



RUTH HÖFLICH

To Feed your Oracle

IMAGES > [Front cover] Ruth Höflich, *To Feed your Oracle* [installation view], 2021. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography. > [Right] Ruth Höflich, *To Feed your Oracle* [installation view], 2021. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



RUTH HÖFLICH

In conversation with Juliette Hanson

JH: Your work draws on a broad range of technical skills, how has your practice developed over time?

RH: I grew up in a print making and publishing environment and was involved in a lot of artist publishing and working between books and photography too. I was always thinking of ways to expand the exhibition space. That often included a lot of collaboration and thinking about other forms for the work to take, so rather than just a classical approach to photography it was sitting within other structures.

The starting point was always photography as a narrative device. Then the moving image part came in a little bit later, when I felt I could combine all these interests into

one space. Working with text and language comes into films naturally, in scriptwriting particularly. So, film is an animated form of all these interests, and it allows me to bring them all into one space. I'm increasingly drawn to working with the moving image and thinking about film.

JH: Given your early exposure to writing and printing, the Georges Mora Fellowship must have felt like a good fit as it involved working with the State Library of Victoria's collection. How has text influenced your work on this project?

RH: I've worked with libraries before and different kinds of collections. The last film I made was also dealing with this idea of an archive. In terms of the WG Alma Conjuring

¹ William George Alma (1904–93) was an Australian magician as well as a fine craftsman and manufacturer of conjuring apparatus and props. His passionate interest in every aspect of magic, and his lifelong dedication to the art of conjuring combined to create a research collection of great range and depth, now held as part of the Arts collection. The WG Alma Conjuring Collection contains around 2000 books on magic, 60 magazine titles, 1500 photographs, 300 posters, over 400 detailed research files on individual magicians, and other magic memorabilia, including small tricks and models. [Source: https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/explore-collections-theme/film-performing-arts/magic/wg-alma-conjuring-collection](https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/explore-collections-theme/film-performing-arts/magic/wg-alma-conjuring-collection)



IMAGE > Ruth Höfllich in her studio, 2021. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



IMAGE > Ruth Höflich, *To Feed your Oracle* [installation view], 2021. HD single-channel video. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

Collection at the State Library, I looked more at visual elements such as images of performance and catalogues of props and ephemera surrounding the staging of magic, rather than the accompanying text. The material in the Conjuring Collection is from the 1950s to the 1970s, so a very particular time frame, within which Alma gathered this collection. There's a lot of outdated gender roles represented in this collection, such as the male magician with the female assistant that I wasn't interested in working with. But the library as a space was interesting for me because you have this existing material and you engage in a process of rewriting things and remaking ideas, so in the end I don't really feel I'm directly referencing the collection anymore in this new work, but rather the visual and mental mechanisms that play into the construction of an experience.

JH: Your photographic images are very layered they almost have a kind of abstract feel about them. Does that somehow point towards the subjective nature of seeing, in that your perception of something will always have those layers to it?

RH: Looking is always informed in some way or other; you're implicated as an observer

in the images that you are making. A lot is implicated in seeing something. It's not a straightforward experience. It's informed by all sorts of things and I think the nesting and the layering of my photographic images, as they're presented in this show, allow me to play with that. They often depict quite ordinary things like coffee cups and household items. The photographs start with simple observations and then they become more abstracted. I'm trying to go beyond the medium in some ways, so the photograph is only the beginning or the surface of something more complex related to the mediated process of seeing things.

JH: I was interested to know if you've had a long-term interest in magic or conjuring and that's what led to you applying to use this particular part of the library's collection, or if your interest was piqued when you discovered that there was this relatively secret part of the library's holdings?

RH: I was always interested in the idea of there being other knowledges or different epistemologies. Things you don't know about and systems around making things visible that are invisible or unseen or unperceived. I think that magic is a sort of theatrical playful way of thinking around these

ideas, using illusion and manipulation, for example. I think the idea of magic has also changed alongside the development of new technologies. The technologies we've created produces, for example, certain surfaces we don't understand or ways of communicating across space and time that is, for most of us, completely mysterious and unfathomable in how it happens.

You can expand this way of thinking to look at politics and public life, and how that has an aspect of make believe, and especially now with things like deep fakes in the media, the status of the images that are presented as reality is highly questionable, they have no relationship to anything real, yet they infiltrate public consciousness. It's good to maintain an awareness about visibility and reality and how it's performed and created at the highest level of society and politics. On the flip-side, I hope my work points to the power of the imaginary in laying a groundwork from which to create other realities.

JH: Maybe you could um tell me a little bit more about how those ideas are embodied in the work that you're presenting at Linden?

RH: The curtain installation is probably the most direct reference to magic in terms

of it alluding to a stage, but I've set it up so that there is no front or back. You can walk around it and it changes according to your perspective so it doesn't hide anything like a stage curtain might, but I think it allows people to read the room as a relational stage. The photographs play with layering and some of them are presented on table-like structures that function a bit like performance props. The shifting imagery of the layered photographs on the tables can also be thought of kind of like card games.

I have one image that has a so-called trick in it and it's not really a trick it's a natural physical phenomenon. It is a balloon that is held above a flame, yet doesn't burst, because it has been filled with water. Audiences wouldn't understand the causality unless they had that knowledge. I think the most interesting tricks are the ones that show you that you don't understand the full picture, but it's not a trick it's just nature. It indicates again that there are levels of reality that we don't know about. Magic is often just the unknown.

JH: And what is the film about?

RH: The film speculates about vision being a product of more than just the sight or the immediate senses. From a physiological or

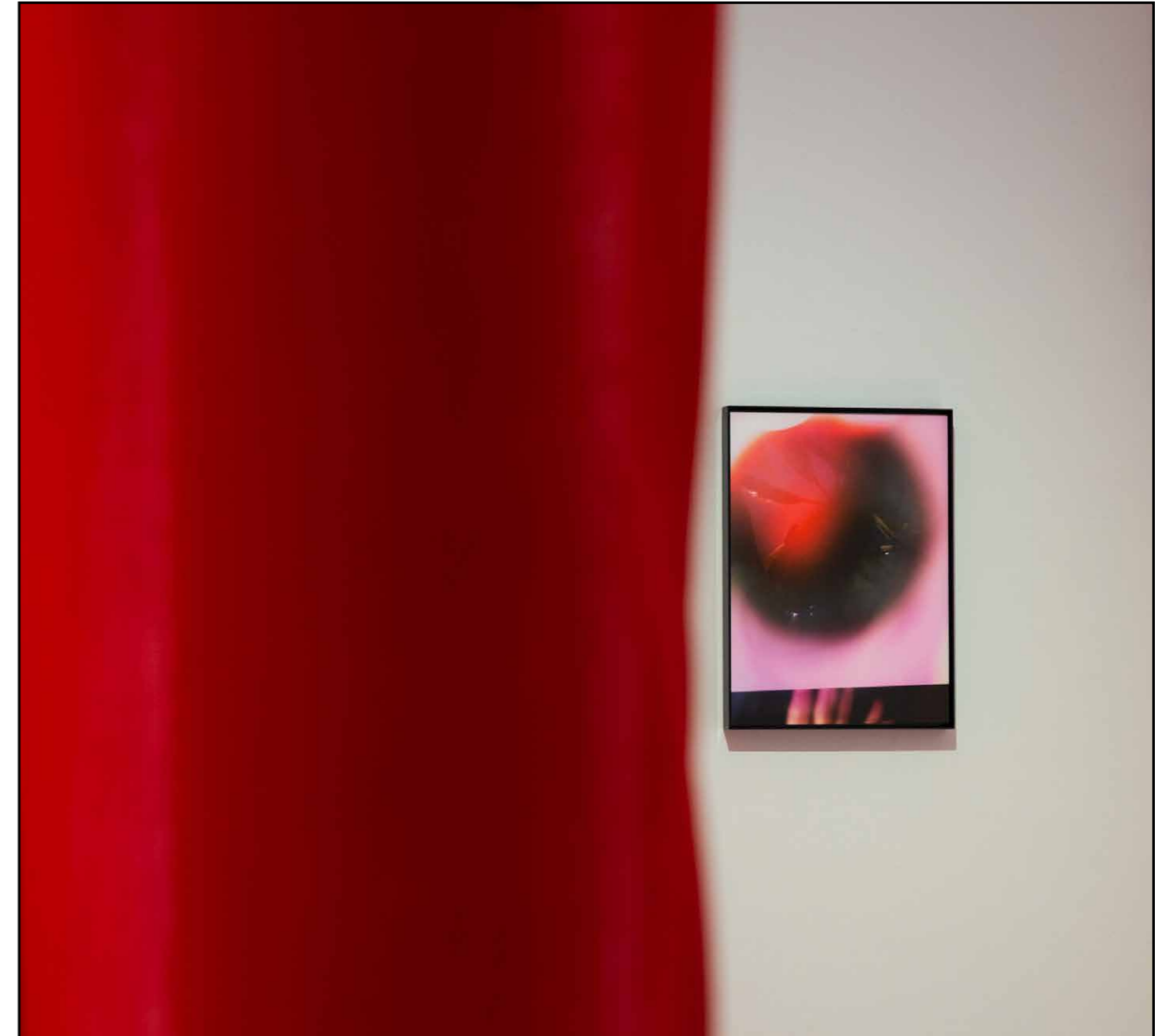


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cognitive point of view it's about how an image relates to memory. It's a strange and interesting thing I think because we tend to, in hindsight, see the memory as an image even though we're not actually experiencing it as an image at the time.

In the film, a group of people are describing a series of images from memory. Their descriptions are heard in layers, simultaneously, which is like a collective trance or sleep situation. It could be read as a kind of hypnosis performance, but it could also be something more like an imagined, communal experience where they share this imaginary or telepathic space. I was thinking about the idea of manipulation in a theatrical space where mentalists would pretend to read minds. I was trying to imagine what if you own that space, and it becomes more of an empowering tool for people to connect at a different level.

JH: The idea that we all construct our own reality makes me think about how this impacts our relationships with other people. How can we all communicate with each other and get along with each other and share the same space if we're all experiencing things differently. We all remember things in vastly different ways

sometimes, depending on how we're feeling or even just from a spatial perspective.

RH: I think if you are open to the idea that everybody perceives things differently, you can at least be open to what other people might be experiencing. To know that it's porous and you understand that you don't see everything is already a very different position to take.

In the film, you're not always sure who's talking and so it becomes a kind of collective identity and you have these individual voices within it, but it becomes a shared experience. It's about possible realities and futures and the role of the imaginary for the collective, which I think is a really important idea relating to communication and understanding of each other. The film is very much based on the idea that sensorial and somatic registers stand on equal ground with language. I hope it moves viewers beyond just an intellectual engagement with these ideas.

JH: I suppose this way of thinking comes in into sharp relief when you're editing the film because you're taking these experiences and things that have been captured and then again reconstructing the situation. It

must be quite a challenging process to edit when you're thinking about manipulation and these layers of perception and layers of truth. Is the editing process intuitive or is it tightly planned?

RH: It's a mixture really. It requires a lot of planning beforehand obviously with film because you're directing people. For me the editing is super important because it's the process that brings the work together and where I do a lot of experimentation. It takes me a long time because I want to let the material speak, which is a form of conjuring in a way, when it does something unexpected or interesting beyond what you thought was there.

JH: The title of the show is so intriguing – *To Feed your Oracle* – can you tell me more about what the word oracle means to you and how it relates to the work in the show?

RH: When I was looking at all the conjuring material, I did get kind of frustrated with the gender stereotyping in it. So, I started looking at prophetic female figures in mythology as a sort of counterpoint to the male magician. I was looking at sirens and sybils and figures that are often hybrids between human and non-human animals. They represent guardians at the threshold of

other types of knowledge, for example they can often see into the future. I thought that was an interesting contrast to this idea of manipulation that often comes through in the collection.

The oracle voice, which is often a female figure, gives people access to the future but it's not actually a prediction it's a sort of riddle that someone has to solve and that then affects the way they conduct their life, which then writes or re-writes the future. The oracle is empowered by embodied knowledge and sensitivity. There's this idea of second site and visions created from cracks and openings. It's not optical but draws on other processes of perception.

In both the film and the photographs, I try to create a sensorial space to convey information and to encompass how things are felt and how information is received and metabolised. I think even though as visual artists we work with sight, I always feel like I work on the edge of that. I'm trying to reach beyond the visible, but how do you make pictures around that? That's the challenge but that's what I'm essentially interested in.



IMAGE > Ruth Höflich in her studio, 2021. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



IMAGE > Portrait of Ruth Höfllich, 2021. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

RUTH HÖFLICH

Ruth Höfllich is a visual artist born in Munich, Germany and currently based in Melbourne. Her work has been shown internationally at Kunstverein Munich, Haus der Kunst and Lothringer13, Munich; ICA London, Ten Letters in Glasgow; Lubov, New York and The Hidden Bar, Art Basel.

In 2019 she was awarded the Georges Mora Fellowship at The State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. Previously, Höfllich has been an artist in residence at Grizedale Arts, UK, The Banff Centre, Canada and Maracuya, Tijuana. In 2016 she received the Emerging Artist Prize from the City of Munich.

Höfllich's work has been published in *Nacre Journal*, *Makhzin* and *Mother Mother* amongst others and she has participated

in numerous publishing events such as Los Angeles Art Book Fair, Publish And Be Damned and the Feminist Art Book Fair, New York. She is also one part of Halpert/Höfllich, a collaborative practice engaged with artists' publishing and performance.

Höfllich holds a Master of Fine Art from Bard College, New York and a Bachelor of Art from The Slade, London.

www.ruthhoflich.com

LIST OF WORKS

Eyes to look through 1, 2021
archival pigment print,
aluminium frame 55 x 40cm
edition of 2 + 1 artist proof
\$850

Eyes to look through 2, 2021
archival pigment print,
aluminium frame 55 x 40cm
edition of 2 + 1 artist proof
\$850

Eyes to look through 3, 2021
archival pigment print,
aluminium frame 55 x 40cm
edition of 2 + 1 artist proof
\$850

Table with green light, 2021
archival pigment print,
aluminium frame, coasters,
85 x 60cm
edition of 2 + 1 artist proof
\$1,650

Table with red light, 2021
archival pigment print,
aluminium frame, coasters,
85 x 60cm
edition of 2 + 1 artist proof
\$1,650

*Table with eyes to look
through*, 2021
archival pigment print,
aluminium frame, coasters,
85 x 60cm
edition of 2 + 1 artist proof
\$1,650

*The ceiling, the floor, the
walls 1*, 2021
archival pigment print,
unframed, 70 x 50cm
edition of 3 + 1 artist proof
\$450

*The ceiling, the floor, the
walls 2*, 2021
archival pigment print,
unframed, 70 x 50cm
edition of 3 + 1 artist proof
\$450

Traveller, 2021
fabric curtain, screen print,
dimensions variable
POA

To Feed your Oracle, 2021
HD single-channel video
POA

Prices are inclusive of GST

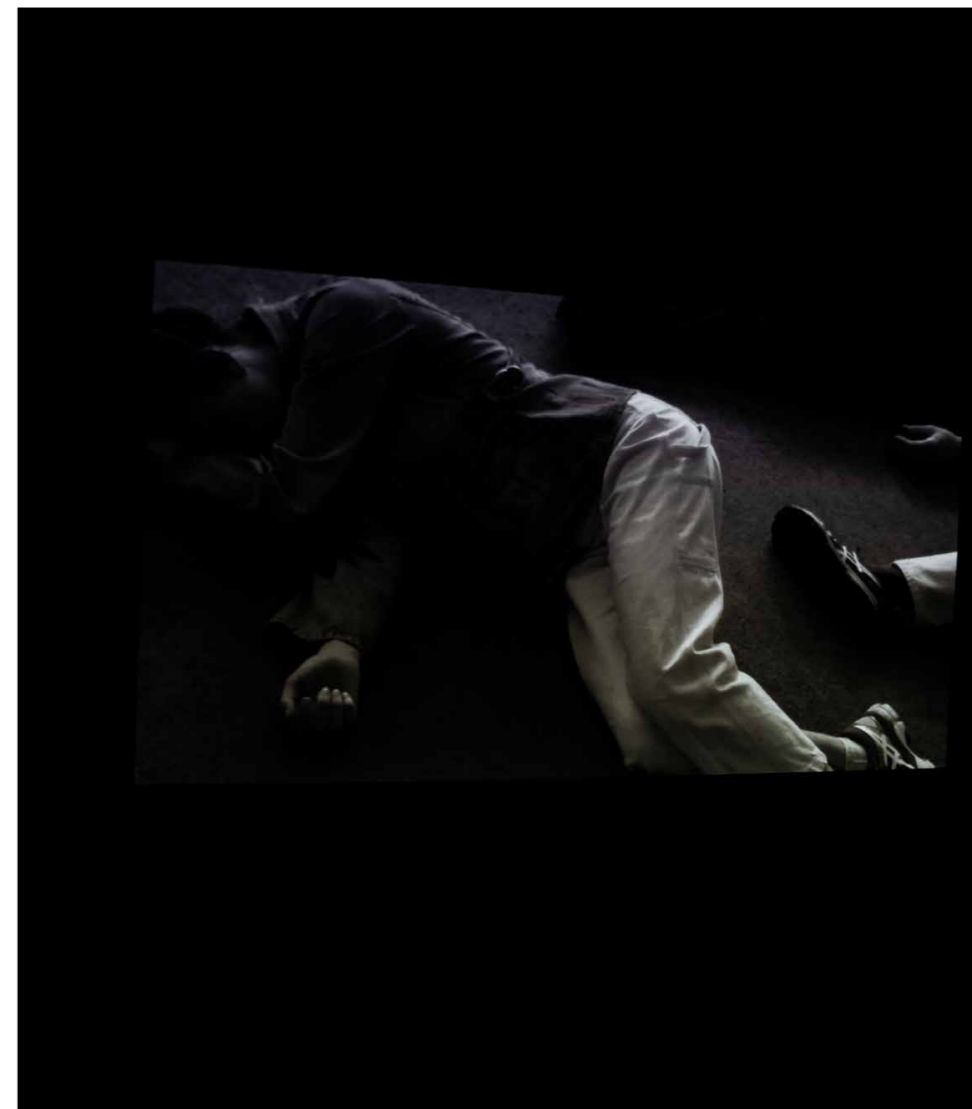


IMAGE > Ruth Höflich, *To Feed your Oracle* [installation view], 2021. HD single-channel video.
Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

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Volunteer Officer: Ada Coxall

FREE ENTRY
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11AM to 4PM
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& public holidays

26 ACLAND STREET,
ST KILDA VIC 3182
www.lindenarts.org
gallery@lindenarts.org
Phone: 03 9534 0099

Trams: 12, 16, 96
(3A weekends only)
Buses: 600, 606,
623, 246

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