

Ursula Biemann, *Sahara Chronicle*, 2006–2009, video installation.

ing this journey. Biemann documents routes and reception camps; she speaks with smugglers and the police. Using five monitors, two projections, and wall texts, she juxtaposes personal narratives with writings on topology, commerce, and law, trying to incorporate the streams of people ceaselessly flowing north into a theoretical discourse. She opens up a productive space of thought that purely image-based media are unable to provide.

Biemann knows something about fieldwork, and she knows something about socioeconomic and geopolitical contexts, and when these spheres meet, her projects are solid. But seeing them in a kind of retrospective, one monitor after the other, leaves one with a disquieting feeling of surfing the world's social conflicts. The problem may be with the institution: How many interviews and how much documentary imagery can a museum stand?

—Stefan Zucker

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.

VIENNA

Mithu Sen

KRINZINGER PROJEKTE

Mithu Sen is known above all for her erotic sculptures, photocollages, and drawings—and she herself often stands at their center, for instance in her photographic portraits from the series “Half Full,” 2007. As she humorously explains, using her own image allows her to avoid copyright problems. Yet this stylistic device is also clearly in line with her aesthetic position. Since her early sculptures made of hair (“Unbelongings,” 2001–2006), Sen’s work has made use of autobiographical experiences, perceptions, and feelings, which she transforms into images rich in ambiguity.

Preparing her show for Vienna, “Me Two,” Sen conducted intensive research on Egon Schiele, finding both thematic and formal parallels with her own work. The New Delhi-based artist decided to take up one particularly striking motif of Schiele’s for her new series of drawings—his depiction of hands. In Sen’s “On your hand – I place my hand – barely. In our hands – nothing,” 2009, these hands appear to be holding or grasping something, but it is nothing we can see. These clenched hands are combined with sweet little roses and charming tigers, with squid, pretzel sticks, a gorgeously adorned boot, a stag’s antlers, and cacti. The motifs are ornamental but also symbolic: The rose stands for immortality but also for the convolutions of the unconscious; the bird is an image of migration but also stands for a “desire to nest.” Balls recall nipples, and even tigers and fish are

Swiss Alps to process what she has seen in the field. One wonders how much can be said about Palestinian shacks from the perspective of a Swiss mountain retreat.

In the installation *Sahara Chronicle*, 2006–2009, Biemann studies the desert as an important space of migration for Africans seeking to reach Europe. She is interested above all in the Tuaregs, who, with their century-old tradition of steering people through the desert, are the most sought-after guides for those attempt-

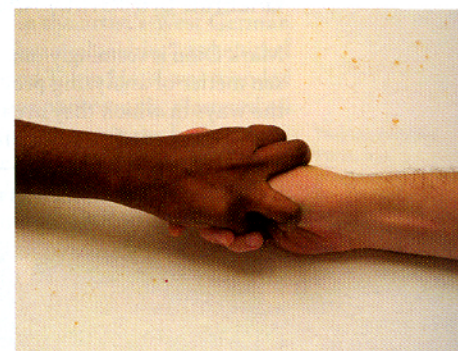
freighted with sexual connotations. Like Schiele’s work, Sen’s pictures conjoin pain and beauty; sexuality, longing, and death; ornament and emptiness.

In *Tattoo*, 2006, a video made during a residency in Brazil, Sen has a spiral inscribed on the most sensitive part of the body: the palm of the hand. She wanted to “resist the tears but not the pain,” Sen says, explaining her motivation. In her new animated video *shifted and shifted—deleted and edited*, 2009, the hand is no longer a surface to be inscribed; it is active. Two hands grasp each other, one holding the other down. This closeness soon turns into pain. The fingers dig into the flesh. Blood flows. The touch that at first was intimate becomes an imposition. The variation of skin color (Sen is Indian) suggests a disparity of cultural spheres—is this Sen’s hand meeting Schiele’s?

The third part of Sen’s show here was *let myself be nailed . . .*, 2009. In a corner of a darkened room stood a confessional. In front of it a pair of headphones dangled. “I copied my own work again and again,” a female voice confesses. In this powerful installation, Sen speaks very openly of her fears of not living up to certain artistic expectations. The drawings in watercolor, ink, appliqué, and collage for which Sen is known and which have become her trademark are put into question. But the drawings already question themselves. The hands in them are not only a motif, they are also tools. The hands create the drawings, but here they are empty, only digging their nails into each other. In these works, we see Sen struggling to overcome her own fears and dangerous hyperconsciousness. What she finds are highly striking images that signify “the sufferings and crisis of an artist.”

—Sabine B. Vogel

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.



Mithu Sen, *shifted and shifted—deleted and edited*, 2009, still from an animated video, 1 minute 39 seconds, loop.

MILAN

Alejandro Vidal

GALLERIA ARTRA

In 2000, the Colectivo Sociedad Civil, a group of Peruvian artists and activists, organized a public action of protest and civil resistance in Plaza Mayor in Lima, Peru. Alluding to the reigning regime’s corruption, their symbolic action *Lava la Bandera* consisted of the washing of the national flag. In *A Song Before Sunset*, 2009, Alejandro Vidal presents a restaging of this rite in ten photographs. Some people, faces unseen, intently soak flags of different nations. Yet the images are not a commentary on current or historic events, and, indeed, the event that precipitated the work fades behind the image. Vidal has always worked with the representation of urban rituals, including the violent practices of youth subcultures and metropolitan “tribes,” but his art maintains a distance from any documentary form. Instead, he is interested in understanding codes, in the grammar of signs and stereotyped gestures, produced or reinforced by their representation in the media. As evinced in this recent exhibition, “Hell Is a Place Where Memory Is Dead,” the artist isolates and abstracts these elements from their contexts, then restages them in detailed, artificial form.

In Vidal’s photographs, then, he treats reality as an interloper that lurks in the background. This strategy was already clear in the artist’s earlier works, also on view: the video *Tactical Disorder*, 2006, and the