

# Laments

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Date

**01.10.2021**  
**31.10.2021**

Location

**Archivio Storico**  
**Palermo**

Istituto Svizzero

Information

**Dorota Gawęda & Eglė Kulbokaitė**

Category

**Art, Exhibition**

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Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, who have been working together as an artist duo since 2013, are interested in the circulation mechanisms and methods of texts, voices, and the knowledge they carry—across centuries, continents, and cultures. In the disseminations and transmissions that take place both orally and in writing, and not infrequently in a fragmentary way, in bits and pieces. In their nomadic long-term project, *YOUNG GIRL READING GROUP* (YGRG), the two artists, who are both avid readers, explore during collective reading sessions the relationship between bodies of text, embodied language, and voices. In doing so they examine how knowledge is produced and disseminated through reading aloud together and listening, as well as the function that modern technologies play in this context: often texts from pirated PDFs are read aloud from glowing smartphone screens. Their artistic works—including performances, video installations, sculptures, and even fragrances—also deal with reading texts and the act of reading as a collective, artistic practice. Going hand in hand with the thematic themes in their work, the texts they draw on span a wide range of topics, such as queer theory, ecocriticism and ecofeminism, radical black science fiction, Eastern European folk tales, and Swiss court records of witch trials.

The Archivio Storico in Palermo is an ideal exhibition venue for *Laments*, the new video and sound installation by Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė. The archive, which stores the documents of the city administration from the end of the 13th century to the 1950s, is centrally located in Via Maqueda in the city's former Jewish quarter, and is thought to be the same spot where the synagogue once stood. The archive's central hall, with its imposing columns and tall bookshelves, was built in the mid-19th century, adding to the buildings of the former Augustinian convent of San Nicolò da Tolentino, which has existed since the 17th century. It is therefore a place where multiple layers of texts, knowledge, and different (oral and written) traditions of transmission overlap. *Laments* is part of the multimedia series *Mouthless*, which Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė have been working on since autumn 2019. As an "open narrative", according to the artists, the series comprises videos, objects, sound, texts, and performances that are continuously presented, rearranged, recontextualized, and translated in various exhibition situations. For example, the singing we hear echoing throughout the Archivio Storico was already part of a performance the artists showed in May at Istituto Svizzero in Milan.

So let's listen to this near-hypnotic sound, a composition inspired by the centuries-old tradition of the Sutartinė—polyphonic folk songs from Lithuania. The English lyrics were excerpted from theoretical and poetic texts from the YGRG archive (written by authors such as Amílcar Cabral and Velimir Khlebnikov), and are interspersed with Polish texts. In some parts, they are sung backwards or repeated. According to the artists, this not only points out the absurdities and weirdness of everyday life but also represents a proposal to think about time, indeed existence itself, in loops and cycles. On the three screens, we see three figures performing the plaintive songs in front of sometimes surreal, computer-generated, or fog-shrouded landscapes. The costumes they wear are also recurring elements in the *Mouthless* work complex. Modular in form, they can be adapted to the performers' bodies in different ways. According to Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, the costumes are loosely inspired by the iconography of European Baroque painting. The objects in the second room, staged in an almost fetish-like manner, are reminiscent of a kind of golf stool, with their shiny metal tapered legs; the two artists call them *Spectator(s)*.

Moments of poetic lament—the lyrics, "there is not a soul", continue to resonate as multiple voices in my ears—and the idea of the cyclical interconnectedness of all things, are central themes in the work presented in Palermo. They form a kind of humus for artists' interweaving of images, texts, songs, and knowledge, and draw significantly on the ecophilosophical texts of Timothy Morton and his examination of the human-made climate crisis, the current era of the Anthropocene (the reality that human intervention is significantly changing the biosphere), and the relationship between humans and nature that must be re-thought as a result. Timothy Morton calls plaintive writing about advancing climate change an 'elegy', a lament, and concludes that ecology is often elegiac and therefore that elegy is also ecological. Given the sometimes irritating realization that civilization and nature are not two separate things, he calls for a reconceptualization of nature. There is no "back to nature", only the understanding that we are nature and that we live—indeed, must live—together in solidarity across species and time. Which brings us back to *Laments* by Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, in which the two artists not only refer to the traditional iconography of landscape depictions throughout art history, but also assert the coexistence of human and non-human, of living and dead beings, of spirits and people. The landscape spirits that populate Eastern European folklore and the Slavic and Baltic oral traditions of ritual and incantation are rooted, according to the artists, in a cyclical understanding of the world in which there are no divisions between times and species. Perhaps this is precisely a key for the coexistence of all beings in the future as well.

Gioia Dal Molin, September 2021

For information:  
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## Biography

Dorota Gawęda (1986, Lublin, PL) and Eglė Kulbokaitė (1987, Kaunas, LT) are an artist duo founded in 2013, based in Basel (CH). Both are graduates of the Royal College of Art, London (2012). The multi-faceted practice of the duo navigates between performance, installation, sculpture, video, text, sound and scent. Creating sensory environments that directly involve the audience, using both screen technology and organic elements, they generate fragmented narratives that echo our contemporary anxieties. They have exhibited internationally, including at: Swiss Institute, New York; Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf; Fri Art-Kunsthalle Fribourg; Kunstverein Düsseldorf; Lafayette Anticipations, Paris; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; MMOMA, Moscow; Kunsthalle Basel; ICA, London.

They are also the founders of the *YOUNG GIRL READING GROUP* (2013–ongoing); they have recently published their first monograph with Edizioni Periferia and Pro Helvetia. Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė won the Swiss Performance Art Award 2021 and were shortlisted for the Swiss Art Award 2021.

**1**  
*Mouthless Part II*, 2021  
Three-channel video installation with sound  
Lyrics: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė  
Voices: Valentin Bezençon, Anastasia Chaguidouline, Abongile Gwele  
Performance: Oskar Pawełko, Dorothea Rust, Tiran Willemse  
Sound design: Haraldur Thrastarson  
Cinematography and Post Production: Raphael Wanner  
Light: Torvioll Jashari  
Costume: Tim Heyduck with Manfred Elias Knorr  
Makeup: Jasmin Berger

The production of *Mouthless Part II* was generously supported by Fachausschuss Film und Medienkunst Basel and Pro Helvetia – The Swiss Arts Council, Lithuanian Culture Council and La Becque Artist Residency.

**2**  
*Spectator (I-III)*, 2020  
Polished stainless steel, print on leather

This exhibition is accompanied by a bilingual publication in Italian and English with a text by Chus Martínez and a reprint of a text by Timothy Morton. The publication is available at the exhibition and can also be ordered (postage applies) from [roma@istitutovisvizzero.it](mailto:roma@istitutovisvizzero.it).

