

TEXTS BY ATIF AKIN, JOAN ANIM-ADDO, MAGALÍ ARRIOLA, RAKHEE BALARAM, ERIKA BALSOM, UTE META BAUER, BETTINA BRUNNER, D. GRAHAM BURNETT, PATRICK CHARPÉNEL, DAMIAN CHRISTINGER, SEBASTIAN CICHOCKI, CM LIVE (NEELOFAR, SURAJ RAI, AND SHAMSHER ALI), GABRIELLE CRAM, HEATHER DAVIS, ANGELA DIMITRAKAKI, GEORGES B.J. DREYFUS, EVA EBERSBERGER, CHARLES ESCHÉ, BEATRICE FORCHINI, ANSELM FRANKE, NATASHA GINWALA, DAVID GRUBER, CARLES GUERRA, SOLEDAD GUTIÉRREZ, NAV HAQ, EVA HAYWARD, STEFAN HELMREICH, STEFANIE HESSLER, VÁCLAV JANOŠČÍK, CAROLINE A. JONES, RUBA KATRIB, LUTZ KOEPNICK, CRESANTIA FRANCES KOYA VAKA'UTA, LUCA LO PINTO, SARAT MAHARAJ, CHUS MARTÍNEZ, MARGARIDA MENDES, SUZANA MILEVSKA, VANESSA JOAN MÜLLER, HEIKE MUNDER, SARA NADAL-MELSIÓ, HENNING NASS, ASTRIDA NEIMANIS, INGO NIERMANN, SANDRA NOETH, HANS ULRICH OBRIST, BORIS ONDREIČKA, ANNIE PAUL, NATAŠA PETREŠIN-BACHELEZ, IGNAS PETRONIS, ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI, FILIPA RAMOS, RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE, MARKUS REYMANN, KATHRIN RHOMBERG, DAN RICHARDS, RIDYKEULOUS (NICOLE EISENMAN + A.L. STEINER), RALPH RUGOFF, THIBAUT DE RUYTER, NADIM SAMMAN, MIRJAM SCHAUB, ANDREAS SCHLAEGEL, CORY SCOZZARI, TSERING SHAKYA, CHRIS SHARP, JASPER SHARP, FREDERIKE SPERLING, ANDREAS SPIEGL, FRANCESCA THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA, EMILIANO VALDÉS, NICOLA VASSELL, FRANZISKA SOPHIE WILDFÖRSTER, EVA WILSON, SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, DANIELA ZYMAN, OONA ZYMAN

Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary The Commissions Book

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Olaf Nicolai

WELCOME TO THE TEARS OF ST. LAWRENCE: AN APPOINTMENT TO WATCH FALLING STARS, 2005
PUBLIC ART PROJECT, BOOKLET, AND POSTER

Every year in mid-August, the heavens open and the Perseids meteor showers streak across the night sky in a fleeting celestial light show. The shower is also known as the “Tears of St. Lawrence” due to its yearly appearance on and around August 10, which is the feast day of St. Lawrence, who is said to have been martyred by being roasted alive on a gridiron for distributing treasures to the poor rather than offering them to the Roman Emperor Valerian. The meteors, according to legend, are the embers rising up from the burning fire. In his mediation, *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence*, created for the 2005 Venice Biennale, Olaf Nicolai extended an invitation through the distribution of posters and brochures (including astrological maps, detailed scientific and historical overviews, images, and links to websites) throughout town to gaze upward upon this ephemeral yearly spectacle that takes place with or without observers.

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OLAF NICOLAI, WELCOME TO THE TEARS OF ST. LAWRENCE:
AN APPOINTMENT TO WATCH FALLING STARS, 2005



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POSTERS IN THE STREETS OF VENICE, VENICE BIENNALE, 2005



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In 1953 the Austrian writer H. C. Artmann formulated the foundations of his poetics in a manifesto titled “Acht-Punkte-Proklamation des poetischen Actes,” writing: “One can be a poet without ever having written or spoken a single word. However the prerequisite is the more or less deeply felt desire to act poetically. The illogical gesture can itself become an act of outstanding beauty, indeed a poem. [...] The poetic act is poetry for the sake of pure poetry. It is pure poetry and free of all ambition for recognition, praise or criticism. [...] A poetic act will perhaps only come to the attention of the public by accident. However, this is a single case in a hundred cases. For the sake of its beauty and integrity, it is not allowed to be publicized for the purpose of publicizing, for it is an act of the heart and pagan modesty.”¹ What Artmann asserts perfectly describes the spirit that drives many of the works made by Olaf Nicolai over the last twenty-five years. The idea that an artistic gesture or a poetic action can take form under conditions alternative to those in which they are usually produced is particularly vivid in the case of *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence*. The work shown at the Venice Biennale in 2005 was an invitation to observe the passage of the Perseid’s meteor shower (commonly known as the “Tears of St. Lawrence” in reference to the burning coals of the Saint’s martyrdom) through the appropriation not of an object or an image, but of the starry sky above us. The artist had posters put up all over Venice to announce the event, and had brochures distributed to provide a wide range of information and historical background regarding the astronomical phenomenon that happens each year during the summer. In a context like the Biennale where artists usually vie for maximum visibility, the choice of presenting an ephemeral, immaterial work like this one is indicative of Nicolai’s desire to operate outside the customary exhibition venues, concentrating on another context at the level of language and space. Not by chance, when he was invited to represent Germany at the 2015 Venice Biennale, he chose to work on the roof of the pavilion with a work titled *GIRO*. In this hybrid between a workshop, an installation, and a performance, which lasted the whole duration of the Biennale, three people worked on the production of boomerangs, which they threw from time to time to test their effectiveness.² Like *GIRO*, *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence* acts on the economics of one of our primary intellectual resources: attention. As the great American economist and psychologist Herbert A. Simon has stated, “in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to

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allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.”² Nicolai adds nothing, but detects something that already exists, stimulating us to observe and interpret it. He takes over a portion of reality, highlighting it and contextualizing it within a gesture whose semantic properties modify its ordinary perception.³ The use of reality as a given and a made to construct a narrative or fictional scenario is a distinctive feature of the artist’s process. A dramaturgical choreography staged through the use of ephemera like posters, postcards, booklets, letters, and stickers distributed in public spaces. In 2011, Nicolai had an old postcard reprinted of Piazza del Plebiscito, a large public square in Naples that is now a pedestrian zone, showing it when it was still used as a parking lot. On the back, he added “Free Parking Coming Soon.” Hundreds of the cards were distributed in the city in an initiative meant to give people a different perception of the place, exploiting a simple image and the power of information. Though the work was conceived more on a conceptual level, as chance would have it, one month later the piazza was occupied by Neapolitan taxis as an act of protest, transforming fiction into reality.⁴ In 2009, for the 3rd Riwaq Biennale in Palestine, Nicolai avoided producing a work to be gazed at, opting instead for a public intervention intended to operate on a linguistic level with respect to that specific cultural context. He commissioned the translation, for the first time, in written and oral form, of Sigmund Freud’s text *Trauer und Melancholie* (written in 1915, first published in 1917),⁵ making it available as a free publication and in an audio broadcast by a local radio station. It is important to emphasize that the circulation of Freud’s thinking in Muslim countries is still very limited. The first book translated into Arabic was *The Interpretation of Dreams* (originally published in 1899) in 1958, in a version by the Lacanian psychoanalyst Moustafa Safouan. For this reason, the artist’s decision to translate a previously unavailable text by Freud into Arabic as well as into the local Palestinian dialect had remarkable implications on a linguistic and cultural level, regarding the importance of psychoanalytic thinking in the Arab world and the function and possibilities of translation in that socio-political context. He was interested precisely in the way the connection between meaning and experience constantly takes shape, in keeping with the famous saying by Jean-Luc Godard: “It’s not where you take things from, it’s where you take them to.”⁶ Nicolai sees the relationship between an art object and a viewer not in a linear way but rather as dynamic process, constantly questioning our habitual ways of relating to things. In this regard, the very concept and methodology of translation play a crucial role.⁷ Nicolai’s artistic thinking stands out for the presence of a dense, complex range of cultural references that nevertheless are manifested in an intuitive, non-anecdotal way, in a harmonious combination of enjoyment and engagement. How can we be objects and subjects at the same time? Under

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which assumptions does a “self” take shape on a rational and emotional level? The artist asks these questions, often using himself as a guinea pig for the experiment, aiming to create conditions which will allow the audience to be captivated by something using aesthetics as tool. *Samani. Some Proposals to Answer Important Questions* (2008) is a possible response—as the title ironically indicates—to this kind of queries. On a strictly technical level, it is a spotlight moving along a vertical metal bar based on commands from a computer inside a dark room. It is a fascinating hybrid between object and animation. A character in search of an author, an automaton that aspires to define its identity. An astonishing bachelor machine that comes alive in a symbiotic combination of sound and light; depending on the various frequencies, in fact, the motor produces a sound that becomes the soundtrack of the choreography. An experience that is both sensory and cognitive, prompting the observer to imagine a narration in which to fit this technological gear conceived not as an extension of the human body, but as another body in its own right. In the preface to the French edition of *Crash* in 1974, J. G. Ballard—an author who has narrated the political, iconic, and sensual power of the machine and technology in the modern world—wrote: “We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the preempting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent the reality.”⁵ *Samani* seems to come to terms with this task. Together with its creator.

1 Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, ed., *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 116–117.

2 Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World,” in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 40–41.

3 In fact, this is also the first text by Freud which was translated from German into Arabic; others were translated from English or French.

4 Jim Jarmusch, “Jim Jarmusch’s 5 Golden Rules,” *MovieMaker*, June 5, 2013. www.moviemaker.com/archives/series/things_learned/jim-jarmusch-5-golden-rules-of-moviemaking. (What Jarmusch says is, “In case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: It’s not where you take things from. It’s where you take them to.” The origin of the quote [or some near-variant of it] is usually presented as said by Godard off-handedly to another filmmaker—sometimes Paul Schrader, sometimes Martin Scorsese—who admits to borrowing a scene from one of Godard’s films.)

5 Robert Louit, “Some Words About *Crash*. Introduction to French edition plus a translation of an interview with J. G. Ballard by Robert Louit,” *Foundation*, no. 4 (November 1975): 45–54.

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