

20:15 Uhr

18:10



The Exercise of Letting Go

This conversation is based on a series of online exchanges between artist duo CONNY (C) and curator Viktor Neumann (V) in May 2021.

V: Hi CONNY, let's start with your origin story: When and how did you become CONNY? And how would you like to be addressed – what is your preferred pronoun?

C: We started our collaboration in 2017, and since then it has mainly manifested itself within encapsulated projects. CONNY is a she, and also the name of both of our mothers. The act of giving this name to our collaborative project is indicative of the attitude we have when we work together. We build on coincidence and chance. It kicks off by talking about something and then realizing: "Oh, this is a funny coincidence, let's build on that," without the need to know exactly where it will lead us from the get-go. We felt there's a sincerity in naming this collaboration after our mothers, trying to steer our project towards a direction where it can exist as a support system, similar to a family bond. We have realized that we need forms of collaboration both for professional reasons as a protective system, as something to hold onto during the moments when you don't trust yourself, and for mental health and quality of life. Besides being family-oriented, CONNY is also quite a flexible lady. Even though the project started very specifically with performance, it is also a platform where we can playfully test other formats, and possibly experiment with something that we wouldn't undertake in our own separate practices. It's like a catalyst that generates new ideas in many different directions.

V: While CONNY is transnational, she really came into being in Hamburg. CONNY has studied with "painter, performer, participant" Jutta Koether, a pioneer in bringing together pop culture, politics, and feminism, among other things. How did she inform your practice?

C: Besides being informed by her artistic practice and how she approaches painting and performance, her teaching created an atmosphere in which working together as a group was encouraged and happened organically. As a class, we

were often put into situations where we had the chance to do collaborative performative actions, with the intention that everyone's contributions together would create a spectacle of some sort. As a group, this allowed us to form networks to continue those exercises, informed by the books we read together and the films we watched. Performance was integrated in a very easy-going way, such as giving us certain texts to read, and then in the following week you would present it in any way you could imagine. One semester, for example, we would read about Piero della Francesca and his relationship to motherhood and a classmate would bake a loaf of bread in the shape of a baby and talk about the womb as a response – there was always a kind of openness to have very free takes on theory, yet without necessarily framing it as a performance. It wasn't about making perfect sense and creating continuity. But the sum of these actions opened up space in our minds for different ways of thinking about art that feel less bound to a "perfect end product" and more linked to the process itself. We both also took part in Kerstin Brätsch's guest class; she promoted this approach as well by making us speculate on how to create fictitious performative characters as a tool for making art. We met many of the colleagues we are still working with in those classes.

V: In a pre-pandemic world, you planned to use the travel grant to travel to Death Valley Junction in California, specifically to work in the Amargosa Opera House. The site is interwoven with the lifework of actress, dancer, choreographer and painter Marta Becket, as she performed there for more than forty years.

C: We knew about the existence of this place in Death Valley having already visited it in 2017, and so we started investigating the life story of Marta Becket. She was a ballet dancer and performer from New York who went on a trip from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to do a show. But her car broke

down in Death Valley Junction, where she saw this empty building which she chose to buy and turn into her own opera house, rather than continuing on to Las Vegas. She set up the theatre hall and performed there herself for a very long time without anybody seeing it. Lacking a real audience, she chose to paint the entire interior with characters who included both actual friends of hers and famous people of the time, colleagues, and so on. Her story made us wonder about what it could mean when you take the audience out of the equation: with what intention do we create a performance? Is it driven by the expectation that someone will watch it, or does something else come out of the process if you are in solitude without the prospect of anyone seeing what you're doing? This whole idea of constructing the reality you're in by painting everything was also of course really interesting in relation to our general thoughts and questions on the correlation between painting and performance. We are trying to take this aspect into account for our new work despite not having been able to travel to the Amargosa Opera House and Hotel.

V: The Opera House was also featured as the Lost Highway Hotel in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, which he described as a "psychogenic fugue". The film's narrative structure is often linked to the circularity of the Möbius strip and seen as analogous to a psychoanalytic process, returning again and again to certain constellations and elements. While CONNY is not formally bound to any medium or style, certain elements do reappear, specifically the two characters Margaret and Niclas, so far in *Doubt on the Fifth Floor (Part I)* in 2017 and in *Changing Batteries (Part II)* in 2018. Could you speak a bit about how they came to life?

C: Just as with the name of CONNY, the two characters grew out of an impulse. We were both invited to participate in a show called "The X-mas Show" by our colleague Astrid

**Access Denied /
Access Granted**



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Access Denied / Access Granted
An On-hold Travel Reflection in Anticipation
Fion Pellacini



When Hamburg-based artist Fion Pellacini applied for the travel grant, he perhaps did not yet know that the planned journey would not take him far away, but on the contrary, would lead him to become deeply involved with himself and his own family history. The history of Pellacini's father and grandfathers has seen two generations of transcontinental migration, from Italy to Brazil to Germany.

When the artist started his "Access Denied / Access Granted" project, curiosity about his own family history, the aspect of social class belonging and the transatlantic twist in its migration history played rather marginal roles. While developing the project, however, it became more and more fundamental to Pellacini to reflect on where his observations came from, where he was thinking and articulating the project from, what his own role was within the texture of what would soon become an analysis of the social and historical implications of São Paulo city's spatial politics in relation to the bodies that inhabit it, and the bodies that move through it.

The architectural project of Brazil's Modernismo was not only an aesthetic: it was first of all a social promise. During the first half of the 20th century, Brazil was "a land of the future" – as Stefan Zweig put it. And it was this promise that drew many waves of migrants from Europe to America, Portuguese, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, particularly many of them to the city of São Paulo.

The large number of migrants and the labor force involved in an unprecedented industrialization and modernization process made São Paulo become not only the economic center of Brazil, but also South America's largest city. Today, two decades into the 21st century, it is also the continent's cultural capital. The change that accompanied this process is multi-layered and complex. Pellacini's very basic, yet fundamental observation is that the change that came about in the city of São Paulo manifests itself in a set of frontiers and thresholds

that organize the population's mobility. It organizes their bodies, and includes systems of codes and references that grant and/or deny access to its spaces. A modern Brazil, in that sense, is only accessible to some, and remains inaccessible to others. Pellacini, an artist interested in collective processes, spaces of transition and the performativity of body movements, saw in the movements of people through these spaces of modernity a bizarre social choreography of granting or being denied access: a cartography of a social, economic and political nature that was inscribed into the city's DNA, its architecture and its bodies. Yet, even arriving from Hamburg, Germany, Pellacini would soon understand that the historical dimension of the change in São Paulo and the promise of modernism were inseparable from the DNA that runs in his family too. This is the story of Fion Pellacini's journey to the centre of São Paulo.

– Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz



“Eu sou um convidado de”¹ was the simple code I was supposed to place before my aunt’s name – that would suffice as an open sesame to that condomínio fechado² she lives in. At first, I didn’t take that sentence too seriously and didn’t note it down as a key. But somehow, this everyday moment at the double-gated security entrance became a repetitive and unsettling process: not only was that rather ordinary question of entry being negotiated, but somehow I felt like my whole identity went through that sluice, delimited through an inner and an outer gate. Massive wrought iron. Forming a stage in front of the gatekeeper’s thick mirrored window, against which I always awkwardly waved a greeting into the unknown, or in fact towards my own reflection, after I successfully recited the magic formula through the intercom and subsequently got buzzed into the interstice.

Even though the journey to São Paulo in 2019 to get to know my aunt and cousin for the first time wasn’t planned with a deliberate rush of questions about culture and identity, it seemed to me almost as if my whole person was placed on a conveyor belt to get X-rayed like a piece of luggage at an airport security check. It wasn’t just the question about whether I’d be able to pass that selective entrance with my own language skills, which of course depended on the arrangement my aunt had made with the security personnel in advance, but also the situation repeatedly became like a reminder of São Paulo’s spatial and social order to me, lurking directly at the entrance of this building, to rattle down into awareness as soon as I crossed the threshold. There were no name tags or doorbells at the entrance gate, as is the case in German cities, and of course, there was no possibility to use a key to get in. As a pedestrian, who wouldn’t enter by car through the underground car park as almost every other resident did, there was no chance to visit without stopping in at the gatekeeper’s lodge. After a few days I

Hitherto

The Resilience of the Cactus
Conversation between Karimah Ashadu (KA)
and Leonie Radine (LR)

Supported by the Neue Kunst in Hamburg travel grant, Karimah Ashadu flew in early October 2020 to Nigeria, a country she not only knows well from growing up in Lagos until the age of ten, but has returned to many times during her studies of art and spatial design in the UK and throughout her ongoing transnational film making practice. This journey, however, turned out to be extraordinarily intense, due not only to the global pandemic with all the increasing conflicts and precarity it caused. Right after the artist arrived in Lagos, she found herself in a tremendously turbulent political atmosphere due to the newly inflamed #EndSARS protests against police brutality. It was almost impossible to move around safely as the outrage spread across the country, airports closed down at certain times, 24-hour curfews were imposed since no security could be provided in the streets, and Ashadu was often forced to stay inside. She once even left the country. Despite these extreme circumstances, however, the artist resolutely and resiliently pursued her plan to travel northeast to Nigeria's Middle Belt, and managed to shoot the film she had long aspired to about tin mining in the Jos Plateau, working with the Berom, the largest indigenous ethnic group in Plateau State – in only a few days at the kickoff of the dry season. The outcome is a fascinating picture about what is at the core of it all. Literally unearthing the roots of today's socio-economic injustices, Ashadu's new film *Plateau* points to the impossibility of detaching the global trade of minerals in the here and now from the colonial exploitation of land, material, natural and human resources – and from how the latter is persistently inscribed in or performed by any bodily entity. The film raises complex questions ranging from the micro to the macro and back again, and shows us the urgency of storytelling and the various shifts of perspectives within. Ashadu stays with the trouble, but deals with it differently. Devoid of judgement or

pity, she creates visibility of both the hardships and the dignity of being and the various survival modes on this planet which we are continuously destroying, and which, in her film, may even appear like a futuristic sci-fi set.

LR The first scene of your new film *Plateau* (2021) is already immersive and compelling: we hear a voice on the radio shouting “This is a central call of the entire universe! If they can capture Plateau State, then they can capture any other state”, and the camera closely follows a tin miner in Nigeria’s Jos Plateau at his daily work. He speaks very poetically about Berom men and their cactus-like resilience. Gradually, the film unfolds into a bigger picture. Unlike your last film *Brown Goods* (2020) – a (self-)portrait of Emeka, a Nigerian migrant collecting, processing and trading discarded electric goods from Hamburg’s Billstraße to West African exporters – this film focuses not just on one particular worker but on an entire community. How would you describe your approach for this particular film?

KA The film is just under 30 minutes and structured in chapters in which you hear testimonies – of workers, a citizen from the village and a landowner who leases his land to miners. Generations before them took part in tin mining in colonial times, so they reflect on what this means for theirs and future generations. Thus, the story of Jos Plateau is told from different perspectives. I wanted a full, rounded point of view. The imagery also plays a huge role in how the story unfolds, because the landscape is so striking and profound – so I wanted to highlight that with really tight shots and meandering camera movements.

LR How did you initially come up with the idea to focus on tin mining?





Basin

KA I had been reading a lot about Nigerian history and its industry and trade. Tin mining is a central part of it, not only during colonization but even before, and it's relevant because it is still happening now. Tin mining began at a local level in 900 BCE. At the advent of colonialism, tin was "discovered" in the 1880s, and it became an actual industry. With the establishment of trade routes and the investment in machinery development, the industry thrived, reaching its peak in 1943. Once the British left Nigeria in the 1960s, the industry and its prior scale slowed. When Nigeria discovered oil, the mines seemed less significant to authorities. With the collapse of the International Tin Agreement (ITA) in 1985, the market price for tin plummeted to below half its previous level. Until that point, the ITA had been regarded as one of the most successful world trade agreements. Mines were closed and thousands of miners were made redundant. Before I shot this film, the idea sat with me for three years – a long time. By the time I made the film, I was quite fluent in what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. As in all my films, it's not really about a political lesson; it's much denser and more poetic, with lots of layers that you have to unpack and that may stay with you after you watch it.

LR That is truly the case with your films. Even though *PlatEAU* made me aware and research more about the complex political and socio-economic history of tin mining and the area, I was also absorbed and carried away by your painterly color compositions, your experimental perspectives and poetic montages of images, language and sound. The question of *how* you make your films and say things is crucial. Although your works are research-based, you don't aim to fully explain the context of each subject. They are neither documentary nor

**A Million Years Is
Probably the Most
Convenient**

The Absence of Limits



Asphalt, also known as bitumen, being laid as road surface in Schmilinksky Street, Hamburg. This material probably did not originate from Pitch Lake on Trinidad or any natural deposit.

In a speculative future, when natural resources of elements that support human civilisation have run dry on earth, this material might have to be mined from outer space. In *The Expanse*, a series of novels by James S. A. Corey, this has become reality for a civilisation that has colonised the solar system and is politically organised in the United Nations of Earth and Luna, the Martian Congressional Republic on Mars, and the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA). The latter is a loose confederation located in the asteroid belt and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Due to its location the OPA is especially dependent, economically and practically, on asteroid mining. Water is scarce, valuable as oil on today's Earth, and is mined as large chunks of ice from asteroids around Saturn.

In today's state of knowledge, Titan, a moon of Saturn, is the only planetary body with stable reservoirs of liquids in the forms of lakes and seas. Temperatures on Titan average around $-179.2\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ and enables elements like methane, gaseous on earth, to be liquid on Titan. The landscape on Titan resembles earth in the sense that there are valleys, dunes, rivers and lakes formed by a similar weather pattern, storms and rain, as on earth. Only about 20% of Titan's surface has been mapped, but this area alone is richer in hydrocarbons, oil and gas, than Earth. Lakes on Titan are composed of liquid methane and it rains oil from ethane and methane clouds in a thick atmosphere of nitrogen. With Titan, mining in space could become a reality when natural fossil fuel resources have been exploited in the known deposits on Earth. In the early 1970s, the economic model of the petroleum industry was based on eternal growth, the "absence of limits to energy, and appeared to offer no way to address the question of the exhaustion of resources and the limits to growth."¹ At the same

time, geologists started pointing to the looming exhaustion of oil, gas and coal reserves. Besides the finite nature of fossil fuels, the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere caused by the burning of hydrocarbons and the consequent threat of global warming imposed a limit on an industry that is gambling with the absence of those very limits.

A first innocent step towards the possible colonisation and mining of Titan was the Huygens probe that in 2005 managed to land on Titan, take photos of its surroundings and record a sound fragment from outer space. Thanks to the thick atmosphere on Titan, sound can actually travel here. Inspired by this aspect of similarity to earth, Finnish composer Petri Kuljuntausta sent his text score “Charm of Sound” to be performed on Titan with the space probe to Saturn’s moon. This fictional form of cultural colonisation seems to be a very gentle knock on Titan’s door introducing us, the human species from earth, as a sentient life form, curious to explore the sounds of “something which is heavier than the fluid”² falling into the aforementioned liquid.

Instead of finding an earth-like landscape on Titan, maybe we should find a Titan-like landscape on Earth and play “Charm of Sound” just here, at home. No need for extra-terrestrial colonisation yet, right? Chemically speaking, the closest landscapes to Titan we have on Earth are probably naturally forming tar pits, also called asphalt pits. The largest natural deposit of asphalt is located in La Brea on Trinidad and is called Pitch Lake. Asphalt lakes form when crude oil, seeping up from deposits underneath, pools at the surface. Here, the lighter components evaporate into the atmosphere, leaving behind a sticky, viscous, black mass. When looking at the fossil record of these unique environments, one is likely to find a disproportionately high amount of predators in comparison to prey. This is because tar acts as a trap, and would have caused animals to become stuck, attracting

predators such as sabre-tooth tigers. Nowadays these tar pits are mined for asphalt and may end up as road surface.

Another opportunity to experience Titan on Earth might be to look at the ways in which we have used and transformed hydrocarbons in the past, how we use them today, and how we have to change how we use them in the future. Since we have extracted a lot of them, in the form of gas, coal or oil, burned them and thereby released a lot of excess carbon into the atmosphere, it is time to look at ways to get this carbon out of the air. CCS, carbon capture and storage, is one way to do so and refers to multiple technologies developed to capture emitted carbon dioxide and deposit it so that it will not reenter the atmosphere. The basaltic rock formations in Iceland provide ideal conditions for a process called natural underground mineralisation. During this process, carbon dioxide is released underground instead of into the atmosphere and thereby captured in the rocks – subsequently turned into limestone – within a few years.

Through techniques like CCS, also referred to as geo-engineering or climate engineering, humans are able to deliberately intervene in the Earth’s geology and climate system. On a geological time scale humans have been messing around with the Earth’s climate for a very short time, a little over a century, but the effects will likely last far into the deep future of the planet. This disconnection and short-sightedness means that our current lifestyle is of extremely transitory nature. The unavoidable impact we have on the deep future, in which the effects of burning hydrocarbons will be most keenly felt, has to be understood in relation to the deep past, in which hydrocarbons formed on Earth in the first place through decaying organic matter. The field of geology is a curious one in which time is defined differently. A million years is not long – it is probably the most convenient time scale to think in. During the 18th century,



Taking regular breaks ensures the efficacy of the procedure and prolongs the training effect.



All good!

**There Is Always
Someone Looking
through the
Window from
that Tower**

This publication is being issued on the occasion of the 15th edition of Neue Kunst in Hamburg e.V.'s travel grant: the association, founded in 1986, has been biennially awarding this funding program since 1996 to support and promote up-and-coming artists who studied in Hamburg and/or live there, in collaboration with varying invited guest curators. It covers travel expenses and subsistence allowances for a stay abroad of several months, a joint exhibition and finally a publication to present the artistic inquiries produced during the grant period to the widest audience possible. The call for entries of this edition in the fall of 2019 met once again with a gratifyingly positive response. Though, given the high level of the approximately 100 applications, it was not easy to make a final selection, the outstanding works of art (and the destinations developed in dialogue for this purpose) by Karimah Ashadu, CONNY, Nina Kuttler, Fion Pellacini and Nina Zeljković convinced in the end.

In mid-February 2020, the travel destinations and research inquiries were presented jointly with the grant recipients to the members of the association in Hamburg. At the latest with the beginning of the lockdown that followed shortly thereafter, however, it became clear that travel would be difficult for this edition of the grant. Instead of journeys to distant places, new encounters, experiences, exchange and mobility, the grant recipients, too, like all of us for the most part stayed home during the subsequent months, while the COVID-19 pandemic spread dramatically. Travel plans to Brazil, Trinidad, Nigeria, to the deserts of California, Croatia and Turkey – to name a few, were abbreviated, postponed repeatedly, or, if they had already taken place by the time of this volume's release, were without exception shaped by the conditions of the global pandemic.

Similarly, the series of publications accompanying the project reflects this situation inasmuch as, beyond a series

of travel reports and introductions to the artists' works, the individual volumes reflect the specific concomitant travel circumstances during a global pandemic, ways to artistically and mentally cope with a lockdown and about access and exclusion, about changing planes and about staying home waiting. What emerged is a series of five very different volumes, the contents of which were developed in close dialogue with each participant's individual mode of working. After a preparatory journey to Cappadocia, Turkey in October 2020, where Nina Zeljković visited Byzantine churches and caves to study early Christian communities, she returned to Belgrade to prepare her road trip for subsequent inquiries. From April to June 2021, Zeljković finally travelled 10,000 km by car from Belgrade, through Bulgaria and Greece, and along the fringes of the former Roman empire to Turkey's easternmost borders. By including a map, photos, a conversation with Milan Vukomanović (professor of sociology of religion) and an essay by philosopher Daniel Falb, the publication enables multilayered perspectives on this journey into the reminiscences of early syncretic Christian settlements inscribed in landscapes, cave architectures, and still untouched archaeological excavation sites along her way.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation to Nina Zeljković and all the other artists of the 15th edition of the travel grant for the inspiring cooperation in turbulent times, for patience and flexibility, and of course for their unique and invaluable contributions to this publication and the exhibition to be opened. I furthermore express my profound gratitude to the board – Katharina Bittel, Judith Fell-Zeller, Peter Labin, Dr. Hans Jochen Waitz, Dr. Michael Schäfer and Karl Dietrich Seikel – and the members of Neue Kunst in Hamburg e.V. for their trust, support and generosity throughout the project. At least since my time as an employee at the Hamburger Kunstverein

(until 2008), I have actively followed, full of curiosity and with keen interest, this outstanding private support initiative, one that is particularly important for young graduates. It was therefore a particular pleasure and honour for me to be able to take curatorial responsibility for the current edition of the project and, at least temporarily, to return to my old home, Hamburg. I would also like to express a very special thanks to the wonderful contributors to this publication whom we were able to attract to enter into dialogue with the artists: Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz (for Fion Pellacini), Daniel Falb and Milan Vukomanović (for and with Nina Zeljković), Adomas Narkevičius (for Nina Kuttler), Viktor Neumann (with CONNY) and Leonie Radine (with Karimah Ashadu). Finally, I also wish to extend my thanks to the Hamburg graphic design studio JMMP for a sensitive approach to my concept proposal. Without Max Prediger's relentless commitment and dedication at every step of this publication, we would never to have been able to produce to this extent this wonderfully designed series of publications. In addition, I would also like to thank Nancy Chapple for her sharp and meticulous edits of all five volumes of this series, as well as the publisher Textem for their distribution. Finally, I wholeheartedly thank the participating galleries that made their premises available for the concluding exhibition opening on October 28th, 2021: Jürgen Becker Galerie, Galerie Melike Belir, Holger Priess Galerie, the Produzentengalerie, the Multiple Box and Sfeir-Semmler Gallery. As most of the funding is intended to support travel, creative solutions and the commitment of everyone involved in the project were called upon, for which I am infinitely grateful!

Nina Zeljković (NZ) in conversation with Dr. Milan Vukomanović (MV), professor of sociology of religion at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy.

- NZ We meditated for ten days, ten times a day for one hour.
- MV Why did you engage in this activity? Did it exhaust you? You must have wanted to get something out of it.
- NZ I think I wanted to meet myself.
- MV And where does this meeting take place?
- NZ In oneself.
- MV Where in oneself? Let's say a person, Nina, wants to find herself, so she enrolls in a meditation course or whatever, writes in her name, goes there as a person, a human being, etc.
- Now she wants to meet herself. Where is that "I"? What are you searching for?
- NZ In that self-observation, you can see ...
- MV What observes itself?
- NZ Consciousness observing itself.
- MV Excellent, then I am conscious, you are conscious ...
- NZ You can move away from yourself, or towards yourself, at least this operative part of yourself.
- MV You cannot move away from *yourself*. You can move to the right or left, forward or backward, but you cannot move away from yourself. Do you know why?
- NZ Why?
- MV Because you are already there. Not just physically: you are already there as presence-awareness. And why would you need to find yourself if you are already there?
- NZ Because there are forms of thought ...
- MV Thinking is just stretching, moving away from oneself.
- NZ Yes, you cannot get to yourself from those forms of thought.
- MV Do you need thinking at all to get to yourself?
- NZ No.
- MV How do you know that?
- NZ Because I need to turn off thought to reach myself. That is why I paint. The ego gets turned off, and thinking is a disturbance ...

MV But you may be aware without thought, right?

NZ Possibly I went there because I realized I am dependent on thought.

MV Good. Now, what drives thought? If you say, “I want to stop my thought”, you will not succeed.

NZ Some want, a longing for something ...

MV Which causes that stretching away from yourself.

NZ Some hunger, a need ...

MV Your attention extends ...

NZ Maybe something neurotic ...

MV Never mind those psychological explanations now, let’s go to the most elementary level. Let’s say you go to YouTube where you want to find something. A song pops up: the Tube is already suggesting a new song for you. You listen to that one too, and now your attention is stretching towards that. Our thought, our mind works like that, like a monkey jumping from branch to branch.

NZ I deleted my Twitter account yesterday.

MV If you say, “Calm down, let me work, meditate” – it will bother you even more. If you close the door on it, it will enter through the chimney. If you start to ignore it, or pull back a little, it will withdraw. You can always do that. You don’t need a retreat for that. But *it* cannot do it alone.

What enables it to do so is *becoming* aware of that center or anchor. There you are in the middle of a storm, in the eye of a hurricane, as it were. Everything around it is in chaos, and it smashes everything, trees, and cars, and all the rest. You are there in the eye of a storm, and none of that affects you. We all have that inner refuge, it shelters us all, while the search for that center was a sort of venture, a real challenge for various ascetics. But you can also look at it progressively: “Here we’re making some progress.” One is advancing from point



Carving on the floor tiles of Via Arcadia in Ephesus



View from a room at Dara ancient city (Mesopotamia)

A to point B, then from point B to point C; now she needs another retreat, then we improve it a bit to get to point D, and now she's climbing toward some peak. This, for example, is the image of Christ in various icons: he is at the top of the ladder, and others are climbing up. But you also have that evil guy, you know, like the one in Bosch's paintings. Take John of the Ladder, for example, the ladder that leads to Christ. Now we are climbing up there, but someone is constantly pulling us back, because the tendency of the evil one is to constantly hinder us, distract us, place obstacles in front of us. We never get to the top, and this is a kind of Tour de France with many stages and laps. The perception of life for many people, basically, is in fact that it's a Tour de France, where you have a lot of time to do very little. And then, there is perhaps another perspective in all this: this center is not some faraway kingdom of God that one has to reach and therefore make an effort, riding laps on one's bike. No, it is already here, and one just needs to say "aha, OK".

- NZ More of a qualitative movement.
- MV It is more an experience of the being *itself*, an experience that takes place in consciousness. And the consciousness itself is what it is – dimensionless, intangible, making all that possible and visible, but in itself blank. This is why I asked you about Zen paintings. From that emptiness, all this is emerging. This is especially important for you in terms of your art.
- NZ Agnes Martin retreated to the desert and painted only the grid. For twenty years before that she painted something she did not want, only to discover that the thing she wanted to paint was empty.
- MV You have that "feed" in the virtual sphere, but you also have it in real life. You constantly have some pop-ups.