

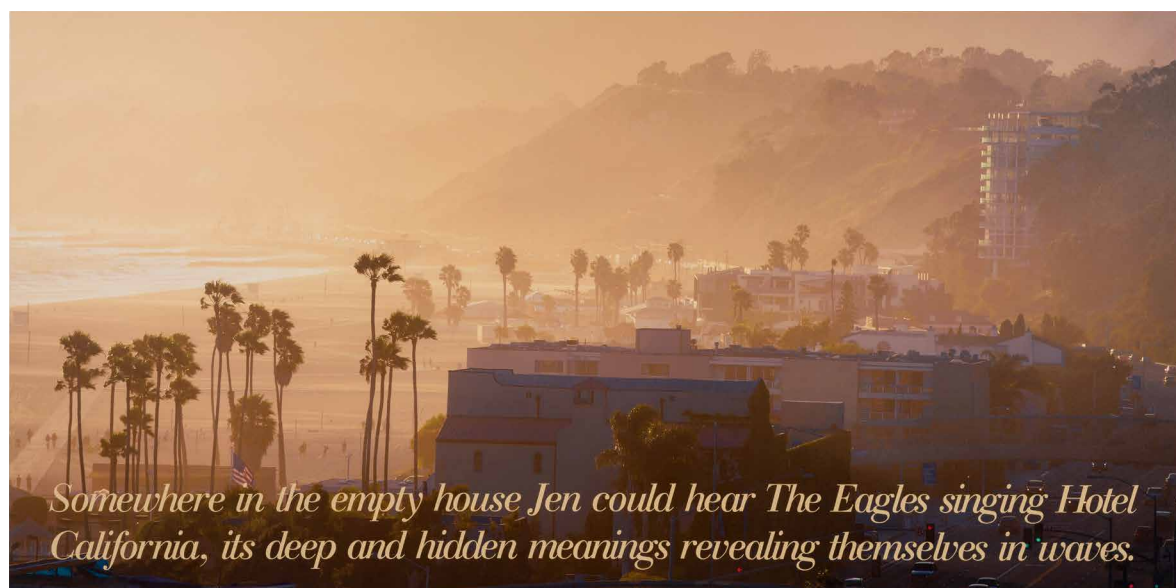
Alex Israel (American, b. 1982) is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles. Bret Easton Ellis (American, b. 1964) is an author who lives and works in Los Angeles. Their collaborative exhibition was held at Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, in spring 2016.

berg and Barbara Kruger. Alex wanted to try to extend this tradition in a fresh and unexpected way. Bringing in the perfect literary collaborator reflects and advances a contemporary artistic

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Born and Not Made
Hotel California
2016

structure that has become standard in popular music (Jay Z featuring Kanye West), but is less common in other art forms.

Bret's texts mine the language of Twitter, phone texts and Instagram posts to advance American poetry into the present. The texts have none of the pretentiousness of "Poetry," but they evoke our time with the same literary precision as the work of the aforementioned William Carlos Williams and other modernist poets who observed the American scene. Alex told me that Bret had written as many as 1,000 texts, which he distilled down to the 100 that he sent to Alex. Alex and Bret then further refined these into the sixteen texts that were made into paintings for

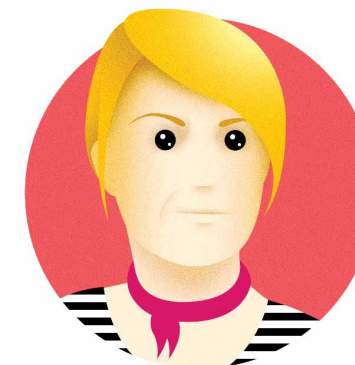


their recent exhibition at Gagosian Beverly Hills. Alex paired the texts with stock images of Los Angeles, purchased online and then extensively re-touched. The fabrication technique is multi-layered and complex, developed through trial and error. Rather than simply printing out the image on an ink jet printer, each canvas is first painted with acrylic and gel medium. The spaces where the text is visible are left blank, prior to the printing of the image, so what one reads as text is actually the underpainting. The works have the depth and texture of paintings, rather than printed photographs.

Connecting the structural and the conceptual elements of the project is the concept of The Double. There is the inspired collaboration between a very contemporary artist and a very contemporary writer, and there is the exploration of a very contemporary Los Angeles state of mind, which Alex Israel describes as a "culture of self-transformation and performance."

As one of the characters in one of the most of the iconic of these paintings declares, "I'm going to be a very different kind of star." ☺

Maria Lind
in conversation
with MARIE
KØLBÆK
IVERSEN



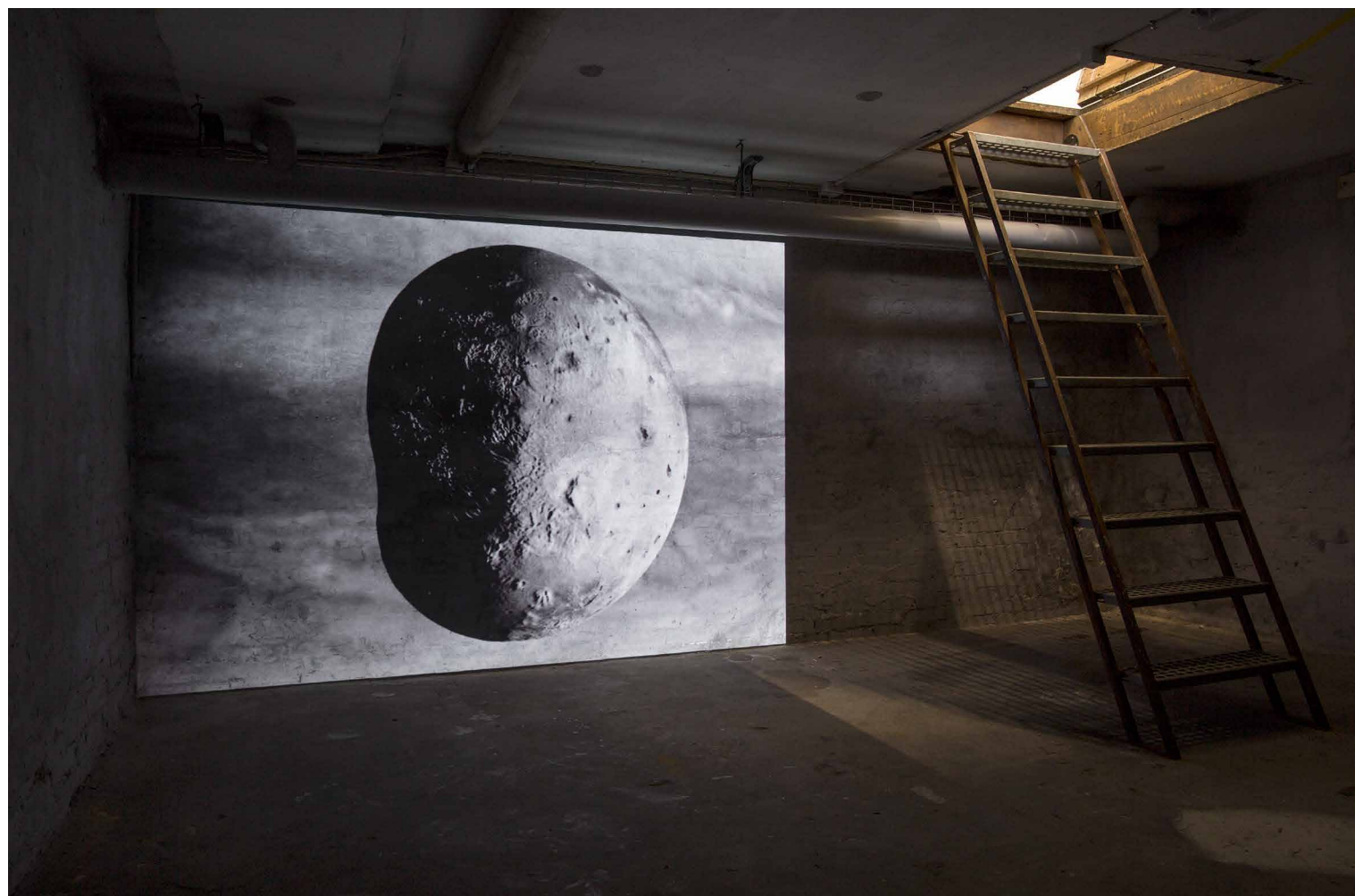
FOCUSING ON ART'S IMAGINATIVE QUALITIES, SOCIAL IMPACT AND ACTIVE RELATIONSHIP TO THE FUTURE, THE CENTER STAGE SERIES DIRECTS OUR ATTENTION TO THE QUESTION: WHAT DOES ART DO?

In the 2015 installation *Mirror Therapy*, a thin slice of lapis lazuli replaces film as the substance between the projector's light and the projected image. Through this "stone slide," you make a hard material immaterial and offer an image for inspection, not unlike an X-ray. It seems to be about presentation, rather than representation or documentation. What led you to this material articulation?

Mirror Therapy is a direct continuation of my general practice and how I relate to my materials. I try to avoid postulating something about or through my material. Instead, I pay attention to it, acknowledging its particularities and, by conceptually enhancing those particularities, make it resonate beyond itself and meet the borders of its definition. I allow it to become strange.

Mirror Therapy came after a series of works with video feedback titled "RETROACTION," where cameras and projectors are combined in a closed circuit, projecting on and filming the same screen, thereby generating a graphic site- and system-specific pattern. Thinking of myself as an organizer rather than creator of those visual effects, my attempt was to break down the idea of "medium" as transparent vessel for foreign contents and instead allow it to act as an enforcer of the materials' own characteristics. I wanted to subtly change the power balance between artist and material as a way of experimenting with more attentive and respectful ways of relating to the world, acknowledging that the artistic material is just another "other" in the line of "others" operating outside Euro- and anthropocentric systems of thought. By using stone in *Mirror Therapy*, I wanted to see if I could repeat this methodology of "listening" to my material, of organizing rather than creating. Being based in Paris at the time, I was inspired by the cityscape. France is a country built on rock, and many buildings have elaborate marbled facades in which stones unfold like giant mineral Rorschachs. There is a certain beauty in the unifying virtual

Maria Lind is the Director of Tensia Konsthall, Stockholm, and an independent curator and writer. She was appointed Artistic Director for the 2016 Gwangju Biennale, to be held from 2 September–6 November.



patterns that arise as a direct consequence of the stones' destruction and distribution across the facades. The veins and streaks of the cut-up rocks reconnect across the many sections and make up new virtual wholes beyond the initial "trauma" of mutilation. Not as a restorative measure—the material unities of the individual stones are forever gone, carved as they were from the mountainside—but as some kind of cyborg condition that rejects the idea of material destruction as absolute destruction, and directs attention instead to the virtual phantom evoked by physical trauma.

What about the title?

I chose the title in response to the virtual operation of the stone—the idea that new wholes are generated through these virtual patterns. It reminded me of V. S. Ramachandran's "mirror visual feedback therapy," which is a treatment method aimed at easing phantom pain. By placing a mirror along the body's symmetrical axis and mir-

10/1, 2015. Installation view at NHL space, Copenhagen
Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Frida Gregersen

roring the good limb in the place of the missing limb, the amputee gains cognitive access to what is absent. In both the treatment and my installation, virtuality is inscribed as part of the physical body and its outward projection into the world. The title led me to my stone material. *Mirror therapy* is widely used in the treatment of Western veterans from the war in Afghanistan. I therefore chose to work with the Afghan stone lapis lazuli, which has been used for decorative purposes in Asia for centuries due to its bright blue color. Because the slide installation projects the actual stone,

In my work, virtuality is inscribed as part of the physical body and its outward projection into the world

it is neither representation nor recollection: it is material actuality, whose virtual resonance spans historical, geopolitical and artistic demarcations.

Fictions of normative embodiment figure prominently in the work—I'm thinking, for example, of a video featuring a Danish soldier who lost his foot while on duty in Afghanistan. Can you tell me a bit more about the geopolitical backdrops of your work, with equal emphasis on "geo" and "political"?

Of the figures reflected in the work, two are particularly important: the planet Earth and the human body. These two figures, simultaneously worlds of their own and subordinates to larger systems, stand on either side of the virtual mirror posed by the artwork, reflecting retroactively upon each other. The cut rock is no more an analogy for the mutilated body than the wounded soldier is an image of the lost unity of the stone, yet they relate to each other through sympathetic processes of similarity and contagion, the soldier having set foot on the Afghan ground from which the stone is sourced. It's easy enough to lament the lacking innocence of the warring human race. The artwork, however, takes aim at the future: rather than pre-

Marie Kolbaek-Iversen (Danish, b. 1981) is an artist who lives and works between São Paulo and Copenhagen. Upcoming projects include the 2016 Gwangju Biennial 2016 and a solo exhibition at PARMER, New York, opening in 2017.

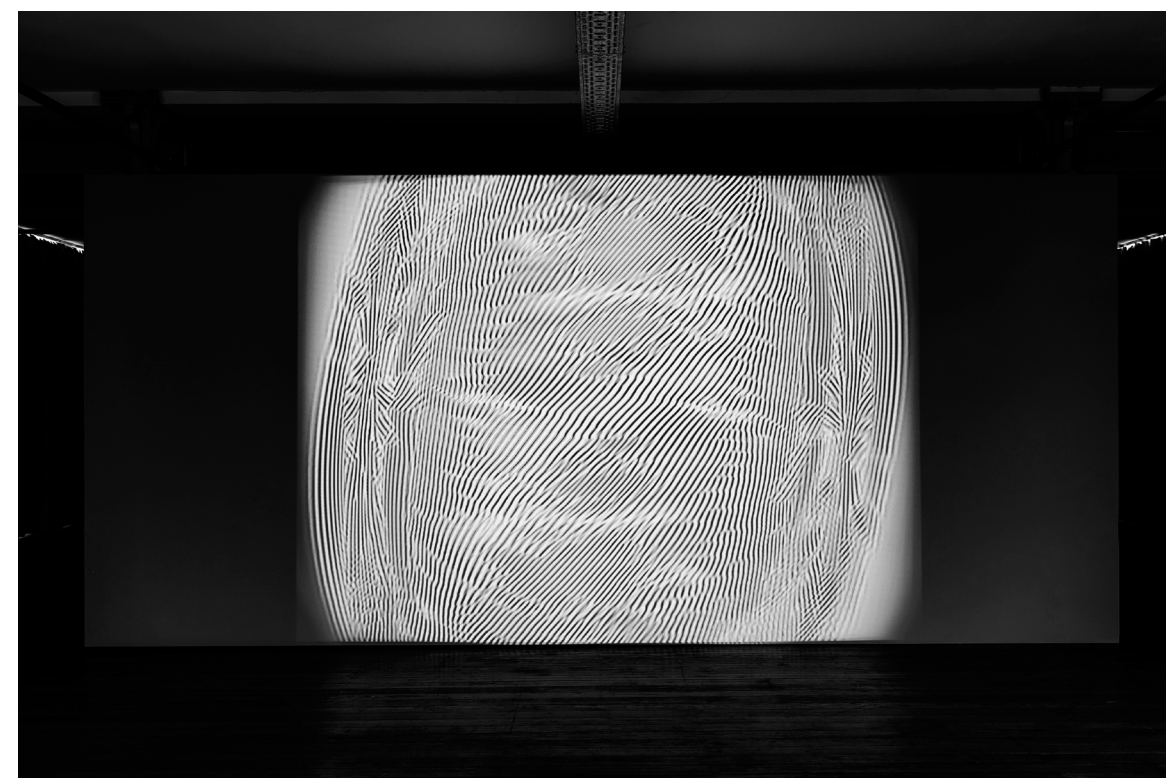
Retroaction X, 2014. Installation view at STUK Kunstencentrum, Leuven. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Pierre Antoine

senting material reorganization or destruction as final, the work renders trauma a fertile ground for new beginnings.

As mentioned earlier, I did not set out to make a work about Afghanistan, but instead arrived there through associative processes; I was shocked that the conceptual machinery of the artwork had brought with it such a charged and tense political reality. With this came a great responsibility, but I also knew that I had to see it through, not least to complicate media-conveyed representations of contemporary wars and conflicts, which reduce people and places to caricatures, alive or dead with a cheer or a tear, depending on political alliances.

Can you elaborate on the idea of responsibility?

There is much debate as to the actual efficiency of war reportage, whether it fosters empathy with or indifference towards the subjects depicted. Short-circuiting the loop of representation by way of actuality, I thought the lapis lazuli slides would be actual represen-



tatives of Afghanistan, firsthand witnesses to the sufferings endured. The question remains, however, whether it is possible for people to empathize with a stone.

Mirror therapy offsets phantom pain because it causes mirror neurons to "fire" across a disparity brought about by amputation, allowing patients to recognize themselves despite physical asymmetry. In neurology, the ability to empathize with others is based on similarity: the closer the other is to us, the more vivid the empathetic feeling. But the sense of distance between the self and the other is not a fixed unity—it's malleable, susceptible to outside stressors and stimuli. A stressed mind equates difference with danger, and is more prone to group behavior and discrimination. So similarity lies both at the core of the problem and in its potential easing. The exercise, then, is to approximate that which is seemingly foreign—to "fire mirror neurons" across gaps posed by geographic, political, religious, linguistic and phenomenological differences. Obviously,



Io/I, still, 2015
Courtesy of the artist

I cannot embrace asymmetry in all its manifestations (racial, gender-based, religious, sexual, economic, militaristic, and so on). So let me stress the notion of approximation, of intimacy, of daring to be intimate with that which is troublesome—to stay with the trouble, as Donna Haraway puts it.

How does "embodiment" function in your work?

If we understand "embodiment" as the incarnation of an idea, I'd say that it only covers part of the material dynamics at play in my work. I tend to grant the material more autonomy than the notion of embodiment provides. Rather than objectifying an idea through a given material, I think of my materials as collaborators, the process of developing an artwork becoming a two-way exchange. I mediate the material just as much as it mediates me.

I compare a work of art with the human brain, as both are condensations of physical materiality and virtual thought.

From the embryonic state, the human brain and its ideas—its materiality and virtuality—emerge as one. While the brain provides the physical structure associated with the mind, it is in fact just another organ. Thinking is to the brain what walking is to the legs: both are transports.

2015's *Io/I* revolves around one of Jupiter's moons, Io, which is the most volcanically active body in our solar system. On the one hand, there is a similarity between the Earth and Io, as both are celestial bodies with volcanic activity at their cores. But in terms of distance, there is a majestic leap between the proximity of lapis lazuli and a moon in the outer parts of our solar system.

How do you think about such similarities and differences?

Io is at once very distant and very close—first, by way of mistranslation from the Italian *Io*, meaning "I" or "me." But like any self, *Io* is inconsistent, as continuous volcanic activity alters her surface to give rise to new configurations. Being a distant astronomical body, it's not possible for me to access *Io* on a material level; the only traces we have of her are pictorial. I am therefore using images from NASA's archives as the source material for a running series of 3D-animated loops of *Io* as a volatile celestial body. Every time I show the work is different, as I add new loops and take others out to reflect the constant reconfigurations of the lunar subject. Despite her distance and unavailability, however, *Io* weaves herself into me by way of the first-person pronoun, just like she wove herself into Galileo, who, when he first fixed his gaze on a spot in the vast unknown, called it "I."

Although apparently different, *Io/I* shares with *Mirror Therapy* an embracing of the new that arises in the face of destruction. Both debunk a moral order based on restoration and an idea of innocence (like virginity, once lost). And while both are projections of outward trauma, what they bring to the fore is potential: other times, other places, other entries into the world, including and exceeding the human measure.

The 11th Gwangju Biennale, where you are showing *Mirror Therapy*, is entitled "The Eighth Climate (What Does Art Do?)". The title conveys

an interest in the performativity of art, not as performance, but rather what it does once it is launched into the world. What do you think *Mirror Therapy* does as an artwork?

I read art's cultural location historically and politically. For that reason, I have previously involved myself in collective, self-organized, artistic and editorial projects. But having grown somewhat disenchanted with activist art, I borrow my understanding of art's potential from Brazilian psychoanalyst and cultural critic Suely Rolnik. In "The Geopolitics of Pimping,"

she writes that while activism accepts "the reigning cartography (conflicts of class, race, gender, etc.)" and fights for a more just configuration, art has the potential of unraveling such cartographies altogether "by bringing the mutations of sensibility into the realm of the visible and the speakable." I think this is a beautiful way to define art's performance in the world. I also think her distinction between the essentially different natures of art and activism is urgent: both are important measures of resistance, but they are irreducible to each other, even at the points where they intersect. ☺

PANORAMA New Normal in CUBA by Gean Moreno



AS THE CULTURAL CALENDAR INCREASINGLY BECOMES A FEAST OF OPPORTUNITIES TO FLY OFF THE BEATEN TRACK, THE PANORAMA SERIES TRAVELS THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS.

Gean Moreno is curator of programs at ICA Miami and is on the advisory committee for the 2017 Whitney Biennial. He previously worked at the non-profit gallery Locust Projects, Miami, and served as artistic director at the Miami arts non-profit Cannonball.

Someday someone will write the grotesquely carnivalesque and tragic story of the relationship between Miami and Havana since 1959. It will include downed airliners, political prisoners, family betrayals, international persecution, secret CIA deals and car bombs. At the moment, sentimentality and imaginations dwindled by false hope prevent such an enterprise. What may be possible in our stirred ambience, instead of a great thriller, is to look from this side (Miami) on the "normalization" of relations between the US and Cuba, which began in December 2014 and crescendoed with president Obama's recent visit, through the tainted lens that proximity and tangled relations afford. After all, "normalization" implies, above all else, a swivel of the camera, a turn toward a new storyline. The endless milking of old struggles, the symbolic capital of being peripheral and poor and besieged, the narrative of representing something other to capitalist self-perpetuation—all this collapses. Now, we are looking at a Havana, racing to catch up to the other Latin American capitals, leaving behind the

discourse of American aggression and overreach (which of course ceased to have much currency when China became a major international trading partner with most of the countries in the hemisphere, and the IMF was relegated to a negligible position). That is, we are looking at a Havana that comes to match the way Cuban international artists, all deeply enmeshed in the market and endowed with all kinds of privileges, live. They have their refurbished houses, their beach properties, their fully staffed studios and substantial production budgets. What is as significant in this period of "normalization" as the reopening of the American embassy is that Galleria Continua has opened a location in Havana's