



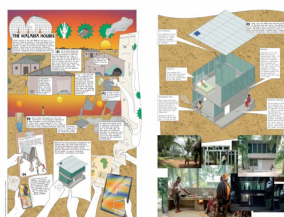
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WRITING CURE / WRITING CONCEPT

Notes on Wordless — Falling Silent Loudly
(2021), *Japanisches Palais, Museum für
Völkerkunde Dresden.*

Soap bubbles and flurries of dust: In *The Dust of History*, a 2017 video by Silvina Der-Meguerditchian, the artist is humming along as she tidies what look like valuable objects and display cabinets in a museum setting. Her acts of care and maintenance lend themselves to a commentary on the invisible work performed by custodians behind the scenes, and furthermore to the curatorial task, that of *cura*, in a borrowed sense. On a meta-reflexive level, Der-Meguerditchian's video performance also invokes concerns of New Museum Studies, such as the restitution of art objects from collections as part of decolonization, the debate over common goods, practices of the 'living archive,' or community outreach for extended inclusion and participation. A set of manifold agendas, which serve as an initial premise of *Wordless — Falling Silent Loudly*, an exhibition on view at the *Japanischen Palais*. The show's contributors, contemporary artists and activists, were invited to enter into a multi-vocal dialogue with items in the collection that vary in provenance. As these occasionally oscillate between archival loot and cultural heritage, the list of works, in the space reserved for artists' names, registers them as "unknown (producer)". Other roles, in turn, are sometimes noted: "photographer," "dealer," "collector," "donor," or "previous owner" — persons whose dealings with the exhibits are at least second-hand. This is of relevance insofar as a trans-generational mobility of ideas, artifacts, and persons such as traumata of harm and injustice (which presupposes an idea of justice) are what is being narrated here, partly through object biography, partly in textual form.

With the poem placed under focus, spotlights can now be directed at language and textuality within the museum's exhibition space: seen from their visual aspect, their materiality and form. "*Es wird nie wieder alles gut*" ("*It's never going to be fine again*") reads a neon sign in italic lettering, a quote from Jewish writer Max Czollek picked by Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, the show's curator. How does *Writing Cure* appear as *Writing Concept*? The show's "Celan room" is dedicated to the life in linguistic and geographical translation of the poet Paul Celan; for he is an exemplary figure of "lost realms of language and culture [...], of the wound Czernowitz, an empty space," as referenced in the *Diskursbuch* accompanying the show — by which it designates the region Bukovina, where Celan grew up and that no longer exists. Not that this should amount

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Image Credits

The Dust of History, 2017, Silvina Der-Mergutichan, video still TC 05:34, courtesy of the artist



to a biographical presentation, rather a polyphony of poetry assembled from different authors. A trail of poems swirls throughout the show, relegating the concept of autonomous artworks to secondary rank. Conceived and designed by the collective Kaboom and graphic designer Katherina Balzer, language is transferred into the space in a multitude of configurations. Running across walls and floors in funnel-shaped formations and undulating lines, the text borrows from Concrete Poetry its essentially phonetic grasp of language. *A SPRACHGITTER* breaks down elements from the eponymous Celan collection of poems, which was published in 1959: an extensive mind map tracking concepts drawn from the "Celan cosmos," encircled and interconnected through a system of lines that suggests an associative and horizontal expandability. The denomination of 'cosmos' indicates that the grid contains more than just words in a communicative-theoretical sense or alphabets as universal systems of referentiality.

Remarkably, the rhetoric of an empty space, as found in the aforementioned metaphor of the "wound Czernowitz," is unlike that of the trail or trace. Because the trace stands for a process-based remembrance model, one eventually leading to forgetting: "The English (forget) and the German (*vergessen*) suggest a kind of fluid power that carries away the traces of an experience, which is then out of reach," as writes Jean BOLLACK in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. In arranging textual fragments, the show's curatorial team played with the negative space of the supporting mediums, in order to translate areas of paper not covered in text into architectonic scenographies and typographic displays. Such omissions may call attention to the unspoken and muted, or point to the infrastructures that form the basis for solidarity, representation, and articulation. Whether on paper or across the space: Poetic content and form interact in the omission, onto which a transfer of meaning takes place — for instance, also onto a silence.

If the omission implies forgetting or reduction, it follows a logic of subtraction. A sign that points back unto itself [...], as known from citation practices, is also found on the cover of the *Diskursbuch* mentioned earlier, with essays and poems to accompany the show. In a sense, an ellipsis here functions as indication that, whether artistically, through activism or on the level of curation, gap-ridden historiographies are to be reworked by means of remains and acts of reconstruction open to reception. An important part of this is the experimentation with intercultural dynamics and cross-referentiality related to the idea of "multidirectional memory": Michael Rothberg developed that approach in his book by that name and it is of particular methodical value to *Wordless*, as it sheds light on the interwovenness of violent histories superimposed from disparate times and places.

Yet another entry point to the installation of text and to remembrance politics can be found in the space arranged by the *Museum der Trostfrauen* (Museum of Comfort Women). Demonstration posters and protest banners with appealing mute slogans that imaginarily echo the slogan, are both a denunciation of forced prostitution as well as a plea for empowerment. As these originate from contexts of direct action, it could be asked whether displaying them in a museum changes their status: do they stand to become ethnographic 'things' in a collective memory to come? Characteristic of their activist aesthetics is the use of all-caps, signal colors, imperatives, and a petitioning tone, yet the mode of presentation lends these exhibits a new character: that of a labor of mourning. Statues of peace of seated woman with clinched fists resting on their laps exemplify, as monuments, the devotional function inherent in resisting genealogies of violence. A psychoanalytic cultural theory would allow one to speak of a working-through of a structural forgetting, of an amnesia on a social scale; a working-through that the exhibition, as a site and medium for trans-cultural encounters, may help facilitate, providing that the exhibits themselves, evidences, and discourses also count as actors.

During the mass demonstrations in Belarus last year, the protest song *Mury* (*Walls*) by Polish singer Jacek Kaczmarski from 1978, which became famous in the Solidarność-movement, once again became a widely-sung symbol during the regime-critical assemblies. It is included in the show as song and typographic interpretation. Even historically, poetry has a distinctly musical component, which manifests in this popular oppositional hymn. Remarkably, the notion of poetry as archaic-authentic, dates back to Herder in 1770, preceding its later co-opting by a nationalistic sentiment, especially in the German-speaking realm. Celan's own unease in the face of language should be seen, precisely, against the background of the poem's nationalization in the 19th century — notwithstanding his use thereof, despite the "Todesmühlen" ("Death Mills") he evokes with reference to the Holocaust. In this respect, one of the show's exhibits reveals itself as symbolically-laden and site-specific: a color photograph taken by Walter Hollnagel in February 1945 after a bombing raid, its golden frame lending the air of a historical tableau to its subject matter, the Japanisches Palais up in flames.

After the boom in memory studies in the humanities during the 1980s, one of the initial questions underlying the show again becomes pressing: that of the translatability of language into spatial terms. As far as the show's "poetic thinking," as put forth by Hannah Arendt, may lead the way from commemoration to memory, it is significant that the mnemotechnics of antiquity — according to Elisabeth von Samsonow in the book *Fenster im Papier* — had explicitly functioned architectonically, before their dissolution into script in the "mnemonic revolution" of the renaissance; a reminder to that are the *topoi*, which caused a "rhetorical over-writing of the spatial concept". Perhaps therein too lies the necessity of redesigning the spatial concept of memory in ways that are multidirectional and institutionally-critical.

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