

Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn  
Maeve Brennan  
Laura Waddington  
16 March – 25 May 2019

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This year, our spring edition brings together stories about people and the objects, things and goods that constitute their lives, places, occupations or legacies. Spanning two centuries and a wide geographic scope, the programme offers diverse historical and contemporary narratives that tell of human efforts, actions and acts directed at objects or things. Through physical exertion or personal endeavour, things are set in motion, kept in motion, or brought to rest: across very different contexts and distances, custodians, family members, crews and caravan workers are amongst those we see push, pull, undo, redo, carry, position, escort or deliver a wide array of objects, artefacts and goods.

Anchoring this edition, our spring exhibition features works by three artists—Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, Maeve Brennan and Laura Waddington—who each invite us to reflect upon the powerful interests or influences that often compel us in our actions or processes towards objects, as well as the ways objects and artefacts seemingly induce us to approach them, as material things to be handled, habitually or knowingly.

Together their works might provoke us to ask: what kinds of knowing do our handling or conveying of objects reveal, or facilitate or produce, and for whom? Nguyễn's installation *Black Atlas* reminds us of contexts where largescale local efforts were put in the service of institutional agendas that advanced particular worldviews, and knowledge production in general. But it also hints at the more tacit or embodied forms of localised knowledge that we see implied in Waddington's *CARGO*, and that are drawn out more fully in Brennan's *The Drift*.

Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn

*Black Atlas*, 2016

Installation in five parts, comprising

*A Portable Darkroom (Bearing Witness)*

Inkjet print on archival paper

*The Administration*

Five inkjet prints on archival paper

*No 17*

Inkjet print on fabric

*The Burden of Knowledge*

Inkjet print on archival paper

*Black Atlas*

Inkjet print on fabric and on archival paper

Maeve Brennan

*The Drift*, 2017

HD video, 50' 29"

Produced by Spike Island, Bristol and Chisenhale, London,  
and commissioned by those venues along with The Whitworth,  
Manchester, and Lismore Castle Arts. Courtesy of the artist

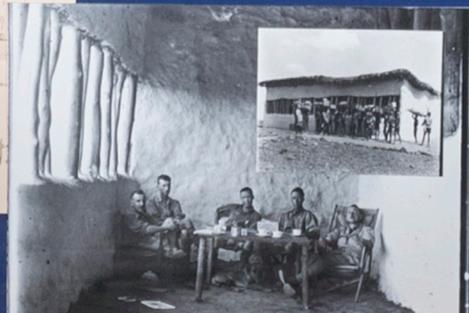
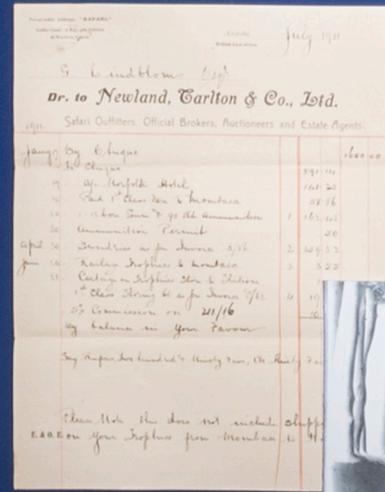
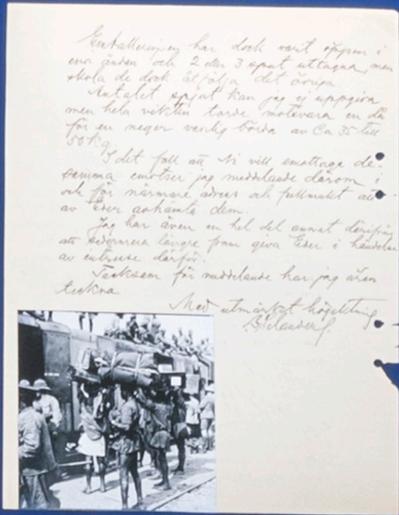
Laura Waddington

*CARGO*, 2001

Digibeta, 29'

Commissioned by International Film Festival Rotterdam.  
Courtesy of the artist

\*Total running time of *CARGO* and *The Drift* is 80 mins



In autumn 2016, artist Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn undertook a residency at the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, Sweden, with the intention of investigating the museum's photographic collections and how personal and institutional histories might collide therein. As Nguyễn has since recounted, towards the end of her residency she found she wanted to delve deeper into questions she had begun to explore, 'namely, how do material culture, artefacts or photographs travel to become a source for knowledge production in the West. In other words, how did the world come to Europe?'<sup>1</sup> Large scale expeditions, such as Russian explorer Wilhelm Junker's extensive travels in eastern equatorial Africa in the 1880s or those conducted by Gerhard Lindblom in 1911-12, constituted 'complicated logistical endeavours' that Nguyễn has suggested demand to be looked at in relation to their systematic appropriation of local labour.

Based on photographs that Nguyễn found in the archives, the resulting five-part installation *Black Atlas* reflects upon the administration of racialised labour for transporting material culture from distant countries to the museum's storage. In *A Portable Darkroom (Bearing Witness)*, a selection of photographs and documents reveals the elaborate administrative infrastructure behind an expedition such as Lindblom's, and the required labour for bringing collections of artefacts to Europe. Small images show nameless porters and caravan workers carrying burdens through rough terrains, alongside invoices and dockets that document various transactions. In contrast, *The Administration* focuses on the museum as knowledge producer, featuring portraits of prominent Swedish collectors seated in contemplation at their desks, alongside photographs of the museum stores filled with objects to be studied and classified. The disjuncture between those whose physical exertions make material culture mobile, and thus reachable to the wider public, and those who render it 'knowable' as part of the edifice of colonial discourse is made clear. As Nguyễn has said, '*Black Atlas shifts the viewer's attention from singular world travellers and individuals to the deployment of local labour.*'

Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, detail from *A Portable Darkroom (bearing witness)*, 2016, image Hannes Anderzen, courtesy of the artist

<sup>1</sup> See a short film made by the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, Sweden: <https://vimeo.com/198804180>



Laura Waddington, video still from *CARGO*, 2001, courtesy of the artist

Various aspects of *Black Atlas* also bring to the fore the curious position that the crate occupies between the efforts of local labour in delivering items to be shipped and the museum that is their destination. As Nguyễn's *The Burden of Knowledge* proposes, the crate is the museum's first space— it puts into effect the language of the institution—objects are grouped, assessed for size, type, materials, their status determined. Arguably, the shipping container has come to function in much the same way, circumscribed as a unit of space by powerful corporate interests. The disenfranchisement of freight workers in respect of the containers they oversee is powerfully evoked in Laura Waddington's aesthetically granular and atmospheric film *CARGO* (2001). Commissioned by The International Film Festival Rotterdam for their 30th anniversary project *On the Waterfront*, it provides a compelling contemporary counterpoint to *Black Atlas*, meditating on the physical and emotional impacts of the globalised freight network on a work force dissociated so radically from place and from the objects of its labour.

Shot in 2000 on a small camera, *CARGO* is the story of Waddington's journey on a container ship alongside a crew of Filipino, Romanian and Polish sailors, who were delivering cargo to Syria and Lebanon. Of the film, Waddington has said: '*I stayed on the ship six weeks. Most of the sailors weren't allowed to leave the boat and they spent their days waiting, singing karaoke and telling me stories in a small TV room. In Syria, the ports were military zones. I hid at a porthole and secretly filmed the life below: a man stealing wood, a soldier fishing off the edge of an abandoned submarine. Later, I made a narrative that falls between reality and fiction. It was a way of showing the limbo these men were living in.*'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for Waddington, it was important that the film hovers somewhere between documentary and fiction, that it would create doubt for the viewer as to what is knowledge or fact: '*For I knew that I couldn't portray an accurate picture of life on the ship, my presence with a camera completely altering the environment.*'

<sup>2</sup> See Laura Waddington, synopsis, <https://www.laurawaddington.com/films/2/cargo>

There is a moment in Laura Waddington's film *CARGO* when the ship's engines are turned off at the behest of its corporate owners, and because of economic imperatives not made known, the ship and its crew drift. One suspects this is not the first time—no response beyond the routine is induced in the crew. Instead the ship gives itself and its cargo over momentarily to the influence of prevailing forces—be they fluctuations in ocean currents or distant markets.

Informing Maeve Brennan's film *The Drift*, shot in its entirety in Lebanon, is the undeniable shadow of conflict, past and present, Lebanon's own, and those that it borders. Against the grain of these larger narratives, we see the ritual business of people and communities adapt, as the film itself follows three individuals: Fakhry, the gatekeeper of the Roman temples of Niha in the Beqaa Valley; Mohammed, a young mechanic from Britel, a village known for trading automobile parts; and Hashem, an archaeological conservator working at the American University of Beirut. Brennan is especially attentive to the deep knowledge of materials and things that these three reveal in their different ways—Fakhry in the hand he places on the Roman temple he rebuilt, Mohammed replacing salvaged car parts as he talks, Hashem silently repairing ceramic fragments. For each, the body or more precisely the hand is the knowing subject. This sits in stark contrast to the exploitative practices we glimpse at the sharper edge of conflict and the brisk gesture of a hand showing images of available illicit goods on a smart phone.

If *Black Atlas* points back to a systemic de-valuing of local or embodied knowledge on the part of the colonialist project, then Brennan's film reasserts those modes of knowing within the shifting, often complex, economies of objects of a place such as contemporary Lebanon. What emerges is a different kind of drift, coined towards the film's close by Mohammad as he reflects on forces greater still: *'Wherever we are, we drift. We have to leave a mark, a trace, a memory of us, because it's all going to fade, humans and cars.'* The issue of legacy, it seems, is not the preserve of the few or of institutions, a record or set of actions that stand apart, but rather is the concern of the many and ultimately to be found in the grain of the things we do and the objects we have directed ourselves towards.



Maeve Brennan, video still from *The Drift*, 2017, courtesy of the artist



**Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn** is an artist who uses archives and a broad range of media to investigate issues of historicity, collectivity, utopian politics and multiculturalism. Nguyễn completed the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, in 2011, having obtained her MFA and a post-graduate diploma in Critical Studies from the Malmö Art Academy, Sweden, in 2005, and a BFA from Concordia University, Montreal, in 2003. Born in Côte-des-Neiges in Montreal, Canada, she is currently based in Stockholm. Nguyễn has an extensive exhibition history both in Canada and internationally.

**Laura Waddington** was born in London in 1970. She studied English literature at Cambridge University before moving to New York and then Paris, where she made short films and videos. Her work has screened at numerous international film festivals, including Locarno, Rotterdam, Montreal, London, New York Video Festival, Film Society of Lincoln Center, on ARTE television and in museums, including the Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid and The Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis. Homages and focuses include at The 51st Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, The 41st Pesaro International Film Festival and *Vidéo et Après: Laura Waddington* at The Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris. She currently lives in Lisbon.

**Maeve Brennan** lives and works in London. Her practice looks at the historical and political resonance of sites and materials, culminating in moving image and installation works. She carries out long-term investigative research and seeks out proximity and intimacy with people and places. Forming personal relationships allows for a particular kind of documentary encounter—one extended by familiarity and complicated by subjectivity. Brennan was a fellow of the arts study programme, Home Workspace Program at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut (2013-14).

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LOTTERY FUNDED



CAMPLE LINE  
Cample Mill  
Cample, near Thornhill  
Dumfriesshire  
DG3 5HD  
+44 (0)1848 331 000  
info@campleline.org.uk  
www.campleline.org.uk