

*ON THE
THRESHOLD
OF THE
INVISIBLE*

*EXHIBITION CATALOG
KUNSTHAUS KULE
MAY 2024*

THOMAS LAIGLE - TAWAN ARUN



01

02



05

06



Excerpts from documentary films currently in production

DES ESPRITS, DES REVENANTS

The Kingdom

CHILDREN OF VODOO

Seppia/Arte

Directed by Tawan Arun

Director of photography: Sylvain Verdet, Greg Blakey

01

Yaowarat Rd, Chinatown Bangkok, Thailand 2022.

02-03

Funeral ceremony, Wat Yai Bang Pla Kot, suburb of Bangkok, Thailand 2022.

04-05-06

Mami Wata cult Abomey/Cotonou, Benin 2023.

07

Donation of a motorcycle for a deceased person, Bangkok, Thailand 2022.



Installation by Thomas Laigle

SATURNIIDAE TOCCATA

Breeding of nocturnal lepidoptera Bombyx Eri, plants,
UV lights, modular synthesizers, solar cells, tape recorder, film

01

Breeding room, capture of the sound perceived
by caterpillars in the vivarium, broadcast to visitors.

02

Breeding room, playback of the recording while caterpillars grow.

03

Breeding room, Bombyx Eri caterpillar.





03



06



04



05

04

Breeding room, Bombyx Eri emerge from their silk cocoon after five weeks in the vivarium.

05

Aviary, live music played by modular synthesizers, interacting with UV lights and moths.

06

Aviary, recording session performed by moths and Thomas Laigle.

AN EXHIBITION OF LIFE, DEATH, AND THE SPIRITUAL BEYOND

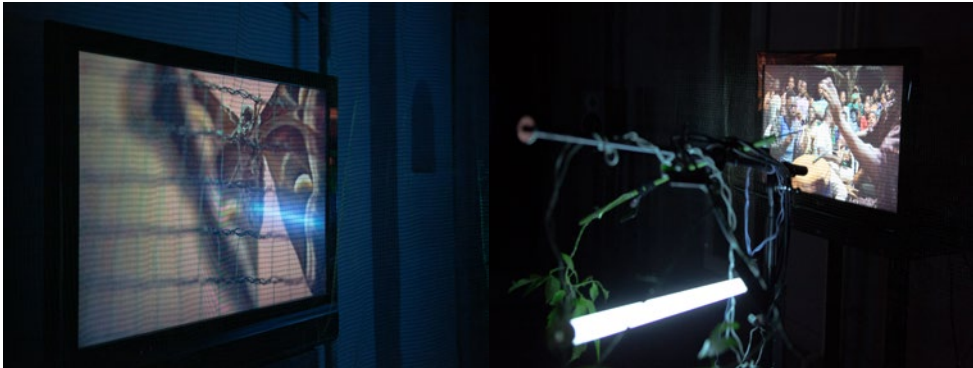
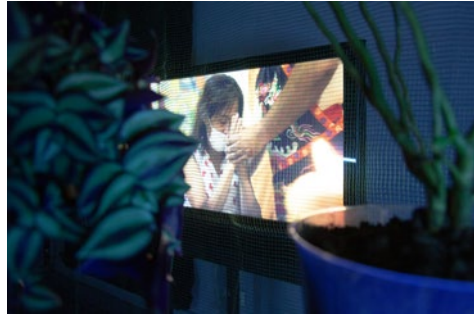
Muriel McIntyre

Ephemeral Echoes: The Dance of Art and Existence

In the strobe-lit corridors of artistic exploration, two souls converged, each bearing the weight of their unique journeys. Their paths have led them to a destination—an exhibition where the tangible and intangible dance in delicate harmony. Their individual quests, though diverse, resonated with a shared reverence for life, death, and the nebulous spaces in between. Here, the flutter of a butterfly's wings intertwined with the rhythmic beats of ancestral drums, while the flicker of a digital aviary mirrored the flickering flame of human memory. This exhibition invites a journey that transcends the boundaries of time and space, asking the viewer to traverse a physical space and ponder the mysteries that lie beyond. Let us pause and consider the relationship

between the soul and the butterfly. It lies in their shared journey of transformation and transcendence. Just as the caterpillar undergoes a profound metamorphosis to emerge as a butterfly or a moth, many belief systems perceive the soul's journey as a process of evolution and enlightenment. In some cultures, butterflies/moths are believed to carry the souls of the departed to the afterlife or to signify the presence of loved ones who have passed away. This association with the soul reflects a deeper connection between the ephemeral nature of life and the eternal essence of the human spirit. Overall, the relationship between the soul and the butterfly/moth is one of profound symbolism, representing the transformative journey of the self and the cycle of life and death.







TAWAN ARUN ON MEMORY, MORTALITY, AND THE MYSTICAL

Tawan merges documentary and art to probe death rituals and the intangible in his latest exhibition. This interview reveals his approach to capturing the profound intersections of life, death, and the beyond, inviting viewers to reflect on our universal connections and unseen realities

How did the idea of this exhibition emerge?

Starting from the idea to have a projection of my work in the space, it quickly shifted to become an exhibition of both our works, collaboratively, into something new. The works you see are clips from longer movies I have been involved in. What I'm showing is an overview of my documentary films in production with mortuary practices, death ceremonies, the intangible - the beyond. Through these documentaries, I wish to understand these rituals. I do not wish to become an exhibitionist of these practices for a western eye. Rather, I wish to bring to our attention these practices, by bringing to our attention that common threads relate them - as they are practiced on different continents. They are here because we all think about these fundamental questions regarding death, the afterlife.

As an observer, I have come to notice the following denominations: these processions (which are a gathering of people), when considering funeral rituals, are serious, important, and respected. One behaves a

certain way within them, and we, the outsider, understand this, without understanding: we understand a common notion of another world, another speciality, that, when digging deeper into older religions, there is this concept of the soul: one that all humans have, which brings us to all be connected to the whole living organism of nature. There is also the notion of the past, of heritage.

I am not a researcher, but an interested and inquisitive person, and I accept my subjectivities in filming these rituals. Indeed, the question of exhibiting these practices is important. There is something of the extraordinary in these rituals, especially when they shed blood (which many of them do). There is also an expected way that the African continent is filmed and shown, and if we don't show this continent in certain ways we are criticized/censored.

How has your video work changed to fit the format of the exhibition?

I don't see this work as a collectible work of art, but rather as a game in which we test

ways of presenting our work together. What interests me is this obsession with creating a link with the immaterial. There's really no way of representing this intangible. I'm interested in representing the staging of cultural and religious practices that "communicate" with another world.

What important themes for the viewer to keep?

I wish that the viewer brings back two aspects of my work with them, or perhaps, that they see the work within these two lenses. The first is memory. Memory of our ancestors, our people, gods we honor, and how do we communicate with them, how do we communicate this memory. The second is human attachment. We are all experiencing this through the deaths of close ones we have lost. And most importantly, we hear of ghosts coming back to see loved ones. There is something human to this, of suffering based on something beautiful.

Has it changed your views on the 'beyond life'?

I am not closing any doors. I am open to different interpretations. To not know what will happen after death doesn't bother me, what interests me is this human dimension in these mystical rituals - of connections to the other world.

One word to describe your work in this show
Memory.



LIFE CYCLES AND SOUNDSCAPES: THE PHANTASMAGORICAL ART OF THOMAS LAIGLE

Thomas Laigle fuses the metamorphosis of caterpillars into moths with soundscapes, creating a captivating exploration of transformation and sound.

How did the exhibition come to be?

We had worked on my musical project before, in which Tawan filmed the accompanying music video. The idea to create a show stemmed from the synergy between our works, which both delve into themes of life after death. We assembled our works so that they dialogue together, side by side, becoming something new yet staying true to their core messages and individual themes.

The backbone of your research:

It was during the 2020 lockdown that I got serious about this project, one that includes moths, light and sound. Making music with synthesizers, I wondered about what might occur if these insects, attracted by UV lights, interacted with their movements to my music. What would happen if we considered an epigenetic alteration, by placing the moths in a constant sound space, as well as providing them with an environment of well-being (I would make sure they were always fed, that the temperature was ideal)... So, during the lockdown, I set up to raise caterpillars. I lived

with them, moving their habitat along my journeys: They were my future protagonists, I the observer.

The current work and the process:

The work presented is an installation combining a caterpillar breeding and a recording studio aviary linked by a musical composition. It stems from the previous work I had done, but this time, in conjunction with Tawan's work, in addition to digitizing the evolutionary cycle of the moths. For the iteration of this show, I have detached myself from the scientific study aspect to leave more room for the phantasmagorical part. It's a new perspective around themes shared with Tawan, including life, death and time. I am addressing the transition from one state to another (the caterpillar to the moth, to the final stage of imago), their development, metamorphosis, this cycle which repeats itself and passes it on to future generations; as the caterpillars are the living focus, they are the living matter. Further, the exhibition rooms offered us the

possibility to experiment with the installation of our works, by contrasting them, which emphasized the ideas of transition from one state to another. The first room, more white cube in style, welcomes the caterpillars, in conjunction with Tawan's mortuary videos, as the clip talks about the processions of passage into another realm. As the viewer, you then walk through the corridor of strobes, to enter the space of the beyond, the space of fantasy. This space comes in contrast to the aviary room, a hybrid ecosystem where Nature and human technology are in a symbiotic relationship. Here, you sense the intangible, where the presence of spirits are invoked in the clips, where the moth appears in the aviary but in a digital way, emphasizing the impalpable nature of that which can not be seen.

How do you see the soul in your work?

The soul can be understood as the materialization of an imaginary cultural legacy, represented here by music. I consider how this species transfers knowledge to their

future generations, without the generations meeting in a life span (as the parents will die before the caterpillar is born)... Indeed, the butterfly is the soul that travels, the soul that returns. If we consider the monarchs (type of butterfly) who migrate, it is through generations that this happens until they reach their destination. In this sense, I see the migrating action as a collective soul which travels.

Word: Heritage (in a biological meaning)



HIDDEN REALMS: THE JOURNEY OF SANTERIA FROM THE CARIBBEAN TO BERLIN

with Anthropologist Samantha Kneissler

From Ritual to Reality: How Santeria Thrives in Concealed Corners of Berlin, Challenging Historical Stereotypes and Colonial Legacies.

The core of your research, and its process:

The research I have done for my master's thesis is around Santeria, an Afro-Cuban religion, similar to Vodou. It originated in Nigeria and Benin, immigrated to Latin America due to enslavement of ethnicities practicing Vodou. I have been researching its practice here, in Berlin.

What my research intends to do is to shed light on these religious practices, ones that have been subject to stereotypes and wrong assumptions due to this colonial imagination we have all been bathed in. Indeed, there is no education in Germany about Germany's colonial past.

Usually, these practices are invisible in German society, they are done in hidden spaces, behind closed doors, in wardrobes or closets. A whole universe is there with special food, music, colors, etc dedicated to the goddess you are tied to. There is a lot of exchange in gifts, which results in a big accumulation of things added to the goddesses throne.

What I have found to my greatest joy while tracing the steps of these rituals, is how much this religion is drenched in artistic aesthetic and methodology. The ones performing these rituals are artists: between earth, community, and the private realms, the people who perform them are creative.

How did you know it was practiced in Berlin:

I did not know it was practiced here. Through academic contacts I got some insight into these communities in Berlin. Also through dance gatherings, workshops and classes that I felt were related to the religion. I think the community is about 500 people - give or take. I'm thinking that Vodou. is also practiced here in Berlin, but it is quite hidden as the practices are not well seen here in the West. One thing that is not done in Germany is the initiation to receive your goddess, as it requires animal sacrifices - which is a big ethical question. And this is where most clichés come to be, based on these prejudices that demonize

the practices. As an anthropologist, it is very important to be careful how to write about these things as this is where the imagination can spin out of control.

Have you become aware of the beyond, in a different way. Is the spiritual realm more tangible?

As an academic and scientist, I have placed myself as the observer. It is not about me, but about them and giving the people that I research, their space. This research is for them to be recognised and seen: I place myself in the back, yet with a curiosity and interest regarding this spiritual practice. It has brought me to realize the amount of religions and spiritual life happening and performed, in an underground / intangible way, in a supposedly non-religious city that is Berlin. I have come to understand the city as a multiple of little universes: An apartment in Prenzlauer Berg becomes a throne to a goddess.

What comes to mind when I say soul?

I would say that they are connected to their gods fully, with their soul. It is this relationship between them and their gods, this connection, this strong bond, it's like a third person in the room.

One word about your research:

Transformation

The term «Voodoo» is used in the academic context to refer to the colonial imagination around the religion, as its the english/commercialized writing.



THE SANTERÍA ALTAR - A THRESHOLD BETWEEN THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

The altars of Afro-Cuban Santería are viewed by the Yoruba people as a gateway to the gods, forming a threshold for communication with the orichas.

Altars reflect the personalities of the orichas

The adept's altar usually comprises a glass display case or a lockable wooden cabinet. It houses the orichas in ceramic vessels in materialized form as stones. The devotees decorate the altar with objects that emphasize the characteristics of their personal orichas in terms of materials, colors, numbers, objects and myths. Here the orichas are invoked and asked for example for health, well-being or protection.

Altars are hidden due to prejudices

In Berlin apartments, the altars are usually hidden and only visible at second glance. Outsiders often react dismissive when encountering the religion, as they are influenced by colonial prejudices regarding African-American religions such as Vodou and Santería. For this reason, santera Susana was unable to set up her altar in her German ex-husbands flat: *«My ex-husband, his colleagues and friends saw me as the Indian with weird headgear and black magic going on. I couldn't show my orichas.»*

Altars are center of exchange of gifts

By decorating the altar, the initiates express their appreciation for their gods. Santero Silvio has dedicated an entire room – the Cuban ideal – of his Charlottenburger apartment to his main goddess Ochún and others. The aesthetics of the altars goes back to the veneration of - later deified - kings and warriors of the Yoruba and

the Cuba of the Baroque colonial era. The altars are constantly changing because the adepts continuously create new objects or integrate gifts for their gods from other followers. Silvio explains: *«My altar is luxurious, but it didn't happen in one day. It's been gifts and things, I've built it with my own hands.»*

Altars are constantly and creatively changing

Some gifts are requested by the deities, others are chosen by the devotees. Every week, Silvio gets yellow flowers for Ochún and greets her with her bells, rattles, songs and dances. The orichas are asked what they want by various divination systems and adapt to the surroundings of their followers: *«They certainly do not expect what cannot be provided.»* So it happens that in Berlin, sweets-loving Ochún receives German Bienenstich for lunch. The foods offered to the orichas are determined by their specific characteristics - in form, color, consistency and taste. After the ritual, the devotees eat the foods and receive its now divine energy.

At the altar, the devotees enter into a direct dialog with their goddesses and gods through dance, songs, offerings and divination systems. The altar is the center of a constant exchange of material and immaterial gifts between the Santería adepts and the orichas. Thus, the altar is a threshold for communication between the members of the Santería community and the transcendent world of the orichas.

This article was written by the Social and Cultural Anthropologist and Latin Americanist [Samantha Kneissler](#). Her Master's thesis at the Freie Universität Berlin was titled *«Todo es un acto de fe. On the transnational religious practice of Afro-Cuban Santería believers living in Berlin.»*

Through these interviews, we are offered a glimpse into three separate research topics and methodologies, yet that reveal common themes. This offers a multifaceted exploration of life, death, and spirituality, inviting viewers to reflect on their own beliefs and experiences while fostering a deeper understanding of diverse cultural practices. The artists' collaborative efforts create a space for dialogue and contemplation, challenging preconceptions and celebrating the richness of human heritage and spiritual expression.

Muriel Mcintyre