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OF

THE

COLLECTIVE

K A T E R I N A
G R E G O S

Over the last ten years Mikhail Karikis' multi-disciplinary practice has consistently explored critical social, political and economic issues with socially disenfranchised groups and communities in transition. His work looks into, among other things, the repercussions of globalisation and the consolidation of neoliberal capital, the demise of industry in the UK and the rest of Europe, vanishing communities and the disappearance of traditional vocations further afield. He explores inter-related issues of identity, community, belonging, and social cohesion – all of which are under threat in our modern world of high capitalism, post-industrialism, uprooted 'nomadic' citizens and economic or political migrants, networks and social media – many of which have contributed to social isolation and arch-individualism.

However, rather than simply documenting or commenting on disenfranchised communities from a distance, Karikis works from the bottom up, engaging with people long-term, and involving them in the creative process all the while privileging memory and restoring a sense of pride within the participatory process. His practice re-affirms the emancipatory power of collaboration and what I would call creative activism. Karikis' work is genuinely political because he not only thinks politically, but he acts accordingly by practicing what he preaches. Moving image is the backbone of his practice, which also includes installation, sound, photography and performance. This essay focuses on six of Karikis' major video installations: *Sounds from Beneath* (2011–12), *SeaWomen* (2012), *Children of Unquiet* (2014), *Ain't Got No Fear* (2016), *No Ordinary Protest* (2018–19) and *Ferocious Love* (2020).

These works share the use of voice as a sculptural material, a consistent point of reference in Karikis' entire oeuvre. Sound in general plays an extremely important role across the artist's practice constituting a red thread running through all of his films. It functions both as an emancipatory expressive force as well as an emotive and affective one, connecting people, their longings, dreams and endeavours, as well as their latent fears. This sound is carefully crafted to reflect the social situation in which it plays out. Be it a choral song imitating the industrial sounds of the underground as in *Sounds from Beneath*; humming

pipes mimicking the flow of gas or the transport of liquids as in *Children of Unquiet*; the sounds of ancient breathing techniques used by veteran female divers as in *SeaWomen*; the drone of children's voices engaging in eco-activism as in *No Ordinary Protest*; or the rumbling echoes of the demolition of a power plant, used as the beat for a rap song in *Ain't Got No Fear*, sound is never secondary to image in Karikis' moving image works.

Sounds from Beneath (made together with artist Uriel Orlow) re-unites a group of former coal miners in a decommissioned derelict Kent coal mine. The video features men from the Snowdown Colliery Male Voice Choir, who were invited to remember, vocalise and simulate the industrial sounds of a working coal mine, such as hissing, banging, rattling, humming, grouping in formations reminiscent of picket lines, against the bleak backdrop of coal slag heaps. The work is epic in character, and the force as well as solidarity of male labour power is transformed through the creative energy of song. At once political and poetic, the film resonates with pathos, dignity and emotional force. It functions as a salvaging of memory, an ode, a tribute, and a requiem all at once.

Ain't Got No Fear (2016) was made with a group of teenagers from the Isle of Grain in Kent, a militarised post-industrial marshland peninsula in the district of Medway, Kent. The area's former facilities include an oil refinery and concrete factory and having gone through production transition, it is now the site of a power station, a gas terminal and import facility as well as industrial warehouses for the Thames Gateway project. It is a highly contested territory in socio-economic and environmental terms: despite its importance as a major habitat for diverse wetland birds, it has been the proposed site for a new four-runway airport to ease Heathrow congestion. Taking the issue of the limited prospects for young people within a post-industrial wasteland in the process of 'economic restructuring', *Ain't Got No Fear* focuses on a group of 11–13-year-old boys from Grain. In response to the isolation of the village they grew up in and the lack of stimuli for teenagers, the boys organised raves in the woods, which were subsequently raided by the police.

With this landscape and reality as a backdrop, the boys sing a rap song they wrote about their lives, recalling their childhood and imagining their future and old age. Once again sound and rhythm play a key role in the film: in addition to the autobiographical lyrics, the boys use as their beat the persistent crushing noises of the demolition of a local power plant. The work is filmed in the style of a socially gritty music video, juxtaposing desolate post-industrial landscapes, on the one hand, and forests at the edge of urbanity on the other, where the camera follows the boys to their secret hideaways and records their act of re-capturing and re-claiming the site of their former raves.

We see the teenagers in the forest in the early hours of the morning, making noise with all kinds of contraptions (including police helmets as drum kits) and gathering around the fire to socialize, dance and rest. It is a space of freedom, far from social convention, parental oppression and social deadlock. A photographic series entitled *Little Demons* – also part of this body of work – features a group of local children in the woods where the youth raves used to take place. They wear demon-like masks as a playful response to parental hegemony. A tribute to friendship and anti-authoritarianism, *Ain't Got No Fear* shows how a former industrial site can be re-imagined through play, creativity and music.

Also featuring children as protagonists, *Children of Unquiet* (2014) is a multi-disciplinary project in several parts. The artist focuses on children and our possible futures. The project takes place in the geothermal area of the Devil's Valley in Tuscany, Italy, which inspired Dante's *Inferno*, and is known for being the place where sustainable energy production was invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and where the first geothermal power plant in the world was built. Until its shift from manual labour to automation, several thousand workers and their families lived in this area. They were housed in several industrial prototype workers' villages constructed by the modernist

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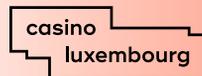
For Many Voices
Mikhail Karikis

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Edited by Hannes Schumacher
& Elinor Morgan
Published by Freigeist Verlag,
Berlin
Design In the shade of a tree
Papers Constellation Martellata 350g
Symbol Tatami White 135g
Fabriano Offset 70g
Typeset in Marcus Bold & Light
(MA-MA Type)
Söhne Leicht & Mono
(Klim Type foundry)
Printed by Stigmi Ltd, Athens
ISBN 978-3-947764-06-8

This publication was made possible with the generous support of:

MIMA, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art
EMST, National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens
Casino Luxembourg - Forum d'art contemporain
LUX London



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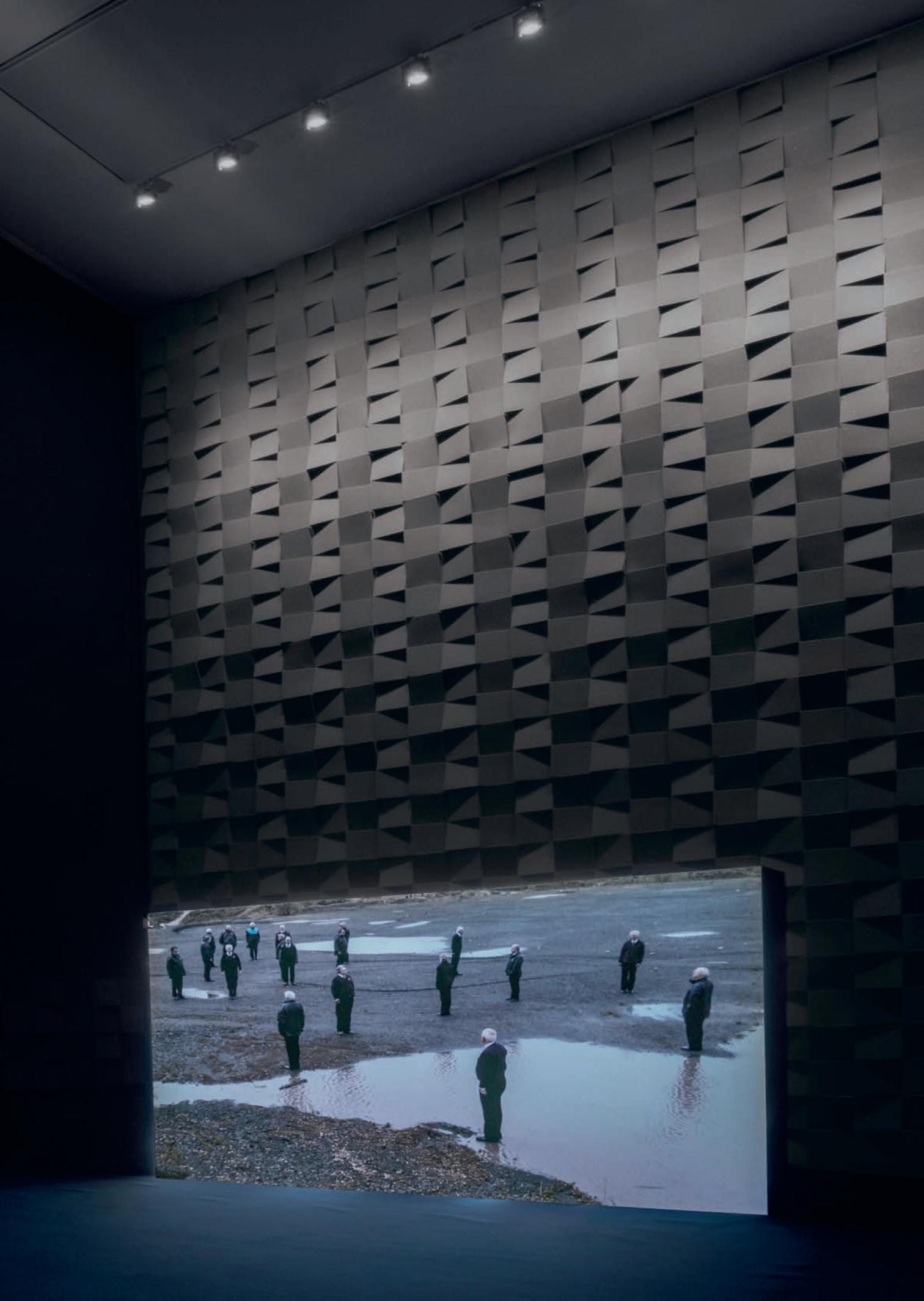
SOUNDS

FROM

Sounds from Beneath (2011–2012) centers on a sound work for which Mikhail Karikis collaborated with a choir of former coalminers inviting them to recall and sing the sounds they used to hear when they worked inside a coal mine. In collaboration with Uriel Orlow, the artists created a video that is set on the disused Tilmanstone colliery in South East England where the group of miners used to work until 1986 when the then British government, led by Margaret Thatcher, closed the coal mine. In the video, the desolate colliery transforms into an amphitheater resonating sounds of subterranean explosions, alarms, mechanical clangs, grinding elevators, shovels scratching the earth and a miners' lament, all sung by the elderly miners grouping in formations reminiscent of picket lines. At once political and poetic, cutting through conventions of documentary realism and exploring the solidarity of sharing a common purpose in labour and song, the work functions as a salvaging of memory, a tribute, and a re-collective lament.

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BENEATH





4 2





SEA

SeaWomen (2012) focuses on a fast vanishing community of elderly female sea workers living on the North Pacific island of Jeju – a South Korean patch of jagged volcanic rock that floats between Japan and China. The work was created during Karikis' stay on the island when he encountered a group of women in their late 70s and 80s called *haenyeo* (sea-women), who free-dive to depths of up to twenty metres to find pearls and catch seafood employing a traditional breathing technique (*sumbitori*) that is transgenerationally passed on among the women. This ancient profession became the dominant economic force on the island by the 1970s, establishing a matriarchal system, and Karikis' project witnesses the diving women's insistence on sustainable ecofeminist practices operating outside the trend of industrialised fishing. It observes the reversal of traditional gender roles, the women's deep sense of community and egalitarianism, their collective economics, their sound subculture, and their sense of professional identity, purpose, fun and independence in later life. *SeaWomen* comprises a multi-channel video and sound installation, and a series of watercolour portraits of the divers, each of which was painted by the artist while holding a single breath.

WOMEN





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