

# Exhibition Concept

## Birds and Buoys

*From that time forth he believed that the wise man  
is one who never sets himself apart from other living  
things,  
whether they have speech or not, and in later years he  
strove long  
to learn what can be learned, in silence, from the eyes of  
animals,  
the flight of birds, the great slow gestures of trees.  
Ursula K. LeGuin, A Wizard of Earthsea*

*„Die Luken gingen kaum ins Freie, sondern eher ins  
Unterirdische.  
Daher die Neugier, mit der ich durch die Stäbe jedes  
Gatters,  
auf dem ich gerade fußte, niedersah,  
um aus dem Souterrain den Anblick eines  
Kanarienvogels,  
einer Lampe oder eines Bewohners mit davonzutragen.“  
Walter Benjamin, Berliner Kindheit um 1900*

*See-line woman | Empty his pockets | And wreck his days  
| Make him love her | And she'll fly away  
(traditional)*

The double exhibition »Birds and Buoys«, with works by Nadja Abt and Barbara Marcel, brings two complex and long-standing artistic strands of research together and deals with transatlantic labour and the cultural history of shipping and mining from a feminist and queer perspective. Together, the works reference the architecture and history of the Bärenzwinger as well as its immediate neighbourhood.

»Birds and Buoys« works visibly outwards, communicating acoustically and visually with the neighbourhood in a colourful, collectively designed reinterpretation of the Bärenzwinger's structural shell. It also comments on its urban proximity to the historic harbour, the Brazilian Embassy and the Marinehaus (former clubhouse of the imperial navy). Inside, intimate and essayistic reflections reveal the transformative powers of "queering" nature, tight spaces dissolve into fantastical scenes and stories that were once hidden appear.

“Birds” and “Buoys”, as named in the exhibition's title, are distinguished by their ability to indicate something. The presence of the canary songbird, as Barbara Marcel's work addresses, is an indication of a toxic environment. Nadja Abt uses buoys as

figures that rise to the surface and refuse to be pushed into the invisible.

The homophonic terms buoy and boy can only be distinguished in writing; the verb “to buoy” also means to lift one's spirits, to be empathetic, to help someone. It is precisely such transgressions and “différences” that the exhibition works with, it is this kind of relating that it proposes: What can be learned and unlearned from landscapes ruined by mining? How can the violent history of seafaring be rewritten as feminist and utopian? How can we navigate, to paraphrase Ursula LeGuin, the "Port of Darkness"?

Based on texts by the writer, philosopher and cultural theorist Édouard Glissant, Nadja Abt presents "Ship of Relation". With this work she reinterprets the ship, traditionally a male-dominated space, as a place for feminist narratives and a multiplicity of relationships. Following Glissant's "Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone", Abt considers the ship with its female crew as a metaphor for creating connections in postcolonial discourse. In three fictional narratives, which can be found on the boat fenders in the hull and which are continued in the accompanying booklet, voices on board speak about the intention and background of their journey. To make a positive rewriting of seafaring as a topos possible, the aimless but pioneering ship flies the flags of a new international stateless alphabet.

What can you do with a hole in a valley? Where can you wander when the earth no longer holds? Do the landscapes of non-cities and their seductive call to solitude remain compelling in times of urban disintegration? What might be learned and unlearned in the augmented topographies of such ruined landscapes? How to wander over and under such unsteady ground? Barbara Marcel's project "Golden Tone" is derived from her research into the historic and cultural landscape of Harz, the western mountain region of Germany, where many of the mining technologies of mineral soil extraction were first developed and later exported across the world. The video installation reflects on the intersections of the past, present and future of this anthropogenic landscape through the particular history of the

breeding, training and trading of canary birds in the region. In a video assemblage featuring hands and machines, silver and serinettes, contaminated heavy metal hills and falling spruce trees, touristic tours and intimate interviews, the iconic landscape of the German Harz gradually reveals its many hybrid layers, giving way to an open field of transformative sonic flights. "Golden Tone" is a film about the Harz Roller canary birds, the domestication of mines and the queering of nature.

The exhibition »Birds and Buoys« opens the annual Bricolage programme and with it a series of explorations into the less visible present and history of the Bärenzwinger.

Bricolage describes a practical as well as poetic process that Claude Lévi-Strauss contrasts with the Western engineer and that unfolds through play, improvisation, sampling and DIY strategies. As Jacques Derrida points out, this juxtaposition is untenable and the engineer himself is a myth, a product of tinkering - but this does not make the concept any less interesting to us. The programme proposes a reparative reading of the concept of "bricolage". Through a process of opening, collaboration and conversation, we want to revisit and practice bricolage, formulating it in an anticolonial way. Bricolage does not complete existing structures but has the capacity to reorganise them. In the current time of crisis, in which rationalities and planning are losing their validity, we would like to use bricolage as a

curatorial practice. We wish to invite artists to jointly design, try out and reflect on tactics and adaptation strategies for this era marked by unpredictability. In this sense, the four upcoming exhibitions will closely research the resources of the Bärenzwinger, from its prehistory to the materials it was built from, from its urban spatial references to the cultural and political networks in which we currently work. With bricolage we seek to dig deeper and reach further, to look at historical and contemporary constellations and to, upon loosening the glue, reassemble them. In falling in line with Donna Haraway, one could say that we are in the process of making new material-semiotic knots, just like the concrete maritime knotting techniques used in »Birds and Buoys«.

»Birds and Buoys«  
Nadja Abt, Barbara Marcel  
09.04. – 13.06. 2021

Bärenzwinger

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[www.baerenzwinger.berlin](http://www.baerenzwinger.berlin)