

ON HANNAH ARENDT:

‘What is Authority?’

26 April – 22 May

41 Dover Street, London



The question of authority – who has it and how it is implemented – has never been more widely debated. In her essay *What is Authority?* Hannah Arendt suggested that by the middle of the twentieth century, the concept of authority had become negatively entangled with notions of obedience. According to Arendt, this led to a confusion between the true meaning of the term and its identification with certain forms of violence and power. She maintains that authority can provide a stabilizing effect when it is grounded in respect for knowledge, experience and integrity in a person or institution. Importantly, Arendt distinguishes between a positive authority, in which it is possible to retain our freedom, and a destructive authority that is implemented through coercion by force. For this exhibition, three artists, Lili DUJOURIE, Everlyn NICODEMUS and Lerato SHADI, uniquely address this rhetorical question, and in doing so, broaden our understanding of what it means to confront power.

Lili Dujourie's (b. 1941, Belgium) *American Imperialism* (1972/2020) is a critique of American Minimalism and the authority it exerted across European cultural institutions from the mid 1960s. This site-specific installation is composed of a large steel plate propped against a gallery wall that mimics the geometric form, scale and weight of a minimalist sculpture. Both the front as well as the sides of the steel plate are painted pink with the area of the wall surrounding the sheet painted jet black, allowing for the space behind it to remain blank. The severity of this intervention and its unapologetic intrusion into the space in which it is presented symbolize the overbearing influence of artists such as Richard Serra, Donald Judd and Carl Andre at the time of its making. In Dujourie's assessment, the seemingly endless exhibitions and discussion of their work moved beyond art historical change to become an oppressive masculinist force that was suppressing a multitude of diverse artistic voices.

During the same period, and arguably in part due to the dominance of American sculpture, Dujourie was developing a pioneering and very personal video practice. *Hommage à ... I-V* (1972) is a series of five silent, grainy black-and-white videos in which Dujourie is candidly recorded in a bedroom by an automated camera set in a fixed position. In each *Hommage*, she uses her body on the bed and on the bedroom floor to slowly move between a number of strangely familiar poses. This new artistic medium provided Dujourie with new possibilities, free from the heavily inscribed traditions of sculpture she was commenting upon in *American Imperialism*. The videos with their soft rounded aperture – suggestive of a 'peephole' – introduce a sense of voyeurism and surveillance. Dujourie was acutely aware that representations of the female body had traditionally been conditioned by a heterosexual male gaze. By playing with and reflecting back art historical images of the reclining female nude, she could deconstruct and reclaim them from a conversation that had previously restricted female agency.

Everlyn NICODEMUS' (b. 1954, Tanzania) series of paintings *Silent Strength* (1989-1990) address the triumph of the human spirit over suffering. Their distinct palette of black, amber, rust and vermillion suggest a nighttime scene and the orange glow of sodium powered streetlights. They feature women, often in pairs, that are not ordinary in any sense of the word. Their bodies are drawn with a curvilinear economy bereft of the regularities and proportions to which we are accustomed. They have no mouths, no eyes, no ears, but we can ascertain they are human by the fingernails on their simply drawn hands or by the basic circles that indicate their breasts. The fact that they do not have a substantive skeleton or muscle mass enables them to merge with their backgrounds, moving back and forth between legibility and illegibility, seen and unseen.

Windows are another consistent feature of these works by Nicodemus and are represented as framed crosses. They disorientate rather than locate as they typically would in an architectural setting. In *No. 23*, the scale and placement of the windows suggest that its faceless figure is in some vast cavernous building, while in others such as *No. 1*, they allude to more private spaces, such as a bedroom. In another example *No. 33*, a body appears to float in the air high above two windowpanes and a tree-like form as if one might experience in a dream. In stark contrast *No. 24* has a far more oppressive mood calling to mind the confined space of a prison cell. The *Silent Strength* series is an expression of the anxieties of lived experience in often perilous and austere conditions. What is remarkable is that, however isolated in their environments, Nicodemus ensures that each subject maintains a certain strength, humility and forbearance.

Lerato SHADI's (b. 1979, South Africa) *Batho ba me* (2020) is a text-based artwork comprised of hand-drawn and neon elements displayed on a painted backdrop that engages with debates surrounding human and civil rights. "We the People" are the first three words of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution. As a phrase it is often used as shorthand to describe all citizens who make up the Union and the rights to which they are entitled. It is a slogan that transcends America as the principles laid out in this instrument of government have been replicated many times over by almost every major democratic country in the world. At its core is the aspiration that the government will always meet the needs of its people. However, the coronavirus pandemic, wide-spread racism and generational poverty has exposed profound dysfunction and inequality in the democratic project. With two neon elements, Shadi sharpens these words into a question targeted directly at the viewer: "Are we the people?" For whom is the "we" claimed here, and how is this "we" defined? Accompanying *Batho ba me* will be a new series of wool on linen works that extend the artist's decade-long investigation into crochet, knitting and needlework as everyday forms of political expression.

'On Hannah Arendt: What is Authority?' takes its title from the third essay of Arendt's 1968 book *Between Past and Future*. It is the third in a 12-month programme dedicated to the writings of the German-born, American political philosopher Hannah Arendt.

Brazilian sound artist and music producer **Laima Leyton** also responds to each chapter in Arendt's publication through a new series of sound pieces commissioned by the gallery, collectively titled *Infinite past, infinite future and NOW*, available to experience via 'Saltoun Online' on our website.

In partnership with the **Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College**, join us each exhibition for the 'On Hannah Arendt: Virtual Reading Group' as scholars, artists and invited guests discuss key themes in Arendt's writing. The session on 'What is Authority?' will take place on Wednesday 21 April at 1pm EST / 6pm GMT. A video introduction to 'What is Authority?' by Roger Berkowitz, Founder and Director of the Hannah Arendt Center, is available to watch on the gallery's website.

With thanks to **Blank Projects, Cape Town**.

Hannah Arendt Center

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For press enquiries, please contact: press@richardsaltoun.com

Visit the gallery's website for the latest opening hours: www.richardsaltoun.com

Image: Everlyn Nicodemus, *Silent Strength 1*, 1989.