

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 REYMAN, 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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BASEL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU-RAHME, DAVID ADJAYE, NABIL AHMED, DOUG AITKEN, ATIF AKIN, JOHN AKOMFRAH, NEVIN ALADAĞ, ALLORA & CALZADILLA, LAURA ANDERSON BARBATA, JONATHAS DE ANDRADE, KUTLUĞ ATAMAN, NEİL BELOUFA, CECILIA BENGOLEA, JOHN BOCK, MONICA BONVICINI, CANDICE BREITZ, JANET CARDIFF AND GEORGE BUREŠ MILLER, JULIAN CHARRIÈRE, ANETTA MONA CHIŠA AND LUCIA TKÁČOVÁ, TYLER COBURN, PHIL COLLINS, CLAUDIA COMTE, ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, EMANUEL DANESCH AND DAVID RYCH, DARK MORPH, JEREMY DELLER, OLAFUR ELIASSON, NOA ESHKOL, OMER FAST, MARIO GARCÍA TORRES, GELITIN, ISA GENZKEN, LIAM GILLYCK, DOMINIQUE GONZALEZ-FOERSTER, DAN GRAHAM, ARIEL GUZIK, CARL MICHAEL VON HAUSSWOLFF AND THOMAS NORDANSTAD, FLORIAN HECKER, NIKOLAUS HIRSCH / MICHEL MÜLLER AND CYBERMOHALLA ENSEMBLE, CARSTEN HÖLLER, MARINE HUGONNIER, PIERRE HUYGHE, INHABITANTS, SANJA IVEKOVIĆ, RASHID JOHNSON, JOAN JONAS, BRAD KAHLHAMER, AMAR KANWAR, RAGNAR KJARTANSSON, ARMIN LINKE, SHARON LOCKHART, LOS CARPINTEROS, SARAH LUCAS, URSULA MAYER, JONATHAN MEESE, EDUARDO NAVARRO, ERNESTO NETO AND THE HUNI KUIN, RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER, CARSTEN NICOLAI, OLAF NICOLAI, JORGE OTERO-PAILOS, MATHIAS POLEDNA, WALID RAAD, RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE, LISA RAVE, MATTHEW RITCHIE WITH ARANDA LASCH AND ARUP AGU, TOMÁS SARACENO, RITU SARIN AND TENZING SONAM, HANS SCHABUS, CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF, ALLAN SEKULA, CHARLES STANKIEVECH, SIMON STARLING, SUPERFLEX, TERRITORIAL AGENCY, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, SISSEL TOLAAS, SUZANNE TREISTER, JANAINA TSCHÄPE WITH DAVID GRUBER, JANA WINDEREN, SUSANNE M. WINTERLING, CERITH WYN EVANS, ŽELIMIR ŽILNIK

The Commissions Book

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Towards the end of our conversation in his studio on the 36th floor, with its cream-colored carpet, white filing cabinets, and golden Japanese waving cats, Cerith Wyn Evans, dressed in starched white linen pajamas and wearing tinted glasses to shield himself from the brilliance of this altitude, shows me an image of a small statuette of an Indian deity, *The Supreme Goddess as a void*. The seated bronze figurine from Andhra Pradesh has two large ears, two arms extended forward, palms facing down, and two legs, bent at the knees, feet flat on the ground, all of which seem to be growing out of the angular sides of a vertical frame. The rectangular middle of the figure inside the frame is empty—there is *nothing* there. Emptiness and evacuation have been at the core of Wyn Evans's attention through the years and notably in his thinking around the neon work *A Community Predicated on the Basic Fact Nothing Really Matters* (2013), part of his exhibition "The What If? ... Scenario (After LG)." The work's title is ambiguous: does it mean to say that *nothing* is, in fact, extremely important, or does it instead insist that nothing at all is of any consequence? A third (and fourth, and fifth, and Nth) possible meaning materialize along with the two iconic components that make up the suspended, only seemingly abstract neon: the figure of a simulated Higgs boson event on the one hand, and an amorphous distortion of the diagram of LSD's molecular structure on the other. The two elements—bright graphemes cutting into the exhibition space and leaving afterimages on the retina—are juxtaposed, or rather collided into each other. There is no obviously privileged position from which to approach the work: both parts of the equation seem skewed, a little cockeyed, complicating matters for the viewer. The neon trajectories extending in various directions represent the beams of a simulated possible Higgs event, some streaks curling back in semi-circles toward the nucleus of the collision, recoiling from an invisible force field, others splitting into the room, down to the visitors' eye level, a communality of dynamic forces and forms without recognizable hierarchy or sequence, except for a definite centrifugal urge. Famously conjured out of the ether at CERN's Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, the Higgs's anticipation, if not its existence, is the consequence of a flaw in the otherwise "exquisitely successful" Standard Model of particle physics (which makes up for its no-nonsense name with what physicists describe as the *beauty* of its simplicity): the Standard Model covers most of the fundamental forces but does not account for all of the mass in the universe. There remained the "necessity of a gravitational scaffolding in the universe: the dark matter needed for the stars and galaxies to not fly apart."² Some particles acquire their mass by interacting with the invisible Higgs field that lies across the

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universe. The Higgs field came into being fractions of a second after the Big Bang, slowing down particles that interacted with it, giving them mass, and allowing them to form composites, atoms, planets, suns, gravity, nouns, verbs, argon, melancholy, Buddhism, radio waves, and Gertrude Stein. The Higgs gives the universe mass. A communality united by inertia, discharging around an empty core. Without it, *nothing really matters*. Talking about emptiness, Cerith mentions that it has been five years since he had cardiac surgery, giving him a mechanical heart to gyrate around. In regard to his tendency to lift titles from other artists' work (such as in the case of the Augarten exhibition's title, appropriated from writing by Liam Gillick), he points out that this offers him a way to evacuate the reading of his own works. In the spirit of his characteristic invocation of transversality, Wyn Evans's references cover an immense ground in lateral movements, spanning Japanese Noh theatre, the *Heart Sutra*, John Cage, Anton Webern, Miles Davis, Occupy Wall Street ("Vacate Wall Street!"), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Madame de Lafayette, Pierre Klossowski's *La vocation suspendu*, Samuel Beckett's double negatives, and Kenneth Anger's reading of the moon as the first cinematic screen, a passive receiver and reflector of light. We don't need to follow Wyn Evans on every passage of his trajectories. We can watch him go into orbit and marvel at the tenderness of his revolutions. And in case we do want to go along with him, we might as well turn to the second component of *A Community Predicated on the Basic Fact Nothing Really Matters*: the chemical composition of acid. In the early twentieth century, the chemist Albert Hofmann, working in another Swiss laboratory, synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide, a veritable collider of references, a mind-melting "Nietzschean maelstrom" (Cerith's words), liquid liminality, a transubstantiation of endless intersecting universes. The distorted perspective of its molecular structure in Wyn Evans's neon work, a hallucination in ruins, is a clue, a key not only to this work, but to the transversal reading that Wyn Evans's practice engenders. Like Hofmann's chemical agent, Wyn Evans's blinking, winking, flickering, glowing, radiating works are bioactive, intent on interacting with the subject in the hopes of dislocating its perception of reality. "[R]etroactively, I tried to find an interpretation and explanation. Each individual who experiences this agent suddenly enters another reality, experiences a completely different reality, seemingly even more real than actual reality. Until that day, I'd always thought there was only one reality, the actual reality. Suddenly, I was experiencing another."³ The ridiculously, beautifully saccharine 2007 Murano chandelier titled "*Astrophotography-Stages of photographic development*" by Siegfried Marx (1987) is hung so low in the exhibition space that its presence is like that of a hovering ghost, kindly descended to meet its observer at eyelevel. It flickers in Morse code to transmit advice on how to photograph stars and planets,

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and how to avoid the misinterpretation of dust on photographic emulsion as unknown galaxies. The four light sculptures of the work *Untitled* (2008) are modeled on the classical fluted columns of antique temples. But neither resting on the ground nor supporting the ceiling, they subvert any architectural hankering for mass in favor of a fascination with energy. Although the light and heat they emanate make it all but impossible to actually look at them, their radiance draws the visitors in like doomed insects, succumbing to the promise of another dreamachine, accepting the bright white tear in the fabric of reality that buzzes away in their peripheral vision. Much has been written about Wyn Evans's messenger objects, communicating in an obsolete code that could, in theory, be deciphered by the viewer but most likely will not be (and in any case, the transmitted text is usefully displayed on a wall-mounted monitor close by). It is not so much the content of the message, but the fact of its transmission and the nature of its transmitter that is of interest: "The chandelier becomes a text, superimposing and suppressing the text it broadcasts."⁴ It operates in the realm of representation and display as much as in the Lacanian symbolic order, or even the insoluble order of the Real. "The world may or may not be fluent, but seeing the blinking, blinks back."⁵ In her beautiful essay on Wyn Evans's work, "Phare de la," Molly Nesbit points out that the electrified chandeliers have "been programmed so as to fade in an out randomly, sometimes in mid-phrase. These breaks in the action ripple through the scene like a chance operation, like a stutter."⁶ This stutter—here as a staged muteness—is the interruption of the flow of electrical current, creating a silence in communication that is, of course, very loud. Nesbit goes on to point to the ghosts that may reside within power failure, and the present that only becomes tangible in the void between events. There still remains the matter of how to ultimately grasp the concept of evacuation, absence, emptiness, and void at the center of Wyn Evans's oeuvre. For example: Is his interest in *nothing* negotiated within the register of the semiotic, the symbolic, or the poetic? Does staring at his oeuvre metaphorically (literally?) create a negative after-image that reveals its actual substance? When the lights go out, are we to poke in the dark for the anti-matter? Following Wyn Evans's own reasoning, if the subject matter is emptied, the idea of the subject itself is problematized and becomes multi-dimensional. With Wyn Evans in mind, Jeannie Moser writes about LSD, altered states of being-in-reality, and the diplomacy of this relation: "The psychotropic condition turns the distinction between the world as given and the perception thereof into a matter of negotiation. *Is it about light, or is it light?*"⁷ In 2009, Wyn Evans embarked on a kind of blind collaboration with the artist and composer Florian Hecker to make *No night No day* (its title appropriated from Peter Gidal's 1997 structural silent film *No Night No Day*). Hecker's electronic multi-

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channel psychoacoustic sound and Wyn Evans's footage premiered as an "abstract opera" at the Baroque Teatro Goldoni in Venice and were reinstalled in 2013 at the Augarten. Both artists had worked on their contributions individually, witnessing their pairing for the first time along with the audience. Hecker's ambition of decentering the focal point of the theatre space, liberating it from the tyranny of perspective by immersing the entire auditorium in spatialized, sculptural sound, was simultaneously supported and thwarted by Wyn Evans's edit of footage from John Cage's 1992 film *One*,¹¹ projected onto a screen onstage. Cage's only film, made in the year of his death, shows wandering zones of light in an otherwise empty room. Both the movements of the spotlights as well as those of the camera are randomized and computer-controlled, and further deconstructed by Wyn Evans's edit. Robin Mackay describes the sensation of watching *No night No day* as follows: "With a sudden flourish, light blossoms on the screen occupying the stage, its mass smoothly expanding, its continuity broken only by the edge of the frame, which it swiftly fills, revealing... nothing. [...] We become aware of an inward effort, almost painful, as the mind tries to constitute into objects both light and sound, and to integrate the two into a reference to some organic world where, once more, sound and light would belong in some determinate way to identifiable objects. We develop a certain irony in relation to these pitiful attempts, in the attempt of any coded, coherent, narrativizable program, to bring this play of intensities back into the plush interior, to create a theater where there is none."⁸ The title's double negative speaks of the abstraction of light and darkness into unclassifiable, unnatural, and uncommodifiable entities. However, Wyn Evans's superimposed appropriations of Cage and Gidal work against a total draining of referentiality. Instead, *No night No day* is overdetermined, in the sense that it makes concrete use of the *nothings* of others. Contrasting abstraction with referentiality in this way (or "crashing an index into a register,"⁹ as Cerith writes), he lets the work shed its mass (in the form of narrative, subject, or representation), and instead allows it to assume the status of an event in a Deleuzian sense, an event of *hearing*, of *seeing*. Now, Molly Nesbit also asks: "Where did the love go?" She suggests a response to Wyn Evans's messages in the form of a poem by Elizabeth Bishop that in turn paraphrases another, older poem about being under siege and holding on to one's loyalties:

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*Love's the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite "The boy stood on
the burning deck." Love's the son
stood stammering elocution
while the poor ship in flames went down.
Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,*

