

# Sebald

variations



Where art  
and literature  
meet

Exhibition at the  
CCCB from 11 March  
to 26 July 2015

CCCB, Montalegre, 5  
08001 Barcelona  
[www.cccb.org](http://www.cccb.org)

*Sebald Variations* focuses on the German writer W. G. Sebald, the author of a number of the key books of the turn of our century such as *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*, taking him as the central thread of an examination of the history of the 20th century and its influence on our present. Sebald's work - a blend of images and words, of travel writing, the novel and the essay, autobiographical yet interested in collective history, deeply poetic and at times provocatively nostalgic - explores most of the great themes of the 20th century: migration, individual memory, historical discourse, political violence, trauma, the figure of the author, travel, tourism, intertextuality, the documentary and art and literature as ethical instruments of restitution.

The exhibition is a visual and textual essay that brings together the voice of the author with those of creative figures in other realms, and looks at the way in which a number of Sebald's conceptual strategies - the use of the image combined with text, his particular reflection on history, the unexpected juxtaposition of scenes and quotations, and walking as archaeology - have influenced the visual arts and literature since his death just over ten years ago.

**Sebald Variations**  
is a production of the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, where it is being shown between 10 March and 26 July 2015.

**Production and organisation** CCCB  
Exhibitions Service  
Production and Installation Unit  
Audio-visual Department

**Project Director**  
Rosa Ferré

**Curator**  
Jorge Carrión

**Concept development**  
Jorge Carrión  
Pablo Helguera

**Co-ordinator**  
Anna Escoda

**Space design**  
Anna Alcubierre / Espai\_e

**Graphic design for the exhibition and publicity**  
Avanti Avanti Studio. Design for All

**Activities**  
CCCBLab  
Documentation and Debate Centre  
Cultural Activities Department of the CCCB

**Blog**  
Jorge Carrión  
Mario Hinojos

# Variations

## Walking

## History

### 01

Someone told me that in Sebald's office at the University of East Anglia there were photographs of four writers: Benjamin, Walser, Wittgenstein and Bernhard. Their gazes bring to mind this passage from *After Nature*: "The brain works continuously / with some traces, no matter how small / of self-organisation, / and sometimes / an order arises from them." I imagine an order among these four masters, whispering their advice to him as he wrote: he quotes in order to construct thought; he walks like someone writing prose with his feet; he is wary of language; he always questions your putrid homeland. The problem is that the verses of his first book continue as follows: "an order arises / in places beautiful / and comforting, though more cruel, too, than the previous state of ignorance."

### 02

Sebald's works are connected by the form of the network. Interwoven paths: a multiplier system of footprints and quotations. Minimum units of meaning: the footprints of the travelling writer and the emigrants he encounters; the quotes he weaves into the passages in his books. In *The Rings of Saturn*, his book that has influenced contemporary art the most, we read "Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara in a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's dress. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains". From the micro to the macro in the same sentence: this shift is profoundly Sebaldesque. From the body of the man who walks, to the route of footsteps seen from the air; to the point on the map. Literature is miniature, but it aspires to represent the complex, the vast, a universe that expands like a quantum membrane in you, the reader's, mind.

# Map

03

If all authors are weavers, putting in order the traces of those who have gone before them, W. G. Sebald is the master weaver par excellence. On more than one occasion he termed this action *bricolage*. Gutenberg invented none of the components for the printing press: wine presses already existed, as did movable type, paper and ink. His was an exercise in putting elements together. Likewise, Benjamin and Breton included photographs in their works; Chatwin and Magris interwove travel writing with cultural essays and novels; Kafka and Handke imbued their writings and meanderings with alienation. Along with so many others, Sebald amalgamated these authors, but he did so like nobody else. And the result chimed with all the themes that concerned literature, philosophy and art at the turn of the last century: memory, the documentary, the archive, visual texts, old and new media, genre, the fake, travel, emigration, drifting, testimony and trauma. It was read by writers, teachers, thinkers and artists. Some of them adopted the pace of the witness, of walkers.

04

Sebald's stories often begin in hospital, following an illness, nervous breakdown, or period of convalescence. They are, therefore, post-traumatic: just like our strange 21st century. His literature shifts between the hotel and hospital, between the traveller's hostel and the sanatorium of emigrants and poets. They are connected by the path. They are connected by Walser, who Sebald linked inextricably with his own grandfather: "they both died in the same year, 1956", he wrote in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. "Perhaps that is the reason why now, when I think back to my grandfather's death – to which I have never been able to reconcile myself – in my mind's eye I always see him lying on the horn sledge on which Walser's body, after he had been found in the snow and photographed, was taken back to the asylum." For Sebald, there is always a personal connection with tradition itself. Teachers are friends, collaborators, relatives. This essay contains several portraits of Walser, but none of the police photographs of his body: you have to understand your teachers, not just try to understand them.

# Gaze

05

In Sebald's books, the images of paths, buildings, objects and nearly always marginal, never obvious, spaces succeed one another. The snow-capped Alps and the desert also appear, persistently, among geographical features that are often depopulated, and at most traversed by a nomad caravan. Sebald's photographs – whether his own or *appropriated* – can be understood as *pensive images*, to use the expression coined by Jacques Rancière; photographs whose meaning has been radically divorced from the intention of the person who took them. "Susan Sontag has called photography the modern-day equivalent of artistic ruins", he writes in one of the essays in *Unheimliche Heimat*. In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, he adds "the silence that reigns over the ruins is particularly striking. The lack of events is deceptive, because in the basements there are still fires blazing and moving below the ground". Everything is combustion, he says elsewhere, even the photographs themselves gradually burn up, slowly, unremittingly. The pages are potential ashes.

06

History becomes space. It is walked; it is explored. As you move forward in reading the fabric or network, you perceive that this world, centred on the topography demolished by the Second World War, is growing ever darker, as if it were being consumed before your eyes. Twenty-first-century Europe becomes a network of paths and railway tracks in perpetual twilight. And it is embalmed in prose written in an anachronistic German from before the fall of the Wall, because Sebald wrote in a language learnt during his childhood, a post-war language. At a certain stage in his life, his character Austerlitz had deep-seated, terrible doubts about words: "The entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in an impenetrable fog." After Hofmannsthal and Wittgenstein we can no longer trust in language. After Warburg and Wittgenstein we can no longer trust in the image either. But, after Auschwitz, we only have words and images to account for 20th-century Europe, in order to attempt to reconstruct and restore it.

# Border

# Space

# Legacy

# Network

# Extermination

# Photography

07

In *Unrecounted*, Sebald's poetic miniatures accompany hyperrealistic drawings by Jan Peter Tripp, the only artist with whom the writer had a long-standing friendship and association. These are 33 etchings of pairs of eyes. The book doesn't feature the eyes of Benjamin, Walser, Wittgenstein or Bernhard. In their place, we find Beckett's, Borges', Hamburger's and Proust's. I imagine these four masters may be whispering to him, imperatively: make language a problem; embrace culture as a whole; emigrate to change language and homeland; remember as if memory were the protracted phrasing of another era. The book could also include the gazes of Browne, Rousseau, Nabokov or Conrad. And of so many other writers who were nodes in this fabric, in this network we call *Sebald*. The variations are variants: they are variable; they are infinite. A work will remain fiercely alive, as long as they are possible and desirable.

08

Spain dealt with the public policy of historic *memory* and its criticism a little late in the day. In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, published in 1999, we can read the following: "Among the central problems of 'eyewitness reports' are their inherent inadequacy, notorious unreliability and curious vacuity; their tendency to follow a set routine and go over and over the same material." Sebald's books are an alternative to the voice of the single witness (based on the quantum membrane of voices and witnesses). Sebald read Améry and Bernhard and was, from the outset, a fearless critic of the putrid basements of German history. However, unlike his teachers, he based his incisive and uncomfortable arguments on the strength of data, of facts, of the academic archive. He delves into the witnesses' swampland until he finds, on the periphery of their discourse, the material with which to generate truth.

09

A pyromaniac writer, an artist of bricolage, the author of *The Emigrants* builds Austerlitz from the shadows of Wittgenstein and Paul Celan. Sebald wrote the chronology of the life of his fictional character on the dust jacket of John Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. The book was such a direct source of inspiration for Austerlitz that Sebald describes him contemplating suicide while he is living at number 6, Avenue Émile Zola where Celan, who himself committed suicide, lived. Just like every one of Celan's poems, every page of Sebald's writing pulsates with the extermination of the European Jews. In *The Rings of Saturn* we read "We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was ... Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point?" Archaeology is necessary, albeit partial. Beneath the European fields and cities lie Roman cemeteries, the bones of religious, civil and world wars and the burial pits of our common market. And beneath every one of Sebald's pages: the same dust from the same bones.

10

The earlier quote from *The Rings of Saturn* wouldn't be complete without the preceding sentence: "The representation of history requires a falsification of perspective." Sebald advised his students, ironically: "You should keep a notebook with quotations, but don't make a note of the sources. In a couple of years you'll be able to return to your notebook and use the material without feeling any guilt, as if it were your own." Complex collages, Sebald's books are profoundly factual and profoundly fictional at one and the same time. Between document and fiction, testimonies and photographs, the shifting text of sand or ash slips through our fingers. It won't allow itself to be fixed. Instability concerns every level of Sebald's work: the narrator, the characters, the architectural spaces – which often move as if they were boats – the landscapes which are constantly being plunged into darkness. Sebald continues to question us from the beyond through these books; books we haven't learned how to read completely.

"Sebald Variations" (2014), Jorge Carrión

# PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES

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## Opening activities

Tuesday 10 March / 7.30 pm

### *Casa Plarre*

Performance by the artist Pablo Helguera, who revisits Sebald's book *The Emigrants* With the participation of the actors: Maria Garrido and Jose Javier Domínguez Assistant director: David Pintó

CCCB Theatre  
Free admission. Limited number of places available.

Wednesday 11 March / 7.30 pm

### **There is a fog that no gaze can clear: artists discuss Sebald**

A conversation between Pablo Helguera and artists in the exhibition

CCCB Auditorium  
Free admission. Limited number of places available.

## Sebaldiana blog

(<http://kosmopolis.cccb.org/en/sebaldiana>)

*Sebaldiana* is the digital magazine accompanying the exhibition, the purpose of which is to build a bridge between the works on display in the exhibition and the literature and the narrative devices of the author of *Austerlitz*. It is an archive in progress edited by Jorge Carrión and Mario Hinojos.

## Sebald's legacy at Kosmopolis. 8th amplified literature festival

(18 – 22 March)

<http://kosmopolis.cccb.org/en>

To mark the holding of Kosmopolis, the *Sebald Variations* exhibition will be open free of charge between 3.00 and 8.30 pm on Wednesday 18 March, the day the festival opens, and between 11.00 am and 8.00 pm on Sunday 22 March, the day it closes.

## Conversations

To what extent do Sebald's books help us to understand the culture of the 21st century? What can we as digital readers learn from an analogue work constructed by hand in the manner of do-it-yourself? How can we escape from the “pedagogical prison of memory” when it leaves us shackled to the horrors of the 20th century rather than paving the way to a social construction of the future?

Friday 20 March /8.30 pm

### **David Grossman and Carles Torner Sebald and Grossman: parallel ambitions**

The literary projects of the German writer W. G. Sebald and of the Israeli writer David Grossman are closely akin in their themes (memory, migration, travel and the Holocaust) and in their relevance and ambition. We will be talking with the author of masterpieces such as *See Under Love* and *To the End of the Land* concerning the ways in which German and Israeli literature talked at the end of the 20th century about Nazism, about the conflicts between individual and collective memory, about conscience and what it means to be writing in a warzone, and how the Arab-Israeli conflict is to be depicted.

With the support of PEN International. Free the World  
CCCB Hall  
Admission €3

Saturday 21 March / 6.00 pm

### **Camille de Toledo and Cristina Rivera Garza**

Post-memory and necropolitics: Sebald's legacy in the 21st century

In her essay *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desapropiación*, the Mexican novelist Cristina Rivera Garza reflects on the strategies that literature

can employ to speak in our times of institutional violence, massacres and drug trafficking. And in his essay *Le hêtre et le bouleau. Essai sur la tristesse européenne*, the French author Camille de Toledo decries the monopoly on memory that developed in Europe in the 1960s and 70s and that led to the emergence of a veritable memory industry. Both writers support translation as a positive tool for the future by encouraging a rapprochement between people and peoples. The dialogue will seek bridges between W. G. Sebald and Art Spiegelman's generation and those that followed, contemporary forms of narrating history and its pain and grief.

CCCB Hall  
Admission €3

## Special programming on the K15 Alpha Channel

### **Patience (After Sebald)**

Grant Gee / UK, 2012, 90', Spanish subtitles

In the form of a visit to the south-east coast of England, director Grant Gee presents a filmic essay on the work and the influences of W. G. Sebald. An exploration of the landscape, art, history, life and loss, following in the steps taken by the writer in his best-known work, *Rings of Saturn*.

### **Austerlitz**

Richard West /Northern Ireland, 2013, 29' 28", Catalan subtitles

As W. G. Sebald himself remarked, photography was an intrinsic part of his process of work. A clear example of this is his book *Austerlitz*, in which the author accompanies the text with images that are often enigmatic. This film visits some of the places featured in the photographs in the book and explores the meaning that the images add to the text and the possible connection between them and the author.

CCCB Auditorium  
Free admission. Limited number of places available.

## Guided tour of the exhibition

Saturday 21 March / 4.30 pm

### **Led by Jorge Carrión, the curator of the exhibition**

Included in admission to the exhibition  
Limited number of places available. Advance booking: [taquilles@ccb.org](mailto:taquilles@ccb.org)

## Sebald Theatre

*Sebald Theatre* is an installation by Pablo Helguera shown in the exhibition space that consists of a small-scale theatre in which the artist will screen his audio-visual piece *Extras 1967-C to York* and in which a number of other activities will be mounted while the exhibition is running.

Included in admission to the exhibition  
Limited to 30 people

## Audio-visual programme in the Sebald Theatre

Rolling programme:

### **Extras 1967-C to York**

2015, Pablo Helguera

### **75 at 75: W. G. Sebald**

Recording of a reading by W. G Sebald. Unterberg Poetry Centre/ USA, 2001, 49' 22" (In English)

### **Walking in the footsteps of WG Sebald**

Laurence Topham and Stuart Jeffries, Documentary / UK / 4' 33"/ (In English)

Scheduled screenings:

Friday 10 and 17 April, 8 and 22 May, 5 and 12 June and 3 and 10 July at 6 pm

### **Patience (After Sebald)**

Grant Gee / UK, 2012, 90', (Spanish subtitles)

### **Austerlitz**

Richard West / Northern Ireland, 2013, 29' 28" (Catalan subtitles)

Check the K15 Alpha Channel schedule

## Performances

Saturday 11 April, 9 May and 6 June at 6.00 pm

### *Casa Plarre*

Performance by the artist Pablo Helguera, who revisits Sebald's book *The Emigrants*. With the participation of the actors: Maria Garrido and Jose Javier Domínguez Assistant director: David Pintó

## Reading Sebald

Thursday 9 April / 7.00 pm

Reinaldo Laddaga comments on *Austerlitz*

Thursday 30 April / 7.00 pm

Jorge Carrión comments on *The Rings of Saturn*

Thursday 14 May / 7.00 pm

Julià de Jódar comments on *The Emigrants*

and in June

Valeria Luiselli comments on *Vertigo* (videoconference)

Piedad Bonnett comments on *On the Natural History of Destruction* (videoconference)

## The Sebald universe debates

(May-June)

In his literary universe, Sebald employs a particular way of exploring the world in which travel is essential, in which getting lost becomes a way of finding the unexpected or the unusual, and in which there is an emotional identification with the landscape and a preference for places off the beaten tracks.

14 May / 7.30 pm

### **Iain Sinclair**

The debates that will take place in May and June 2014 will feature a number of the writers who have made the spirit of travel a central thread of their work, among them Iain Sinclair, the author and filmmaker, who has created a universe of his own in which the experience of the landscape and the urban environment is fundamental.

## A very sebaldian Xcèntric

(12 and 26 March)

<http://www.cccb.org/xcentric/en/>

In March, the CCCB's Cinema, Xcèntric, will devote two sessions to two representatives of cutting-edge North-American film, Bruce Elder and Stan Brakhage, whose works contain many formal and conceptual links with that of Sebald.

CCCB Auditorium  
Admission €4

## Activities for families

22 March (coinciding with K15)

26 April and 10 and 24 May / 11.30 am

### **Sebald for all the family**

This workshop run by the GR collective takes an artistic approach to Sebald's work and creative methods. We will be creating an artist's book, a map of the journeys of our lives, an archive for the future; we will be muddling the real with the imaginary. We will be playing a game in the style of Sebald based on history, architecture, photography and literature, the outcome of which will be the creation of a narrative for each of the participants and another for the group as a whole.

Prior registration required: [taquilles@ccb.org](mailto:taquilles@ccb.org)  
Admission: €6  
Limited to 15 people

## Guided tours

## General public

Guided tours

Saturdays and Sundays / 11.30 am

Included in admission to the exhibition

## Social programme

Guided tours for groups booked

in advance

Apropa Cultura sociocultural programme

Bookings: [www.apropacultura.cat](http://www.apropacultura.cat)

## School parties and groups

Guided tours for groups booked

in advance

Bookings: [seducatiu@ccb.org](mailto:seducatiu@ccb.org)

## Useful information on activities

To confirm dates, times and admission charges, see

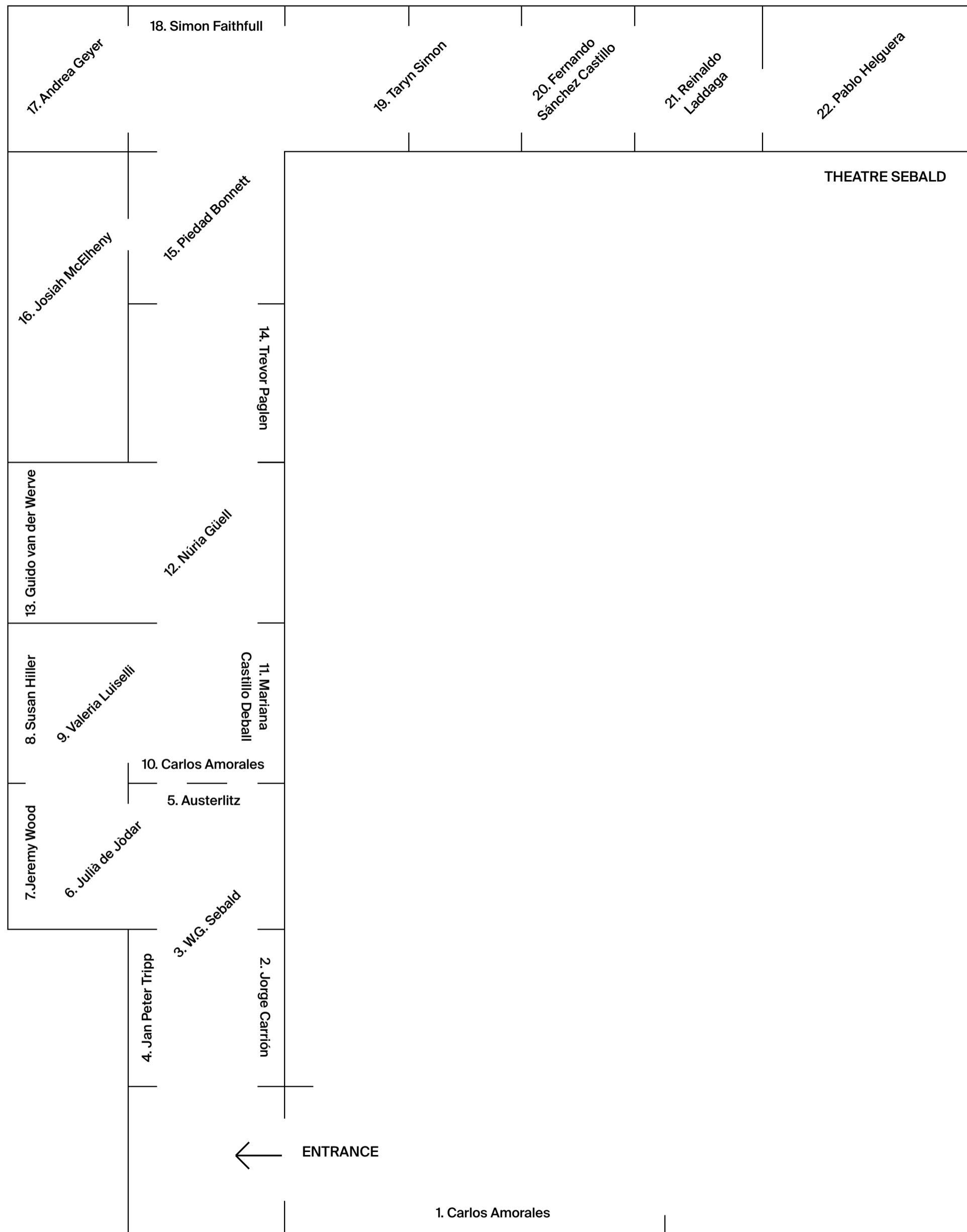
[www.cccb.org](http://www.cccb.org)

#Sebald

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1. Carlos Amoraes  
*Black Cloud*, 2007  
Installation



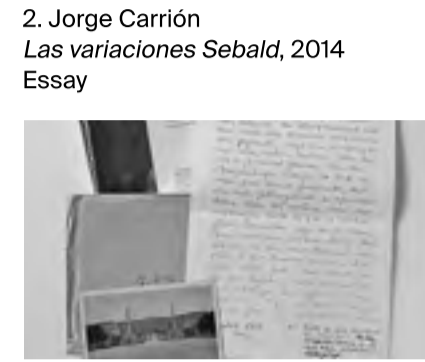
7. Jeremy Wood  
*My Ghost*, 2015  
Giclée on silk



13. Guido van der Werve  
*Nummer veertien, home*, 2012  
Video



19. Taryn Simon  
From the series "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII", chapters I, XI, and XVIII, 2011  
Photographs



2. Jorge Carrión  
*Las variaciones Sebald*, 2014  
Essay



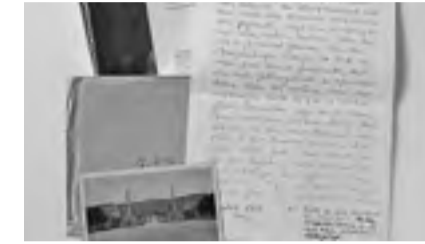
8. Susan Hiller  
From the "Country Roads" series, 2003  
Photographs



14. Trevor Paglen  
*NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK, 2014 and An English Landscape (American Surveillance Base near Harrogate, Yorkshire)*  
Photographs



20. Fernando Sánchez Castillo  
Models and other materials from the "Monumentos ciegos" series, 2007-2015



3. W. G. Sebald  
Material from the archive of W. G. Sebald (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach) and correspondence between Jan Peter Tripp and W. G. Sebald. 1982 - 2001



9. Valeria Luiselli  
*Collected poems*, 2014-2015  
Installation



15. Piedad Bonnett  
*La luz en las cenizas. Relectura acotada de "Los anillos de Saturno"*, 2015  
Installation



21. Reinaldo Laddaga  
*La Baronesa Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, al regresar con Dane Rudhyar a su loft de una visita al Museo Metropolitano, le muestra su "Retrato de Marcel Duchamp" y luego lo acompaña en la ejecución de su "Sintonía"*, 2015  
Installation



4. Jan Peter Tripp  
*L'oeil oder die weisse Zeit (L'oeil or White Time)*, 2003  
Acrylic paint on canvas and metal



10. Carlos Amoraes  
*Black Cloud Aftermath (Austerlitz book)*, 2009  
Book



16. Josiah McElheny  
*Towards a Light Club - The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture*, 2012  
Installation and video



5. W. G. Sebald  
*Austerlitz*, 2001



11. Mariana Castillo Deball  
*Parergon itineris i Parergon aetas*, 2014  
Installation



17. Andrea Geyer  
*Gezeiten*, 2015  
Installation and video



6. Julià de Jòdar  
*Projecte per a Sebald, amb ell y més enllà d'ell*, 2015  
Installation



12. Núria Güell  
*Resurrección*, 2013  
Video and installation



18. Simon Faithfull  
*0°00 Navigation*, 2009  
Video



22. Pablo Helguera  
*Sebald Theatre / Extras 1967-C to York*, 2015  
Installation and video

This exhibition, produced by the CCCB, is presented as part of the Kosmopolis 2015 Festival

Featuring original material by W. G. Sebald and the work of the artists:

Carlos Amorales

Mariana Castillo Deball

Simon Faithfull

Andrea Geyer

Núria Güell

Pablo Helguera

Susan Hiller

Josiah McElheny

Trevor Paglen

Fernando Sánchez Castillo

Taryn Simon

Jan Peter Tripp

Guido Van der Werve

Jeremy Wood

and of the writers:

Piedad Bonnett

Jorge Carrión

Julià de Jòdar

Reinaldo Laddaga

Valeria Luiselli

Organised by:

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Contemporània  
de Barcelona

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