

Alex Ayed
Owls and Promises
11 Jun–24 Jul 2022

Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities—a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfills, can dispel.¹

Hannah Arendt

The concept of a promise refers to the contents of the commitment but also to the act itself, i.e the necessary actions in order to keep the promise. But what does it mean to commit oneself to something in the future, to something unforeseeable? How does a promise relate to obligation and responsibility? And what if a promise manifests itself temporarily within an exhibition or a practice?

With the show *Owls and Promises* Alex Ayed embraces the idea of keeping a promise. Interestingly, the act of promising and that of collecting occupy overlapping spaces, since the latter is per se a conservation practice, it is, “a veto against the gnawing tooth of time and the natural force of forgetting.”² Much like a promise, collecting can also be located as an identity-forming force, as an “island of certainty”³ in a sea of fundamental uncertainty and unreliability. In Ayed’s case, keeping a promise also means the continued existence of a left behind collection. However, what Ayed presents at Kunstverein Freiburg is merely one intermediate state, one of many possible states, providing a glimpse into the processes of preserving and archiving the collection and only so much as hinting at how much potential, knowledge and memory lie dormant here.

At Kunstverein Freiburg two heavy duty shelves house books, fossils, shells, stones, cases, caskets, medical instruments, agricultural equipment, ceramics, blacksmith’s tools – to name but *one* selection of collections within the collection itself and at that failing on all counts to do justice to the multitude and number of objects discoverable within it. They were meticulously stashed away over decades by Ayed’s grandfather and have been transferred from Burgundy, France, to Freiburg. Each working process that accompanied this transfer, such as sorting, unpacking, inspecting, cleaning, photographing and cataloguing, comprises those actions in which the attempt to keep a promise occurs repeatedly.

The irrepressible curiosity and passion for collecting possessed by Ayed’s grandfather can not only be understood preliminarily through the abundance and variety of the objects but also through traces that came and still come to light during the archiving process, e.g. through so-called ephemera. Those printed matters characterised by their short lifespan, like the letters, newspaper articles, notes, postcards or receipts that could be found amongst the boxes not only tell of the grandfather’s fascination but connect the several collections and

groups of objects with each other. “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”⁴ Thus, an overwhelming and elusive collection unfolds as a memory space. Like a net that spans the exhibition space, the objects intertwine not only the memories, interests, relationships, travels and knowledge of the artist’s grandfather but also visitors’ own inner worlds of thought and association.

The collections do not bare witness to only *one* history nor do they visualise just *one* biography but accumulate an extraordinary multitude of temporalities and territories in the Kunstverein, referring to knowledge practices, cultural techniques and crafts, conflating individual fates and societal developments. The artefacts testify especially to cultural techniques and practices now largely unknown to us, insofar as they were and are relevant for the generation, storage and transmission of knowledge.

Now, a medieval bellows (French: *soufflet*) used to stoke the embers during forging; the *Encyclopédie* published by Diderot and d’Alembert in 1751; a drip-glazed stoneware jug,⁵ and a flail (French: *fléau*) used to thresh the wheat from the chaff are certainly not paleontological or archaeological finds. Nevertheless, every single object is a trace or an impression of past labour, a ritual, an experience. They elucidate pre-industrial living and working environments that were characterised by a low division of labour and subsistence agriculture, bound together with local resources and produce, the regulatory systems of guilds and chambers, and family-run workshops.

Each of these devices can be traced back to real coordinates; locations and biographies, but in many ways their former functionalities remain a mystery. Everything that is commonly subsumed under the term ‘modernisation’, from the mid-19th century onwards, fundamentally altered spacial, temporal and especially social regimes, so much so that just short of approximately 300 years later, some tools are no longer identifiable. It is hoped that much of what remained cryptic and unassignable at the

time of the exhibition opening can be named and deciphered during the course of the exhibition, even if only fragmentarily.

In addition to the actual knowledge of and about the objects, Ayed is also concerned with their imaginative and narrative potential, i.e. everything that they are able to conjure in terms of inner images, ideas, associations and memories. This “thinking in pictures“ leads us to the distinction between primary and secondary process thinking, primary being inherently associative, chaotic, anachronistic and intuitively visual, whilst secondary is characterised by rationality, conceptual attributions and chronological sequences. Based on this, Jean-Paul Satre states “[i]magination is not an empirical or superadded power of consciousness, it is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom; every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is big with imagination in as much as it always presents itself as a withdrawing from the real.”⁶

The resulting interdependence becomes decisive for viewing the collection stored at the Kunstverein; that moment of iridescence between the state of knowing and not knowing, between the real and the imagined and between presence and absence, which is all underlined by the way in which the shelves lie partially open, partially closed, as well as by the positioning of the boxes. And it is precisely these modes of estimation, guessing, puzzling and getting lost in thought which are rooted in our own experiences, memories and imagination, which this collection is able to activate, allowing us to embark on all kinds of journeys.

A state of momentariness is inherent to both collection and order that has us “oscillat[ing] between the illusion of the finished and the vertigo of the unattainable”.⁷ Different arrangements or groupings, as well as the visible ways in which things are set aside, unpacked, unhinged, leaning, stacked, convey a sense of the immediate moment and hint that much more can and must be possible.

Literature

¹ Arendt, H. (1956[1958]). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 237.

² Assmann, A. (2008). *Collecting, Collections, Collectors*, in: *On Interchange. Zwischenspiele einer Sammlung*, ed. by Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Cologne, 93–96, here 92.

³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220.

⁴ Benjamin, W. ([1931]). *Unpacking My Library. A Talk About Book Collecting*, in: *Illuminations: Essays & Reflections – Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 59–67, here 60.

⁵ Stoneware’ refers to one of the main ceramic types (stoneware, earthenware, porcelain), which differ in terms of their firing temperatures and the clay used.

⁶ Sartre, J.-P. (1966[1940]). *The Psychology of Imagination*. Translated by B. Frechtman. New York: Washington Square Press, 243.

⁷ Perec, G. (1999[1978]). *Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One’s Books*, in: *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. London: Penguin, 148–155, here 155.

Alex Ayed (b. 1989, FR) lives and works in France and Tunisia. *Owls and Promises* is his first institutional solo exhibition in Europe, curated by Theresa Rößler.

Selected solo exhibitions:

Laws of Confusion, together with Lydia Ourahmane, The Renaissance Society, Chicago, US, 2021; *TRANSUMANZA*, Galleria ZERO, Milan, IT, 2021; *Roaring Forties*, Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris, FR, 2020; *Soap Opera*, B7L9 Art Station, Tunis, TN, 2019; *Exhibition 3: Alex Ayed*, Institute of Arab & Islamic Art, New York, US, 2018; *Pathetic Fallacy*, Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris, FR, 2018.

Selected group exhibitions:

Tactics of Augmented Dreams, Fondation D'entreprise Hermes, Brussels, BL, 2022; *Soft Water Hard Stone*, Fifth New Museum Triennial, New York, US, 2021; *Risquons-Tout*, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, BL, 2020; *La psychologie des serrures*, CAN, Neuchâtel, CH, 2020; *Horology*, Jack Hanley Gallery, New York, US, 2019; *Water Pressure*, Jaou, Tunis, TN, 2018.

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1

Untitled, 2022

Two industrial storage racks,
wooden crates, labels,
cardboard boxes,
books, various
collections, various
objects

Installation

615×1400×110 cm

2

Louis Jean

Untitled, 1953

Gelatin silver print,
wooden frame

23.5×17.5 cm

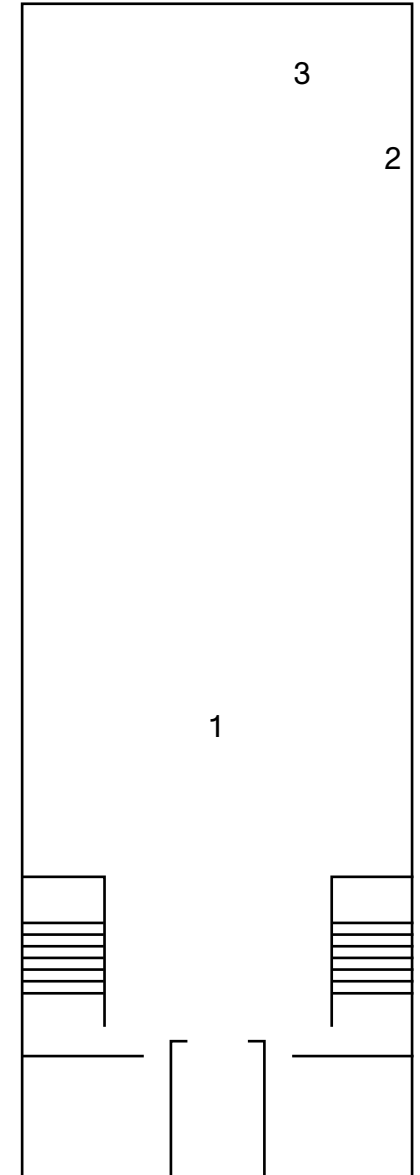
3

Untitled (Chest), 2022

19th century chest,
industrial blue cart

59×69.5×44 cm

Hall



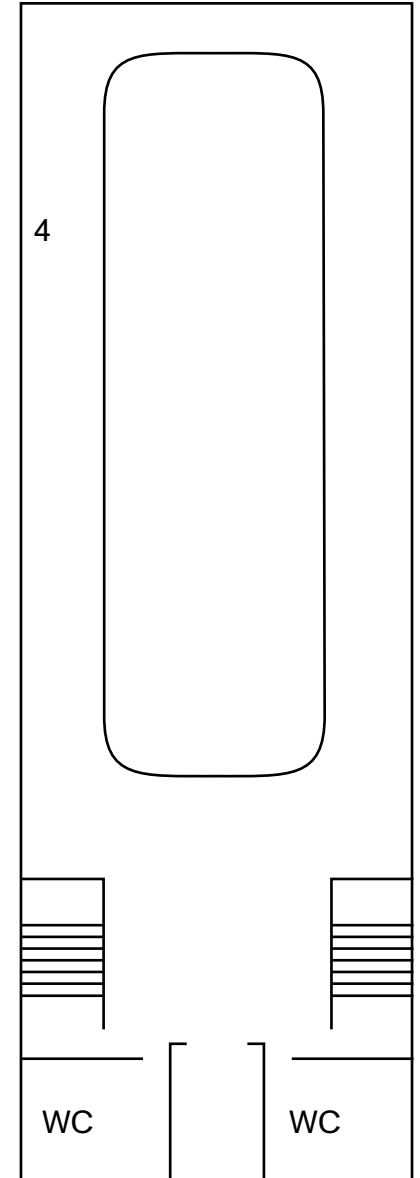
4

Untitled, 2022

19th century ceramics
collection from
Burgundy on wooden
shelf

199×151×57 cm

Gallery



Programme

Fri, 10 Jun 2022, 7 pm
Opening Night with an Introduction
by Theresa Rößler

Thu, 23 Jan 2022, 7 pm
Guided Tour with Heinrich Dietz

Fri, 24 Jun 2022, 7 pm
Exhibition Tour with
Junge Kunstfreund*innen

Thu, 14 Jul 2022, 7 pm
Curator's Tour with Theresa Rößler

Sat, 23 Jul 2022, 8 pm
Museums Night
Sound Performance
Martina Lussi

Sun, 24 Jul 2022, 2–4 pm
Workshop for Children 6–12 years
Printing Workshop with
Buchkinder Freiburg e.V.
(Registration required)

Opening hours

Tue–Sun, 12 am–6 pm
Thu, 12 am–8 pm
Mon closed
16 Jun open

Entrance: 2 €/1.50 €
Thursdays free
Members free

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