

Dominique White:  
*When Disaster*  
*Strikes (EN)*  
Kunsthalle Münster

Kunsthalle Münster, Hafenweg 28, 5th floor, 48155 Münster

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 12–6 pm (Free admission)

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Opening: December 8, 2023, 6 pm

Maria Winkel, *Major City of Münster* (Greeting)

Merle Radtke, *Director Kunsthalle Münster* (Introduction)

Accompanying programme:

→ 10/12/2023, 3 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Artist talk with Dominique White

→ 17/12/2023, 3 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Guided tour with Jolanda Saal

→ 17/1/2024, 6 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

*No Mask*. Grada Kilomba. The Reading Group *Machtkritische Kunstvermittlung* as guest at Kunsthalle Münster

with Prof. Dr. Gesa Krebber and Merle Radtke

→ 16/2/2024, 6 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Guided tour with Jolanda Saal

→ 10/3/2024, 3 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Curator's tour with mit Merle Radtke

Colophon: Director Kunsthalle Münster: Merle Radtke / Curator of the exhibition: Merle Radtke / Curatorial assistant: Jolanda Saal / Bookkeeping cultural office: Beate Spörk / Public relations: Artefakt Kulturkonzepte / Design: JMMP – Julian Mader, Max Prediger / Texts: Merle Radtke, Calvin L. Warren / Editing: Merle Radtke, Jolanda Saal / Translation: Tim Connell (EN), Dominikus Müller (DE) / Technical execution: Christian Geißler / Construction: Jaimun Kim, Shantelle Palmer

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A game featuring memory and metamorphosis: in the unpredictable forms of Dominique White's oeuvre, disappearance ironically inhabits the exhibition space. The British artist's sculptures represent the materialisation of Black Life beyond its subjective boundaries as vessels of an ignored civilisation defined as stateless. White squarely addresses Blackness in her work, both in its conceptual and material implications. Her works are abstract memorial sculptures that seem as though they have been dredged up from the floor of the Atlantic—monuments to an underwater nation comprising submerged non-humans.

White draws on various legends that take place in the watery depths and are anchored there. In the nether regions below the sea, inhabited by the spectral ruins of Black Lives, a living vocabulary exists that spawns fantastical creatures, myths and fictions resulting from the unthinkable union of the unborn child, the enslaved and the shipwrecked. White's work is inspired by the sounds of Detroit Techno. She refers to Afrofuturist narratives, such as those propagated by DJ Stingray, Drexciya and Tygapaw. As a result, she interweaves theories of Black Subjectivity, Afropessimism and hydrarchy—all of which are approaches that highlight structural injustices, such as the assertion of power by imperial governments over territories, including the dominion of the oceans—with the nautical myths of the Black diaspora, to create a concept she defines as "Shipwreck(ed)".

The encounter with her ghostly sculptures gives rise to weird, uncanny feelings. Gradually, they are suffused with an intelligible whisper, as Cédric Fauq points out in his experience of White's sculptures. And even if he was unable to interpret the language in which they spoke to him, he could at least sense its texture and essence.<sup>1</sup> As a viewer, one becomes a witness to a conflict, or rather a bygone struggle that is yet ineluctably ever present.

There is a palpable brutality inherent in these seemingly fragile works. In her visual vernacular, White houses the semblance of a shipwreck—replete with ripped sails, tattered hand-woven nets, ropes and battered buoys—in a spectral kaolin shroud. Other recurring elements in the artist's works are rusty harpoons, transformed by the erosion of time and saline ocean waters. Oxidation references their transience, their slow, gradual disappearance transforms them into inverted monuments. In *A Billion*

*Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff notes that iron is "the only human thing" that can be salvaged from places that preserve the memory of the slave trade.<sup>2</sup>

In the works she has produced for the exhibition at the Kunsthalle, White also takes up the motif of traps used for snaring crabs and lobsters and deploys it in a more or less abstract way. Out of context, the traps seem to take on a life of their own, quite apart from their actual function. With the help of the trap, White metaphorically brings things to the surface, stories are salvaged and no longer remain beneath the waves. At the same time, she uses the trap as an object of resistance in the extended sense of a trap that is able to lure ships into the abyss. For when the trap drifts forgotten and invisible in the sea, it unleashes an effect that is comparable to a naval mine; it functions indiscriminately and can capsize ships—a form of (accidental) self-destruction and, not least, an example of how the master's tools can destroy the master's house.

In her most recent works, White juxtaposes kaolin, a substance that symbolises a protective power, that is inherent in many pre-colonial historical sculptures in various parts of Africa, with charcoal. White uses it in the works *The domination of Nothing* <sup>(1)</sup> and *The dethroning of the Human* <sup>(6)</sup> in connection with variously defunct forms, whereby she confronts the moment of violence and destruction with the inherent energy of the material itself. There is a real danger residing in these sculptures, a force that holds a virtual moment of liberation: "Fire remained a weapon of liberation. If it threatened apocalypse, a new world might yet arise from the ashes."<sup>3</sup> White recharges the material, expanding its iconography, as well as the medium of sculpture *per se*. She uses the powerful union of the material as a means of detaching the motifs from their original function and redefining them as bodies imbued with retribution, protest and resistance. Her sculptures aim at nothing less than the destruction of the hydrarchy.

The vulnerability of White's works is nothing if not uncompromising. As fragile entities, her sculptural ensembles posit a balance between states of preservation, decay and destruction; ghosts among ghosts. The sculptures embody a rejection of a future based on the violence of colonialism, a repudiation of authority and a protest against the persistence of a system based on the patent dehumanisation of Black Life. She looks at

the sea as a site of global capital and the concomitant wreckage left in its wake in the pursuit of power and capital, reminding us of the inextricable link between global trade and capital rooted in the Atlantic slave trade.

It is fundamentally a material appeal that deconstructs and reassembles Oceanic narratives: an attempt to create a world after an apocalypse that will never come but has nevertheless already arrived. Inasmuch as the sea represents the ark of death, the starting point for her intellectual pursuit is typified by a strain of hopelessness. White draws attention to the devastation of Black Lives in a white world, in which the oppression of Blackness is by no means a relic of the past: “The question for theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our knowable lives.”<sup>4</sup>

*Merle Radtke, Translation: Tim Connell*

1 Cf. Cédric Fauq, “Dominique White”, in *Possédé-e-s. Déviance, Performance, Résistance*. exh. cat. MO.CO (Montpellier, 2020).

2 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 70.

3 Peter Linebaugh and Markus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra. The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2012), 198.

4 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, Durham/London 2016, 50.

The free black is nothing

Owning nothing

A deep abyss, or a *terrifying question*, engenders the declaration “Black Lives Matter.” The declaration, in fact, conceals this question even as it purports to have answered it resolutely. “Black Lives Matter,” then, carries a certain terror in its dissemination, a terror we dare to approach with uncertainty, urgency, and exhaustion. This question pertains to the “metaphysical infrastructure,” as Nahum Chandler might call it, that conditions our world and our thinking about the world. “Black Lives Matter” is an important declaration, not just because it foregrounds the question of unbearable brutality, but also because it performs philosophical labor—it *compels* us to face the terrifying question, despite our desire to look away. The declaration presents a difficult syntax or an accretion of tensions and ambiguities within its organization: can blacks have life? What would such life *mean* within an antiblack world? What axiological measurement determines the mattering of the life in question? Does the assembly of these terms shatter philosophical coherence or what metaphysical infrastructure provides stability, coherence, and intelligibility for the declaration? These questions of value, meaning, stability, and intelligibility lead us to the terror of the declaration, the question it conceals but engages: what *ontological* ground provides the occasion for the declaration? Can such ground be assumed, and if not, is the declaration even possible without it? “Black Lives Matter” *assumes* ontological ground, which propels the deployment of its terms and sustains them throughout the treacheries of antiblack epistemologies. Put differently, the human *being* provides an anchor for the declaration, and since the *being* of the human is invaluable, then black life *must* also matter, if the black is a human (the declaration anchors mattering in the human’s *Being*). But we reach a point of terror with this syllogistic reasoning. One must take a step backward and ask the fundamental question: is the black, in fact, a human *being*? Or can black(ness) ground itself in the *being* of the human? If it cannot, then on what bases can we assert the mattering of black existence? If it can, then why would the phrase need to be repeated and recited incessantly? Do the affirmative declaration

and its insistence undermine this very ontological ground? The statement declares, then, *too soon*—a declaration that is really an unanswered (or unanswerable) question. We must trace this question and declaration back to its philosophical roots: the Negro Question.<sup>1</sup>

This question reemerges within a world of antiblack brutality, a world in which black torture, dismemberment, fatality, and fracturing are routinized and ritualized—a *global*, sadistic pleasure principle. I was invited to meditate on this globalized sadism in the context of Michael Brown's murder and the police state. The invitation filled me with dread as I anticipated a festival of humanism in which presenters would share solutions to the problem of antiblackness (if they even acknowledged antiblackness) and inundate the audience with "yes we can!" rhetoric and unbounded optimism. I decided to participate, despite this dread, once students began asking me deep questions, questions that also filled them with dread and confusion. I, of course, was correct about my misgivings. I listened to one speaker after the next describe a bright future, where black life is valued and blacks are respected as humans—if we *just* keep fighting, they said, "we're almost there!" A political scientist introduced statistics and graphs laying out voting patterns and districts; he argued that blacks just did not realize how much power they had (an unfortunate ignorance, I guess). If they just collectively voted they could change antiblack police practices and make this world a better place. The audience clapped enthusiastically; I remained silent. Next, a professor of law implored the audience to keep fighting for legal change because the law is a powerful weapon for ending discrimination and restoring justice. We just needed to return to the universal principles that founded our Constitution, "liberty, equality, and justice!" (I thought about the exception clause in the Thirteenth Amendment, the Three-Fifths Compromise, and the way the sharecropping system exploited the Fourteenth Amendment in order to reenslave through contract. I continued to sit in silence.) The audience shouted and applauded. I felt a pit in my stomach because I knew what I had to do; it was my time to step up to the podium—it was my *nihilistic responsibility*. I told the audience there was no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists. Furthermore, all the solutions presented rely on antiblack instruments to address antiblack-

ness, a vicious and tortuous cycle that will only produce more pain and disappointment. I also said that humanist *affect* (the good feeling we get from hopeful solutions) will not translate into freedom, justice, recognition, or resolution. It merely provides temporary reprieve from the fact that blacks are not safe in an antiblack world, a fact that can become overwhelming. The form of antiblackness might alter, but antiblackness itself will remain a constant—despite the power of our imagination and political yearnings. I continued this nihilistic analysis of the situation until I heard complete silence.

A woman stood up after my presentation and shouted, "How dare you tell this to our youth! That is so very negative! Of course we can change things; we have power, and we are free." Her voice began to increase in intensity. I waited for her to finish and asked her, "Then tell us how to end police brutality and the slaughter of the youth you want to protect from my nihilism." "If these solutions are so credible, why have they consistently failed? Are we awaiting for some novel, extraordinary solution—one no one had ever imagined—to end antiblack violence and misery?" Silence. "In what manner will this 'power' deliver us from antiblackness?" How long must we *insist* on a humanity that is not recognized—an insistence that humiliates in its inefficacy? "If we are progressing, why are black youth being slaughtered at staggering rates in the twenty-first century—if we are, indeed, humans just like everyone else?" People began to respond that things are getting better, despite the increasing death toll, the unchecked power of the police state, the lack of conviction rates for police murdering blacks, the prison industrial complex and the modern reenslavement of an entire generation, the unbelievable black infant mortality rate, the lack of jobs for black youth and debilitating poverty. "This is *better*?" I asked. "At least we are not slaves!" someone shouted. I asked them to read the Thirteenth Amendment closely. But the intensity of the dialogic exchange taught me that *affect* runs both ways: it is not just that solutions make us feel good because we feel powerful/hopeful, but that pressing the ontological question presents *terror*—the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism. *Ontological Terror* engages this question and the forms of terror it produces.<sup>2</sup>



The event also put the metaphysical infrastructure into perspective for me. Two philosophical forces were colluding (and at times conflicting) to orient the solutions proposed and the audiences' responses, and both presented "free black" as a concept with meaning: black humanism and postmetaphysics. I use these two terms to docket a certain posture toward metaphysics—and the ontological ground metaphysics offers. Black humanism enters into romance with metaphysics. It appropriates schematization, calculation, technology, probability, and universality—all the instruments of metaphysical thinking—to make epistemological, ethical, and ontological claims concerning blackness and freedom. Freedom is possible, then, because metaphysics provides it with ontology; from there, all sorts of solutions, policies, and practices emerge to address antiblackness. Scientific reasoning, technological innovation, and legality are tools black humanists use to quantify suffering, measure progress, proffer universal narratives of humanity, and reason with antiblack institutions. All problems have solutions for black humanists, and their task is to uncover the solution the problem conceals, as this uncovering equates to an eradication of the problem. Black humanism relies on an eclectic approach to antiblackness—Hegelian synthesis, Kantian rationalism, Platonic universals/idealism, Cartesian representation, and empiricism. In short, black humanists lay claim to the *being* of the human (and the human's freedom) through metaphysical thinking and instruments.

Postmetaphysics, in contrast, attempts the surmounting or twisting [*verwunden*] of the ground and logic of metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> It insists that metaphysics reproduces pain and misery and restricts human freedom. Representing the human as an object of scientific thinking (e.g., biology, economics, law) destroys the spontaneity and uniqueness of the human—things that make the human special. The *ground*, then, upon which metaphysics relies is problematic, and this ground must be destroyed (i.e., twisted) and deconstructed (i.e., displaced) to free the human. Postmetaphysics would advocate for a self-consumption of this ground through hermeneutical strategies, unending deconstructions, and forms of plurality (such as hermeneutic nihilism). The *post* is rather a misnomer, if we think of *post* as an overcoming [*überwunden*]; the postmetaphysician will never overcome metaphysics. A residue will *always* remain, but the postmetaphysician hopes to reduce this metaphysical residue

to render it inoperative. The postmetaphysician understands antiblackness as a problem of metaphysics, especially the way scientific thinking has classified being along racial difference and biology. The task of the postmetaphysical project is to free blacks from the misery metaphysics produces by undermining its ground. Hermeneutical strategies, which contest ultimate foundations, would question the ground of race (racial metaphysics) and its claim to universal truth.

Black humanism and postmetaphysics, however, leave the question of being unattended as it concerns black(ness). Both assume being is applicable and operative—black humanism relies on metaphysical being and postmetaphysics relies on multiple interpretations or manifestations of being. In other words, the human's *being* grounds both philosophical perspectives. Although postmetaphysics allows for a capacious understanding of the human and Being, it still posits being *universally* as it concerns freedom; no entity is without it, even if it manifests differently, or as difference, if we follow Deleuze. This is to suggest that both discourses proceed as if the *question* of being has been settled and that we no longer need to return to it—the question, indeed, has been elided in critical discourses concerning blackness. *Ontological Terror* seeks to put the question back in its proper place: at the *center* of any discourse about Being.

*Ontological Terror* meditates on this (non)relation between blackness and Being by arguing that black *being* incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing). Being claims function as its property (all functions rely on Being, according to this logic, for philosophical presentation), but the aim of black nihilism is to expose the unbridgeable rift between Being and function for blackness. The puzzle of blackness, then, is that it functions in an antiblack world without being—much like "nothing" functions philosophically without our metaphysical understanding of being, an extraordinary mystery. Put differently, metaphysics is obsessed with both blackness and nothing, and the two become synonyms for that which ruptures metaphysical organization and form. The Negro is black because the Negro must assume the function of nothing in a metaphysical world. The world needs this labor. This obsession, however, also transforms into hatred, since nothing is incorrigible—it shatters ontological ground and

security. Nothing terrifies metaphysics, and metaphysics attempts to dominate it by turning nothing into an object of knowledge, something it can dominate, analyze, calculate, and schematize. When I speak of function, I mean the projection of nothing's terror onto black(ness) as a strategy of metaphysics' will to power. How, then, does metaphysics dominate nothing? By objectifying nothing through the black Negro.

In this analysis, metaphysics can *never* provide freedom or humanity for blacks, since it is the objectification, domination, and extermination of blacks that keep the metaphysical world intact. Metaphysics uses blacks to maintain a sense of security and to sustain the fantasy of triumph—the triumph over the nothing that limits human freedom. Without blacks, I argue, nothing's terror debilitates metaphysical procedures, epistemologies, boundaries, and institutions. Black freedom, then, would constitute a form of *world destruction*, and this is precisely why humanism has failed to accomplish its romantic goals of equality, justice, and recognition. In short, black humanism has neglected the relationship between black(-ness) and nothing in its yearning for belonging, acceptance, and freedom. The Negro was *invented* to fulfill this function for metaphysics, and the humanist dream of transforming invention into human *being* is continually deferred (because it is impossible). *Ontological Terror* challenges the claim that blacks are human and can ground existence in the same being of the human. I argue that blacks are introduced into the metaphysical world as available equipment in human form. [...]

Calvin L. Warren

This text first appeared in Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror. Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, Duke University Press, Durham/London, 2018, 1–6.

1 Throughout this book, I will use the terms *Negro* and *black* interchangeably to docket an ontological problem of Being and blackness. I am not as much interested in historicizing the terms or engaging in the contentious debates concerning identity; rather, I understand these terms as pointing to the same problematic, which is beyond individual identity.

2 The term *ontological terror* appears in many scholarly texts, primarily as an undeveloped term but expressing a poetics of fear or anxiety. Much of this work is done in theological studies in which the lack of ultimate foundations (i.e., the Death of God thesis) leaves the subject unnerved. Most of this work, however, assumes humanism as its ground of investigation, meaning that the human subject is precluded from exercising its ontological capacity. My use of *ontological terror* is designed to foreground not only the terror the human feels with lack of security, but also that this fear is predicated on a projection of ontological terror onto black bodies and the disavowal of this projection. Thus, humanism does not exhaust ontological terror, and an antimetaphysical understanding of it is necessary to analyze antiblackness. My use of *ontological terror* is

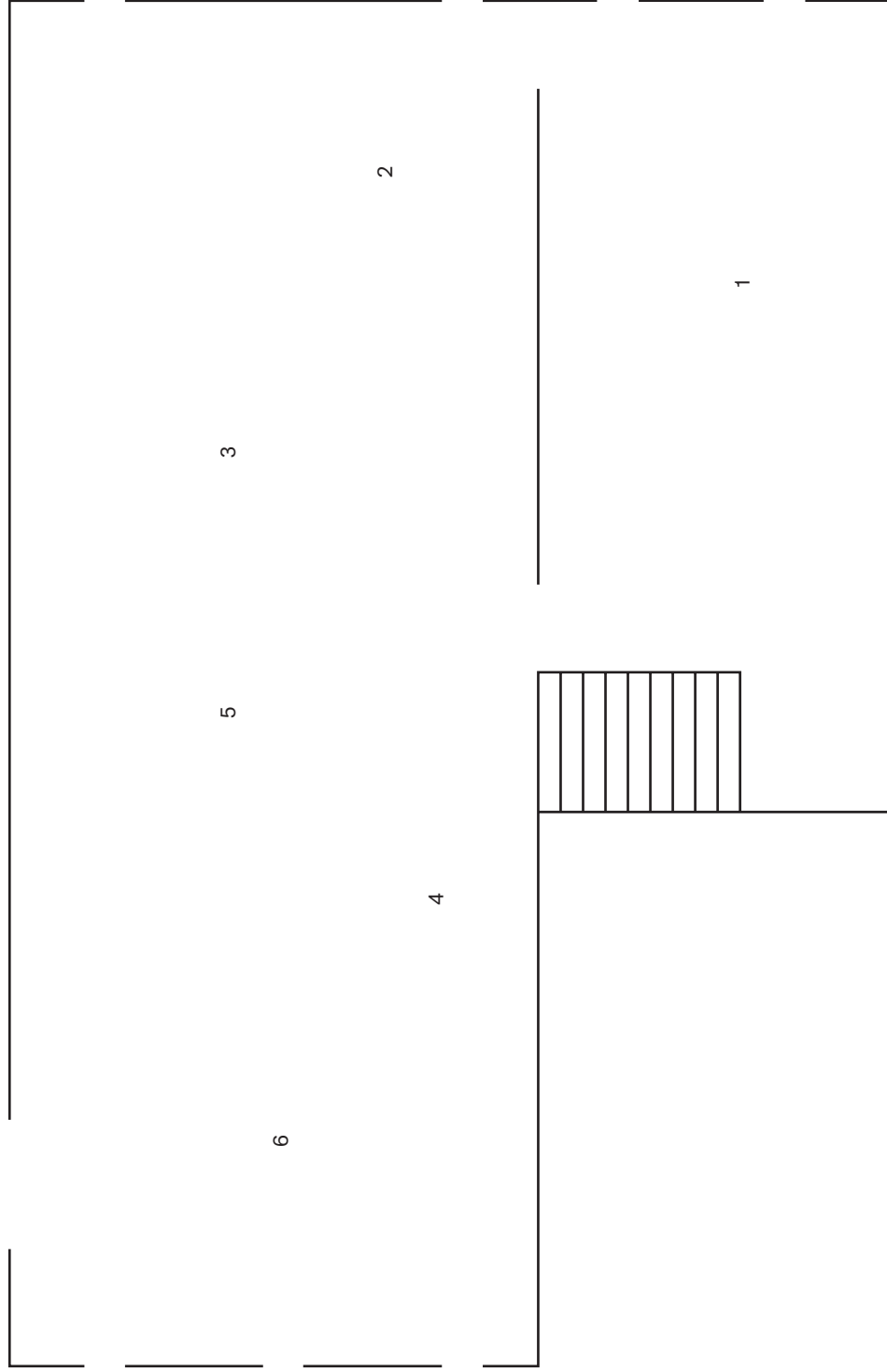
more along the lines of Julius Lester's description of it as "the terror of nonexistence, the unending trauma of being damned in the flesh" in his *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*, 25. For examples of ontological terror as a human/humanist experience, please see Anthony B. Pinn's wonderful *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*; Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair's *Secularism and Religion-Making*; and Louise Morris's master's thesis, "The Spectre of Grief: Visualizing Ontological Terror in Performance," which understands the artistic representations of terror as a veil—something concealing trauma. I will argue something similar in chapter 4, but argue that representations expose and uncover rather than serving as a veil.

3 In his *The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays*, Heidegger understands that the overcoming of metaphysics [überwunden] is impossible, since a remnant will always remain and one must go *through* metaphysics to ask the ontological question; but the thinker must aspire to verwunden, the surmounting that restores metaphysics (technology as instrumentalization and domination in this instance) "back into its yet concealed truth," 39.

Dominique White (born 1993 in the UK) is a graduate of Goldsmiths University of London and Central Saint Martins. Her recent exhibitions include *May you break free an outlove your enemy*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid (2023); *Statements*, Art Basel, Basel (2022); *Love, Bold Tendencies*, London (2022); *cinder's of the Wreck/les cendres du naufrage*, Triangle France, Marseille (2022); *Techno Worlds*, produced by Goethe-Institut, Art Quarter Budapest (2021); *Possédées*, MO. CO, Montpellier (2020–21); *Boundary + Gesture*, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge (2019).

White is the winner of the 9th edition of the *Max Mara Art Prize for Women* (GB/IT) (2022–2024) and CURA magazine has chosen her as one of the most significant artists of the current generation. White was awarded the Roger Pailhas Prize in 2019 in conjunction with her solo exhibition at VEDA, Florence (2019) and received awards from Artangel and the Henry Moore Foundation in 2020. In 2020 and 2021, White was a guest artist at Sagrada Mercancía (Santiago, Chile), Triangle France – Astérides (Marseille), and La Becque (La Tour-de-Peilz). White works nomadically.





Raum 1 / Room 1

- 1 *The domination of Nothing*, 2023, rostiges und geschmiedetes Eisen, Sisal, zerstörtes Seil, gebranntes Mahagoni, hochflüchtige Holzkohle / wrought iron (rusted), sisal, destroyed sail, mahogany (burnt), high volatile charcoal, 540 × 270 × 270 cm

Raum 2 / Room 2

- 2 *A refusal to be captured*, 2023, rostiges und geschmiedetes Eisen, zerstörtes Seil, Sisal / wrought iron (rusted), destroyed rope, sisal, 270 × 220 × 190 cm
- 3 *A refusal to be dominated*, 2023, rostiges und geschmiedetes Eisen, zerstörtes Seil, Sisal / wrought iron (rusted), destroyed rope, sisal, 220 × 220 × 220 cm
- 4 *The tortuous*, 2023, gebranntes Mahagoni, rostiges und geschmiedetes Eisen / mahogany (burnt), wrought iron (rusted), 160 × 130 × 170 cm
- 5 *The antropophagus*, 2023, gebranntes Mahagoni, rostiges und geschmiedetes Eisen / mahogany (burnt), wrought iron (rusted), 120 × 210 × 250 cm
- 6 *The dethroning of the Human*, 2023, geschmiedetes Eisen, Kaolin, zerstörtes Seil, hochflüchtige Holzkohle / wrought iron, kaolin, destroyed sail, high volatile charcoal, 240 × 330 × 410 cm