

P. Staff

DURCHDRINGUNG

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Bonner Kunstverein
October 11, 2025–February 1, 2026

Bonner Kunstverein is proud to present *Durchdringung*, the first institutional solo exhibition in Germany by artist, filmmaker and poet P. Staff. Bringing together newly commissioned works within a site-specific architectural intervention, *Durchdringung* is conceived as a choreography of dense spatial atmospheres in which body politics are addressed through sensory overload, latently menacing interventions, and gestures of eroticism.

For the past decade, Staff's practice has explored ideas that merge the body—often marginalised, debilitated, or queered—with the architecture of disciplining institutions, somatically and psychically perverting our integration with the built environment. Across video installation, sculpture, and poetry, their work probes the structures of power that produce and define the living and the dead.

Staff's exhibition takes as its departure point a total intervention into the spaces of the Bonner Kunstverein: a newly constructed series of rooms and corridors are each consumed by a vivid deployment of synthetic and fluorescent colour that at once flattens and intensifies, choreographing unnerving environments and affects. In a culmination of the artist's long-standing engagement with varied registers of violence and agency, *Durchdringung*—penetration—evokes the forces that enter, infiltrate, and transform: beams through tissue, armies through borders, laws through bodies, vision through opacity—each crossing leaving traces of power and exposure.

On the occasion of the exhibition, a first collection of Staff's poetry entitled *Minimum World* has been published. Collating texts written between 2018 and 2025, the publication highlights Staff's visual and concrete poetics, experiments in typography, and obsessive linguistic tics.

Room 1

Minimum World, 2025

Holographic fans, video

24 fans, each 65 cm

Video, colour, no sound, approx. 5 min, looped

Programming: Joseph Stewart

Room 2

Skeleton, 2025

HD video, colour, sound, 16 min., looped

Lighting: Matt Savitsky

Audio Mastering: Adam Staff

Room 3

Hormonal Fog (Kunstverein), 2025

Fog machine, herbal tincture

Minimum World (Pages), 2025

Various inkjet prints on pink paper, 29,7 × 21 cm each

Room 4

Penetration, 2025

HD video, colour, 5.1 surround sound, 20 min., looped

Director of Photography: Conci Althouse

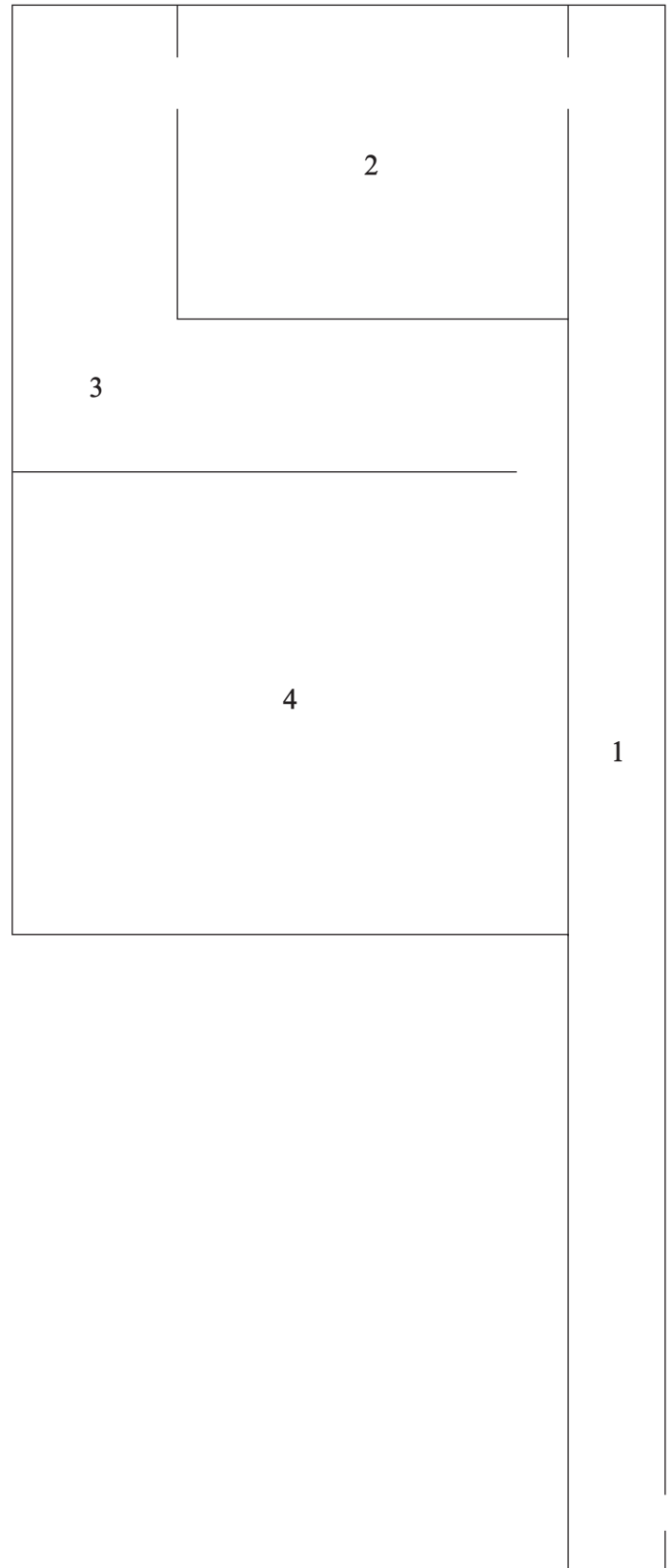
Camera Assistant: Giselle González

Gaffer: Austin LoCicero

Audio Mastering: Adam Staff

Performer: Gregory Barnett

All works courtesy the artist; Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles; Galerie Sultana, Paris; David Zwirner Gallery.



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In 1925—exactly one century ago—the conglomerate IG Farben was created through a merger of Germany’s leading chemical firms, consolidating a branch of modern industry born from the nineteenth-century synthetic dye chemistry. What began as colour science was soon transformed into an industrial platform for plastics, pharmaceuticals, and, ultimately, the machinery of war. Under the Nazis, IG Farben became integral to the war economy: it built the Buna (synthetic rubber) Works at Monowitz/Auschwitz III, operated with enslaved labour, and, through its subsidiaries, supplied Zyklon B, a cyanide pesticide weaponized for mass murder in gas chambers. The manufacturing of synthetic colour was never just a question of aesthetics; rather it was from its outset onwards penetrated by militarization and governance—by the management of life, the production of harm, and, in the German context, by war crimes on an unimaginable scale.

I

For the prologue to their first institutional solo exhibition in Germany, the artist, filmmaker, and poet P. Staff—acclaimed for the deployment of exuberant, deeply-saturated synthetic and fluorescent colour that at once flattens and intensifies spaces in which they choreograph unnerving environments and affects—opts for a markedly different approach: we enter the exhibition through chromatic restraint, through episodes of near-white, clinical luminosity, before becoming immersed in *Minimum World* (2025), the artist’s latest and largest poem-turned hologram. Staged within a 50-meter tunnel built for their sober yet alarming diagnosis of the present, the poem entertains no illusion of hope; it views the violence and brutality of our world as “irreversible.” Stripped of colour, lines of text flash up, stutter, vanish, and return. *Minimum World* rotates and shatters in white alone, at times exposing its skeletal armature—the effect is radiographic, recalling X-ray’s fundamental reconfiguration of materiality and solidity, which forever overturned the received divide between the visible and the invisible.

Staff’s unwavering exploration of the fluorescent chromatics has long hinted at a deeper connection

between synthetic colour and medical imaging, one that is not merely technical but ontological: a chemistry that redefined visibility, representation, and the body itself. The invention of synthetic dyes in the mid-nineteenth century—variations of magenta and indigo, emblematic hues of early industrial synthesis and commercial success, later shape the chromatics of the exhibition—marked the moment when colour itself became an industrial product. Chemistry found ways to “fix” the invisible, to control how matter absorbed and refracted light, thereby turning colour into an instrument of diagnosis. Aniline derivatives soon entered biology and made visible cells, tissues, and pathogens; the medical gaze was literally dyed into being. The dye industry that later merged into IG Farben expanded from pigments to pharmaceuticals and radiography, translating the optics of dye chemistry into the physics of imaging. The same principles of transparency, absorption, and luminescence would shape X-ray screens, photographic plates, and contrast agents. Synthetic colour thus founded a science of contrast. Once the body could be stained, scanned, and illuminated, medicine, industry, and the military came to share a penetrating visual language of exposure, control, and the management of life itself.

Minimum World becomes a metronome that tunes the audience’s bodies in anticipation of what follows—a choreography of dense spatial atmospheres in which body politics are addressed through registers of sensory overload and latently menacing interventions. For the past decade, Staff has mobilised medical and military imaging systems—including MRI, X-ray, thermal, and other heat-sensing modalities—to ask which subjectivities and which politics settle into these images, and what happens when such technologies of visualisation become artistic media in their own right. X-ray imaging and its predecessors do more than expose; their language insists that visibility itself is engineered—by laboratories, factories, and the laws that authorise their procedures. These technologies install a regime of looking—probing, possessive, standardising—that extends and strengthens a biologisation of politics. Thus, Staff’s works operate at the threshold of image and intervention; they make the clinical gaze palpable, not as neutral but as a social organisation—sometimes caretaking, often normalising, not infrequently violent. In Bonn, their sensitivity to the constitutive forces of violence in the making of a person meets a specific historical context: the Federal Republic and its law-making, negotiated in the former German capital over decades—with deep impacts on bodily self-determination, reproduction, and the recognition of gender.

Durchdringung denotes many things at once: the act of entering, or forcing one’s way through; the reach of influences into tissues, spaces, or institutions;

the charged moment when inside becomes outside. In medicine, it refers to radiation, fluids, or instruments traversing the body—a clinical touch that makes interiors visible; in the military, it marks a breach of defences, the incursion of territory, and a weapon’s power to pierce. In physics and optics, it measures the depth of rays or waves; in social life, it signals how laws and norms permeate everyday existence. Always, it carries the sense of something incisive, insistently perceptible. Such penetrations—optical, juridical, ballistic, clinical—do more than reveal; they recompose what a subject can be. In a culmination of the artist’s longstanding engagement with visible and invisible registers of violence and agency, *Durchdringung* evokes the forces that enter, infiltrate, and transform: beams through tissue, armies through borders, laws through bodies, vision through opacity—each instance leaving traces of power and exposure.

In the following spaces, Staff’s desire to look inside—the invisible, concealed, or hidden, toward what might constitute a subjectivity—drives their artistic investigations to the skeletal, the endocrine, and the subconscious.

II

From antiquity’s *memento mori* and medieval Dances of Death through Vesalian anatomy, baroque ossuaries, and nineteenth-century museum specimens, depictions of the human skeleton shifted from moral emblem to scientific diagram to administrative image—conscripted into classificatory regimes that sorted bodies into purported racial types and pathological categories. After 1895, Röntgen’s X-rays reordered visibility: the skeleton shifted from memento to index, from emblem to evidence. Radiography’s promise—non-invasive truth—spread across surgery, forensics, and war medicine. The skeleton became a screen image, an index for diagnosis, surveillance, and standardisation. In this new regime of visibility, Bertha Röntgen’s famous response to seeing her hand’s radiograph was telling: “I have seen my death.” With *Skeleton* (2025), Staff engages with both the long traditions of depicting human remains and the distribution of affect around death: A bath of red light sets the scene. One by one, bones advance across the frame—skull, rib, phalanx, femur. Some index the human body without question; others slip toward pure form, almost unplaceable once untethered from the whole. A granular soundtrack fortifies the image: industrial, mechanistic—collaged recordings of various operations, cleanings, radio transmissions—skittering over a thudding, heavy bass. Aligned with Staff’s filmic practice that combines structuralist

strategies with poetic propositions, *Skeleton* extends such lines of inquiry into organic matter that is at once ubiquitous and excessively signified, freighted with personal, spiritual, and symbolic investments. Staff’s presentation of bones may be read as a reaction to anatomical and forensic traditions that repeatedly mobilised pelvic dimorphism and cranial metrics as clinical “proof” of a binary, essentialised sex/gender—turning averages into diagnostic certainties in order to police identity.

III

The third spatial composition literalises the exhibition’s title: a low, dark corridor bending at a ninety-degree angle opts for both perceptual scarcity and heightened attention. Its engineering demands that visitors traverse the passage twice, becoming enveloped by *Hormonal Fog* (2017–), the latest site-specific iteration of a collaboration between P. Staff and Candice Lin. The work vaporizes testosterone-inhibiting compounds into the air to intervene in the audience’s endocrine balance, nudging it toward what has been socially coded as “less male.” Since its inception, the score of the artwork has been interpreted both jointly and individually by Staff and Lin; for *Durchdringung*, Staff scales this new iteration—*Hormonal Fog* (*Kunstverein*) (2025)—architecturally, situating it within a climate of resurgent anti-trans and anti-non-binary governance, present globally but particularly the UK and US, the two countries Staff’s lives between, where populist fear-mongering has hardened into law-making that renews systemic marginalisation and dehumanisation. While the artwork is rooted in endocrine politics, it also gestures toward environmental harms unevenly distributed across class, race, and geography, channelling forces that usually pass below the threshold of representation yet at the same time script bodies, societies, and discourses alike—hormones, pollution, radiation. Within this work, evaporation functions as a double bind: a political tactic to reclaim, if only momentarily, opacity, and a technique for dissolving the fixed into a domain where identity, risk, and the unseating of male power circulate anew. Here, amid Staff’s alarm call for endocrine interference, they reintroduce the poem *Minimum World* in another register: sheets of pink paper dispersed through the dim space, bearing the poem’s fragments—“with no go back you are o p e n e d.”

In the exhibition's final room, Staff resumes the dialogue with the ancient convergence of architectural and medical measurements that runs from Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture* to its most prominent interpretation in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. In *Penetration* (2025), Staff's moving-image version aligning to this tradition, the artist stages an ambiguous event of light piercing the human figure: a single green laser touches a body, and sinks inside it; a performer stands still—calm, or perhaps steeled. No spectacle, but a distillation that leaves open whether we witness a medical procedure, a ballistic threat, or a body under siege. Imaging that touches; touch that measures; measurement that produces its subjects. Extending Staff's research into X-ray, radiography, scanning, and surveillance, the work tests what forms of data—and what kinds of imagination—arise when interiors are externalised, and how such protocols, at once clinical and militarised, police bodies. In this sense, "penetration" denotes less an act than a condition, revealing the carceral and disciplinary logics at work within imaging and exposure. The soundtrack mirrors this logic: sounds and recordings heard both inside and outside the body, produced within or resonating through its hollows—the ear canal, the stomach, and beyond—collide and merge, impossible to disentangle from another, they are recomposed anew.

Yet, as power dynamics come into play, *Penetration* may also be read as a gesture of eroticism: projected gigantically and monumentally into the Kunstverein's exhibition hall, the shirtless performer is, ambiguously, both touched and penetrated by a laser that lingers on their abdomen for the work's entire duration—in a charged instant where camera and weapon become indistinguishable, as much as the distinctions between the external and the internal obscure. One might ask whether the performer is being penetrated, or, following theorist Bini Adamczak's *On Circlusion* (2016), whether the scene might instead be read as one of being circluded—an antonym that shifts the act from "pushing something into something else" to an active enclosing around, a "pushing something onto something else." By keeping the scene indeterminate though this productive disorientation of such active/passive binary, Staff unsettles the old grammar of penetration, relocating agency into the receptive body.

In 2025—exactly one century after IG Farben's merger—the intertwined visual logics of medicine and the military remain shaped by synthetic colour. Fluorescent dyes that make cells light up under a microscope resonate the false-color palettes that let drones and satellites highlight movement. The phosphors that convert invisible X-rays into visible images illuminate the green glow of night-vision screens. Iodine and gadolinium contrast agents echo the tracer dyes and smoke colours that render visible flows, borders, and targets. Monochrome laser light crosses surgery, scanning, and aiming; spectral filters and multi-band sensors translate wavelengths into actionable hues. Displays—heat maps, color grading, lookup tables—decide, by palette, who becomes legible, triageable, strikeable. A shared drive persists: to penetrate opacity and render interiors—of bodies, buildings, and landscapes—visible, controllable, and therefore governable.

Amidst our world, a *minimum world*, that consents to witness war crimes on an unimaginable scale, broadcast on every screen and device, *Durchdringung* illuminates a condition we inherit; it offers no resolution but a recognition: that every act of exposure might as well participate in a history of governance and violence. What remains is a question: how to reclaim opacity?

Viktor Neumann

P. Staff
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The public programme and educational activities are continuously updated on Bonner Kunstverein website. You can receive the information also by subscribing to our newsletter.

On the occasion of the exhibition, Bonner Kunstverein and Bierke Verlag have co-published the first collection of Staff's poetry entitled *Minimum World*, designed by Björn Giesecke and Sean Yendrys. The publication is available at Bonner Kunstverein and its website, at Bierke Verlag and its website and their selected bookshops.

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In memoriam Silke Hildebrandt

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