ARTFORUM

ON SITE

UNSAFE SPACE

Amanda Sarroff on "*Risquons-Tout*"

Lydia Ourahmane and Alex Ayed, *Fox, Glass Eyes, Tara River Water, Boat Trailer, Pirlitor Stone, Wand, Sage, Stone, 5 Paintings on Canvas, 1.5L Adriatic Sea 1.5L Adriatic Sea, 1kg Honey (Crna Gora), Olive Oil, Double Bag, 250g Coffee x2, 100g Coffee, Salt, Sugar Cubes, Bubble Gum x2, Cigarettes (20 pack), Tinned Sardines, Vit C Juice Carton x3, Eurocrem, Fridge Magnet x2, Chicken Soup x2, Beef Soup x2* (detail), 2020, taxidermy fox, boat trailer, stones, water, wand, sage, five paintings on canvas, water bottles, coffee, juice cartons, plastic bags, cigarettes, fridge magnets, food items. Installation view, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. Photo: Philippe de Gobert.

NESTLED ALONG the Belgian-French border lies a sleepy hamlet by the name of Risquons-Tout, or "risk everything." In 1848, it served as a point of entry for two thousand Belgian émigrés returning home to overthrow the monarchy. (They did not succeed.) Later, the town became a notorious site for smuggling. The expansive namesake exhibition at Wiels Contemporary Art Center, Brussels, which opened in the throes of a global pandemic, includes works by thirty-eight artists, among them seventeen new commissions. The organizers (Dirk Snauwaert in collaboration with co-curators Zoë Gray and Devrim Bayar, associate curator Helena Kritis, and curatorial assistant Sofia Dati) set out to explore how "innovation and creativity can emerge from attitudes that defy the norm" by bringing together artists for whom "risk is . . . a matter of passing beyond the boundaries that limit the mobility of thought, ideas, or people." Though none of the works in "*Risquons-Tout*" address Covid-19 directly, they nonetheless bear its trace, along with those of other human disasters either exacerbated or accelerated by the virus. In Mounira Al Solh and Jana Saleh's performance *Lackadaisical Sunset to Sunset*, 2019, Saleh played on an electric guitar and synthesizer that had been damaged this past August by the chemical explosion in Beirut, where she lives.

Touching on ways of living in and with danger, "*Risquons-Tout*" offers flights toward or away from safety as well as harbors for fugitive identities. A boat trailer is marooned at the center of a collaboration by Lydia Ourahmane and Alex Ayed whose title is an inventory of the sundry objects it comprises. When travel restrictions foiled a project linking Brussels to the Global South by way of secondhand-car-recycling routes to sub-Saharan Africa, the pair decided instead to embark on a thirteen-day trip from the EU capital to the "borders of Europe." Objects they encountered are distributed around the gallery, including a jar of honey, some olive oil, two bottles of water from the Adriatic Sea, a plastic bag full of canned provisions, burning sage, and a dead fox they stumbled upon on the side of the highway, now stuffed. Through these objects, we can, at least partially, plot the pair's trajectory, which took them from Croatia to Montenegro and back through Italy. The lived experience of this undertaking, however, remains inscrutable. Among the tabulated materials are "5 paintings on canvas" that have been buried within the museum's walls. With these insertions, the artists have imperceptibly if irrevocably altered the building's structure. Ourahmane and Ayed withhold a narrative that can be neither fully seen nor spoken but that nevertheless resonates throughout the museum space.

We are, all of us, vectors of harm.

There are other intimate intrusions elsewhere. For Lubaina Himid and Magda Stawarska-Beavan's *Blue Grid Test*, 2020, Himid translated sixty-four patterns borrowed from disparate ornamental traditions into variations of the color blue. They unfurl around the gallery space in a single horizontal stripe painted over an array of salvaged objects: from maps and books to musical instruments, paper shopping bags, and furniture fragments. Stawarska-Beavan's aural composition features Himid's voice performing incantations and incarnations of the color over blues music. Speakers installed at the center of the wall, just above eye level, bring these sounds into our field of vision. If songs have long offered possibilities for migratory passage denied to bodies, Himid's voice, too, becomes a form of transmission that eludes capture.

Himid, in giving voice to her work, endows it with her own breath. These utterances and their pauses return us to the crux of our predicament: the danger of the air we breathe. Over these past months, we have come to realize just how many people we share our breath with. Most of them are strangers to us within our communities. Meanwhile, far-right groups continue to fan nativist flames while the pandemic rages on in Fortress Europe. When the world shut its borders to Europeans last year in an attempt to stem the virus's spread, many of the continent's inhabitants experienced arrested freedom of movement for the first time. Long-cherished ideas about self-preservation were met with the realization that we are, each of us, vectors of infection. We are, all of us, vectors of harm.

By attending to our breaths, this passage from one person into another, maybe we can wake to the recognition that others among us have long risked injury by us. As more and more people find themselves in positions of acute precarity, and as rule-breaking leaders like Trump demolish the notion that transgressiveness is always liberatory, old avant-garde valorizations of risk have become at best unpersuasive. "*Risquons-Tout*" asks us to reconsider these risks, in art and beyond, in their uneven distribution and in the context of migratory histories and bodies at the mercy of aleatory fates.

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