



IRIS KENSMIL REMY JUNGGERMAN

The Measurement of Presence is a transnational presentation that explores traditions and the past, bringing them into contact with the present. Remy Jungerman (b. 1959) and Iris Kensmil (b. 1970) bring together influences from different backgrounds. In their work they combine the inspiration they draw from twentieth-century modernism – particularly Mondrian and De Stijl, the Russian avant-garde and artist Stanley Brown – with elements of other traditions and positions.

The concept underlying *The Measurement of Presence* was prompted by a reflection on the history of the Biennial exhibition, the modernist pavilion by Gerrit Rietveld, discussions between the curator Benno Tempel (b. 1972) and the artists, and the current discourse.

An important part of the concept underlying *The Measurement of Presence* is the pavilion, which dates from 1954, designed by architect Gerrit Rietveld. The features of this building – open space, light, modular dimensions – have been adopted in the exhibition installation. The architect wished to create a space where people could meet, like a public square. The works by Jungerman and Kensmil will emphasize this human element of coming together, sharing and experiencing.

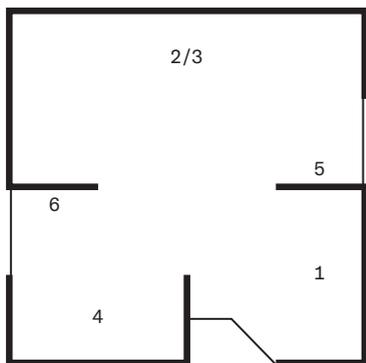
I Giardini, the site of the national pavilions, largely reflects the geopolitical relations of the twentieth century. Originally, the pavilions were intended as national showcases, based on nineteenth-century notions of nationalism. This view underwent a transformation in the twentieth century. Nationalism made way for unconditional faith in what one saw as the universal values of modernism. Neither of these dogmas allowed a different point of view. Nowadays it is clear that both these views have had their day. The current, permanent flows of people and artefacts break boundaries and produce new identities outside and separate from nation states. Places and societies are becoming ever more interconnected in our globalized world. On the whole, globalization also causes alignment and imposes prevailing principles. As a result, we risk losing the specific. Change is needed, but how this is to happen is not always clear. *The Measurement of Presence* is a transnational presentation that reflects on these developments.

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Curated by Benno Tempel
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#measurementofpresence
#dutchpavilionvenicebiennale

THE MEASUREMENT OF PRESENCE



- 1 *Promise IV*
- 2 *Kabra Tafra*
- 3 *Horizontal Obeah GEENGESITONU*
- 4 *The New Utopia Begins Here #1*
- 5 *The New Utopia Begins Here #2*
- 6 *Beyond the Burden of Representation*

Please do not touch the artworks,
they are fragile!
Si prega di non toccare le opere d'arte
in quanto fragili!

REMY JUNGERMAN

During 2018 Remy Jungerman lived in New York, a city with a dual meaning for him. It is the city where Piet Mondrian, an artist of great importance to Jungerman, found refuge in 1940. At the same time New York is the place where in 1674 the Dutch traded Suriname with the British. In a bilateral negotiation they made a deal to swap conquered land: New Amsterdam became New York, and Suriname passed from British into Dutch hands and became a Dutch colony. For Jungerman, living in this city in preparation for the Biennale gave him the perfect setting in which to think about the subject of measurement and transnationalism.

The wind can push us in different directions. But it can also blow things, thoughts and spirits spontaneously towards us. Remy Jungerman uses these winds stemming from various backgrounds in his work, combining motifs from Africa, from Maroon culture and from twentieth-century modernism. He is interested in the path travelled by patterns, drawings and shapes. Since he brings these winds together from different directions and times, the condensation of time plays an important role in his installations. The motifs meld to form a new dimension and reality. The coming together of such diverse sources as Winti and Gerrit Rietveld determines the format and rhythm of his installations.

1 PROMISE IV

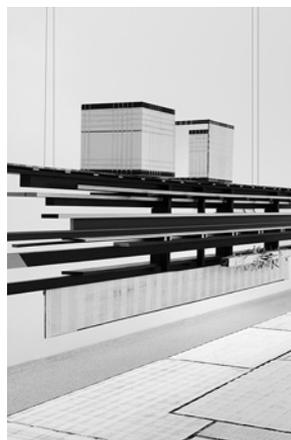
Upon entering the pavilion, visitors are greeted by a large-scale vertical installation. This monumental work takes the form of a grid-work cube with 15 wooden, standing slats. Seven of these slats are covered with fabric, paint, kaolin and nails. While the colours and textiles appear to be random, they follow an ingenious underlying scheme: the slats are composed of coloured fields that are arranged in terms of five units of measurements. Three units are partly based on the work of artist Stanley Brouwn (1935–2017): the foot (F), the ell (E), the step (S). Two other units are fictional measures, the R and the J, based on Remy Jungerman's own initials. These five units can generate a total of 120 compositional combinations. Jungerman allows the measures to switch places in the established order. From EFJRS to EFJSR, a long line of different combinations ensues. *Promise IV* suggests a game that is as playful as it is serious. Within its logic, the rules of the game give rise to freedom: eight small cubes are hidden within the grid-work cube.



Remy Jungerman, *Promise IV*, 2018–19, painted wood, cotton textile, kaolin, yarn and nails, 134 × 136 × 489 cm



Remy Jungerman, *Visiting Deities: Kabra Tafra*, 2018–19, wood, cotton textile, kaolin and dry river clay, 860 × 260 × 70 cm; *Horizontal Obeah GEENGESITONU I, II, III*, 2018, painted wood, cotton textile, kaolin, yarn, mirror and nails, app. 910 × 180 × 160 cm (size total installation app. 910 × 370 × 260 cm)



Remy Jungerman, *Horizontal Obeah GEENGESITONU I, II, III* (detail), 2018, painted wood, cotton textile, kaolin, yarn, mirror and nails, app. 910 × 180 × 160 cm

Visiting Deities is an installation comprising the *Kabra Tafra* and three suspended constructions entitled *Horizontal Obeah Geengesitonu*.

2 KABRA TAFRA

This large construction, the *Kabra Tafra*, resembles an altar-like table that invites communication with ancestors. The tabletop is covered with fabrics that have been impregnated with kaolin; the patterns of the textiles have been carved into the dry clay.

A striking element is the richness of the surface of the panels, caused by the interplay between the fabric, the kaolin and the raking light that filters through the Rietveld Pavilion. The tactility of the tabletop's surface, coupled with the linear patterns and the edges of the panels, lends the work the appearance of a map.

As a site for gathering and acknowledging the past and its impact on the present, the *Kabra Tafra* rests in a dried-up riverbed. This riverbed, with the absence of water, but still remembering its presence, evokes the transatlantic slave trade that redefined the world and expanded networks of exchange of ideas, art and influences.

3 HORIZONTAL OBEAH GEENGESITONU

Above the table hover three spatial structures. On the one hand, these relate to the De Stijl movement. Jungerman's suspended sculptures are indebted to the energetic visual language that emerged in 20th century avant-garde. Like those artists, Jungerman's work also offers an utopian and progressive vision.

On the other hand, the suspended constructions relate to the plantation structure of Suriname. In colonial times, the grid was an important element by which to divide the land, as well as a prison structure for enslaved people who tried to escape. This spatial sculptural work celebrates the braveness of the Surinamese Maroons who escaped slavery and continued to develop their African aesthetics in the Surinamese rainforest, where their culture-preserving vision survived. Lines from these aesthetics run through Jungerman's work.

Visiting Deities makes room for the spirits to enter and take part. This installation moves beyond a critique or a lamentation for the ancestors who have been lost to us. In the spirit of a *kabra tafra* ceremony, Jungerman instead aims to call together the forefathers of the greater Dutch world – our ancestors from the Netherlands, Suriname, Indonesia and elsewhere – to rally behind us with positive energy as we look towards our communal future. Emphasizing interconnectivity and echoes between cultural particularisms, *Visiting Deities* welcomes an open conversation.

IRIS KENSMIL

Iris Kensmil depicts in her work an inclusive history from a Black feminist perspective. She honours Black authors, philosophers, activists and musicians, and, in general, the Black counter-movement that is an undeniable part of modernity. Her installations for Venice have three points of departure. Modernism and utopianism, as also embodied in the Rietveld Pavilion, are appropriated by Kensmil in a mural covering all the walls of her three installations. She presents Black feminist thinking about the future in eight portraits placed in two of these installations. In a third installation Kensmil reflects on the position of the artist, protecting his/her authenticity against institutions, critics and too obvious judgements.

4 THE NEW UTOPIA BEGINS HERE #1

The wall painting evokes the modernist utopianism. At the same time, Kensmil sees the utopianism of that era as a one-sided ideal. This work corrects that one-sidedness by presenting another vision of utopianism espoused by Black female intellectuals, women who, in their writing and their actions, expressed their desire to create a better world.

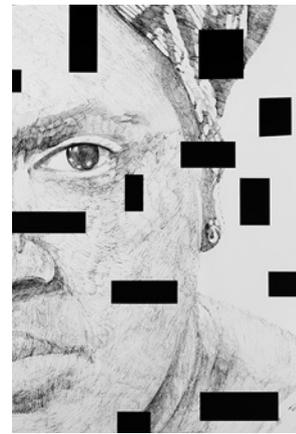
In collaboration with The Black Archives, Kensmil researched Black female utopians, focusing mainly – in view of her own background – on the Caribbean, the US, and Europe. This research resulted in seven portrait paintings – of iconic Black feminist bell hooks (b. 1952), the Pan-Africanist Amy Ashwood Garvey (1897–1969), DJ and singer Sister Nancy (b. 1962), journalist and activist Claudia Jones (1915–1964), communist and activist for Surinamese independence Hermina Huiswoud (1905–1998), anti-colonial writer and surrealist Suzanne Césaire (1916–1966), and feminist science-fiction novelist Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006).

The abstract mural is inspired by the work of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, whom Kensmil regards as the iconographers of modernist utopianism. But instead of citing them, she composes the spatiality and dynamics with elements derived from their work.

The women portrayed are all painted from found images. The paintings glow with a soft light emanating from beneath the surface. This technique was used by nineteenth-century impressionist painters who discarded the traditional dark undercoat for a layer of white paint. Kensmil's light undercoat serves to light up historical figures who, in the Netherlands at least, have been kept in the shadows, and to underscore their importance for *our* present.



Iris Kensmil, *The New Utopia Begins Here #1*, 2019, acrylic paint on wall, oil on canvas, 550 × 1596 cm



Iris Kensmil, *The New Utopia Begins Here #2* (detail), 2019, ink and acrylic paint on wall, 580 × 390 cm



Iris Kensmil, *Beyond the Burden of Representation*, 2019, acrylic paint on wall, oil on canvas, books on shelves, 580 × 390 cm

5 THE NEW UTOPIA BEGINS HERE #2

In this wall painting Kensmil continues the abstract composition of the other murals. Here she unites this with a portrait of writer, poet and activist Audre Lorde (1934–1992). Lorde introduces herself in her books as: “I am a Black Lesbian Feminist, Warrior Poet, Mother, stronger for all my identities, and I am indivisible.” She fought for a way out of the identity-politics, in which society is trapped now.

6 BEYOND THE BURDEN OF REPRESENTATION

In *Beyond the Burden of Representation* Iris Kensmil reflects on the position of the artist, protecting his/her authenticity against institutions and critics. She presents paintings of installation shots of exhibitions by artists.* Together with the paintings, books on shelves are placed upon the wall painting. These books, as containers of knowledge, bring the paintings in relation to history and philosophy.

The strategy that an artist adopts in dealing with the reception and framing of his/her work is a prominent feature of the current discourse, in a striking analogy with other groups such as Black feminists. The urge to stand up and claim rights and visibility is a powerful attitude that demands respect.

* Kensmil used photos of the following exhibitions: installation at Offenbach, 1967 (*Posenenske, Square Tubes Series*); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1986 (brouwn); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1999 (Kawara, *One Million Years*); Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006 (Hammons, *Untitled (basketball drawing + stone)*); Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018 (Piper, view of a wall in *A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016*).

More information about the artists, publications and the research material of Iris Kensmil can be found in the *Book Pavilion project* in the Stirling Pavilion.

Colophon

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