



# H A I N T

ALYSSA TAYLOR WENDT

# HAINT

## Eulogy as Elision



In her multichannel video *HAINT*, Alyssa Taylor Wendt takes the viewer on a dark, cinematic journey, weaving cycles of destiny and veneration against a backdrop of detritus and ruin. Casting an integrative gaze upon the discarded, from concrete monuments known as *spomeniks* in the Balkans, to crumbling structures in Detroit, to an abandoned armory and bathhouse in Texas, *HAINT* subverts narrative resolution and reveals instead an artistic discipline grounded in questions and complexities. Wendt's monumental, three-channel installation coaxes from its viewers the parallel desires to salvage resolve and uncover symbolic associations. To behold this nomadic triptych is to be held by it: to surrender to its immersive exploration of mortality, history, and the spiritual energy of objects.

A recurring motif in *HAINT* is represented by the German phrase *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, seen emblazoned on a pageant

sash that appears on different characters throughout the work. Meaning "to come to terms with one's past," Wendt uses this concept as a starting point to unpack the function of collective memory and to cultivate a sense of yearning for resolve, even when resolution is impossible. The most we can hope from any attempt to come to terms with our history is a kind of honest unraveling. Never a full binding. Never a straight line with a clear beginning or end. Instead, a wandering, elliptical construct that, in the case of *HAINT*, unfolds across the disparate landscapes of Croatia, Detroit, and Texas. This diversity of near and far-reaching locales is apropos, as in this modern world we tend to occupy multiple geographies simultaneously.

Filmed with various crews over the course of three years, Wendt initially conceived of the piece in 2013. Inspired by her father's history of mythologizing his Berlin upbringing and survival in the years following World War II, along with a deep penchant for ruins, faded grandeur, and the power of the moving image, she embarked on a project she knew would take years to fully realize. Beginning in her current home of Austin, Texas, Wendt selected local musicians and artists to improvise in character on themes of purpose, animism, divination, and autonomy; she shot the results of these exercises in an abandoned armory and bathhouse in 2014. Later that year, the artist traveled to Detroit to film the central narrative of the project, which conveys the struggle to endure in the aftermath of conflict. The performance artist Joseph Keckler appears throughout this segment as Helmselm, a vision of mortality,



tethering the gaunt survivors to his haunting, shadow-soaked vocals. For the final production in 2016, the artist filmed primarily at socialist monuments and *spomeniks* in the Balkans, using sweeping, panoramic shots to capture the brutalist style of the monoliths. She layered these visuals with choreographed performances by an avant-garde dance troupe, a female choir singing traditional laments, a medium communicating with trapped energy, and regional Ganga singing woven into a stirring eulogy of both mourning and healing.

The three productions were meticulously stitched together for over a year to produce this stirring meditation on history, memory, and the aftermath of trauma—timely issues that we continue to face in our contemporary world. The concurrent settings seen in *HAINT*'s three channels speak to a central truth about how we perceive and process what we see. Accompanying the video installation is a series of staged production stills that surround us in an adjacent darkened room. Wendt constructed these tableaux during the film shoots, choosing to employ the medium of photography to bring additional dimension to the video. Rather than displaying actual frames from the film, these photographs present alternative moments from the world of *HAINT*, bringing a sense of liminal connection and autonomous interpretative license to the project as a whole. In a similar spirit, the exhibition's sculptural components—an abstract bronze assemblage alongside a *Wunderkammer* filled with altered props from the film—offer the possibility of an extended purpose beyond the objects' roles on the screen.

These eclectic objects and complex visuals complement Wendt's signature, dark aesthetic, further amplified here by *HAINT*'s rich, mesmerizing soundtrack. Multitudinous aural layers fill the space with a stratified compilation of sounds including ambient noise, voiceovers, dialogue tracks, drone metal, original compositions, opera, sound effects, and looped samples. Individual audio design from each of the three segments blend together to create a dense and dynamic synthesis of sound. For Wendt, previously a musician, song and sound are vehicles for transmitting not just tone, but entire histories—an homage to storytelling traditions and living lore.

Music, like memory, gets stuck in our heads. Loss, too, is an earworm. Might our wounds, like our favorite music, be a saving grace? "How do you choose what to forget?" intones a voiceover midway through the work. This is a trick question, just as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is a false proposition: a hope to help us survive. Music haunts the narrative throughout *HAINT* in the literal form of Keckler, whose resounding bass and falsetto, heard in performances of Schubert's *Lieder* and original interpretations of poems and arias, guides the storyline that unfolds in the center channel. As a family digs up heirlooms and buries other memories in the aftermath of war, his voice and presence—from a closet, in the kitchen, on the steps of an abandoned church—are there to remind the living; to console them, not with comforting reassurance, but with a darkness and a vulnerability they have been evading.

A sense of anxious movement underlies the film, from bureaucrats shuffling sticks around file cabinets to figures moving through ruins in Hazmat suits, functioning as a counterpoint to a series of suspended, gently pirouetting objects held in the camera's reverent gaze: pearls, a fish, a grenade, a stuffed monkey, a hairbrush, a set of keys. The darkness behind them serves as a kind of altar, a quiet nothingness from which to take them in. Divorced from any utilitarian identity, the objects take on an animistic beauty. This also holds true for the architectural elements in the film: a dilapidated brick structure ensnared in black ribbon; an abandoned building occupied by a raven-clothed choir; empty hallways that lead back to themselves. This strange majesty is especially exuded by the monolithic *spomeniks*, now severed from the vanished regimes that birthed them, existing here as totems of transience rather than longevity. *HAINT*'s visuals propose that the objects and spaces we tend to see as devoid of consciousness are often stronger in spirit than we are.

What do men enact throughout *HAINT*, in contrast to the film's women? In the Croatian segment, women create and embody



elaborate rituals. They sing ancient chants in light-dappled concrete. In the Detroit channel, a woman cooks for her family; another smokes out the window, bearing it silently, while her neighbor bellows on the table and Death lies like another dish across their fantasy dinner spread, singing of futures past. And in the Texas channel, ungendered beings in Hazmat suits give way, slowly, to a single woman, her protective mask removed, singing a single word: "haint." \*

Like the secret lives of the buildings and objects in the film, the female creative act offers a redemptive alternative to a traditionally male obsession with empire, monument, and domination. At the end of the Croatian segment, the women pull themselves up with black ribbon tethered to a scrapped metal cenotaph, seemingly gaining strength, but ultimately collapsing as they draw closer to their cultural heritage. Wendt's curatorial and narrative trajectories aim to process the errors left behind by men, drawing on ritual, ruin, personal cosmology, and inherited memory to create maps of consequence. Her maps are drawn with string, ribbon, and echoing hallways, rejecting notions of borders and traditional storytelling to provoke thought through the binding, memorializing, tracing, layering, and deconstructing of time.

*HAINT*'s blend of phantasmagoria, historical fiction, and dystopian fantasy suggests that in surrendering to the subconscious, fiercely unwedded to daylight logic, the fecund dark delivers a series of important questions, not answers. To ask these questions is what we most need—and what we are most desperately afraid to do. To ask, to remember, and to create; to move back and forth from

black mourning bands and silk sashes and white ribbons to a circle of beings responding to a unified intuition. These moments are not for coming to terms with the past, or overcoming it, but rather for coming to life in the face of evolution, globalism, and our collective memory. We cannot resolve. We can only trace. To shed light on a subject may temporarily illuminate it but, as suggested by the stunning shot of light sifting through a darkened armory in Texas onto a mourner performing *butoh*, light will haunt the dark in our world as much as any ghost.

Brittani Sonnenberg

\* This vernacular term for a restless spirit hangs over the entire installation, bringing with it a mixed history of lore from the American South. A variation on the word "haunt," this notion that the souls of the dead may remain among the living is epitomized by the Gullah tradition, originating in Africa, of painting porch ceilings a particular shade of blue to ward off evil spirits.



LEFT  
*Majesty*, 2016  
digital chromogenic print

CENTER  
*Baphomet*, 2014  
digital chromogenic print

RIGHT  
*Alchemical Crone*, 2017  
digital chromogenic print



# H A I N T

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January 25 – February 22, 2019

**FRONT**

*H A I N T*, 2018

composite image of stills from three-channel video

**BACK**

*In the Shadow of the Pneuma*, 2014

digital chromogenic print

All images courtesy of artist

**Alyssa Taylor Wendt** received her BA from NYU in 1991 and her MFA from Bard College in 2008. Her performances have been featured at the Museum of Art and Design, New York (2013); Fusebox Festival, Austin (2012); and NuMU Arts Center, Brooklyn (2010). She has had solo exhibitions at Women and Their Work, Austin (2015); Co-Lab Projects, Austin (2012, 2010); Vox Populi Gallery, Philadelphia (2011); and Lademoen Kunstnerverkstede Babel Gallery, Norway (2009). Her work has been included in group exhibitions at Monte Vista Projects, Los Angeles (2018); DEMO Gallery, Austin (2017); Third Man Records, Detroit (2016); Northern-Southern Gallery, Austin (2015); Southern Exposure, San Francisco (2014); New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York (2011); and Miami Art Basel (2008), among others. She is a recipient of numerous awards, including Official Winner at the International Istanbul Experimental Film Festival (2018) and grants from the City of Austin Cultural Council (2015–2018), and has held residencies at the School of Visual Arts, New York (2012); NES, Skagastrond, Iceland (2009); and Lademoen Kunstnerverkstede, Trondheim, Norway (2009).

**Brittani Sonnenberg** is a fiction writer, poet and journalist living in Austin, Texas. She serves as a visiting lecturer at the MFA program of the University of Hong Kong and teaches local creative writing classes. Her writing has been featured in such publications as *The O'Henry Short Story Prizes*, NPR, *The Visual Poetry Project*, and *The North American Review*. Her novel, *Home Leave*, was selected as a *New York Times*' Editors' Pick. She studied English literature with a citation in Mandarin Chinese at Harvard University. She received her MFA from the University of Michigan and was a European Journalism Fellow at Berlin's Freie Universität from 2009–2010.



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