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«Contradictory Statements»: Michèle Graf and Selina Grüter at Fri Art

Programming the Performance: A Contradictory Proposition

Nicolas Brulhart

Those who think of contemporary art as a cultural activity tend to rely on performance to bring a degree of variation to the exhibition format. Given its nature as an event, performance can lend a program a rhythm. *Contradictory Statements*, Michèle Graf and Selina Grüter's proposition for Fri Art, involved a series of appropriative strategies as well as a method of what you could call programming performance. In doing so, it deviated from the prevailing tendency, which establishes a dialectical opposition between performance and exhibition – in much the same way that the living oppose death.

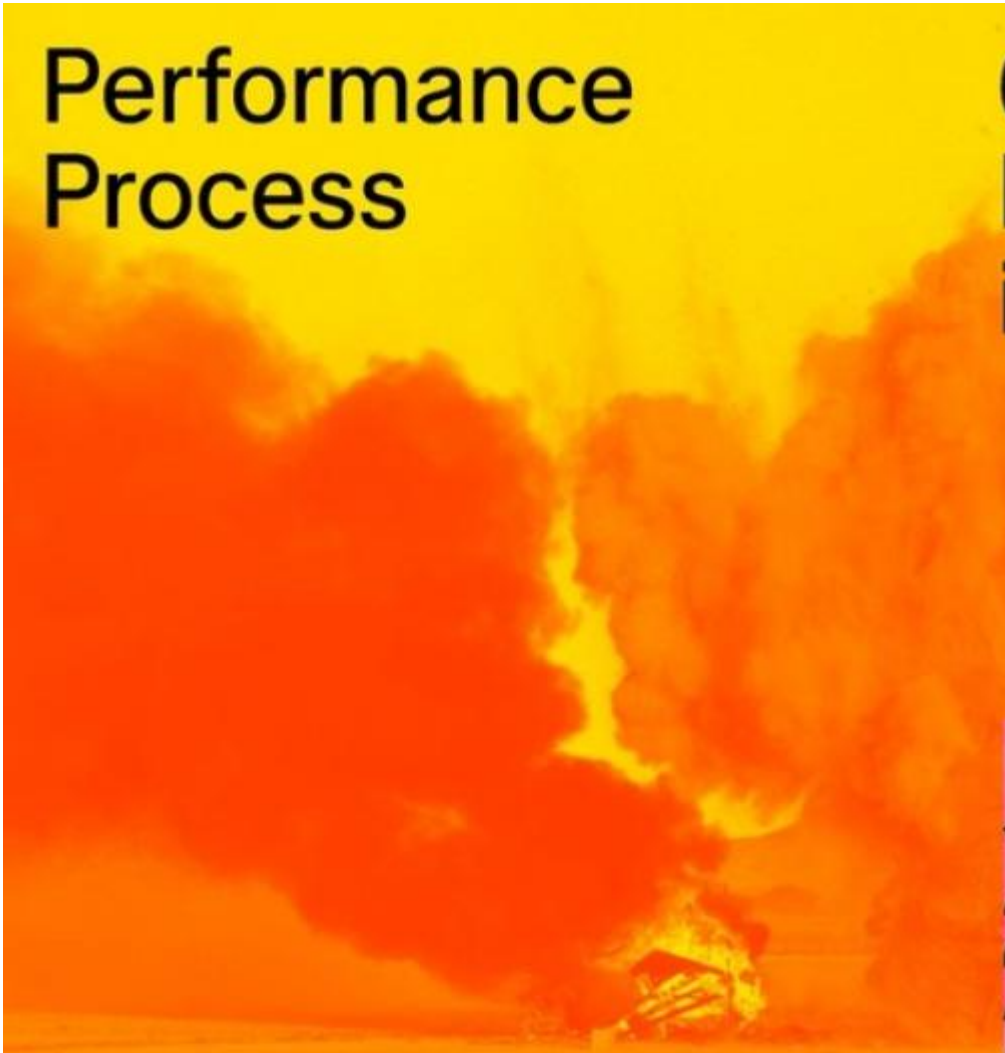

in fact, the notion of an audience does not sit well with us,
and maybe we should start avoiding the mystifying term 'performance'
because it reframes the space of concrete action as a stage,
preparing the viewer too much and over-determining experience as
art.

Contradictory Statements: Exhibiting Performance?

Performance art's origins are historically bound to the period of the neo-avantgarde. That legacy is generally understood as having emerged to subvert the articulation of those bygone mediums that maintained the bourgeois ideology of art. But by taking up residence in the field of contemporary art, performance allowed its transgressive character to be suspended by being rendered public. The medium of performance is itself contradictory. For, that which comes to legitimate performance, through the simple act of naming it, also robs it of its disruptive character. Simply put, it's the mediation of performance that poses a problem.

Performance creates a separation between activity as presence and its documentation as a kind of trace. This conception of performance naturalizes real time and reifies its history. Through the repetition of performative acts, which are always different, it creates a dialectical tension – between the original action, which the discipline never ceases to chase after, and an institutionalization that doesn't do it justice. *Contradictory Statements* cuts to the heart of this problem so as to respond both to performance's character as an event and to its historicization. Faced with the naturalized time of the activity, it reintroduces a degree of negativity to performance within the art context. Faced with historicization, it reframes performance in terms of a more general investigation of the performative.[1]

Performance Process



Eine Kooperation des Museum Tinguely, der Kaserne Basel und der Kunsthalle Basel, in Partnerschaft mit dem Centre culturel suisse Paris

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Poster for *Performance Process*, Kaserne Basel / Kunsthalle Basel / Museum Tinguely, 2017

Contradictory Statements takes its title from a 1979 video by American artist John Miller, an early work by a central figure within the history of postconceptual art. This unusual video recording, made by filming into a mirror – which gives a spectral quality to the protagonists – was created by the artist while he was still a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, before he went to CalArts. It recently resurfaced in the form of a digital copy of the original videotape now accessible on YouTube. *Contradictory Statements* is thus not an original creation, nor a new creation; rather, it follows from an existing proposition. It's based on a work that evokes a dichotomy of too early/too late: too early in the career of a young artist; too late for the historical canon of video art. This spectral quality allows us to measure a historical distance. Contrary to the timely encounter between the arrival of video technology and the development of performances that exploited the new possibilities of feedback, *Contradictory Statements* avoids recognition based on an image. It highlights a historical difference – between the potential that feedback possesses and the flux of endlessly refreshing digital images – in relation to which contemporary subjectivities are produced and articulated.



Screenshot of John Miller, *Contradictory Statements*, 1977. Link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIk9fEudX0c

In the exhibition space, six performers stood on a platform raised a few centimeters off the ground. This non-spectacular construction allowed visitors to move around the stage. Partially integrated into this platform, as a kind of extension of it, was a table with a laptop connected to a video projector. It allowed someone to take the minutes of the performance. By using a computer to take what was said during the performance and transform it into text, the work obliterated the presence of the bodies. The text itself was projected onto the walls surrounding the piece. The video projector, which is normally used for moving images, thus made the writing process visible, rather than serving the visual. A distance away, we found another, similar setup. It was used for the nearly instantaneous translation of the original, written version from German into French. A third person, absent from the site of the action, was responsible for the translation into English. The text is available on the art center's website in these three languages. Anyone who wanted to follow the progression of the various performances was free to do so online. The summaries are archived on the site, so they can be

reread (http://www.fri-art.ch/fr/expositions/contradictory-statements). Besides a few official photographs, the performance resisted photo documentation as well as the wish to relate the presence of bodies in action. The documentation of the piece, which tends to be poor or minor, is thus closer to a written record.

4 contradictory office



Michèle Graf & Selina Grüter, *Contradictory Statements*, 2018. Courtesy Fri Art. Photo: Gina Folly

The two artists participated in each of the performances, which took place three times a day during the run of the exhibition. Each of the performances was scheduled and announced in advance. At all other times, the scene remained unoccupied, awaiting the action. It constituted a minimalist apparatus in the service of a defined form of recording information, a recording device that took after the judiciary more than after broadcast. Each performance began with a performative statement: «In this piece, each person will contradict the person who came before him [sic].» Once the sentence was uttered, each participant was thrown into the game of producing contradictory statements, which took the form of a continuous conversation. The duration of the performance varied depending on how quickly those on stage were able to respond. It was kind of like a game of logic, a form of intellectual production, in which the mind was tested, put to the test. In this way, the time of the performance primarily consisted of the time involved in reflection.

Instead of being the pretext for a performance with an extended duration, the exhibition articulated the performance through automated forms of programming and recording. Thus, both before and after someone spoke, a device channeled the bodies and their voices. The performative act was designated as an act of producing statements. And that act was located between the moment that preceded and conditioned it, on the one hand, and the moment in which it was written down, in which it left behind a trace. Within this strictly defined course of events, one element maintained a high degree of contingency: the statements produced by the bodies present on stage. By exposing the various conditions and the process of recording, the artists refused the articulation of the performance via an apparatus of spectacularization – whether a moving image or a series of photographs, both of which were common choices in the past. *Contradictory Statements* stood in opposition to the use of media to represent performance; in opposition to an articulation of the visible with the legible that strives to create the impression of pure presence.[2]

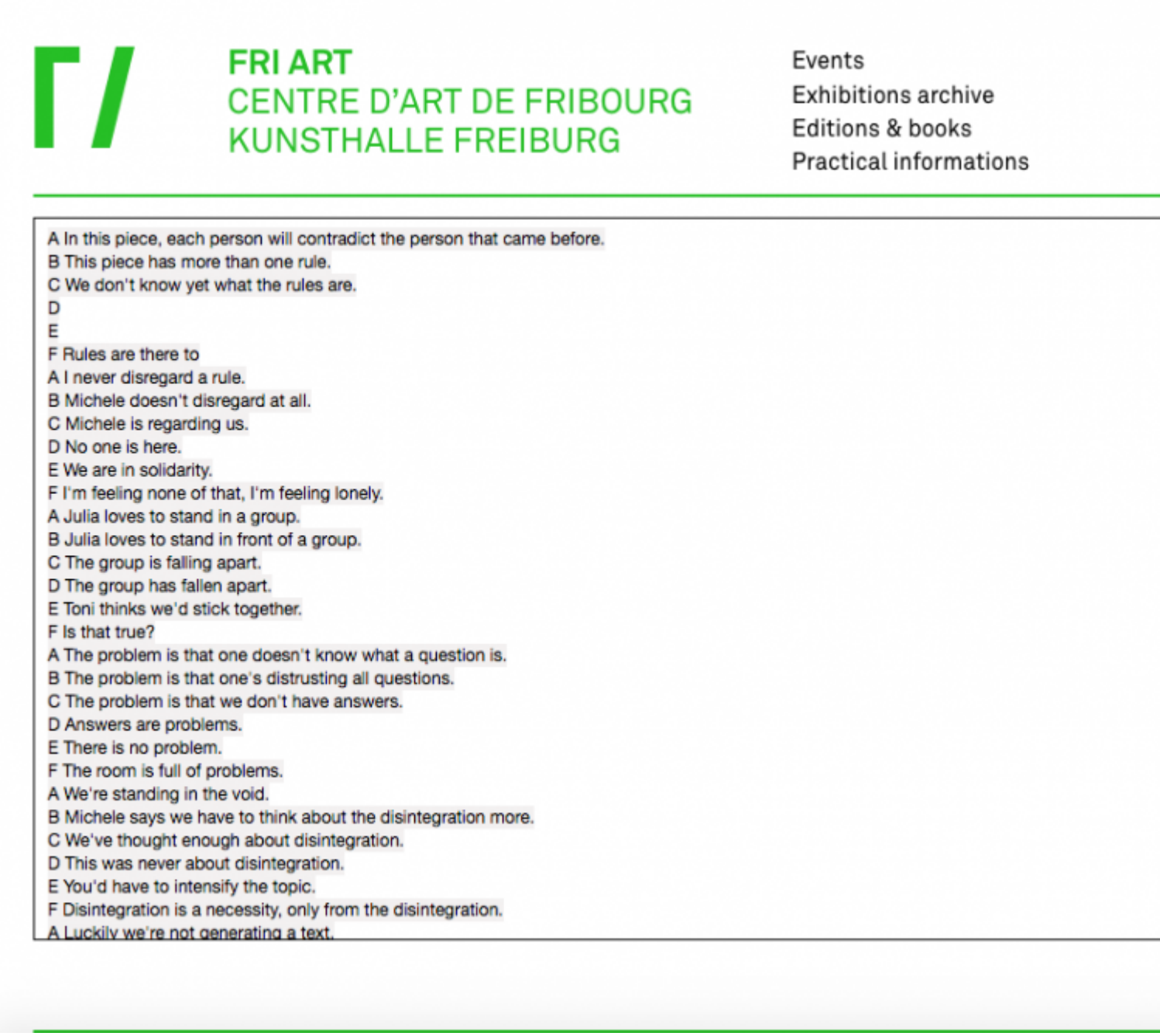
Michele Graf and Selina Grüter
Contradictory Statements

4 to 17 March 2018
Opening on Saturday 3 March 20

Performing on

Saturday	3	March	2018	at 5pm
Sunday	4	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Wednesday	7	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Thursday	8	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Friday	9	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Saturday	10	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Sunday	11	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Wednesday	14	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Thursday	15	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Friday	16	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm
Saturday	17	March	2018	at 1pm, 3pm

Invitation card for the exhibition Michèle Graf & Selina Grüter, *Contradictory Statements*, Fri Art, 2018



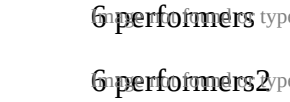
Transcript of the performance, screenshot of Fri Art's website (www.fri-art.ch)

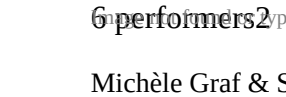
Performative Language and Programming

The performers' statements followed a more or less sustained rhythm. The successive contradictions dealt with the semantic contents of a phrase or their semiotic significance. The sequences that played out could also be quite commonplace: refusing to play the game, silence following a dead end, a mistake. The sequences could be perfectly logical, or they could be absurd. The statements were often declarative in nature. They oscillated between a referential function and a metalinguistic function. Thus the statements were sometimes contradictory only in a loose sense of the word, which offered the participants a margin of error. You could appreciate the humor, the traps that some people laid for whoever spoke after them, or the statements that revived an exercise that seemed like it'd gotten off to a bad start. The exercises were comparable, and they were more or less successful. So the performance lent itself to being judged in terms of quality. But the exercise also represented a provocation to the very same impulse: the statements' imperfections amounted to scoffing at a

certain conception of the performative. The inability of thoughts to be carried out frustrated the functionalist and rationalist conception of thought as such – in other words, the performance of it.[3] The performers found themselves in a situation where they were compelled to perform, to think. But their occasional inability to do so conveyed to the public a sense of collapse. In defiance of the compulsion to generate performative thought, the work offered non-operative thought. Thought, in the negative, came to represent a mode of production that differs from (and is based on) both programming and a script. By presenting us with the programming of performance, the exhibition *Contradictory Statements* revealed how the conditions for generating statements depends on an apparatus of recording, programming, and writing.

Following the emergence of information technology, language – the model of thought par excellence – increasingly came to mimic the model of programming. In doing so, it abandoned the act of thought as pure difference without content. Contradictory Statements reconnects the emergence of performance as an artistic discipline with the emergence of cognitive capitalism. The progress achieved through cybernetics and its influence on new technologies amounts to a new, finite modeling of thought as a program. Within a society of control, the concept of performance is internalized by the individual and constituted as a form of subjectification. The performative is disciplinary in that it can set the soul to work,[4] in ways ranging from extraction, to quantification, to capitalizing on the power of intellectual labor. This relation to what can be thought cannot prevent us from making a detour via the conditions of contemporary theory as well as certain tendencies that hold bearing over a quasi-tautological use of the notion of performativity. All too often, a circular dialectic assigns performance to production in a kind of vicious cycle. This equation leaves out an excess, or a lack, which occurs through the insistence of thought as difference and as inadequacy. In Contradictory Statements, whatever happens to the individual also has an impact on the collective. Intersubjectivity exists to the same degree as a sequence of shaky, non-functional propositions. Thus, the horizon for participation is not the communication between individuals, but the creation of rifts within a work that never ceases to change.





Michèle Graf & Selina Grüter, *Contradictory Statements*, 2018. Courtesy Fri Art. Photo: Gina Folly

Before and After: Programming the Performance

The first artworks that Michèle Graf and Selina Grüter made together play with the possibilities of computer programming. There's nothing trivial about this. The artists went from programming code to programming performances. In *Contradictory Statements*, the performance itself was programmed. The script for the actions involved was already available, in its entirety, before the performance began. It indicated the timing, the order in which things would be said. It revealed that the performance consisted of an empty structure waiting to be fleshed out. If we compare this way of using a script with historical examples, we might gain some perspective on it: for example, the systems of notation and composition in post-Cagean music, minimalist dance, Happenings, the instructions in Fluxus performances, or Conceptual artworks using language.[5] During the transitional period of the 1960s, descriptions, instructions, and language games were often used as a way to pose a vertiginous question regarding performance: specifically, the problematic articulation of language and of the event. The performativity of language and the way in which language becomes legible entered into dialogue with one another, while the physical location of the work got lost between virtual possibilities and materialization in multiple forms. Text was sometimes used to describe works consisting of actions; it could also function as an abstract

partition later realized by the event; or it could be like the opening credits of a film, a version of the work that's at once an occurrence and its definition.

The title *Contradictory Statements* possesses a clever reflexivity in relation to the interplay of language and action. It describes the performative act that will take place, but it also refers to language as an event or as a paradoxical, performative act. The proposition of Contradictory Statements is an oxymoron that is at once paradoxical, self-referential, and performative. It does what it says it will, but in doing so, it contradicts itself. It acts like an ideal model that the specifics of the performance can't help but to perform and to flee at the same time. This reflexive quality endows the work with a generic character. As a result, the work is able to address itself to performance in general, as a discipline, while also being an example of it.

The idea of the statement has historical connotations. It derives its affirmative character from the manifestos delivered in public space – that is to say, they share a certain conception of action. But it reflects an updated version of it, one adapted to the destiny inherent to the professionalized, contemporary art system. The statement emerged within the field of contemporary art as certain strategies were borrowed from marketing and branding.[6] Some Conceptual artists used these strategies as a metalanguage for positioning reading within their works: Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968) («The idea is the machine that makes the art.») and Lawrence Wiener's *Declaration of Intent* (1968) («1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built.») are two canonical examples. These artists were also engaged with a critique of presence like that which formatted the discourse on minimalism, along with the positivism of analytic philosophy and its linguistic turn: Ian Wilson, *There is a Discussion* (1972); Mel Bochner, *Language is Not Transparent* (1969). This critique of language as information also operated based on witticisms, paradox, whether internal to language or present in the relationship between text and image: Luis Camnitzer, *This is a Mirror, You are a Written Sentence* (1968); John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971); Bas Jan Ader, *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1971). Recording was another way that scripts were used to deconstruct activity: John Cage, *4'33”* (1952); Christine Kozlov, *Information: No Theory* (1970); Bruce Nauman, *Audio-Video Underground Chamber* (1972–1974); David Lamelas, *Time as Activity* (1969–2017).



Christine Kozlov, *Information: No Theory,* 1970

Contradictory Statements follows in this legacy of the critique of communication, which inquires about the way in which technology participates in and modifies the conditions of language. The references that the work makes to these models is strategic. These connections allow a comparison that questions the institutionalization of culture. The practices in that era reacted to the synthesis brought about by electronic media (the absorption of bodies, the externalization of faculties of the spirit); these reactions took the form of dematerialization and the deskilling of artistic practice, and they were underpinned by the discourses on the death of the author and anti-subjectivity. But the question regarding the subject was posed in a different way. Cybernetic infrastructure had not yet been deployed, and it had not yet foreseen the spread of immaterial labor. Contradictory Statements took thought as its subject, but it is not about the production of the impersonal, the universal, or desubjectification. Rather, it is about producing thought as difference in the face of performance as production.

0 Statement

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Michèle Graf & Selina Grüter, *Contradictory Statements*, 2018. Courtesy Fri Art. Photo: Gina Folly

The contemporary digital condition is able to maintain, for the subject, the illusion that production is necessary. It conditions the subject to perform. By integrating and managing the modularization of temporalities, it establishes a pathological relationship with production. Performance's relation to temporality manifests this pathological schizophrenia regarding immaterial labor. The re-performance of a historical work, now no longer understood as a kind of emergence, but rather as a medium in itself, reintegrates a form of negativity in terms of programming the time involved in activity. In this exhibition, the collective participated in and underwent a learning process in terms of production, specifically one that refused to integrate performance into language as a form of communication. In so doing, the exhibition denounced the disciplinary conditions of democratic egalitarianism.

A poster printed on aluminum and hung in the second room, at the back of the exhibition space, wasn't visible until later. It refers to the use of definitions in Conceptual art and, notably, to the aesthetic of Joseph Kosuth. This alternate statement further clarified the project's denunciation of the problematic relationship between performance and public space.

Within a consensual public sphere, which the work of culture tends to believe in, performance has become too operational. To program performance is to distill a subtle form of negativity, one which addresses the conditions under which intellectual labor is produced today as well as its extraction and digital interfaces' promotion of it. If *Contradictory Statements* operates according to our digital condition, it does to in order to suggest an escape, a kind of deviation opposed to the normalization of behaviors and their progressive internalization. The project of a semiotic synthesis in terms of digital infrastructure will lead to a commodification of the relation between itself and collective intelligence. A critique of it, however, will proceed via the exploration and deployment of strategic forms of non-operative thought.[7]

Translation: John Beeson

[1] See: Sven Lütticken, «General Performance», in *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).
[2] Jacques Derrida, «Signature événement contexte», in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972).
[3] See: Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion – Technologie – Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Hélio Oiticica und Yvonne Rainer* (Berlin: b_books, 2007).
[4] See: Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

[5] See: Liz Kotz, «Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score», in *October* 95 (Winter 2001), pp. 54–89.
[6] See: Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
[7] *Poor Man's Expression: Technology, Experimental Film, Conceptual Art*, ed. by Martin Ebner and Florian Zeyfang (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

NICOLAS BRULHART

Nicolas Brulhart is art historian and curator. In 2013, together with the artist Lauris Paulus, he founded the artspace WallRiss in Fribourg. Since 2014, he develops the archives project of the Kunsthalle Bern.He is currently running the artspace Forde in Geneva together with Sylvain Menétrey.