

# ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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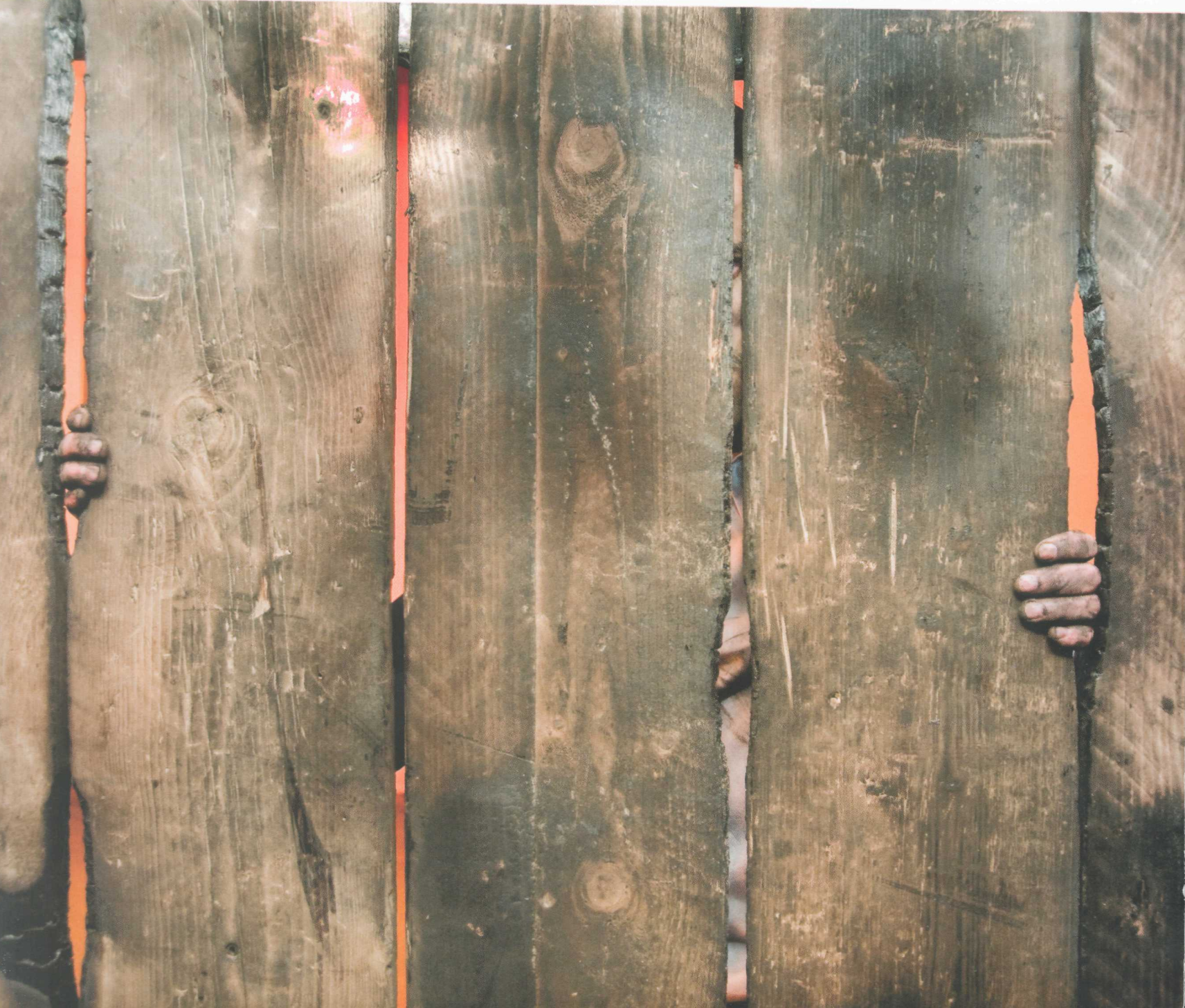


BOUNDARIES  
PERFORMA 11  
AND THE VOICE

BATTLE LINES  
RITA ACKERMANN  
RECONSIDERED

BORDERS  
SVEN AUGUSTIJNEN'S  
REIMAGINED CONGO

NARRATIVES  
VOX'S ALTERNATIVE  
ART HISTORIES





## RACHEL KNEEBONE

BROOKLYN, NY

A wave of controversy spread through the art world the last time the British invaded the Brooklyn Museum. *Sensation*, 1999, a showcase of Charles Saatchi's Young British Artists, including Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Sarah Lucas, was lambasted in the press and labeled "sick stuff" by then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The exhibition was deemed vulgar, an insult to taste, yet in keeping with a new generation of artists in the post-postmodern era trying to find their own niche in the shock aesthetic.

Now the English Rachel Kneebone, well over a decade later, has restored relations with our neighbors across the pond in her first major solo museum exhibition, *Regarding Rodin* [January 27–August 12, 2012]. Her work is much more sedate in aesthetic and concept, and caters to the taste of any highbrow art connoisseur by engaging the canon of Western art in a smart, clever way.

Kneebone chose fifteen of Auguste Rodin's maquettes from the museum's extensive collection to accompany her own work so as to explore their commonalities and differences—from their shared interest in the representation of death and ecstasy to their varying approaches to materials and processes. Her channeling of Rodin is neither parody nor imitation, but genuine admiration for his complex and turbulent compositions. The torsos of Kneebone's figures are deformed or even absent; their limbs intertwined with flowers, foliage, and biomorphic forms in surreal vignettes. She sculpts with porcelain, using a kiln rather than a cast, and her pieces, glazed plain white, are ever so delicate standing next to Rodin's heavy bronzes. The use of porcelain goes beyond the terms of craftwork. The works are more than just pretty things; they are a celebration of the sculptural medium. The purity of her surfaces brings to mind the Venus de Milo or the Winged Victory of Samothrace. Cracks, however, run across the sculptures to make each feel even more breakable and fragile.

Both artists were inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Rodin's masterpiece *The Gates of Hell*, 1880–1917, as

well as the centerpiece of this exhibition, Kneebone's *The Descent*, 2008, the artist's largest work to date. The porcelain sculpture is an 11½ by 5-foot cauldron filled with hundreds of tiny human forms falling into a seemingly bottomless pit. The assemblage of twisting and deformed figures is a hedonistic orgy of displaced legs and torsos. The heads are gone, replaced by elongated shapes resembling squids or flaccid penises. Kneebone's tangled masses, unlike contemporaries Jake and Dinos Chapman, are sensual and playfully suggestive. On the surface, the mutated forms could well belong in a grandmother's china cabinet atop a doily, but their unrelenting physical energy would swiftly knock them off any such musty perch.

Catherine Morris, the curator of *Regarding Rodin*, suggests that Kneebone takes on Rodin's work and "feminizes it." But this feminizing is not shackled to the reductionist reading of gender and sexuality of, for example, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79, which is on display in an adjacent gallery. Instead what we see is a new brand of feminist engagement that forcefully inserts itself into the art historical canon. In these kinetic piles of limbs the artist uncovers "a psychosexual formation of the individual," as Morris suggests, by invoking a metaphorical reading that alludes to "the hole, or the absence of the phallus, that defines womankind in Freudian thought and to the biblical lump of earth that gave birth to Adam." Simply put, the work teeters between feminist commentary and sexual delirium.

—Harry J Weil

## JOACHIM KOESTER

CAMBRIDGE, MA

It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate setting for Joachim Koester's first major US exhibition than the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Just as this institution is positioned at the forefront of scientific inquiry, Koester's work pushes the limits of human knowledge. In *Joachim Koester: To navigate, in a genuine way, in the unknown...* [May 10–July 8, 2012], curator João Ribas brings together a selection of the Danish-born artist's photographs, films, and texts. The concrete nature of these media is countered by his imagery, which frequently suggests the mystical and occult. By combining an objective approach with irrational narratives, Koester's work reveals how experimentation with new modes of perception can generate alternative bodies of knowledge.

In *The Kant Walks*, 2003–2005, for example, the artist retraces and photographs Immanuel Kant's daily walks through Königsberg. Kant's original route is obscured by the historic city's many layers of construction, so Koester can never be certain whether he is following in Kant's footsteps. Despite his deliberately documentary aesthetic, Koester's moody palette and attention to textured surfaces infuse his photographs with visual appeal. Additionally, the images' icy tones echo the cool tint of the salvaged boards that partition the gallery space and cover its window. The weathered wood transforms the gallery into a neglected site, similar to the ruins featured in Koester's films and photographs.

In *The Kant Walks*, it is difficult to tell where Koester's journey began and ended. This is also true of his other works, which likewise tell stories without using a narrative arc. *Morning of the Magicians*, 2005, is a series of photographs chronicling the abandoned Abbey of Thelema formerly inhabited by Aleister Crowley's cult. However, Koester's thorough visual documentation of this site intentionally fails to provide a coherent reconstruction of the locale's history. By simply presenting viewers with a sequence of evocative fragments, Koester questions the possibility of reconstructing factual, unitary narratives, as well as the authority of film and

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Rachel Kneebone, *When I doubt I exist again*, 2009, porcelain, 21 x 12 x 19 inches (© The artist; courtesy of the collection of the artist and White Cube, London; photo: Todd-White Art Photography, courtesy White Cube); Joachim Koester, still from *Tarantism*, 2007, 16mm black-and-white film (courtesy the artist and MIT List Visual Arts Center)



### DISOBEDIENCE: AN ONGOING VIDEO ARCHIVE CAMBRIDGE, MA

photography to communicate such accounts. More importantly, the very subjects that his art seeks to unearth—a philosopher's private routine, a countercultural commune, and a magical dance—are at odds with mainstream scientific modes of understanding the world. Herein lies the transgressive tension between objective and subjective knowledge that is central to Koester's oeuvre.

Koester continues to explore irrationality: yet although previous series such as *The Kant Walks* and *Morning of the Magicians* consider how personal subjectivities are manifested in specific sites, recent films such as *Tarantism*, 2007, shift to explore embodiment itself. This silent, black-and-white film captures actors' frenzied gestures as they reenact an ancient dance believed to cure tarantula bites. By reviving this ritual, Koester questions whether their impulsive choreography is simply sensual, or capable of effecting higher transformation.

Ribas adds a final layer to this discourse through his own curatorial vision. By carefully limiting his selections he allows each piece to breathe in what could easily have been an overly dense, esoteric exhibition. Ribas lets the artist speak for himself by displaying Koester's writings prominently in the gallery and distributing lengthy packets of his statements to visitors. In these texts, Koester often describes his own encounters with his subjects. While recounting his rediscovery of the Abbey of Thelema, he draws an analogy between the forgotten dwelling and Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970. On the surface, both artists seem preoccupied with the dissolution of structures through the process of entropy. However, it appears that what ultimately interests Koester could be seen as entropy in reverse: in Joachim Koester's art, the ideas and monuments of the past are perpetually revealed and reanimated.

—Sarah Parrish

Defying both common sense and horticultural science, television sets grew alongside herbs and plants in earth beds in MIT's Media Lab Complex Building's main atrium. *Disobedience: An Ongoing Video Archive* [December 9, 2011–April 16, 2012] was a veritable technological cabbage patch whose main theme was about social behaviors that flout norms. With pun intended, the grassroots narratives recounted here shot up to be heard above the social canopy.

The exhibition began with Italy's revolutionary politics during the 1970s, a decade of violence, which has come to be known as the *Anni di piombo*, in which mass demonstrations and social unrest challenged the state's aggressive military policies. The works exhibited here are seldom seen in North America, such as Alberto Grifi's fictionalized documentary from 1978, *The Psychiatric Videopolice Against the Self-Styled Groups of Militant Madness*. In this work, Grifi, a pioneer of Italian underground cinema, intricately weaves together documentary footage from heated debates at an anti-psychiatry conference in Milan in 1977 with a fictional narrative. The fantastical political story depicts how the state, after having discovered the drug "Normalina," transforms all citizens into successful, white-collar employees and model workers beholden to an addiction only the government can feed. However, a botched batch of the drug produces a clandestine group of dissidents who are nearly caught by the police when—all of a sudden—the main character wakes up; it was all a dream. This absurd plot delivers a sharp satire of the repressive measures of individual creativity and expression in Italy at the time.

Fittingly, the theoretical underpinning of the entire exhibition was the radical leftist Italian movement *Autonomia*. During the 1970s, Italian intellectuals-cum-activists conceived of an autonomous sphere of activity that would usurp political power from the central government. The autonomists saw Italy's transformation into a neoliberal, post-Fordist society as undermining the principles of the welfare state. Finding enterprising ways to

create an alternative welfare society, they conceived of ways to elude the imperatives of capitalist production through a so-called refusal to participate. For example, they fabricated their own train tickets to avoid supporting the centrally controlled transportation department.

This concise, well edited show—a collaboration between the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology and the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano—flew quickly through the decades and across the globe. From Italy we moved to the anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and the G8 protest in Heiligendamm in 2007. Oliver Ressler's *What Would It Mean to Win?*, 2008, was filmed at the G8 summit blockades and consists of documentary footage, interviews, and animated sequences. Almost ten years after mass demonstrations in Seattle, Ressler explores the impact on contemporary politics and considers the question what would it mean to overturn the hegemonic order? Ressler shows an effect of globalization is that a new mobile and heterogeneous international community has come together to voice its discontent.

The exhibition's central conceit was that artists are agents of cultural change, partisan fighters against new technologies deployed by the state and modern corporations for controlling fundamental aspects of life. Reacting to this new type of power outlined by Michel Foucault in his writings on biopolitics, artists offered "bioresistance." The collective Critical Art Ensemble, founded in New York in 1987, for example, explored the theoretical threat of biochemical weapons. On display was *Germ of Deception*, 2005, in which the group addresses the bacteriological experiments carried out in the United States. Their investigation reproduces the conditions of one such experiment carried out in 1946, when a branch of the United States military charged with biological research released the bacterium *Serratia marcescens* (a harmless anthrax simulant) into the air ducts at the Pentagon. The resulting contamination prompted the Pentagon immediately to invest in a biological weapons program. The collective's laboratory-

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Joachim Koester, *The Kant Walks*, #5, 2003, c-print (courtesy the artist and MIT List Visual Arts Center); exhibition view of *Disobedience: An Ongoing Video Archive*, 2011 (photo: John Kennard © 2011)