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Denise Ferreira da Silva & Arjuna Neuman. Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims

5/10 2023—17/3 2024

PRESS CONFERENCE: Thu 5/10 2023 • 11 AM

OPENING: Thu 5/10 2023 • 7 PM

CURATOR: Andrea Popelka

CURATORIAL INTERN: Lara Mejač

EXHIBITION VENUE: kunsthalle wien Karlsplatz

Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims is Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva's first solo exhibition in Austria. It is centered around the presentation of a new work, coproduced by kunsthalle wien and presented as a large-scale projection.

The eponymous film *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* is the latest part of a series called *Elemental Cinema*, which the artists began to develop in 2016; each film in this series is dedicated to one of the four classical elements: earth, water, fire, or air. In it, the artists have developed an approach that takes matter, material, and the elemental as its starting point—aspects which have been purposefully neglected over hundreds of years by Western idealist thought.

Ferreira da Silva and Neuman's work undermines patterns of thinking about and relating to the Earth that have been shaped by European colonial modernity. They show that categories and distinctions that seem self-evident to us—such as the interiority of the subject versus the exteriority of its surrounding—underlie a profoundly unequal, racist, and violent world. In her writing, Ferreira da Silva directs us to what is kept outside of the resulting global order of knowing and being. What is the seemingly irrelevant raw material, the bricks used to construct this order? How do the subjects of this order fashion themselves and their world? What are they indifferent to? What does this order unsee?

Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims turns the spotlight on the persistence, though in altered form, of this modern relation to the Earth in the history of neoliberalism and one of its defining early episodes: Chile under the Pinochet regime. (September 11, 2023, marked the fiftieth



Denise Ferreira da Silva & Arjuna Neuman, *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*, 2023, film still • COURTESY THE ARTISTS

anniversary of the coup d'état that violently overthrew democratic socialist **Salvador Allende**, elected president of Chile.)

Partly documentary, partly anecdotal and experimental, *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* was shot in the Chilean Atacama Desert. In terms of visibility, there is a paradoxical relationship at work in this region. Because of the extreme aridity and elevation of the terrain, the skies above the desert are completely clear, allowing for an unobstructed view of the stars. Scattered across the dry land are powerful telescopes, such as the ALMA observatory, a science facility shown in the film. (*Alma* is Spanish for soul.) Through the telescopes and the clean air, scientists gaze into the cosmos's deep time, while the surrounding desert freezes history: Today you can find prehistoric stone drawings there, but also labor camps from colonial times which were later reactivated during Pinochet's dictatorship and used to exploit opponents of the regime—stories of violence that stay hidden in plain sight.

Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la Luz* [Nostalgia for the Light] (2010), a documentary film to which *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* is related in its methodology, depicts groups of women who continue to sift through the desert's sand in search of the human remains of their loved ones who were disappeared during the dictatorship. Untold numbers of murdered dissidents were left there without burial. The camera in *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* mechanically moves over fields of such unmarked mass graves. **Neuman** writes about *Nostalgia for the Light*: "The documentary seems to ask of Chile: how can there at once be such clarity and such obscurity?"

In this layered terrain—the Atacama Desert is also home to some of the world's largest mines—, *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* sets out to trace the long, ongoing history of mining and its dependence



Denise Ferreira da Silva & Arjuna Neuman, *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*, 2023, film still • COURTESY THE ARTISTS

on forced labor—from the extraction of resources such as saltpeter and copper to lithium in the present day. One sequence, for example, depicts the bright blue *salares* of the Atacama. These are vast salt flats used to extract lithium, a mineral that today powers rechargeable batteries, electronic devices such as computers, smartphones, robots, electric cars, and solar panels all around the planet. Lithium is at the center of a global energy transition from fossil fuels to so-called renewables—a transition that still operates under an extractivist logic.

Neuman and Ferreira da Silva's work experiments with thinking and sensing simultaneously the various moments of material existence: the quantic, cosmic, organic/mechanic, historic/geologic. It functions like an "interscalar vehicle" (Gabrielle Hecht) that often departs from a particular site, but then moves through and weaves together various times and places to show the planetary scope and historical depth of pressing geopolitical issues.

Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims follows the classical element of air or wind, which allows the artists to experiment with said distribution and diffusion of matter across space and time. In the film, the wind travels from the Sahara to the Amazon and along the Pacific coast. Like the film's off-screen voices, the composition and movement of material reality tells stories of migration and displacement, but also of another geography drawn by the winds.

Matter—next to historical, political, social, and aesthetic aspects, as well as discourses and sciences—becomes a pathway to reimagine our history and open up perspectives beyond a constitutively violent world. By undertaking this analysis, the artists move beyond critique and pursue new ways of knowing, being, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching.

Behind the large-scale film projection, a cluster of plants that are native to the Atacama Desert is situated: *Tillandsia usneoides*. Hung in a cascading curtain and titled *What a Wall Could Be* (2023), they separate the viewing room from a space called *Cloud Chamber*. *Tillandsia* grow without soil, nourishing themselves from the air alone. In this, they resemble some of the science facilities shown in the film that filter water from the air. After the end of the exhibition, the wall will dissolve: the individual plants can be adopted by visitors and taken away.



In the so-called *Cloud Chamber* visitors can watch *Serpent Rain* (2016), the first joint work by **Ferreira da Silva** and **Neuman**, which haunts or reoccurs in the new film, as well as two videos of interviews with scientists that the artists conducted during the making of *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*. ●

EXHIBITION GUIDE



The comprehensive, free exhibition booklet allows for an in-depth reading on the topics addressed in the exhibition. It features essays by **Denise Ferreira da Silva**, **Ehsan Fardjadniya**, **Ana Teixeira Pinto**, **Massimiliano Mollona**, and **Arjuna Neuman**, as well as a conversation between the artists and **Hannah Black** and a curatorial intro by **Andrea Popelka**. ●

Denise Ferreira da Silva & Arjuna Neuman, *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*, 2023, film stills ●
COURTESY THE ARTISTS



Denise Ferreira da Silva •
PHOTO: MIQUEL COLL

ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

Denise Ferreira da Silva is an artist, philosopher and the Samuel Rudin Professor in the Humanities in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures at New York University. Her artistic and academic work reflects and speculates on themes and questions crucial to contemporary philosophy, aesthetics, political theory, Black thought, feminist thought, and historical materialism.

She is the author of *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), *The Impagavel Divide* (Workshop of Political Imagination and Living Commons, 2019), *Unpayable Debt* (Sternberg/MIT Press, 2022), and co-editor (with **Paula Chakravartty**) of *Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

Besides the films made in collaboration with **Arjuna Neuman**, **Ferreira da Silva's** artwork includes the relational artistic practices of Poethical Readings and the Sensing Salon, in collaboration with **Valentina Desideri**. She has performed shows and lectures in important artistic spaces such as the Centre Pompidou (Paris), Whitechapel Gallery (London), MASP (São Paulo), Guggenheim (New York), and MoMA (New York). She has also written for major art event publications (Liverpool Biennial, 2017; São Paulo Biennial, 2016; Venice Biennale, 2017; and documenta 14) and published in art magazines such as *Canadian Art*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *e-flux journal*. ●



Arjuna Neuman •
PHOTO: KUNSTHALLE WIEN

Arjuna Neuman is an artist, filmmaker, and writer. His films and installations have been shown internationally, including at Berlin Biennale, Manifesta, Sharjah Biennial, and in museums such as Centre Pompidou (Paris), Madre Museum (Naples), MAAT (Lisbon), and Jameel Arts Centre (Dubai).

As a writer, he has published essays with *Relief*, *Into the Pines Press*, *New Writing*, *VIA Magazine*, *Concord*, *Artvoices Magazine*, *Flaunt*, *LEAP Magazine*, *Hearings*, and *e-flux journal*.

Neuman studied at the California Institute of the Arts. He works with the essay form through a multiperspectival and mobile approach in which "essay" is an inherently future-oriented and experimental mode, becoming the guiding principle for research and production, which shifts between the bodily, haptic, and affective through to the geopolitical, planetary, and cosmological.

Arjuna Neuman and **Denise Ferreira da Silva's** collaboration includes the films *Serpent Rain* (2016), *4 Waters—Deep Implicancy* (2018), and *Soot Breath//Corpus Infinitum* (2020). Their films have been exhibited at major art venues, such as the Centre Pompidou (Paris), Whitechapel Gallery (London), the Venice Biennale 2015, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), Centre for Contemporary Arts (Glasgow), Museum Arnhem, and others. Their films have been screened at Berlinale Forum Expanded (Berlin), Images Festival Toronto, Doclisboa (Lisbon), Pravo Ljudski (Sarajevo), and others. They were the 2021 feature artists at the Flaherty Seminar (New York), and their work is held in the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery collection (Vancouver). In 2023, they showed the ensemble of their films at the MACBA (Barcelona), and they premiere their new film, *Ancestral Clouds, Ancestral Claims*, at **kunsthalle wien**. ●

Public Program

The discursive part of the public program shows how the planetary and Chilean contexts and topics such as extraction or migration are implicated in the local setting of Vienna and Austria.

ARTIST TALK AND LISTENING SESSION

WITH Denise Ferreira da Silva • Arjuna Neuman • Lama El Khatib • Sam Nimmrichter • Nicole L'Huillier

Fri 6/10 2023 • 6:30–9 PM

kunsthalle wien Karlsplatz

In cooperation with Tanzquartier Wien, hosted by Anna Leon (Tanzquartier Wien) and Andrea Popelka (kunsthalle wien)

In their collaborative artistic work, philosopher and artist Denise Ferreira da Silva and artist-author Arjuna Neuman reflect on decolonization as, in da Silva's words, "the restoration of the total value extracted from Native Lands and expropriated from Slave Labour". Defying universalist norms of thought established by the European Enlightenment, Ferreira da Silva and Neuman counter the linearity of history and the separation of space to interrogate the presence of colonialism now, here, with us.

Lama El Khatib and Sam Nimmrichter will be in conversation with the artists to continue their thoughts. The discussion will be accompanied by somatic exercises by Daliah Touré and transition into *Difusiones*, a listening session by artist Nicole L'Huillier.

CONVERSATION

unfeeling

WITH Henrike Kohpeiß and Maxi Wallenhorst

Tue 17/10 2023 • 6–8 PM

kunsthalle wien Karlsplatz

As disappointment with the dominant vocabulary of how to talk about one's own as well as shared feelings is growing, unfeeling has recently been receiving more attention. What happens when, particularly in the face of social violence, feelings appear not as too much but as absent, lacking, insensitive? In this conversation, Henrike Kohpeiß and Maxi Wallenhorst talk about provisional histories and latest trends in not feeling anything. Expanding on Wallenhorst's work on a dissociative poetics and Kohpeiß' book on bourgeois coldness (*Bürgerliche Kälte. Affekt und koloniale Subjektivität*, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus, 2023), they aim to relate individual indifference and injury to infrastructures of unfeeling.

DISCUSSION

How Does One Get to Own a Mountain?!

WITH Markus Gönitzer • Rose-Anne Gush • Philipp Sattler

Thu 23/11 2023 • 6:30–8 PM

kunsthalle wien Karlsplatz

In *How Does One Get to Own a Mountain?!* we discuss a landscape of memory and property that stretches along the mountain ranges of Carinthia in Southern Austria. This landscape holds the site of a future

lithium mine that opens questions concerning neo-colonial modes of extraction on-shored to European soil, the Nazi legacy of agricultural property and fascist concepts of nature, the impact of climate breakdown in the region, and counter-concepts found in Partisan resistance and anti-fascist practices along these borderlands.

OPEN STUDY SESSIONS ON EXTRACTIVISM

WITH Anca Benera • Moira Hille • Annette Krauss • Andrea Popelka

FIRST SESSION: Thu 12/10 2023 • 1–4 PM

kunsthalle wien Karlsplatz

In cooperation with the **Academy of Fine Arts Vienna** and the **University of Applied Arts Vienna**

This practice-based seminar is situated in the Master in Critical Studies program at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, but open to all who are interested. Together we will explore the theme of extractivism and various artistic approaches to it. The seminar is anti-hierarchically structured. In Open Study Sessions we will not only deal with the content, but also with the way how we gather and discuss the topic.

EVENT SERIES

Making Sense

This series has emerged from an interest in exploring new ways of relating to art that focus on the body and the senses. *Making Sense* is a practice-oriented, open format that encompasses performances and workshops. It draws from a variety of disciplines and approaches that shall allow the visitors to navigate the exhibition space with curious and playful enquiry. Its relaxed atmosphere seeks to establish a different attunement to the exhibition space, where art is not static or separated from us.

The first session will take place on Friday, October 6, 2023, 6:30 PM in the context of the artist talk followed by the listening session *Difusiones*. ●

The exhibition at a glance

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- EXHIBITION VENUE: kunsthalle wien Karlsplatz
- EXHIBITION DATES: 5/10 2023—17/3 2024
- OPENING HOURS: Tue–Sun 11 AM–7 PM • Thu 11 AM–9 PM
- The admission is free.
- PRESS MATERIALS: kunsthallewien.at/en/exhibition/denise-ferreira-da-silva-arjuna-neuman/press/

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