

OVERSEAS

What happens when the TÒ SU duo meets a group of seafarers from Kiribati by chance at the port of Hamburg during the pandemic? Research reasons had brought Martina Mahlknecht and Martin Prinoth to the port. The encounter with the group of stranded men led to the joint project Overseas.

In the six films created, which can be accessed via QR codes on mobile devices in the first part of the installation, seafarers appear on the screen who have left their homeland behind and taken up a physically and mentally challenging profession on the high seas, primarily to provide for their families.

Silence is as much a part of the conversation as thoughts that are spoken and shared. The reflection of the water of the flooded room is mirrored on the uniformed bodies and faces of the sailors. The audible splashing of this water together with the darkened background lends the scene something insistent.

The mutual greeting and introduction of the invitees is marked by the utmost respect and kindness. The appreciation for one another and the mischievous, shifting glances between those sitting in the circle of chairs create a palpable warmth that makes the familiarity and strong cohesion which has developed in times of crisis and the precarious situation on board tangible. In part, the gratitude for each other also comes up in conversation. The idea of having to survive the time ashore without each other, alone, isolated, seems unthinkable.

Previous experiences at sea are also shared. They show that some of the six seafarers already look back on several years at sea and many memories, while others, younger participants in the discussion group, are still at the beginning of their careers as seafarers.

The conversation provides insights into the work on the freighters and the variety of goods that are transported around the globe on large container ships. There is a sense of pride in the statements, which is entirely justified in view of the fact that a large proportion of goods are now transported over long distances in order to be offered and sold worldwide in the commercial sphere. The countless seafarers of this world, who (have to) tear themselves away from their own homeland in order to provide financially for their own families and to satisfy the unbridled hunger of the capitalist economy, have a share in this that should not be underestimated.

The pandemic, with its lockdowns and travel restrictions, has left ships unable to leave and inevitably stranded along with their crews. Some of the five films resonate with a sadness that is hard to escape. What is striking is that despite the continuing difficult situation of the seafarers, no anger, hatred and no indignation come through. This is impressive to experience and marks a difference in the way restrictions on freedom are dealt with which was often not the case locally.

The fact that Kiribati is particularly affected by rising sea levels and will be much more so is the subject of several statements and illustrates the existential concerns

that shape the lives of the people who live on the islands near the equator. Without explicitly naming it, the poignant narratives can be understood as an appeal to vehemently do something to counter the advancing climate and environmental crisis.

Only the six seafarers appear, openly expressing their feelings and idiosyncrasies, and thus giving viewers the opportunity to gain insights into a world that often remains closed at present. Whereas ports used to be public spaces of farewell and arrival, of trade, today they are closed off, sealed off, non-public spaces that conceal adverse poor working conditions and other questionable processes.

The themes addressed by the two-part installation are politically highly topical, exert subtle yet unequivocal criticism, and refer to a state of the world that seems absurd - where friendliness and openness meet exploitation and waste. Human ideals, but also abysses, traditions and memories, customs and needs emerge equally on the horizon of the installation, without hierarchical determination and without the goal of convincing viewers of anything in particular.

The result is a documentary format between film, multimedia installation, and performance that invites visitors to enter transcultural border spaces and to get to know the *weltanschauung* of the six seafarers portrayed. Together with the second part of the installation, the result is an atmospheric experience that defies a simplistic art-theoretical classification. In the second part is a large screen showing the sailors dressing, adorning themselves, and dancing together. The dance was also shot in the same setting, the flooded room. The dance was performed without music, but the rhythmic sound of the dancers' simultaneous movements in the water, breathing and hand movements can be heard through loudspeakers in the exhibition space.

As the first part of a trilogy, *Overseas* focuses on the realities of life and working conditions on the high seas. In the following two parts, among other things, the working conditions of the crew of cruise ships are highlighted. The trilogy of the duo TÒ SU is an impressive work of the search for a new view beyond Eurocentric perspectives.

By Leonore Spemann (cultural scientist and curator)