a gigantic political decision-making machine. The artistic work repeatedly changes the standpoint of its recording and, especially through the intonational accentuation of individual correspondences, consciously shifts the documents. In its reconfiguring movement, this shift can be conceived as political, since it also elucidates the effective intensity with which decisions of global importance are made in the cabinets of today's United Nations – on chairs or at tables and lecterns that are not only charged in material ways but also inscribed with structural positions of power that are also worth questioning.

Another artwork that tasks itself with making visible the United Nations' great power of decision-making and its continuation on a national level in regard to questions of current asylum policies is the twelve-minute video *View from Above* (2017) by Hiwa K.[8] The video installation *View from Above* by Hiwa K was presented at the documenta 14 on the second floor of the Stadtmuseum Kassel, directly at the start of the permanent exhibition section *Krieg und Frieden* (War and Peace) – and was placed between different cultural-historical exhibits and media stations of the permanent exhibition. The work intertwines a visual and an acoustic narration, which initially seem to belong together but contain disruptive moments. The video shots slowly scanning the ruins of a heavily destroyed city are combined with a calmly spoken narration. A voice speaking slightly accented English narrates the experiences of person M, who fled from Kurdistan/Northern Iraq and for a while lived together with the narrator K (who also experienced flight). With his support, M memorises the detailed map of a city previously unknown to him. From this city, which according to the United Nations counts as a so-called "unsafe" zone, person M purports to have fled when questioned by a European immigration official, although it is not his hometown. He hopes to convince the officials to grant him political asylum, which he has previously been denied several times in other European countries because he is actually from a city in Kurdistan/Northern Iraq that these authorities classify as a so-called "safe" zone. This personal narrative is superimposed by anonymous aerial shots of a destroyed city. Only when walking further though the exhibition spaces of the Stadtmuseum does one find out that it is not a Kurdish-Northern Iraqi

8 Hiwa K, "View from Above", 2017, *KOW*, https://www.kow-berlin.com/artists/hiwa-k/view-from-above-2017 (accessed: 18 October 2022).

city but the German city of Kassel after the Second World War, as it is being shown a few rooms further on in the form of a twelve-square-metre historical model of the city in ruins from the 1950s.

View from Above thus combines different temporal and geopolitical contexts. Via the narrative of the voice-over, the video work deconstructs the view "from above" as an innocent, neutral view:
Since 1991, after the Kurdish Revolution against the central government in Iraq, a division happened between Kurdistan and the rest of the country. Kurdistan was considered by the United Nations as the safe zone. A safe zone is a fictitious place which only exists in the map and minds of the European bureaucrats. All asylum requests from people who are coming from the safe zone will be declined. If you originate from this so called safe zone you will be deported back to the unsafe country. […] M was from the so called safe zone. And yet as a deserter from the army it was totally unsafe for him to return there.[9]

In this brief explanation, the video refers to the insurrection in Iraq by parts of the Kurdish and Shiite population in 1991, shortly after the Second Gulf War (1990–1991).[10] A view "from above" that superordinates itself in a hierarchising way, as practised by European "bureaucrats" in the countries of arrival, is associated with the notion of being able to divide war regions into "safe" and "unsafe" zones. It suggests that authorities can judge the question of individual danger without exception – something which has serious effects on the fate of individuals, as the story of M subsequently reveals:
Before I met M he applied for asylum in one of the Schengen countries. And he told them the truth. That's why he got a negative answer. They told M: You are from a safe zone. Your life is not in danger in your own city. For five years he tried to appeal against this decision. But he got one negative answer after another and he had no hope to get a positive answer there. He was supposed to be sent back to his own country.[11]

The view and the attendant, asylum-political assessment converge with Western power. Thus, *View from Above* criticises the perspective that a country, granting asylum, has on countries and stories in war regions – a perspective that judges from a distance without empathising with the situation of the individual:
From 20,000 feet up you can't see any sign of life.[12]

9 Transcription from the video of Hiwa K 2017 (note 8).

10 Encouraged by the military defeat of Saddam Hussein, the Shiites in Southern Iraq revolted on 3 March 1991, followed several days later by the Kurds in Northern Iraq. The insurgents hoped for support from the West, which relied more on humanitarian aid and did not directly intervene. In April 1991, the United States, Great Britain and France publicly announced the installation of a protection zone against airstrikes for the Kurdish population up to the 36th parallel. A no-fly zone south of the 32nd parallel to protect the Shiite population was finally proclaimed in August 1992. Because of this unilateral ceasefire, Hussein was able to bundle his armed forces and brutally crush the rebellions. After decades of oppression, the insurgents were not sufficiently prepared for the sudden outbreak of hostilities and felt betrayed by the Western forces. But also the difference between the Shiite and Kurdish ambitions, which ranged from establishing states of their own, to a union with Iran, all the way to more autonomy within Iraq, let the

The space of war thus becomes a space of contemplation seemingly devoid of individual stories. The video reveals that such a view of the authorities is much too simplifying in that it restrains itself without assuming responsibility, it disappears in the act of dividing and categorising the landscape, and it does not have to justify itself and can, in a bureaucratically comfortable way, refrain from taking a closer look or listening more intently to individual stories, and thus refuse the necessary protection:
The eye can see far but the hand is too short to reach. I was always fascinated why eyes can reach astronomical distances – till the black holes sometimes but voice cannot exceed a few hundred meters and hands less than a meter.[13]

The facts that things can elude the field of vision and that an assessment is not always possible from an objectifying perspective are subversively turned and undermined by person M in the narration of the video. Person M mimics the logic of an allegedly total surveyability of a war region, appropriates it, and reduces its pseudo-objective standpoint to absurdity:
I helped him [person M] commit to memory the streets, the important landmarks, a random selection of unimportant buildings as well.
At first he was unable to memorise all these details. His own memory from his city was polluting his thoughts.
The day of the interview arrived, I was silent with him the whole time. Never before have I stayed so silent. Not a single person noticed that I was there. The judge was checking whether his answers were identical to the map to which he was comparing. He was surprised, even impressed, because M was answering from a perspective that was from above, from the judge's eye view this time. After five years wait now it took him only 20 minutes to get a positive answer. He was finally accepted as a refugee coming from an unsafe zone. My own positive answer came 15 years later.[14]

This successful mimicry enables the narration to unmask the categorical divisions into "safe" and "unsafe" from the inside, and in doing so to reveal or even expose Europe's prevailing asylum-political power structures. In this manner, the work critiques the simplification of complex individual stories within a general, politically determined narrative. In this respect, Hiwa K's work can be understood as a continuation of Donna Haraway's feminist critique of the "god trick"[15] in that it breaks with the notion of objectivity of a view "from above" and, to continue with Haraway's argument, insists on the "particularity and embodiment of all vision"[16] by connecting

insurgency remain unsuccessful. The rebellion in Iraq in 1991 cost tens of thousands of lives and forced 1.5 million Kurds to flee. See Henner Fürtig, *Kleine Geschichte des Irak. Von der Gründung 1921 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2003), pp. 131–132; Stephan Bierling, *Geschichte des Irakkriegs: Der Sturz Saddams und Amerikas Albtraum im Mittleren Osten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2010), p. 22.

11 Transcription from the video of Hiwa K 2017 (note 8).

12 Transcription from the video of Hiwa K 2017 (note 8).

13 Transcription from the video of Hiwa K 2017 (note 8).

14 Transcription from the video of Hiwa K 2017 (note 8).

15 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1988), pp. 575–599, here p. 581.

16 Haraway 1988 (note 15), p. 582.

it with the narration of a subjective story. As the narrative of the storyteller in Hiwa K's work shows, this also leads to a redistribution of the historical political powers. In this process, subjectivity inscribes itself as a factor for historical knowledge into the narrativity of history. The situatedness associated with this is also inscribed in the historical events themselves. Jacques Rancière, who with his philosophical considerations seeks to emphasise the aspect of subjectivity for historiographical work, writes:
A history, in the ordinary sense, is a series of events that happen to subjects who are generally designated by proper names.[17]

This assertion that history is bound to subjects forms a starting point in the work *View from Above* to overturn political orders. Hiwa K's piece, which seeks to offer a platform for the articulation of a position that is suppressed in the discourse of asylum politics, strongly links itself to a historical-philosophical perspective of historical subjectivity as advocated by Rancière which aims to intervene in traditional order structures and to contribute to the visibility and audibility of unrepresented or marginalised (historical) subjects. In the sense of Rancière, it is concerned with the political gesture of being heard, acknowledged, and read in the symbolic order as a speaking being.

In her engagement with the question of how an embodied aesthetic experience leads to thought, the art scholar Jill Bennett argues that art, especially due to its affecting mode of representation, is able to trigger an empathic response that ideally leads to critical thought: "[…] feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought."[18] Following Bennett, the interweaving of disparate stories, as performed in *View from Above*, can be understood as an "affective operation"[19] that can enable a reflection of traumatic experiences. The artistic response of an *other* history-forming order confronts the order regimes of customary, powerful historiography. What I see in this is, above all, the artwork's claim to politically intervene in historiography; thus it invites the recipients to empathise in an affecting-political way with a subjective experience that belongs to *another* person. Traumatic war experiences, flight, and exile are materialised in *View from Above* by "borrowing" the model of Kassel in ruins and allowing for an empathic-emotional reaction to what-is-given-to-be-seen and what-is-given-to-be-heard. Even if M must be regarded as a fictive person, the work does not rely on whether this documentary facticity exists, meaning that M exists. Through the appropriating mimicry and by smuggling person M into a bureaucratically acknowledged story, the work unmasks the judging, allegedly objective standards of immigration authorities as fixed

17 Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 1.
18 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art. Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 7.
19 Bennett 2005 (note 18), p. 3.

ideas that treat the answers to the posed questions in a generalised way and do not take a detailed look at the individual-political consequences in the particular case. The political relevance addressed by the work speaks to our ability as viewers to imagine the possibility of such a figure, thus lending a different sense of possibility to the actual political historical circumstances.

Boundary Conditions of Documents and Methods of Making Them Visible

Bureaucratic procedures establish power structures, while their repetition further consolidates them. In the video work *The Distance from Here* (2010)[20] by Bani Abidi, immigration authorities are also exposed as regulating sites of border demarcation. The video starts with a view of carefully staged objects – two old tables and a folding chair, a typewriter and a leaning sign with the words "LEGAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE (REGD.)" – placed in an asphalted outdoor space. The shot of these objects in Abidi's twelve-minute video provides a glimpse into a day in the life of visa applicants. One sees security officers preparing their trained activities at a security checkpoint, while more and more people arrive. Their documents are checked, stamped, passed on – until finally the applicants are standing in queues between yellow lines.

In between, an interior packed with chairs is shown, where the applicants continue to wait. Neatly dressed, with nervous faces, fanning themselves and dabbing off sweat, they eagerly await the moment they are called up to go through the approval process.

Ticket number 411, please go to counter 1.[21]

Meanwhile, outside, the stamps are sorted. They are symbols of order and bureaucracy – tools to seal decisions. The subjection of the protagonists seeking to travel to another country and the procedure of being turned into a document which they are forced to endure show how they are stuck in an intermediate space. *The Distance from Here* is a reflection on the psychology of visa anterooms, embassy protocols, and the nervous waiting of applicants hoping to be allowed to travel from South-Asian cities to other countries. During frequent visits to the "diplomatic enclave" in Islamabad, Abidi carefully observed the gestures of her co-applicants, their conversations and questions, and the local economy that enables the time of waiting and preparation, as well as the repellent architecture and the approval procedures that rob the people of their

20 Bani Abidi, "The Distance from Here", 2010, *Vimeo*, https://vimeo.com/329579456 (accessed: 10 June 2023).

21 Abidi 2010 (note 20).

possessions and separate and organise them as obedient bodies. The video can therefore also be understood as an homage to those who feel afraid and are unsure whether they will ever be able to take their trip.[22]
Abidi's eight-part photo series *Untitled (Files)* (2010) is an expansion of the shooting locations, props, and figures of the video *The Distance from Here*. The photographs of single visa application dossiers symbolise the control over individuals. Artistically they take a conceptual approach, whereas the video casts a view on the psychological effects of the entire process on the applicants. Abidi constructs an anatomy of preparation, fear, and patience, and displays the representation politics that affect the individual political (im)possibility of migration. These artworks are narrative forms that make institutional routines visible while at the same time involving us as viewers in an active process of perception and confronting us with the question of our relationship to them and how we want to relate towards them.

Art as an Aesthetic-Critical Document

What is called documentation shows the world as if it were known, which has the effect that, a few years later, we can no longer experience what it looked like. Images must made with which today's strange world can be discovered and the present becomes history. We need to produce building blocks. First we need to develop them, and then we have to assemble and disassemble.[23]

Harun Farocki wrote these words on an electric typewriter in 1975 in his originally two-page appeal *Was getan werden soll* (What Ought to Be Done). His reproach of a concept of documentation that suffices with showing the world "as if it were known" led him to conduct an extensive artistic-research activity which he pursued his entire life with the aim of producing building blocks with which he participated in deconstructing the elements of alleged documentation.

Let us now return to the work of Köhle/Vermot and their aesthetic-critical (re-)reading of the documents of the League of Nations. The analytical handling of the conditions of the documentary is distinguished here by not defining itself artistically via the category of the work as an end product; rather the work provides repeatedly, in the sense of Farocki, different provisional stages – stages made of building blocks serving to approach, circulate, and interfere. Their work explores audio-visual instruments of perception that not only introduce us to the files of institutionally formalised work stored in archives, but lead us straight to the centre of the typology of their domination. In this way, Köhle/Vermot

22 See Bani Abidi/Experimenter, *Section Yellow* (Kolkata/Mumbai: Experimenter, 2019), p. 4.
23 Harun Farocki, *What Ought to Be Done. Document, Commentary, Material* (Berlin: Harun Farocki Institut/Motto Books, 2016), p. 4f.

subject the archived documents to a process of creating vis-ability which means to establish an atmosphere of attention towards that which emerges in the first place when taking an attentive and careful look.
In *It remains to be seen if […] and if it will be* as well as in the impressive photographic overall research, presenting itself in this publication, we are dealing with a dedicated artistic gaze that – amidst all the superiority practices of bureaucratic speech manifesting itself in the archived documents of the League of Nations – engages with the invisible and allows it to emerge. In the interstices of the image-sound spaces and the speech acts of the documents, this gaze works out ambiguities, for the documents do not always provide a specific access but are at the same time permeated by a state of withdrawal. The artistic gaze of Köhle/Vermot hereby adds a critical commentary to the documents and performs work on the documentation, thus becoming an aesthetic-critical document that involves us as viewers in a careful negotiating process.

Translation Karl Hoffmann