

The Lightning Catcher

An Interview with Julius von Bismarck

by Bettina Krause / photography Philippe Gerlach

Frogs croak in the pond near Julius von Bismarck's studio in the Berlin Malzfabrik. From the window you see his little garden where he grows vegetables and flowers.

The versatile Berlin artist is an adventurer and tinkerer, a scientist and inventor. Whether it's hurricanes, wildfires, oceans or lightning – Julius von Bismarck is fascinated by the power of nature. In his artworks he draws near these natural phenomena, he experiences, explores and documents them with a strong will that pushes him to his limits. He creates powerful, almost devotional impressions of nature's two faces: as our environment that is in need of protection and as the natural force which devastates and is to be soothed and worshipped. Inevitably, the viewer of the artworks relates his own existence to those elementary forces and takes something away from this experience. At best, reflecting and rethinking their own behavior and to do what Julius von Bismarck is striving for: making the world a better place.

Bettina Krause: Was there a point in your life when you knew that you wanted to become an artist?

Julius von Bismarck: There are often statements about artists like "as a child he already..." but for me it was a little different. As a child I did a lot of creative tinkering, but not with the idea of becoming an artist. My mother was an architect; we visited a lot of architecture and exhibitions, so I knew there was such a thing as art. But I didn't know that you could become an artist. I thought one would be declared an artist after death. That's why as a child I was more interested in becoming an architect but I also had a great interest in science. My father was a geologist, my grandfather and brother both physicists. That was exciting for me. But I was also always inventive and did all kinds of things. I was interested in botany, later I was fascinated by psychoactive plants and cultivated more than 20 different species. As a teenager, I've also earned some of my first money with web developing and programming for a while.

BK: Then you studied visual communication?

JvB: Yes, visual communication is more scientific, pragmatic and closer to economy than art. At that

time, I still didn't see my projects as works of art yet, but I thought that if I called them that, I could have a chance as an artist. I thought maybe the idea of art could be expanded in my direction. My first successes gave me the courage to try it. And then I studied art at Ólafur Eliasson's "Institut für Raumexperimente", that he had just founded. He wasn't interested in cliché art students but in people who worked in an interdisciplinary way and had studied science before. And I was the same way. I wasn't interested in classical art studies.

BK: So that was a perfect match.

JvB: Exactly. I had started working as a media artist in the meantime, but I realized that this was not the right place for me. Many people in that scene had several jobs simultaneously but I wanted to put one hundred percent of my energy into what I wanted to do. At that time, I did not work with a gallery yet so I was always broke as I put all my money into new projects. Art is one of the few places in our society where you can be independent. Today, I work with several galleries, I can apply for funds, work with institutions or foundations. This way I am independent to do what I want.

BK: When you studied with Ólafur Eliasson – how did that influence you?

JvB: Even before I started studying with him, he was one reason for me to go and engage with art, because he made works that I didn't think could be considered art. He exhibited natural phenomena, for example. That inspired me. I thought, if he can do that, then I can also manage to declare my works as art. When I studied with him, it was more the other students who influenced me. Ólafur himself was more like a curator. He created situations for us to talk to the right people. He invited scientists, artists, dancers, and philosophers. I met a lot of people there, traveled a lot, made friends. For the first time in my life, I had the feeling of being amongst people like myself. Before that, I always felt like an alien in my surroundings. I was the crazy guy who felt strange about being crazy. I always had a long beard, I was very interested in art, I was taking drugs – that was too extreme for many people. At a normal school, that makes you stand out. I was self-confident enough to deal with it, but sometimes it was also sad.

BK: It is great that conforming was not an option for you. Let's talk about your work.





Nature is one of your main focuses. Do you have a definition of what nature is and how do you see the relationship between humans and nature?

JvB: I don't think one can have a clear position on this, unless you are a devout Christian. Natural science has no answer on this since many fundamental questions are still unsolved. It is a philosophical question. And it is clearly a very important core question, especially after the Christian Church lost its importance and no longer has sovereignty on how our relationship to the rest of the world is defined. Natural science cannot fill this "gap" that was left, and it is not its task to do so. I am very interested that this gap is not filled with nonsense – which is currently happening – but that we consciously build a new self-understanding of it. This is essential to steer towards a future that works better than the chaos we have produced now. I don't have a clear theory of how this works, but I have a strong awareness that we need to deal with this much more extensively. We need to find clear statements that we all share. When it comes to the climate crisis, it's easy to think that one has to take very drastic and radical measures against it now. But of course, there are also many things that speak against that. The question is how to weigh these two sides against each other. We simply don't have an answer to that at the moment. So we need a new philosophy, new values that we could live by and which we can agree on all together. But that doesn't exist yet.

BK: I totally agree. What role does art play in this?

JvB: Art has always been involved in this topic. Our understanding of nature has always been influenced or accompanied by art. Art influences society and society influences art. They cannot be separated. What we perceive as beautiful, also in relation to nature, has of course been very strongly constructed by art. As an artist today, I see it as my responsibility to accompany what is buzzing around in the air with images to provoke an examination of these topics. Images that are hard to ignore, that make it hard to continue to invoke outdated ideas that simply no longer work.

BK: So, we need new values, new instructions for action, new norms. How can art help in this context?

JvB: Art itself is too imprecise for that, but it can thematize and provoke people to deal with these questions. If philosophers are inspired by contemporary art, and they influence the ethics council, and they in turn influence politics, then in some decades we have different politics that are influenced by the art that is being created today. And it is indeed the case that in many philosophy books there are references to art. Because art is part of the pictorial sphere. If you were always only inspired by words, you would always stay in the word sphere you are already in, and you would not

be able to get closer to the things that are outside that sphere. Art uses a lot more media than words. And different to science, it doesn't have the burden of precision. As an artist, you can capture feelings in your works that are lurking somewhere on the horizon and see if other people feel something about them. That's how language and actions can develop in a new direction, that's what happened in the past. And that's what I'm trying to do. That's an ambitious goal, of course. But without this goal, it would be difficult to do my art projects, because it is also quite exhausting. You need a motivation, which is a bit far-fetched.

BK: I can imagine that it takes a very strong drive. And it is of course very relevant what motivates you to realize your projects.

JvB: As a teenager, I was in the left-wing scene, I criticized a lot of things, I went to demos. It was always clear to me that I needed a self-conception that wasn't just about doing what I liked or what looked good. That's why I need this somewhat dramatic goal of making the world a better place. But of course, I also enjoy inventing things and experimenting. I'm very curious, that's also an important drive for me. To answer a question with my projects that has not been answered yet. Like a little child who sets fire to something to see what happens when it burns down.

BK: Fire is a good keyword. What drove you to do your recent artwork *Feuer mit Feuer* (translated: *Fire with Fire*) in which you document forest fires?

JvB: It was my curiosity about standing in the burning forest and I wanted to counter the image of the forest fire that is constructed by the news and media coverage. It is a very strong image, a horror that we are afraid of. But fire is also always something incredibly beautiful. As a child I used to stare into the fireplace like other people stare into waves in the ocean. I thought, maybe this gaze into the fireplace is like society's gaze into the burning forest today, hoping to have an epiphany in dealing with the climate catastrophe. But the image of the forest fire that is transmitted by the media today is not at all suited to be stared into because it is hectic and dramatized, very focused on individual fates. For me, that is the wrong way of dealing with it. Since the fitting images didn't exist yet, I had to create them. So, I had to go into the forest fire.

BK: How does it feel to be in a burning forest? I can't imagine it. Were you overwhelmed, fascinated, sad? After all, forest fires are also a natural process.

JvB: Exactly, it is a natural process. The human guilt that is often projected into it was not there in that moment and there was no fear. Even though mankind may indeed be to blame for it. If you were to show this burning forest to different people, everyone would have a different opinion, because we have no common sense about it and opinions

are often based on false assumptions. One motivation for my artwork *Fire with Fire* was to create new images that can help to develop a new common sense about it. It's about the gaze into the campfire and about fire as a phenomenon that destroys everything and makes us afraid. The mirror effect in the film creates spaces that generate an almost religious feeling. Objects like ghosts, monsters or devils become visible in the flames. I'm focused on the shapes we can imagine while looking into the fire and especially the visual similarities to religious images.

BK: Yes that is indeed very interesting. And what is your latest project on Lanzarote about, where you painted a quarry?

JvB: It is a continuation of my landscape paintings. *Quarry* is a landscape drawing that consists, almost like an etching, only of black and white. Etchings were the first means of reproducing images. They also gave Europeans their first impressions of the jungle or other foreign landscapes. I always found it fascinating how people got to know the wilderness, even in colonial times. I wanted to know what the medium of drawing looks like on nature itself. It's kind of a performance that shows the attempt to control and depict nature, to understand it and to destroy it in the process. And in the end, I've decided to remove all the paint afterwards in order to make the place look "natural" again.

BK: I found it interesting to observe myself when looking at this project. My first thought was – very aesthetic, but what a brutal intrusion into nature! Until it hit me, we rarely see so clearly how drastically we permanently interfere with nature.

JvB: Exactly, it was a very visual intervention, which seems terrible for many people. But that's what it's all about: the proportionality of our actions, for which we no longer have any feeling at all. I painted inanimate stones, so it was not a bad intervention for animals or plants. The reaction of the people living on the island has been quite controversial.

BK: You sometimes work with Julian Charrière. Together you realized the fascinating project *I'm afraid I must ask you to leave*. What was your intention?

JvB: That was a very important project and an intense experience for me. It's about different layers – for example, the absurd role of nature as a celebrated landscape or as a source of identity for a country. In this case, it was about the striking rock formations in the desert of Utah, USA. These rock arches are printed on every license plate there; we know them from Westerns, from Instagram. They are false images of nature that fascinate people because they look like they are man-made bridges. These rock arches are almost sacred in the US, they are worshipped like idols – and at the same time the environment is not

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respected at all. When we did the project, Trump was in still power and had just withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement. I wondered what it would be like to destroy these arches in response to Trump's withdrawal. Such an action would of course be insanely wrong – I would never do that. Although, as a natural terrorist, I would have loved to. Anyway, our solution was to do it in a virtual space that was close enough to reality so people would perceive it as real. We destroyed the arches in people's minds but not in reality. We went to a desert in Mexico, which looks exactly like the desert in Utah, to build five of these natural monuments out of 70 tons of stone. Then we destroyed them and filmed it. That documentation generated a lot of attention, American television reported on it – and many people thought it was real. But at some point it became obvious that it must be a fake, because the arches in Utah were still standing. Apparently no one knew that there

was a desert outside the US that looks exactly like the one in Utah – it is just across the border. Anyway it was an exciting project, but there were moments when I thought we were going too far.

BK: What were your concerns?

JvB: The Mexican workers had a different idea of work safety than we did. This became a real problem at some point and I panicked that someone might die on this project. Horrible idea. On top of that, we couldn't get enough money from the ATMs to pay the workers. So they sat outside our hotel rooms all night. We were always respectful to each other but it was difficult. It went beyond what I felt comfortable with.

BK: That sounds difficult indeed. I would like to talk to you about another difficult topic: the not climate-friendly art world with its countless fairs, exhibitions, transports, travels and

museums. That is certainly an issue, and still I'm slightly sorry that especially the art sector is being picked on currently. How do you see that?

JvB: Well, whether it's the climate discussions, racism, MeToo, Black Lives Matter, colonialism – there are many issues at the moment, it seems a bit like a competition to chalk up or criticize someone else. Generally, it's important that this happens, of course, but it also goes too far sometimes. If I'm not allowed to fly, drive a car or consume energy as an artist anymore, I can't be an artist. I have to go to the hurricanes and forest fires, otherwise I can't make art about hurricanes and wildfires. Also I am a white male and my name is Bismarck. I live in a country that still benefits from colonialism. That's all difficult. Humans as such are responsible for a major extinction of species, even without emitting excessive amounts of CO₂. If you let all of this become too much of a part of your self-perception, you can only kill yourself to make more room for something else. But killing myself feels wrong. I'd rather develop projects that are relevant. For that I have to fly, but maybe less often. The climate crisis is an international crisis that we can only solve internationally. But we don't have this international sense of responsibility yet. To achieve this we also need international art, international togetherness and a new kind of philosophy or values everybody agrees on which we talked about earlier. One has to weigh up the facts and consider the issue in its complexity, not only from the CO₂ ban perspective.

BK: And one should not only see the perspective of pleasure. It's quite difficult to find a good balance for doing the right thing.

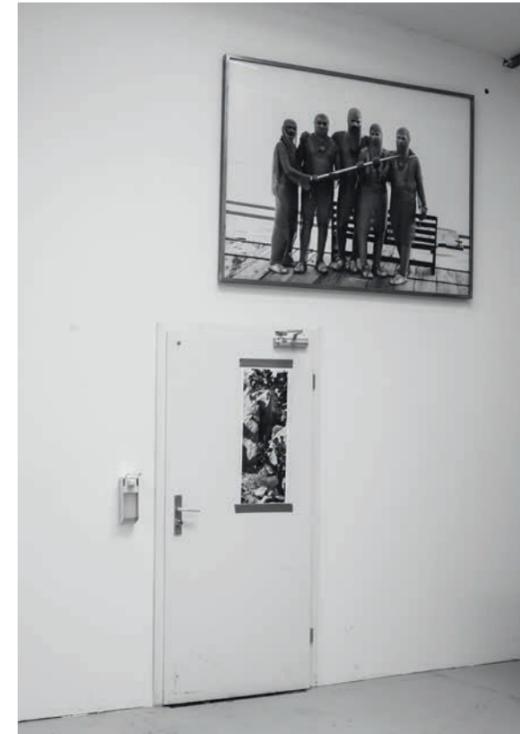
JvB: We have to change a lot of things, that's for sure. For me, CO₂ taxation would be one helpful tool. In general, it's always difficult to forbid certain technologies, as they could be still useful on special occasions. But also just reducing its use through high taxes cannot be the solution either – because this would be unfair. Well, I'm not a politician, but I'm an artist so I rather focus on that.

BK: What are you working on at the moment?

JvB: I am building a small rocket. I've always had a weakness for rockets and I'm interested in every advance in the space industry. But my rocket has nothing to do with space travel – it can catch lightning. I'm preparing for stage two of catching lightning with it. I didn't get as close to it as I thought I would with an earlier project. My goal is to use lightning as a medium, but my first encounters with lightning via the rockets were still quite uncontrolled. The project took a lot of energy out of me so I had to stop it at some point. But now, I have the power again – so I'm building new rockets I can use to catch lightning.

BK: Sounds great, we are looking forward to seeing the results.

www.juliusvonbismarck.com







JULIUS VON BISMARCK
Landscape painting (Quarry), 2021 (video still)
4k video, stereo sound, 37 min 3 sec
Courtesy the artist; alexander levy, Berlin and Sies + Høeke, Düsseldorf



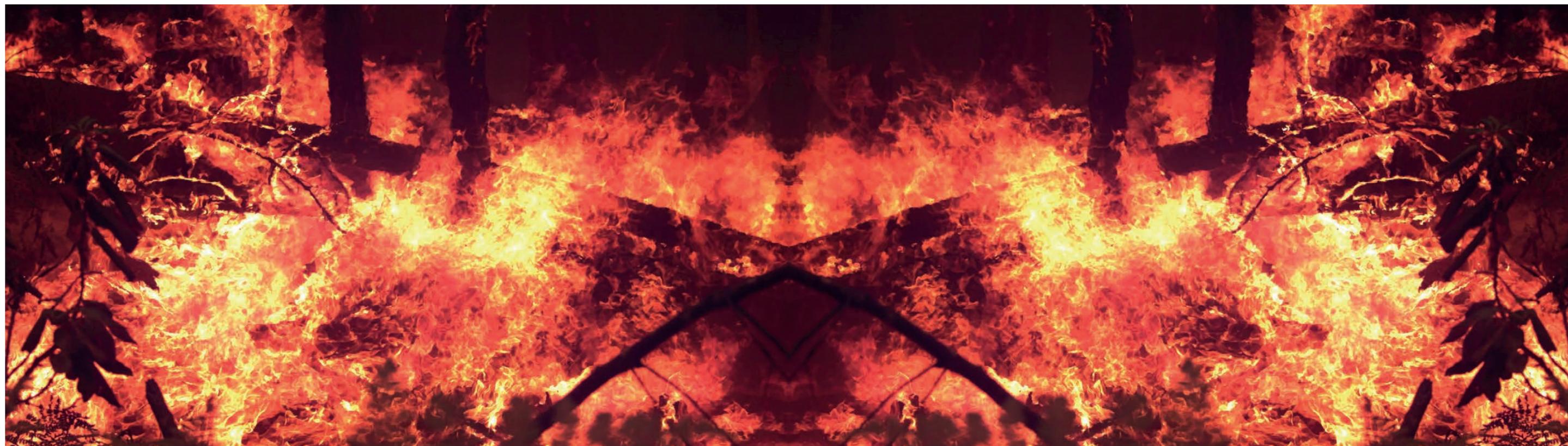
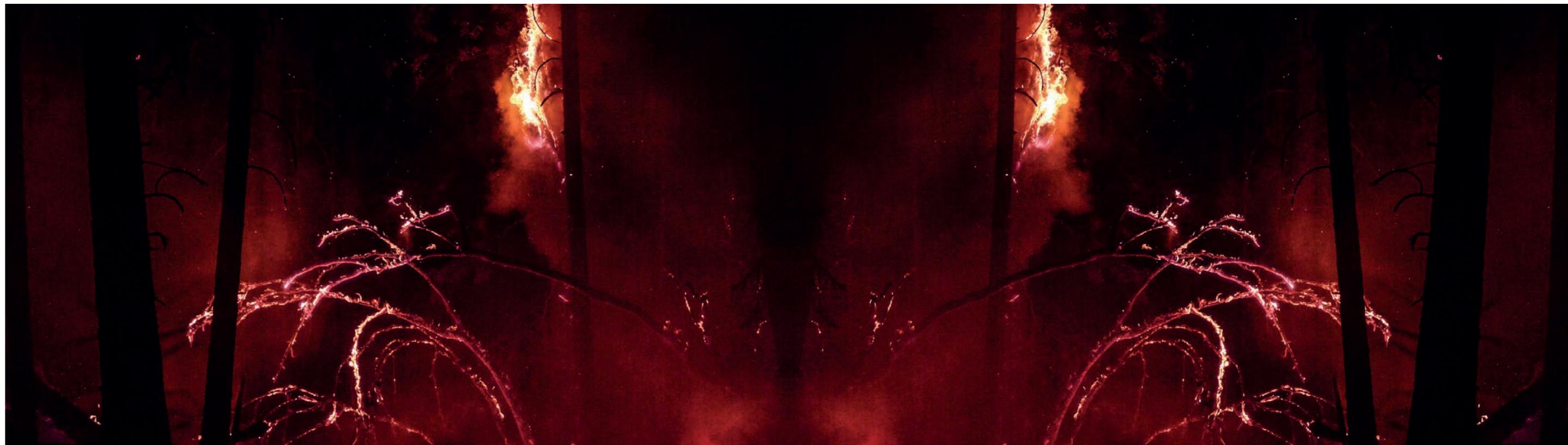
JULIUS VON BISMARCK & JULIAN CHARRIÈRE
Grand Staircase Escalante, We Must Ask You to Leave
(mountain view drive), 2018



JULIUS VON BISMARCK & JULIAN CHARRIÈRE
I Am Afraid, I Must Ask You to Leave
(Behind the scenes footage), 2018



JULIUS VON BISMARCK
Fire with Fire (Video test), 2020
UHD video, 67 min
Courtesy the artist; alexander levy, Berlin and Sies + Hoeke, Düsseldorf



JULIUS VON BISMARCK
Fire with Fire (Video test), 2020
UHD video, 67 min
Courtesy the artist; alexander levy, Berlin and Sies + Hoeke, Düsseldorf