

# As we hear the booming thuds of

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In the transitional corridor that bridges the main area and the back room, there is a lone **video** work flickering in the dim light. The corridor gives access to the main area, the back room, the toilet and storage. It is an awkward and undefined space. The work can be seen from the main space and despite the ample amount of wall space still available, for some reason it is almost condemned to reside in a kind of limbo.

The **video** work is small and the footage flickers and is **glitchy**. We see the **silhouette** of a person aiming a bow and arrow at the camera, which seems to **hover** far above the ground. The person in the image appears to perceive us as a threat and takes aim at us. It looks like the image is struggling to stabilize itself within the digital medium that carries it. It is a moment where the calm composure of the surrounding **exhibition** feels raw, heavy, uncertain of itself and with that uncomfortable feeling of . Despite the threat, there is a part of me that likes feeling. That ominous, gravitational pull that slows down your heartbeat into a dull and booming thud, draws in your reluctant, anxious gaze and forces you to tread carefully, with clear intentionality, into the scene – towards something that never fully comes into view but that you know is out there and affecting your every move.

The unstable nature of the **video** work reflects an oft-felt sentiment that we live in an increasingly fragmented and unstable world, where the deluge of **data** accumulates faster than it can be understood and stories come together just as quickly as they fall apart with the next wave of information. **Objects** remain after the stories that once animated them have faded, just like **images** circulate long after the circumstances that produced them have disappeared. What is often missing is the connective tissue that would bind these **fragments** into a meaningful **narrative** and which would place you firmly into the world. One of the most popular tools invoked of late, which has regained renewed relevance in response to this disarray, has been the **archive**.

**Marginal Evidence** brings together the works of **Claudio Tola** (1997, IT), **Nadia Sotirova Abajiva** (2001, BG) and **Severi Aaltonen** (1992, FI) and unfolds in a landscape of partial information, where each artist approaches the **archive** from a distinctly separate position. Each artist works with forms of archival material, such as digital **images** circulating online, personal artifacts and **datasets**. Their work assembles traces that all point towards subjects that remain **partially inaccessible** to the audience. It is only through talking to the artists and to Marie-Jeanne and Ron that we get some further clues about the source materials. Yet, **Marginal Evidence** is exactly what it suggests it is; knowledge emerging from incomplete accounts from the edges, margins, bits of **evidence** that hint at something larger. While this gathering of **fragments** is done with the promise of unveiling hidden **narratives**, while moving through the **exhibition** something **inaccessible** seems to be equally looming at the edges that refuses to meet my direct gaze.

**Fragments** come together and accumulate in the **exhibition** into an environment that mostly feels comforting and safe. From speaking to the artists during the **installation**, I am struck by the **suppleness** in the way they have organised themselves; space was allocated without big arguments or the flare ups of vile artistic ego's, and many of the works were prepared way in advance. Apart from a few minor disasters that are to be expected from setting up any **exhibition**, such as a broken glass partition,

damaged sculptures and a few broken cables, things came together swiftly and with a clear goal in mind.

It is especially in the **basement** that features **Nadia's** work that I feel extra safe. Deep down in the earth, surrounded by thick concrete **walls**, tucked away behind the office and the main space, it resembles something like a cheerful **bunker**; with bright, colorful **walls** and **pipes** and beautiful toy-like **objects**. It reminds me of how hospitals have gone through a similar transformation over the past few decades: from the utilitarian spaces that were painted in drab grey and brown colors, they have transformed into soft wellness-like spaces that seem to deny the **gravity** of the **emergencies** that take place within them. In a similar manner, the **basement** has been cleaned and meticulously repainted by **Nadia**, even the floor has received a fresh coat in honor of her **exhibition**. The light from the **fluorescent tube**, a feature often hated by exhibiting artists, makes the blue **walls** feel extra matte, even and clean. Within this carefully arranged setting we have **Nadia's installation**, *The Autobiography of My Father*, which is an inward search into an **archive** of an intimate nature. Her **installation** is an **autoportrait** of her **father**, which came forth from conversations between the two and it showcases replicas of his personal belongings: model buses made out of carefully painted pieces of wood are arranged on a large sculptural plywood pedestal that doubles as a road and a display surface. Ceramic reproductions of pine-shaped air fresheners hang nearby, with ceramic cuddly toys sitting on very tall slender wooden pedestals/chairs, while giant animal-shaped perfume caps made out of a construction-type plaster stand on slender plywood pedestals. Some of the **walls** are painted in the **father's** favorite colors: a bright blue and some construction details such as **pipes**, bolts and steel beams are painted bright orange (his favorite color to highlight details).

The **objects** originate from a personal quest to get to know her **father** and ask the questions we stop asking over time: such as what his favorite colors are or what's the deal with the small items he collects. In other words, the meaning behind all the everyday traces that accumulate within private domestic life. In that sense what we see here is an autobiographical investigation. Yet, despite the incredible attention with which all of these items are replicated and crafted, the **father** actually remains completely **unknown** to us. Each item is lifted out of the original context, severing it from its source and starts to live a life of its own, rather than exposing the person that is supposed to be contained within these **fragments**. It feels like the act of replication, crafting and staging is carefully protecting the stories that underlie these **objects**. What might have unfolded as a **narrative** of family life, with all its complicated tensions, histories, (unspoken) affections or even misunderstandings, remains completely **unknown** to us. Though **Nadia** did reveal to us that one of the ceramic figures actually resembles him, that's not stated anywhere publicly. The **installation** brings together **evidence** of life where biography might have encountered . It's almost as if the **installation** functions as an emotional **bunker**, shielding us from the collateral damage that would come with truly exposing the most intimate details of someone's life. Nor does any work dare to look over the ceiling of the **basement** and connect to **Claudio's installation** that unfolds above it. It stays well within the boundaries that it has set up for itself.

**Claudio's installation**, *As Far as It Can Be Seen (Notes around a "Desert" Island)*, takes up the whole main area of the project space and provides a generous amount of works to the audience. At the beginning of the **installation** process, it seemed like everything was decided beforehand and carefully planned. Yet, over time, as **Claudio** kept on bringing out more and more works and carefully fitting them to the space, it all revealed itself to be a lot less predetermined than expected. It was as though he had a stash of works that he could grab something from at a whim, as if all works were **fragments** of the same story regardless. Which makes us suspect that the subject at hand has been a fascination of his for a long time. The works come together as a dispersed **constellation** of **screens**, **projections**, a **photograph**, a **poster** and a **light**. Small, exposed screens sit next to each other like bare extensions of a digital **archive**. A 16mm projector loops footage that could depict almost any tropical island. Near the entrance, on the exact opposite side of the space, two iPads show aerial **images** of a similar island. Although the work never explicitly reveals their source, through talking with **Claudio**, we find out that

most of the works repeatedly orbit **North Sentinel Island**, a place that has long existed in the margins of visibility: known primarily through scant amounts of **satellite images** and **fragments** of recorded encounters, the island exists in the global consciousness largely as a visual rumour.

At first glance, together with the sound of the sea, the **installation** breathes a calm that feels like we are surrounded by adverts for trips to the tropics. The clean aesthetics, the ample space between the works and the polished digital surfaces create a frictionless environment. Yet, while this **installation** is confronting us with what **Claudio** calls the superficial cliché of the “desert” island and the tension between the demands of our gaze and visibility, he is purposefully also skirting around the direct confrontation concerning the historical tensions surrounding the much featured **North Sentinel Island** (eg. colonial encounters, missionary intrusions, geopolitical fascination, etc.). They remain suspended just outside of the frame, sometimes literally, such as the shadow of **John Allen Chau** featured in the photo on the wall of the office – who famously was killed by the **Sentinelese** in 2018 while trying to bring Christianity to **North Sentinel Island** – and sometimes simply by omitting the origin of the **images**.

The **installation** approaches these histories without allowing them to settle into their rightful **narrative** form within the **installation**. Never fully rupturing the aesthetic calm that reigns in the space, the works all orbit the unnamed centre of **Severi**. You can feel the dark, gravitational pull of it, but the rearranged **fragments** are deliberately steering you into a safer territory. Even though it does nothing to erase the uneasy feeling of something lurking underneath the mirror-smooth surface.

The uneasy feeling nevertheless comes into full view in **Severi’s installation**, *Spectator*, which occupies the garage-like back room of SIGN. It is one of the trickiest spaces in SIGN to get designated as an artist, as it has such a distinct character of its own; with a metal floor, a full-length garage door, always cold due to poor heating and very poor lighting. Yet it seems to work in **Severi’s** favor, as the aesthetics of the room match those of his work perfectly and no adjustments to the room were made, save for a few pillows thrown on the floor in the corner. Nothing is necessarily set out here to make you feel comfortable or safe; things are as they are. The cold, harsh and hostile environment is in sharp contrast to the safe, clean and colorful **basement** of **Nadia**.

Unlike the spread that the other two offer the audience, **Severi** presents us with just one work, which does span the full diagonal length of the room. Ten computer monitors are mounted onto a bare steel frame at waist height, forcing the viewers to sit on the floor against the incredibly uncomfortable garage door and the dirty wall to watch the **images** unfold. The **video** playing across all of these screens is assembled from hundreds of thousands of **images** from **datasets**, all extracted from online **archives**, unveiling the harrowingly blatant breach of privacy due to the intimate nature of some of these **images**; such as family photographs and security footage from the work floor. All **fragments** of everyday life whose origins remain unclear.

Within the work *Spectator*, the **archive** takes on the role as designated by the tech industry; as a grab bag that is there to be pilfered for your own purposes, rather than something that is meant to stabilize our stories and root us securely in the world. In the **installation**, the **data** that **Severi** extracted from various sources is distilled into little **narratives** that fall apart as quickly as they are formed. **Images** appear and disappear across the monitors. Sometimes aligning neatly with the screen, sometimes spilling across the borders. The work is presented as an attempt to interrupt and reveal the operations of **algorithmic systems** by extracting and reorganizing their visual materials. However, just making these **datasets** visible doesn’t necessarily interrupt the logic that produced them. Instead, it mirrors the very structure it seeks to expose and by doing so makes itself complicit with the practice it sets out to criticize. It has become the artistic accomplice to the crime it seeks to uncover, in the process unveiling suspects that refuse to name names, making us depressingly aware of the scope of the problem in front of us. **Severi’s** work confronts **us** most directly, yet doesn’t put a real

name or a face to it. The **systems of surveillance**, extraction and weaponization remain largely invisible and hover like an ominous faceless, oppressive force over the work.

I feel depressed, I am cold and the garage door has been poking into my back for a while as I sit in front of **Severi's** work on a metal covered threshold, watching the **images** fly across the screens. I notice that I am longing for the warmth of **Nadia's** space and all the safety it provides me. To be able to marvel at the beautifully crafted model buses and ceramics and in that process not being able to begin to imagine or even dare to ask if maybe her dad could have a dark side and might actually be an enormous asshole? I wonder if there are **images of Nadia** and her dad somewhere on one of the **databases** being pilfered right now? Yet I notice I would rather not think about such things, and be given the permission to stay in the colorful **basement**, to just marvel at the beauty of the model buses and their pristine environment. To feel like everything is ok for now and someone is looking out for me and my emotional well-being. I am sure I could confide my stories with **Nadia** more securely than in any online **archive**, as she, unlike them, is clearing putting a more ethical approach into practice,

I would also rather study the carefully composed **fragments** that **Claudio** consciously puts up for consideration, pointing me to the safety of formal studies and shielding me from the very worst parts of humanity and that feeling of grave that we can all currently feel the threat looming in our everyday lives and should be confronting, such as the issue of **neo-colonization** or the geopolitical disasters unfolding right before our eyes. While tech companies are raiding not only our most intimate galleries, but also showing us what a **technocracy** looks like in real life. Meanwhile they help push the **Doomsday Clock** ever closer to midnight, rather than towards that utopia that they keep promising us.

It is curious that within the **exhibition**, all artists have clearly defined spaces and don't venture much out of them in order to engage in a direct dialogue with one another, with the **glitchy video** work of **Claudio** being the one exception. These are essentially three solo **exhibitions**, rather than one intermingled, messy group **exhibition** that would perhaps lay the emphasis on the overarching themes within the works of all three of them. Instead, there have been clear decisions made in supple mutual agreement as to what the artists were willing to navigate. It is only the lone **video** work in the dank hallway that short circuits this and provides a brief, almost accidental glimpse of a raw, exposed nerve that is directly connecting **Claudio** and **Severi's** work, and through which a shared melancholic attitude towards the threat that the digital **archive** can hold becomes clearly legible. But even without it, the **exhibition** can be seen as a diagnostic moment within a larger condition and is an example of how well attuned SIGN is to the world. That even without formulating a heavy handed, concise curatorial vision about the why, the what and the whole of this all, they intuitively manage to select artists that demonstrate a clear understanding of how we all simultaneously operate within the field of art and the real world through their works and are extremely familiar with the ways that fragmentation dominates both the digital landscapes and our social fabrics. Their work responds to a world in which **images, data** and **objects** flood our everyday reality and are often completely detached from the stories that produced them. Yet the **exhibition** also shows how these **fragments** can be stabilized into an aesthetic vocabulary of contemporary art, one that is capable of approaching , while maintaining a careful distance from it. Which in turn shows the inherent human urge to compose a sense of safety within a world that overwhelmingly feels unsafe, with conscientiously shaping the discussions we choose to have.

Leaving the **exhibition**, the small screen can even be seen from the outside of the building, as it is trying to stabilize itself in the digital noise. Positioned at the very back of the space, in that transitional nothing space, the image remains **marginal** to the **exhibition's** overall composition. Yet it is precisely there that the instability resonates loudest with the rawness and ugliness of the world that it is trying to bridge. Yet it remains stubbornly pushed to the margins.