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Venice Immersive



BELOW DECK

a VR-Documentary Play by
TÒ SU

directors **MARTINA MAHLKNECHT & MARTIN PRINOTH** screenplay **JAN EICHBERG, MARTINA MAHLKNECHT, MARTIN PRINOTH** lead developer **LEONHARD ONKEN-MENKE**
music **POSE DIA** sound design **DORIAN BEHNER** director of photography **MARTIN PRINOTH** stage design **MARTINA MAHLKNECHT** costume design **GIANNA-SOPHIA WEISE**
light design **DENNIS NÄHR** sound engineer **STEFFEN REIL** developer, camera operator **LUCA KOWALINSKI** vfx, colouring **JONAS LINK** main cast **MARIA ANTIGUA,**
MANOLET CASTILLO, VANESSA FAUVEL, GADIE SANTOS, MARY GRACE WESCH project management **PAM GORONCY, STÜCKLIESEL** graphics **BÜRO KLASS**
production **TÒ SU FILM OHG**



MO/N Filmförderung
Hamburg
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ALTO ADIGE
PROVINCIA AUTONOMA DE BULSAN
SÜDTIROL



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SYNOPSIS

BELOW DECK is a VR theatre play that combines documentary and fictional means, immersing you behind the luxurious facade of a cruise ship.

In the role of a tourist, you are invited to autonomously discover scenic miniatures of compelling stories of vulnerability and resilience performed by real crew members from the Philippines. More than one-third of all crew members

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

BELOW DECK is the third part of a trilogy about the living situations and working conditions on the high seas. This topic has been with us for several years and has resulted in the immersive installations **OVERSEAS** and **THE STAFF YOUR DREAMS ARE MADE OF** developed in collaboration with people whose life and work are closely linked to our „Western“ lifestyle.

In the third part **BELOW DECK**, we explore the artistic possibilities of narrating through techniques of MR, seeking a concentrated and atmospheric cosmos in which viewers themselves discover the narration through their movement

worldwide are Filipino, living and working below deck for several months without any days off. As an addressed observer of a quicky crew show rehearsal, you find yourself in a Lynchian scenario, oscillating between being a secretly invited guest and a voyeur. What persists is the question: Shouldn't we risk a glimpse behind the curtain to discover what remains hidden from our perception?

in the physical space by tracing the absurdity of reality below deck. What intrigued us most was finding a narrative form that merges documentary research with fictional distillation, allowing us to powerfully tell the crew's experiences on board to a wider audience. Formally, the installation combines Passthrough with VR and 360° film. In this mixed reality, two viewers at a time can experience surreal situations and intimate moments, all while being aware of their own physical bodies, allowing intuitive movements through the MR dramaturgy.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Born in the Italian Alps and living in the harbour city of Hamburg, **MARTINA MAHLKNECHT** and **MARTIN PRINOTH** form the Italo-German artist duo **TÒ SU**. In their collaboration, they combine the medium of film and theatre, developing transdisciplinary projects that are presented in cinemas, theatres and exhibition spaces (43rd Mostra São Paulo, 60th DOK Leipzig, Visioni Italiane, IRap Lagos, Sharjah Biennial II, 2nd Biennial Regard Bénin). Thematically, the duo explores

transcultural border areas in a global world and addresses Eurocentric perspectives alongside their own cultural identity. Their projects, created in collaboration with experts from art, science, and everyday life, are characterized by analogue and digital interactivity, inviting the audience to an engaging and sensory experience. Currently, they are developing a new narrative project centered around AI-controlled border areas.

DON'T PANIC

“You know, sometimes the storm is not outside the ship but inside the ship.”
Manolet, pastry chef

We shouldn't actually be here. In the belly of a passenger ship with the Filipino crew who are rehearsing a play. Millions of Filipinos work on cargo ships and cruise liners. We've read that somewhere before: seen, not really. Not even in the cruise ports of this world such as Venice, Hamburg, Amsterdam or Miami, where they often land, change ships or cargo or, during Covid, even got stuck for months. We belong on the sun deck, with territorially spread out towels and flip-flops. S and A class. Kate and Leonardo. Or rather: Kate and – further down towards the engine room – the staff. The eternal world order of the Titanic. Triangle of Sadrress had a bloody fine moan about it. A kingdom for a lifeboat ... Now we are standing there in chirpy yellow rubber slippers that give way to our weight as if they were made of clouds or sandcastles. “Oh... hello! I guess you are the guest who shouldn't be here?! I see you are wearing a mask, that's fine...well, aren't we all wearing masks somehow and playing a role?” Manolet, the pastry chef, lures us in through the curtain like in a Lynch movie. We are guests. We are being played with. A little bit of being at the mercy of others is part of it. Manolet invites us into a blue illuminated interior that becomes a walkway below deck on a cruise ship. Unlike the view onto a movie screen, the view through the VR glasses is more coercive, authoritarian and physical. A prosthetic that impacts the whole body. Its effects can be felt in the stomach, the balance has to readjust itself, every step further is a little uneasy, is a decision.

In front of us, a roundel of fabric with a yellow texture, we can touch it and – as far as we can tell – see. Touching, seeing, that makes us believe. A piece of fabric slides to the side, clearing an entry for the next performance. If we dare to advance too far with our heads, the image disappears again. As if it were behind us. In a different spatial dimension, with its own presence and independent flow of time. Space and time, we have no other coordinates to grasp the world and

CREDITS

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LANGUAGE: ENGLISH/TAGALOG

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LUISE NAGEL, MARKUS WICHMANN, MARAIKE MARXSEN,

MARKWARD SCHECK, PETRA MÜLLER, PUJA ABBASSI,

SEEMANNSMISSION HAMBURG-ALTONA, SVENJA WEIL,

SVEN MENNINGMANN, TONI MAHLKNECHT

form sentences about it. Therein, too, lie the deeply unsettling forces of this installation.

Of course, there is – like in cinema – a contract between the audience and VR: a contract visitors pay for with their temporary belief in the diegetic worlds of the performance. Neither the gap in the curtain nor its opposite are really there. We somehow know this and get into it anyway. More unreserved, perhaps, than in the cinema, more corporeal. And so we go on into a strange narrative space with an incapable visually that never becomes our own. For all its Lynchian pull, it always narrates its own strangeness, too. In one of its rooms, the pastry chef now presents us with a multi-tiered cake for the captain's dinner. In the next, the dressing room, the crew is getting ready for their own re-enactment. Work as play. Exploitation twisted into a show of self-empowerment. The invisible look at us. A ghost story. The ghosts that appear to us in **BELOW DECK** rehearse the uprising, become visible under their own direction. And they oblige us to look, not only at their VR appearance, but also at our ignorance.

“What they are trying to do is a funny sketch about the guests, but it's a delicate task. How would it be possible to speak freely to those who have money and pay the cruise company and eventually give the salary and the possibility to send your kids to school? Ssshhhh, they proceed rehearsing...”



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A painting, a picture – however abstract – “is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears. Without the disappearing, there would perhaps be no impulse to paint.” Is how John Berger understands the artistic intention in “Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible.” Without such consent, there would probably also be no impulse to photograph, to film, etcetera. Without these affirmations in art, “the visible itself would possess the surety (and the permanence) which painting strives to find.” In the beginning, then, is the visible, the existing, that which confronts humans as a mountain, a tree, an animal or an other. Even cave paintings served to formulate a kind of “magical community” (Berger). To create a connection between human imagination and existence. From the moving or still image outside to those inside our heads. Image production thus obtains an almost ritual function. **BELOW DECK** by Martina Mahlknecht and Martin Prinoth uses immersive means and links to theater and film to take us exactly there. To a temporary, magical community. The installation is the third part of a trilogy about the living situations and working conditions on the high seas, dealing with realities that are directly linked to us and our “Western” European lifestyle, and yet remain unseen. In **BELOW DECK**, the existing, the visible becomes – by means of image production – ghostly, non-existent. As it is with all creatures that have been turned into images and films. The staging of the installation, from the curtain to the performance rehearsal to the perspectival definition of a placed audience, is anchored in the theatrical. The proscenium stage can also be found in the production design of early cinema. And finally, the immersive, that is two spectators, equipped with a total visual prosthetic, who move, scan walls, grasp into the void. **BELOW DECK** and its tentative visitors touch the absent. An absence we would not have become aware of without this image machine creation. The crew, the below deck workers, the strangers. They disappear again after the tour. The bluish darkness in which they appeared to us is difficult to describe. It is neither night nor ignorance. It is the inside. The one behind our eyes, from which everything thought about the world emerges.

BIRGIT GLOMBITZA

