

Anselm Franke  
**Across the  
Rationalist Veil**

e-flux journal #8 — september 2009 Anselm Franke  
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Many recent works of art hold undoubtedly close ties to anthropology, resembling reverse ethnography or neo-ethnography, taking the form of research that embraces anthropology's sociological methods, adopting documentary techniques or borrowing from such genres as the travelogue. Anthropology, on the other hand, is currently engaged in renewed debates over the discipline's roots as reflected in its contemporary "politics." These controversies, involving politics, ethics (both disciplinary and individual), and image strategies, were sparked by the death of "human terrain" researchers in Afghanistan – anthropologists embedded with the U.S. military to help tacticians in the field navigate local customs and codes.<sup>1</sup> Claiming not to militarize anthropology but to anthropologize forms of violence, these practitioners have eroded a border that, given the colonial roots of the discipline, was before only notionally in place.

This is the first in a series of articles concerned with a specific site of convergence between contemporary anthropology and contemporary artistic practice, namely, their concern for boundaries, whether territorial, epistemological or conceptual; and of which the question of collaboration and entanglement of forms of knowledge production (and operation) is only one aspect. Certainly, many works of art that appropriate elements of anthropology are doing so in awareness of the history of the discipline, but many also assume its problems. Anthropologists, on the other hand, as Hal Foster observed some time ago, often look with a certain envy at artists, and the capacity of aesthetic strategies to relate to, and particularly to transgress, boundaries.<sup>2</sup> But Foster's critique remains within the representational logic of the self/other dichotomy, and consequently he is concerned with the problematic of identification and the question of either "too much" or "too little" distance. Much of the discussion since has remained within these parameters, leaving aside the historical nature of aesthetic transgression, that is, the way modern boundaries are established as well as crossed through the use of images and their placement within artistic strategies.

Which borders, however? And how does transgression affect them? These questions are of some urgency, particularly with regard to art that we perceive to be "politically engaged." The transgression of political boundaries has largely been perceived as a form of negation, one that could effectively be used to build up an oppositional position. This approach to transgression could be termed "dialectic," since it mobilizes that which is excluded in a regime of inclusion and exclusion. But this mobilization must have as its prime target those



Jimmie Durham, *Xitle and Spirit*, 2007. Volcanic stone on automobile, 200 x 350 x 160 cm.

representations that are employed to legitimize such exclusions.

There are two familiar problems with the “dialectic” approach. One is that, when taken to be an exception, the critique often retains, or even confirms, the paradigms on which the original law or boundary is modeled. The other problem is that the strategy applies only to borders modeled on dichotomies (such as linguistic binaries) that are at least theoretically symmetrical, constituted by a *de jure* symmetry that can therefore be politically claimed where a *de facto* asymmetry rules. This applies to the borders of the modern disciplinary regime, such as the nation state and its institutions, or to gender division, to name but a few. The “modulated” boundaries in the “society of control,” however, pose a different challenge, for not only do they incorporate plurality effectively, they are scattered, evasive, and themselves transgressive, mobilizing the power of images by shifting the static logic of representation to the dynamic and the performative.<sup>3</sup>

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an overwhelming amount of the critical engagement with modernity and modernism in the past decades has questioned the conceptual separations on which modernity is modeled, separations which constitute modernity’s sources of authority. If we are, as Bruno Latour claims, no longer able to be modern and yet not able to be anything else (which also characterizes much of the situation in the arts), this is certainly connected to the erosion of the power of the first type of borders, those modeled on more or less static conceptual dichotomies.<sup>4</sup> With regard to the technologies of power they have enabled, however, the “rationality” of these dichotomies so crucial for the self-understanding of modernity has always had a mythical side to it, in which the first type of border division is always already connected to the second. This concerns the original separation on which any rational dichotomy must be built, based on a paradoxical inclusion of that which it excludes, thus performing a dialectical twist or proper reversal, which the work of rationalization must later mask in a magical sleight of hand.

This is the prevailing question in the context of the political debates on the “exception as rule.”<sup>5</sup> However, it is less the question of sovereignty than the “sleight of hand” that interests me here, as this is what potentially has the furthest-reaching consequences for the role aesthetics holds in both transgressing and constituting the modern border-space. This sleight of hand is what I wish to discuss here under the guise of the “rationalist veil.” Any sleight of hand, as is well known, relies on the complicity of its audience; the “rationalist veil,” as the belief in the “rationality” of modern power as modern myth, is what constitutes this complicity. It places rationality always already on the side of the moderns, rendering its power a self-fulfilling prophecy – a necessity exempt from any qualification beyond just what is rational and what is not. If we are no longer modern, but still unable to be anything else, it is perhaps because the residual “rationalist veil” constitutes a form of continuity that binds the present to the modern past.

In what follows, I turn to the work of anthropologists Michael Taussig, Johannes Fabian, and later, Bruno Latour, to sound out this proposition. These authors prove especially helpful because of the particular ways they relate to modernity against the backdrop of struggles within their own field(s), of imperialism and colonial heritage, and of their concern for how conceptual dichotomies have become actual boundaries. Their work touches upon aesthetic questions in different ways, directly and indirectly, but even where the place of aesthetics is left almost entirely unacknowledged, as in the



Sol LeWitt, *Incomplete Open Cube*, 1974, baked enamel on aluminum.

### A Sleight of Hand

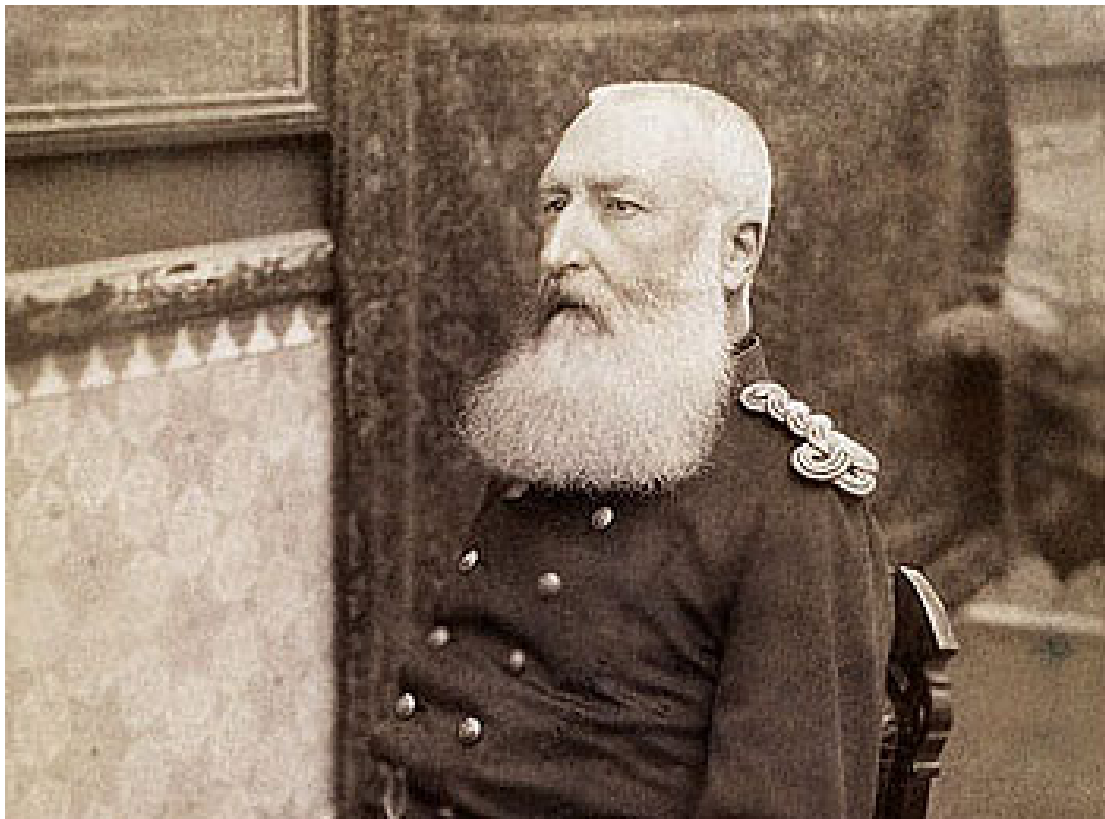
An understanding of the operational modes of both types of borders – borders modeled on theoretically symmetrical dichotomies, and “modulated” boundaries – depends on a grasp of their historical genealogy. Across several fields,

work of Bruno Latour, there is much ground offered for a historically grounded discussion of aesthetic strategies in the modern border topography, particularly with regard to its paradoxical reversals.

What I wish to suggest with the term “rationalist veil,” however, is not merely another gesture in the great machine of critique, an unmasking of the rational as really irrational, for example, or an embrace of the irrational that positions it against modern rationality. The point is to sound out historical layers within the modern rationale – the emancipatory promise entailed in the triumph of reason over superstition and the “irrationality” of religious violence – in an examination of both its rationalizing of what it rendered irrational in the first place, and its production of that which is exempt from rational scrutiny *without* being a danger to the rational order, on which the order in fact relies. The point is to locate the smooth shifts and displacements between such seemingly distinct, even irreconcilable categories. The “rationalist veil” is a privileged site of a particular modern practice aimed at creating continuity, blending systemic knowledge, belief, and the power of imagery.

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Insofar as art has developed a political consciousness vis-à-vis these problematics, it has struggled with its place and participation in the logic of boundaries. Modern art, for instance, variously problematizes the line of distinction between the rational and irrational; through negation, affirmation, and dialectic exposures, it participates in the common conceptions of what constitutes the rational and the irrational. Alongside the apparent advocacy of the rational in art (e.g., the iconoclasm of modern architecture), there was equally a mobilization of irrationality in movements as diverse as Romanticism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Primitivism, and Art Brut. Appearances notwithstanding, those strands of modern art that embraced rationality for their own distinct purposes also, upon closer investigation, reveal an essentially “irrational” core. Rosalind Krauss’ book *The Optical Unconscious*, to give just one example, makes such a case for High Modernism.<sup>6</sup> In recent exhibition-making and critique, one often encounters Sol LeWitt’s statement that “conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.” Suggesting a possible reconciliation between the rational and irrational, the notion seems to appeal to contemporary artists, in particular to those



contributing to a renewed interest in the obscure and the occult, for whom this reconciliation is a formal loophole through which one can remain formally agreeable without resorting to subjective mythology.

### Primitivism

A paradigmatic case is the “Primitivism” debate that had such a profound impact on the course of recent art history following the critique of the “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art” exhibition at MoMA in 1984. It is worth recalling how influential that exhibition became through the criticism it sparked. It informed the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1989, where the criticism was renewed and sharpened, and without which neither documenta X nor documenta 11 would have been possible in their scope. The debate evolving around the MoMA exhibition exposed the very category of the “primitive” as a Western fantasy and master narrative projected onto its colonial others firmly situated in a spatial and temporal outside. The exhibition took place at a time when this category could no longer pass uncontested. In the preceding decade, art had increasingly taken its cue from theoretical attacks on modernity’s system of imaginary oppositions. The notorious dualisms had already been under attack. Feminism, queer studies, and postcolonial theory, among others, drew attention to just how these (often linguistically rooted) dualisms resulted in confining border regimes. Whether it be children, the insane, “primitives,” the colonial other, women or gays, the differences monitored by the border regime and its respective institutions in each case fundamentally relied on inscribing and subsequently rationalizing the “irrational.” In a similar pattern of “inclusive exclusion,” the “primitive” was exposed as subjected to a dialectics that simultaneously split and locked the subject rendered “other” within a confined place.

In her book on cinema as modern magic, Rachel Moore makes the distinction between three kinds of primitivisms, with each corresponding to a different level in the modern border topography.<sup>7</sup> The first sees primitivism as a neutral term denoting a lack of sophistication, an “artlessness” which, in the hands of modern artists, also becomes an effect. The second refers to primitivism as the use of artifacts or the appropriation of forms from non-Western “native” people. In the third sense primitivism refers to the “repressed” of modernity. This is where irrationality develops a rationality of its own; nonetheless, it must stay symptomatic, as it is always a compensatory expression, a “displacement.” The third primitivism, however,

exceeds the aesthetic by far and instead refers to a persistent modern boundary in which the question of binary rationales is always already turned on its head. This is the Western mythology of savagery as a self-fulfilling prophecy, a “savage imagination” of repressed contents projected onto the “other” that not only legitimizes, but necessitates terror in building order on disorder. This primitivism played itself out on the colonial frontier. The colonial frontier is a site where the original separation of building order on disorder takes place. On the frontier, rationality thus acts through irrationality, in a paradoxical intertwinement of systematic arbitrariness, where power is the power to induce separation, physically and socially. The frontier exchanges means for ends, things for people, terror for law, but these exchanges happen in the name of people and the law.

While the three primitivisms listed above have been the subject of much work and debate, it has historically been difficult to get beyond the problem of “projection” in the case of the third. This is the limit established by the “dialectic” approach, except that here a simple dialectics gazes only into mirror images, into self-fulfilling mythologies, or into the “irrational.” Thus much work has dealt with the problem of “otherness.” However, it is precisely the frontier as the original separation and, thus, as boundary paradigm of modernity, that needs to be grasped aesthetically, if it is no longer the rationalist boundaries that are at stake, but their irrational underside. Not unlike the evasive boundaries of global capitalism today, the colonial frontier cannot be represented by taking one’s distance from it. It seems to draw any representation, any image, into its logic, thus reproducing itself. But if images hold such a privileged place in the “original separation,” what accounts for this history? Is there any history of the frontier in the arsenal of modern imagery? It is to be found in the modern understanding and positioning of images themselves, I suggest – but in order to dwell on this point, the frontier needs further attention.

### King Leopold’s Rationalist Veil

The first mass human-rights movement in the first years of the twentieth century makes for an interesting case. It was what today can be considered global in scale, and it involved not merely reports, but photographic evidence of crimes reproduced in widely circulating newspapers in both the industrialized world and in the colonies; thus was initiated a form of activism in which both the evidence and the effects of empathy produced by pictures of atrocities for the first time occupied a central place, thus mobilizing public opinion in novel

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ways, instituting the mediascape of modern democracies. I am referring to the protest movement against King Leopold's regime in his private colonial possession, the Congo Free State, where he had set up a forced-labor system for the extraction of the natural resources of the Congo, in particular rubber, necessary for, among other things, automobile and bicycle tires. The death toll associated with the rule of the Belgian King, "enthroned" at the infamous 1884 Berlin conference, is today estimated to have been between five and thirty million people.

The protest movement had its origin in the port of Antwerp, where a British then-clerk named Edward Morel confirmed the practice of slavery in the Congo based on trade records. The campaign against slavery led by Morel proved successful largely thanks to the eyewitness accounts of British diplomat Roger Casement, who had been sent to the Congo to assess the human rights situation, not least because the British government objected to Leopold's de facto trade monopoly. The Casement Report was delivered in 1904 and sparked a public outcry as well as petitions to Parliament that became instrumental in turning the Congo into a "normal" colony four years later, which was then the limit of the imaginable.

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In clarifying the wicked dialectics established by the "rationalist veil," Leopold and the activism of the Congo Reform Association are of particular interest for three reasons. The first concerns the veil of deception set up by Leopold himself, which, until Casement's report, had systematically spoiled attempts to reveal the truth of his corporate terror regime. Under the guise of the International African Association, ostensibly a scientific and philanthropic association, Leopold represented his Congo activity as a civilizing mission all the way up to the end. He was a gifted public relations manager. In the book that in 1998 ended the "Great Forgetting" concerning the Congo atrocities since it had become a "normal" colony, Adam Hochschild reports that there is no evidence of a single journalist, diplomat or even outright opponent ever leaving a personal audience with the King without becoming complicit in his veil of deceptions and lies.<sup>8</sup> That veil, however, was operative only because its rationale conformed with the practice and beliefs of the day; its real scandal was that it was private terror and profit, not the state, which then as today was the impersonal guarantor of reason and rationality.



Sol LeWitt, *Corner Piece No. 2*  
(from *Cube structures based on nine modules*), 1976. Painted wood, 43.3 x 43.3 x 43.3 in.



Caspar David Friedrich, *Mann und Frau den Mond betrachtend*, c. 1830-1835. Oil on canvas, 34 × 44 cm.

The second lesson to be drawn from Leopold's case concerns aesthetic consequences and responses to "the veil," and their historical resonance. In his groundbreaking 1987 study *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, anthropologist Michael Taussig examines the economy of terror and the colonial "space of death" in the Putumayo region in Colombia, where Casement was sent in 1906 after his engagement with the Congo, once again to report on atrocities connected to the rubber economy.<sup>9</sup> The civilizing order brought about by the original settlement of British rubber barons in the Putumayo is described by Taussig as

a society shrouded in an order so orderly that its chaos was far more intense than anything that had preceded it – a death space in the land of the living where torture's certain uncertainty fed the great machinery of the arbitrariness of power, power on the rampage – that great steaming morass of chaos that lies on the underside of order and without which order could not exist.<sup>10</sup>

Taussig calls on us to understand the quickly achieved hegemony of a small number of white Christians over the "*irracionales*" by thinking-through-terror, that is, through the "space of death where the Indian, African and white gave birth to a New World."<sup>11</sup> Taussig invokes a different aspect of what James Clifford famously has termed "ethnographic surrealism," namely, the long history and rich culture of the social imagination of the "space of death," in its Western genealogy the space of negativity, branded as underworld and evil, and the space of transformation and metamorphosis, too, the latter becoming the starting point for Taussig's examination of healing as that which mobilizes the dialectical imagery in the space of death.<sup>12</sup>

### The Business of Mimesis

Previously in the Congo, Casement had met Joseph Conrad, who had embarked on that infamous steamboat journey on the Congo river, on which *Heart of Darkness* was modeled. This "trip" into the reality of the "colonial unconscious" – "The horror! The horror!" – is used by Taussig to confront the problem of aesthetics, of perspective, of complicity in the rationale representing the brutality and irrationality of colonial reality that evades explanation. Casement, according to Taussig, in writing his reports, was torn between his own Anti-Imperialist views (based on his Irish Nationalism, for which he would later be hanged), and the obligation to comply with the

common sense of political economy that ruled in British Parliament, the rationality of business, which was the way to make sense of reality there, if there was any sense to be made of it at all. Just as in the famous case recalled by Jacques Rancière, also in this instance the politics of aesthetics found the patricians simply unable to understand what the plebeians in their uprising were exclaiming, until the latter had begun to imitate the former, in a mimetic appropriation that is also telling with regard to the limited resources in positions from which one can speak at all.<sup>13</sup>

To claim the rationality of business for this is unwittingly to claim *and sustain* an illusory rationality, obscuring our understanding of the way business can transform terror from a means into an end in itself. This sort of rationality is hallucinatory like the veil that Conrad and Casement faced earlier in the Congo, where . . . Conrad abandoned the realism practiced by Casement for a technique that worked through the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality.<sup>14</sup>

In order to be understood at all, Casement clothes his report in the rationale of business, for the reality of what he was reporting would otherwise not have been comprehensible. Through the language of business, a political stage is created, and the colonial subjects acquire a "voice" and enter the "picture" – at the price, however, of affirming the rationality that rendered them mute in the first place. The veil produces necessity in forging an impossible choice: the other option, for Casement, would have been merely to speak the language of that which was already rendered irrational, and British Parliament surely would have declared him mad.

Conrad, instead, embraces the veil, and exposes it from within. Taussig sees here "a twofold movement of interpretation in a combined action of reduction and revelation – the hermeneutics of suspicion and of revelation in an act of mythic subversion inspired by the mythology of imperialism itself."<sup>15</sup> *Heart of Darkness*, a cornerstone of modernist literature, to be sure, does not rationalize the border away, but leaves it in place. It accounts for the economy of projection and mimicry by which the colonists enact the very savagery that they impute to the natives. But is such a "twofold strategy," which brackets the twisted dialectics of framing *and* becoming what has first been established as "other" and properly "negative," capable of moving beyond the closed circuit of "projection," the modernist self-reflection of



modernity? Is it capable of conceiving of a different political stage? Taussig, while endorsing Conrad's aesthetics and its ambiguities, maintains that it was Casement's reports, not Conrad's semi-documentary fiction, which had forced political responses.

### Rational Imperialism

Another influential anthropologist who wrote about the problem of writing across the veil, also attempting to cope with its mythological dialectics of rationality, was Johannes Fabian. In *Out of Our Minds* Fabian examines the travelogues of Western explorers, as well as the anthropological practice of fieldwork premised on them, engaged in a re-reading of how the question of rationality, of rational detachment as opposed to sensual experience in particular, is posed therein.<sup>16</sup> The mythical image of the explorer is of a heroic figure "guided by self-denying missionary zeal and philanthropic compassion, as well as a taste for travel and adventure, often combined with scientific curiosity."<sup>17</sup> This was the image, too, that most explorers, often equipped with remarkable skills in self-marketing, were careful to present of themselves. Faith and reason, as well as political and economic imperatives, supposedly determined their encounters. However, as long as this determination is accepted, writes Fabian, the conclusions drawn from their accounts remain entirely predictable and inescapable.

In seeking a writing mode that contests the myth – capable of speaking of the conditions of anarchic irrationality, of ecstasy and outright delirium for which he finds much evidence beneath that mythological veil – without falling into Western rationality's self-fulfilling prophecy, he writes:

One strategy adopted in recent years to counteract that self-fulfilling prophecy is to accumulate evidence for resistance to conquest and to write about that. This is a necessary task, and much more needs to be done to carry it out. But what will such efforts show? That imperialism was weaker than the image it liked to project, or less organized, or less rational? . . . Even if we can point to deception, misrepresentation, and perhaps blindness in these encounters of exploration, conquest and exploitation, that is not likely to shake in any fundamental way the belief in the basic rationality, and hence necessity, of Western expansion.<sup>18</sup>

In the context I wish to invoke here, I take this to be not merely a historical question on the retroactive legitimization or deconstruction of

imperialism. It is indisputable that historical interpretations – the articulation of a rationale – have far-reaching consequences for the present, depending on the context in which they are made intelligible. The invocation here is primarily targeted at the border technologies that we have inherited from modernity and imperialism, and which, by way of their simultaneously evasive and imperative nature, constitute a continuity in hegemony, and concern the establishing of indisputable background conditions and thus of the "political stage." It concerns particularly the mechanisms by which the "original separation" that marks this stage embraces what it formerly established as its "outside." The "accumulation of evidence" was surely a successful strategy in contesting the separations that have structured the stage set up by Western modernity internally; however, if the background conditions, the border of the political as such, is at stake, different strategies are necessary, strategies in correspondence with the twisted economy of the frontier. And it is because of its dialectically twisted structure that "critique," itself a modern practice, has entered into the often lamented crisis we currently face, foregrounding its complicities in upholding the power of the critiqued, corresponding to the specific ways in which transgression confirms, rather than undoes, the law of boundaries. However, rather than conclude, from the realization that the "outside" of modern critique was nothing but a pretense and phantasm, that there is "no more outside" – and thus only "insider" positions, varying by degrees of consent – it is the *production* of an outside through the economy of the frontier (ranging in scope from conceptual divisions via political separations to the act of killing) that provides the historical backdrop to the contemporary challenge. This requires a different optics than those of modern critique. It requires that one *think-through-terror* – as Taussig demands in his study – the world that is already-upside-down.

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In a following text, I will attempt to trace some conjunctions between the economy of the frontier and the logic of the imaginary.

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Anselm Franke is a curator and writer based in Brussels and Berlin. He is the Artistic Director of Extra City Center for Contemporary Art in Antwerp, and he was a co-curator of Manifesta 7 in Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy, in 2008 (Trento). Previously, Franke acted as curator of KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin until 2006, where he organized exhibitions such as *Territories. Islands, Camps and Other States of Utopia* (2003); *Image Archives* (2001/2002); *The Imaginary Number* (2005, together with Hila Peleg), and *B-Zone – Becoming Europe and Beyond* (2006) and he co-developed the project *No Matter How Bright the Light, the Crossing Occurs At Night* (2006). He has edited and published various publications and is a contributor to magazines such as *Metropolis M*, *Piktogram*, and *Cabinet*.

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