

KOW – Santiago Sierra

Exhib Title:

Exercises in Popular Gymnastics

Artist:

Santiago Sierra

Dates:

MAR 9 – APR 13

Text by Alexander Koch:

Santiago Sierra returns to Berlin with an exhibition of his new project *The Maelstrom*. Having seen the show at KOW, you're not likely to forget it anytime soon. Because Black people are being subjugated in it in ways we don't want to see, because Europe speaks with a nastiness we don't want to hear, and because this is arguably Sierra's most aesthetically pleasing work yet—and in this thematic context, we also might not want to be pleased. In short: there are several conflicts that Sierra's exhibition evokes. And then there's a flag, drenched in blood.

Gambia, Africa, a walled-in compound. Men are put up against the wall. Hands behind your heads. Hands behind your backs. On your knees! One after the other, they go through the motions of a universally familiar choreography of obedience and submission. Their master? The camera. Cut. Transplanted into an abstract visual space, the same black bodies return on a digital stage before a white backdrop like the graphic elements of an increasingly ornamental, dehumanized composition, forming patterns, grids, circles.

The action in the picture is almost drowned out by a voice, the voice of Europe. It is the voice of Josep Borrell, the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, the second-most important person in Brussels. In 2022, it became publicly known that Borrell had given a speech in which he had called Europe a garden and the rest of the world a jungle that needed to be brought under control. It was a textbook-ready specimen of racism and colonialism, an instant classic of the genre. Sierra replays it in a loop, again and again; at first you don't believe your ears, then you get sick to your stomach.

Sierra's project is carefully calculated. His film and accompanying photographic works with which the exhibition opens on the gallery's ground floor were created in collaboration with players of the Gambian football team Tallinding United, who performed for *The Maelstrom*. Among the sources of inspiration for the choreographic arrangements were the principles of Busby Berkeley, the influential Hollywood choreographer and director of musical films who established the geometric-modern play with bodies in large numbers as a widely popular form of entertainment; around the same time, the Nazis, too, whipped their crowds

into visual shape. A very different inspiration were the pictures coming from El Salvador: the staged abasement of young men made to surrender their bodies to a brutal carceral regime by the tens of thousands made headlines around the world in 2022. The Israeli military recently applied the same image politics when it published pictures of Palestinian prisoners in their underwear.

Santiago Sierra's new work unmaskes the postcolonial Western rhetoric. It points to the continuity of the European pattern of really existing colonialism and racism. The Maelstrom eventually congeals into exactly the kind of menacing, apocalyptic Black mass that strikes such fear into the hearts of Europeans like Borrell and that anarchists like Sierra welcome as an uncontainable geopolitical biopower from below.

In a side room that visitors are asked to enter singly, a Spanish flag lies in a display case, hard and stiff with caked blood. It is blood that people donated for Sierra's project; blood from areas that Spain brought to heel under its national flag in the course of its history, countries of the erstwhile colonial empire as well as formerly independent regions of the Iberian peninsula. No comment needed, presumably. Everyone must find their own way through this room.

On March 15, Santiago Sierra will be featured by Videoart at Midnight. He will be present to introduce the audience to the night's program, which, besides The Maelstrom—on the big screen—will showcase additional works by Sierra.