FIGURA CUNCTA VIDENTIS

### THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA ART CONTEMPORARY

# FIGURA CUNCTA THE ALL-SEEING EYE / HOMAGE TO CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF

VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG WALTHER KÖNIG, KÖLN Edited by EVA EBERSBERGER and DANIELA ZYMAN

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## WorkintransitFRANCESCAVONHABSBURG

When Christoph Schlingensief first walked into the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary offices in Vienna in the winter of 2004, I don't believe that he really knew where he was, who I was, and certainly not what the T-B A21 foundation does! But it seems that his instincts were right on target. He works very spontaneously, but at the same time nothing about his work is not deeply considered in his mind, which races at the most extraordinary speed. He rushed me through two hours of a stream of images, video clips, entire acts of Richard Wagner's Parsifal with music, from one continent to the next, jumping back and forth, developing his ideas through a visual language that left me aghast! His seductive charm, together with the "tourbillion" of images and ideas, fit perfectly together with a language that I had been learning recently through the production of the puppet rock opera Don't Trust Anyone over Thirty by Dan Graham and Tony Oursler. It is a language that is not defined by any single art form but that involves a matrix of expression, one that is layered with images Schlingensief's extraordinarily of rich visual language-and while the bad boy of German theater dreamed of other horizons, he already had them all in his laptop.

A couple of weeks later I received the Animatograph—which included Nepal, a QuickTime rendering in 3D of the Namibia, and the rain forest of Brazil—as a first Animatograph, with projections of collector of myths and sagas from around the Schlingensief's past work flowing over world. These myths represent man's obsession screens as it rotated around and around with fear and a currency of protection

my desktop. I was dizzy with excitement! A project was born, and while sometimes I wait respectfully for months (even years) for some artists to become available and then conceive and develop their projects, here was one that I could absolutely see happening immediately. At the very same time, I was planning my next trip to Iceland in January 2005 and had heard about the appointment of Jessica Morgan of the Tate Modern as curator of the Reykjavík Arts Festival, which was conceived around the Dieter Roth retrospective at Reykjavík's two major museums, the National Gallery of Iceland and the Reykjavík Art Museum/Hafnarhus. A perfect combination of coincidences started to push the Animatograph into its first journey. What better company could Schlingensief have for his art installation than Roth and some of the new-generation artists whose work he certainly had some influence over, such as John Bock and Jonathan Meese? He liked the idea very much, and a month later we were scouting about Iceland. Braving the subzero temperatures, I watched Schlingensief immerse himself in the culture, the people, the history of Iceland, but most of all in the sagas. There was a moment in the truly remarkable National Museum of Iceland when the commitment to Iceland and this project really took form. I could see the images flashing through his mind. In the following months we drew up a plan for the future travels of the Animatograph—which included Nepal, Namibia, and the rain forest of Brazil-as a collector of myths and sagas from around the world. These myths represent man's obsession

against evil in all parts of the world. It is appropriate, in the end, that the *Animatograph* was born in Iceland, and from there would continue its journey around the world.

It needs to be understood that the *Animatograph* is a "work in transit," collecting sagas, myths, symbols, and paranoiac fears from all continents that are translated into an ever-evolving sequence of images: the *Animatograph* collects and disseminates at the same time as it circles our lives and questions our existence. It is our Holy Grail.

In the meantime, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary has commissioned and produced an extensive series of performative works in various contexts-more systematically between 2005 and 2007, when we developed an interesting partnership with the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin. With the Staatsoper we coproduced a series of performative projects in its spectacular storage facility, the Magazin. The series, which was supported by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, was titled Relation in Movement. Some of these productions were also presented in collaboration with the Vienna Festwochen. We developed an intense relationship to performative works over the years that we are quite proud of, and we also gained a new interdisciplinary language that set us apart in the contemporary art world as proponents of performance projects. This exhibition is a rearview-mirror insight into a series of these projects, with a view into the future of our commitment to continue this line of production through a number of new commissions and performances.

I hope that you enjoy this exhibition as much as we enjoyed creating each one of these projects. I also hope that we have given a proper and respectful contextualization to Christoph Schlingensief's work. I still can't believe that he has left us because his legacy is so rich, lively, and spontaneous. We very much miss his presence in our midst, as, I am sure, do many other institutions that have worked with him. His passing is a massive loss for contemporary expression, in whatever form it takes.

#### Rising from the Ashes of Live Art: Figura cuncta videntis (The All-Seeing Eye) DANIELA ZYMAN

Since Thyssen-Bornemisza 2004 Art Contemporary has developed an ongoing program of performances and performance-based works in various contexts and, more systematically, in the Relation in Movement series, realized at the Magazin of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin. As live events, performances are time-bound and ephemeral, and in many cases they resist being transformed into autonomous artworks. Often existing or unfolding in between the aesthetic space of art, theater, dance, and film; performer and audience/participant; viewer and viewed; inside and outside; and real and imaginary space, they situate art as a temporal intervention within a specific spatial context. Artists who work in performance shatter and rivetingly complicate these divisions and recombine categories of social, political, aesthetic, and environmental experience.

The artifactual residues of the performative may be documentary (drawings, writings, records, relics, films) or spatial (environments, sculptural assemblages) or may consist of objects produced "out of actions." Without the exclamatory gestures of their original agents, the residual objects and documents only partially retain the explosive kinetic energy, tension, humor (more often than not), and exuberance of their original making. It is within this dialogical relationship that the works presented in *Figura cuncta videntis: The All-Seeing Eye* operate.

*Figura cuncta videntis* presents a selection of eleven performative installations,

documents of past projects, and videobased installations that are informed by the aesthetics of the performative, as well as some new commissions created or re-created for this show. The exhibition seeks to underline the processual, durational, ephemeral, and dynamic nature of aesthetic production as well as the transformative quality (in the process of rapid development from articulation to dearticulation) of the residual or aesthetic production that possesses a performative disposition. The works inadvertently keep articulating the question of their own status, as expressed by Guy Brett: "Can the ashes of live art explode, by some process of poetic re-presentation, into new life?"1 The unequivocal answer would be no/yes.

As its centerpiece, the exhibition presents the Animatograph (Iceland Edition) by Christoph Schlingensief, the German filmmaker, artist, and theater director who passed away in August 2010. The Animatograph is a many-faceted installation that refigures the gaze as the all-seeing eye, providing both a metaphor for a universal ur-narration and an apparatus for its navigation. Realized at the KlinK og BanK Gallery in Reykjavík, Iceland, it is the most prominent corpus of work by Schlingensief and will be reinstalled in Vienna for the fourth time as a homage to the artist. The show's title, Figura cuncta videntis, is a term borrowed from Schlingensief's extensive repertoire of appropriations and détournements derived from the medieval text On the Vision of God by Nicholas of Cusa. Schlingensief's rotating apparatus-or soul-writer-would enable, according to its creator, the transition from relative to absolute or performative vision, or as Joseph Leo Koerner writes in regard to Nicholas's notion of absolute vision, "from the self's limited and deluded perspective to a viewpoint that can, like the figure of the omnivoyant itself, encompass all individual perspectives."<sup>2</sup> However, the omnivoyant act of seeing, which becomes particularly important for Baroque perspectivism, is fundamentally reciprocal—seeing and being looked at or polysemous—looking *into* pure vision, devoid of any objects, rather than looking *at*.

So we look at one another and cannot shake off the gaze. But we are also being observed. So who is really looking at whom when we stand before this icon cuncta videntis. Simultaneously? The icon stares at both of us even though we thought it was only us that could no longer evade its gaze. The room scrutinizes us rather than we the room.—Christoph Schlingensief

The juxtaposition of the all-seeing eye and the space of theater has a prominent precursor in the form of an illustration to Claude Ledoux's treatise on architecture titled The Eye of the Member of the Audience Reflecting the Theater of Besançon, published in 1804. As stated by Wolfgang Kemp, "The natural disposition of our sight organ is in accordance with the structure of the auditorium: the theater is all eyes." Here again, the eye looks at us and mirrors the image of the auditorium back to us, and yet the gaze remains undirected, "toward nothing special, but see[s] all and everything."3 This undetermined space, which examines us, as Schlingensief would have it (following Heidegger and Derrida), is the "clearing in which being takes place," a space of radical otherness, "tout autre."

Taken further, the ocular symbolism appears on the Great Seal of the United States, in the pyramid with an eye at its peak, first used in 1782. "Combined with any form of symbolic

light, the eye and the triangle are the most successful emblems of two great bourgeois revolutions of the 18th century (French and American) and of the Enlightenment in general."<sup>4</sup> And yet it is hardly possible to negate the organization of social control exercised by the all-seeing eye, in which "nothing escapes the supervision" (Ledoux) or invoked by Michel Foucault (1975) in the panoptical "watching machine" that announces the concentration universes of control and surveillance.<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore no coincidence that the figura cuncta videntis reunites the space of the theatrical with the space of the political in Schlingensief's oeuvre. The theatrical in his paradigm does not take place behind Denis Diderot's "fourth wall" but rather is unlocked, unleashed within the most intense encounter of the personal, communal, and mythological. It is a space of transformation, a passage through which we attain the restless experience of seeing.

Conceived over many years, during Schlingensief's work on Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* for the Bayreuth Opera, and finally realized in Iceland, at the site where the first parliament was convened in 930 and mythology has been preserved *shock-frosted* in the form of the *Edda*, the *Animatograph* is "a soul writer," according to Schlingensief, "a walk-on photo plate. An organic body situated between mankind's oldest wish for government (Pingvellir) and the house of ungovernable obsessions (Holmur). Here, on this earth crust fringe, spirits ride our bodies; here the biggest film I'll ever make begins."

Just as the Animatograph is deeply rooted in Wagner's Parsifal, the performance Jonathan Meese ist Mutter Parzival (Jonathan Meese is Mother Parsifal) is a performative counteraction to the Wagnerian opera. Presented at the Magazin over three nights in March 2005, Meese's (solo) performance unfolds as an "immediate and violent



Claude Ledoux, The Eye of the Member of the Audience Reflecting the Theater of Besançon, 1804

action" (following Artaud), investing the total theatrical space with archaic, spiritualistic, and shamanistic rituals. Meese has been obsessing over the grand Germanic narration for many years, producing and assembling hundreds of sketches and drawings and extensive writings, documents, and manuscripts. His habitual artistic method of collecting and juxtaposing different forms and types of materials-photographs, drawings, paintings, sculpture, writing, stage sets, installations, and theater props-literally coagulates on stage into a slow-motion, at times violently eruptive, performative / aesthetic collage. The pantheon of historic and fictional charactersmore often than not composite figures such as Mother Parsifal and Artaudaddy-are impersonated by the artist's multiple personas or artist-egos (Jonathan, ME, Meeseewolf, and others) in a real-time permuting défilé of Parsifal, Hagen of Tronje, Saint-Just, Kundri, Wagner, Nietzsche, Hitler, and so on. Meese's "oeuvre is based on the principle of generating many different references starting from a single center, namely Meese himself as an artist," states Fabrice Hergott.6 Through this process the artist effectively is and becomes a vehicle for his own citations.



Detail from United States One-Dollar bill

A grand historic narrative of a different kind is the reference material for John Bock's operatic production Maltreated Frigate, shown at Berlin's Magazin in 2006. The catastrophic shipwreck of the French vessel Medusa off the west coast of Africa on July 2, 1816, became a cause célèbre not because it was the consequence of a natural disaster, but as a social drama that produced the crudest violation of morality for the sake of personal survival. Bock's spectacle in ten scenes oscillates between rock opera and theater of the absurd, between performative installation and puppet show. But more importantly it is an idiosyncratically narrated parable of displacement, inescapable misfortune, and individual struggle against systemic and collective collapse. Performed in a condition of suspension and alarming disequilibrium (in a police van suspended from a thirty-meterhigh ceiling), the play spectacularizes processes of subjectivization and desubjectivization. The body, language, speech, and subjectivity expropriated, are gradually massacred, dismembered, and rejected from the symbolic order. It is the space of the abject, from which the

subject is evicted, rejected from life. The loss of distinction between subject and object, self and other, creates a severe breakdown of meaning and social coherence. But ironically, the abject, as always, evokes laughter and amusement, which is in part what constitutes it as abject.

Don't Trust Anyone over Thirty, a rock opera conceived by Dan Graham and created in collaboration with Tony Oursler and other artists, revisits a historic moment in closer proximity to us today, (also) narrating the tale of a breakdown, namely the failure of the youth revolution of the 1960s to create a "new social movement." In the words of Mike Kelley, the artists tackle the ageism of the Sixties' New Left and, so too, the continuing ageism and antihistorical tendencies of the various subsequent American "underground" youth movements. For those of us who are now long past the age of thirty, the age at which you became useless, it is a bitter experience to look back and see how a generation was seduced by this cult of youth. We were blind to the fact that our beliefs were a by-product of the capitalist commodity fetishism and planned obsolescence we were supposedly against. The rock opera is the perfect form for such an exploration: it was born kitsch, and signaled the death of the delusion that rock musical was inherently a "revolutionary" form.7

Structurally, Don't Trust Anyone over Thirty is a narrative composed through joyful, "schizophrenic" the overlapping of textures, counterpoints, slogans, and clichés, continually splicing together disparate media-opera and punk rock, the proscenium and the television screen, the 1960s and the 2000s, real people and puppets.

The Storyboard is an entire wall/room installation of drawings, collages, photos, and videos, unfolding the creative process and spirit of the rock opera. The Storyboard reveals the opera's visual and audio elements in a collagelike synopsis and features documents of the concept and references to the hippie era: one of the time," in the insufferable standstill and in

items is the original cover of Neil Young's first solo album from 1968, which was influential for the entire production, its spirit and the music.

When the punk band Japanther came to perform in Don't Trust Anyone over Thirty in Vienna, they had just started moving from the underground spaces of clubs and garages (and any other available space) into the limelight of performance and the white cube of the gallery. As one of the duo explained: "Japanther have a long standing tradition of playing in real time and space. On bridges, under bridges, out moving trucks in Manhattan, in bathrooms... . Taking risks in order to advance our chosen art forms."8

Japanther's It Never Seems to End (2010) is an homage to the encounter with Christoph Schlingensief, the artist for whom real-time and the streets were to real locus of theatre, and a nod to Dan Graham. It is "a trance ritual performance in which the two performers deprive themselves of solid food and sleep for three and a half days in the hope that beta brain waves will inspire new levels of creativity." This is the lapidary description of a self-experiment whose outcome is possibly less important than the process of its realization. In specific, it begs the question as to what relation any premeditated aesthetic act—staged in a performance space or on the streets, for that matter-has to reality and to common notions of risk, safety, and physical endurance.

When Marina Abramović and Ulay drove a van around in circles for hours on end for their 1977 performance Relation in Movement (which gave its name to the series of performances at the Magazin of the Staatsoper), the action was defined by the limits of fatigue and the provisions of fuel. Temporality and "real time" are constitutive elements of the performative and their distinguishing features. Performances take place in "real

engage the collective consciousness and create deep-rooted narratives that script the way we structure and perceive symbolic aspects of reality.

In The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Claude Lévi-Strauss observes that "the religious life of ... societies is dominated by beliefs affirming an identity of substance between the clan and the eponymous totem."10 This "identity of substance" is both demonstrated and ritualistically shed by (1) the neutralization of the W.D. product; (2) its transformation by applying heat, smoke, and liquid (all of which are primary processes associated with the cultural act of cooking); and (3) its transfixion on the altar. Altars function as places where totemic objects are preserved and localized (given a place to rest) but also "tranquilized" and domesticated in order to be controlled by and to communicate with the powers within the totem.

Nevin Aladağ explores though her work Hochparterre, Himmelportgasse Wien (Mezzanine, Himmelpfortgasse Vienna) the liminal zones where fiction and reality meet. Whereas common wisdom has it that forms of documentation represent the authentic (through voices, physicality, the capturing of the moment) and art and theater produce fictionalized narratives, Hochparterre counteracts this assumption with a thoroughly developed method of representation by the artist. By conducting a series of interviews with neighbors, city dwellers, tourists, and other accidental passersby, Aladağ is attempting to render a composite portrait of the area around T-B A21's space on Himmelpfortgasse. Edited down to an eight-minute loop, the interview snippets are "performed" live by an actress who lip-synchs the interviews replayed through the PA system. So whereas the interviews and voices are "real," as in the tradition of verbatim theater, they are actually being performed by an actor/performer, whose own individual interpretation and rendering (of the original interview) we can watch. The breaking point

the "condition of time." The present is not constituted as a commodity; the action is not a symbolic quotation but irreducibly itself.

Another feat of endurance was set up by artist Gregor Schneider in the framework of his performance 7-8:30 PM 31.05.2007 (2007). In an act of reversal between performer and viewer, Schneider imposed an enervating and excruciatingly long waiting time on the audience that came to see the announced performance. Eight hundred or more visitors were made to wait in line for hours before being allowed to enter the Magazin in Berlin, and when finally the doors opened, allowing individuals to enter one at a time, they were led into an empty space and ushered out of the Magazin's back door without the promised fulfillment of an aesthetic act. "There is nothing to see" was uttered as a hysterical outcry by some of the disappointed visitors who had made the rounds. But there could be no certainty as to whether expectations were fulfilled or not, or whether there was something to get or not to get, so the audience stayed.

The absolute singularity of the event an undisputable feature of "real time"—is inscribed into the performance itself. As one critic noted: "In the Magazin, those waiting are waiting *exclusively* for the Magazin. Ergo, those waiting in line become the event itself. Quite simply, Schneider has constructed a space with people."<sup>9</sup>

In their work, Palli Banine and his partner Davíð Örn Halldórsson perform the ritualistic transformation or sacrifice of W.D. merchandise by dipping various Disney products into paint and preserving them in melted wax on a sacrificial altar in a salubrious and—arguably culinary act. Attention is placed both on the objects of sacrifice/transformation and on the processes of their transformation. Clearly the selection of commodities produced by today's most successful myth-producing entertainment conglomerate is effective on a highly symbolic level. They carry a totemic character in that they between what we see and what we hear is all the more vivid in moments in which a male voice is so perfectly incarnated that we actually *envision* the speaker through his female impersonator.

The feminist rock band cum art collective cum record label cum fashion line (et al.) Chicks on Speed bursts and liquefies all disciplinary borders in constantly performed and re/invented acts of self-empowerment and subversion. Not adhering to any given form allows them to hop back and forth, enter and disengage with, take up and dismisssimultaneously and instantaneously-the competences and material and artistic outputs associated with certain genres and cultural professions. To counteract any complicity with (male-dominated) production and distribution systems, the Chicks have set out to own their means of production and distribution in the form of a record label, an online store, and a clothing and cult accessory line.

The oversublimation of the aesthetic language and the space of art opens up onto a field of anti-aesthetics associated with a trashy look, dilettantism, resistance to learned musical and acoustic forms, and an unmaking of all representational articulations in favor of a limbo state between articulations and their undoing. As radical rule breakers and transgressors, Chicks on Speed have developed a language of affect and emotion, "operating within the aesthetic of maximum visibility" (Linda Williams) and the "appropriation of a subversive representation of sexuality" (Birgit Pelzer).11 ART RULES! is in many ways a symbolic work for the collective. It took the form of a series of concerts performed predominantly in art spaces but was in fact an improvised and constantly rescripted performative and musical critique of the power mechanisms with the art system. "The recipe combines mid-90's eurotrash music and feminist statements to concoct a contemporary live piece switching between pop clichés & performance art," states A.L. Steiner, one of the core Chicks.

Ragnar Kjartansson's performative works combine-more often than notdurational live performance, music, and uncompromised romanticism. Once he performed for several days in a row Robert Schumann's Dichterlieder (Schumann Machine, Manifesta, 2008) in a "psychedelic loop." Earlier he occupied an abandoned community house in the remote countryside of Iceland to play the blues on guitar and make watercolors of licks and tongues in endless variations day in and day out over a period of months (Reykjavík Arts Festival, 2005). For another project he orchestrated a big band performing a sad majestic melody to the words "sorrow conquers happiness" in a thirty-minute-long take (God, 2007). In The End – Rocky Mountains, he ventures out into the wilderness of the Canadian Rockies with his collaborator Davið Þor Jonsson. Their extravagant performance en plein air is set against the pristine majestic landscape. Two solitary figures dressed in heavy winter gear yet equipped with, among other instruments, a grand piano, guitar, and amplifier inscribe themselves into grand nature to nonchalantly perform country music. It is as if only the genius loci would allow them to explore the true nature of their tunes or as if the soul of the music lay within the landscape that they occupy. The classic dichotomy of culture versus nature, of inner and outer landscapes, merges here in a subtle orchestration. The outcome is a fivechannel installation, each screen dedicated to one instrument and one take but synchronized to a multi-instrument arrangement: a romantic loop in which performative time is made to last.

Anetta Mona Chişa and Lucia Tkáčová's *After the Order* is an ephemeral monument taking the shape of a human pyramid, dedicated to a (re)presentation and the spontaneous formation of a social power structure. Inspired by sports and propagandistic events (famous Spartakiads in former Soviet times), folkloric or religious rituals (known to be performed by castellers in Catalonia and rituals in honor of Lord Krishna in the province of Maharashtra, India), it explores the symbolic qualities of the organization of a number of people into an interdependent structure. Every human pyramid has to be built from the bottom up. Interdependency and even distribution of weight is thus key to any attempt at reaching stability. The higher a pyramid grows, the more weight is put upon the shoulders of the first level's participants. In fact, they carry the weight and provide for the structural foundation.

The social symbolism of the human pyramid takes an interesting turn in the film by the same name, directed by the ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch. Rouch's Pyramide humaine (1960) is a complex documentation of an experimental setting revealing the issue of racism seen through the eyes of young black and white students in a lycée on the Ivory Coast. Whether seen in a postcolonial or neoliberal or postsocialist context (as is the case of Chişa and Tkáčová's pyramid), the human pyramid exemplifies the fine stratifications of society and the ever-changing order between those who benefit from the vantage point at its top and the ones who get stomped upon at its base. Here the performative enactments do not attempt to create a perfectly shaped athletic structure of bodies, nor is the challenge to reach a maximum height. The enactments take the notion of the "new order" from a symbolic level of representation to a personalized, physical embodiment in which each of the actors takes on a given role within such scenarios.

Figura cuncta videntis tests the boundaries between art, performance, theater, and film and between the artifact and the exhibition space. Since theatricality enacts an encounter between the aesthetic realm of artifice and social reality, the "fourth wall"

and the exhibition space both perform the divide between artistic and social subjectivity. Posing the question "How much reality can we bear?" art historian Kristine Stiles concludes: "Whatever one's response, the artists who have made action art received, transmitted, and made visual more reality than we knew before their actions, creating new worlds, new cosmologies of human experience."<sup>12</sup>

#### Notes

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3. Wolfgang Kemp, "The Theater of Revolution: A New Interpretation of Jacques-Louis David's Tennis Court Oath," in Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations, ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith P. F. Moxey (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 216, 217.

4. idem

5. Luc Gruson, "Claude Nicolas Ledoux: Visionary Architecture and Social Utopia," in International Conference of Territorial Intelligence, Besançon 2008, Papers on Tools and Methods of Territorial Intelligence, MSHE (Besançon, 2009), 303.

6. Fabrice Hergott, in Jonathan Meese: Mama Johnny (Cologne: Walther König, 2007), 307.

 7. Mike Kelley, liner notes, in Dan Graham and Marie-Paule Macdonald, Wild in the Streets: The Sixties (Ghent: Imschoot, 1994).

8. Ian Vanek, quoted in Alex Nino Gheciu, "Japanther Sees Evil in CMW," *Torontoist* (blog), March 1, 2010. http://torontoist.com/2010/03/japanther\_see\_ evil\_in\_crww.php.

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10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Elementary Structures of Kinship (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 20.

11. Linda Williams and Birgit Pelzer. In: Sabeth Buchman, "Fetish," unpublished essay. Magazin Textuelle Bildhauerei, 5, 2010.

12. Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in *Out of Actions*, 329.