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Antonio Jose Guzman and Iva Jankovic, *Electric Dub Station (Orbital Ignition)*, 2018–, indigo ajrakh block print, recycled wood, sound. Installation view. From Sonsbeek 20→24.

## Sonsbeek 20→24

### VARIOUS LOCATIONS

To tell the story of “Force Times Distance: On Labour and its Sonic Ecologies”—the twelfth iteration of Sonsbeek, an exhibition that has recurred at irregular intervals since 1949—you’d have to begin with a doctor’s bill in the archives of the Dutch province of Gelderland. The receipt notes the treatment of a patient named “Zwarte Anna,” or “Black Anna.” No last name is given because she was a (broken) piece of property; her owners, the Brantsen family, who built the estate in which Anna was pressed, paid the expenditure. There is little else we know, save that she was imported to the Netherlands from Suriname in 1727. What she did, who she loved, what she looked like, and even her real name are all lacunae.

As a kind of fanciful exegesis, the curators—led by artistic director Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung—used Anna’s story as a generative spirit for their enterprise. Likewise, the exhibition, which encompassed contributions by forty artists and collectives, was centered on issues of labor and as a whole implied the need to “do the work” of cleaving open a more equitable future. Symbolically, the manor where Anna toiled became a site from which the curators tried to probe the political organization of hatred for profit. Contained within that house was a historical revisionist display by the collaborative Black Archives in partnership with artist Yinka Ilori. There, posters conveyed Anna’s story, while an effigy, which blurred together fragments from various faces, gave her a kind of composite everywoman visage. Though informative, these works mostly served as glorified signposts that seemed to have sprung from textbook illustrations. Characteristically, many works in the exhibition’s main venue—the St. Eusebius Church, in the city’s center—also appeared to be mere tokens from which to hang meaning; however, like the church’s own reliquaries, their true force lay not in their material form, but in their power to provoke social rituals and discourse around them.

Ibrahim Mahama's *Parliament of Ghosts*, 2019, framed the central axis down the church's nave. The structure—a bricolage of remnants, primarily wooden pallets, chairs, and other bits culled from Ghanaian train networks—had a purpose beyond its reuse of nostalgic elements; it also served as the forum for Sonsbeek's exemplary program of talks and performances. Nearby, Antonio Jose Guzman and Iva Jankovic's *Electric Dub Station (Orbital Ignition)*, 2018–, was in part a set of patterned indigo screens stretched over a modular polygonal scaffold, replete with several similarly patterned banners hanging from the church ceiling above. Although their syncopated shapes were livelier than the other fossil-like artifacts within the hall—which in addition to Mahama's *Parliament* included an inert installation of minimally altered Islamic screen fetishes by Oscar Murillo—*Electric Dub Station's* manifestation as an abstract “sea” during a tour-de-force performance revealed its rightful might. Dancers, clad in indigo, writhed through this set as if they were awash in the middle passage through which indigo and other goods traveled. That dance was the end point of a procession that began in Arnhem's streets to exorcise this “dismal science” and to celebrate the sounds of resistance coded into the work songs that once flooded indigo fields.

Like any city, Arnhem cannot be reduced to one story. That said, the building in which Anna involuntarily labored was built, in part, on the backs of the colonial cash-crop plantation system. Auspiciously, the exhibition's opening coincided with Ketikoti (the word is Sranantongo for “breaking the chains”), the annual celebration marking the date, in 1863, when the Netherlands started the process of abolishing slavery in its then-colony Suriname. To honor the occasion, the curators invited the drum-and-brass marching band Ritmo Entertainment to lead “A Noisy Ballad For Freedom,” a collective walk through the city's Sonsbeek Park, pausing by the manor house and then moving on. The band's anthemic beat was cheerful; people danced around and around the house, as if to show there is more strength in love and joy than in repression and fear. If the living organ constituted by the bodies called into being by this event—and by Guzman and Jankovic's procession—continues to mature and pull more bodies into its orbit, we may then finally find ourselves in a land not dominated by an invisible fist hand, but regulated by the beat of an invisible shared heart.