

Archive Review

Learning Performance by ~~Doing~~ *Archiving* Performance

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What – if anything – can one learn about performance through archiving performance?

After one year of working on the digital archive of Swiss Performance Art 1990+ we raise our heads and take a brief break. Covered with the digital dirt of CD-ROMs, Zips, emails, scans and video stills, not to mention the spiderwebs off old postcard invitations, programmes, photos, statements and press reports of forgotten works and events of the last decade, we ask ourselves: 'What is the sense of doing all this?' The nearly 1000 painstakingly accumulated entries of the fresh archive flicker disidentically at us from the flat monitor screen.

Theatre has its script, dance its Laban notation, music its score, while the documents of performance lack the ability to gather, represent and thereby conserve the genre's own quintessence. What would be required is not only a translation of the visible and the durational into words, but new devices to capture and replay the experience of smell, touch, taste and other senses of dimensions not yet identified. That is to say, enigmatically, even in the digital age, performance seems to continue to resist being represented in the archive.

Unable to conserve the live, data chips provide a compact repository for dead documents, a genre in itself which tells its own story. A perfect archive of performance would need to be a kind of time machine – or, rather, isn't the festival the true *Wunderkammer* of performance, sufficient for our need to collect things so that these things can be seen together, where they can become new and unusual

and also at the same time just be themselves? In the near future, performance archive-users, Stelarc-like, with their nerves hooked up live to the data bank, will be able to navigate in a sea of sensations. But even then performance will remain, separate unto itself, a thing without correspondence. If one believes, however, like Paolo Bianchi (1999a), that the fundamental condition of the archive is movement, is process, not product, performance might turn out to be one of the most difficult things to archive because it is most like the archive itself.

Gerhard Dirmoser's and ASA-European's (i.e. Boris Nieslony's) labyrinthine 'diagram' *Performance-Art-Context* (*Performance Research* 6: 2), a scheme of mapping performance art, demonstrates the difficulty of setting up ground rules for even deciding what performance is, a prerequisite to going out there collecting its materials. Developed over a number of years, their research has included performance materials and views on performance since 1948, with some material going as far back as Futurism, Dada, etc. The result of this research is available as a poster-size diagram (240cm × 180cm), which can be downloaded from a website. The diagram is split into 4 parts with a total of approximately 32 categories of performance ordered according to its context, e.g. live, social relations, society, humanities, philosophical relations, personal identities, body examinations, etc. Illustrating these contexts are 90 definitions of performance art and performing arts, at least 900 names of artists and 400 names of theorists, titles from exemplary books, etc. This diagram could be interpreted as a map of the landscape that any serious performance collector needs to cover. One

definition of an archive is that it has to be a unity which includes everything. Yet the performance archivist, setting out to gather just one specimen of the categories outlined in this map, might easily become disheartened. The Performance-Art-Context chart suggests the state of disorder that can be expected in a system in which every single performance forms its own category, and where the diversity of the contents dissolves any unity of the collection.

Another kind of guide for archiving performance could be Allan Kaprow's strategy of negation. As combined artist and art historian he pursued his own creative work through setting it in opposition to the traditions of art – first painting, then theatre. Eventually, with the anti-art object, he ended up cancelling his own work. The Kaprow archive would be the space of an empty mind. Richard Schechner could be another guide. Even more inclusive than Dirmoser and Nieslony/ASA, Schechner has no

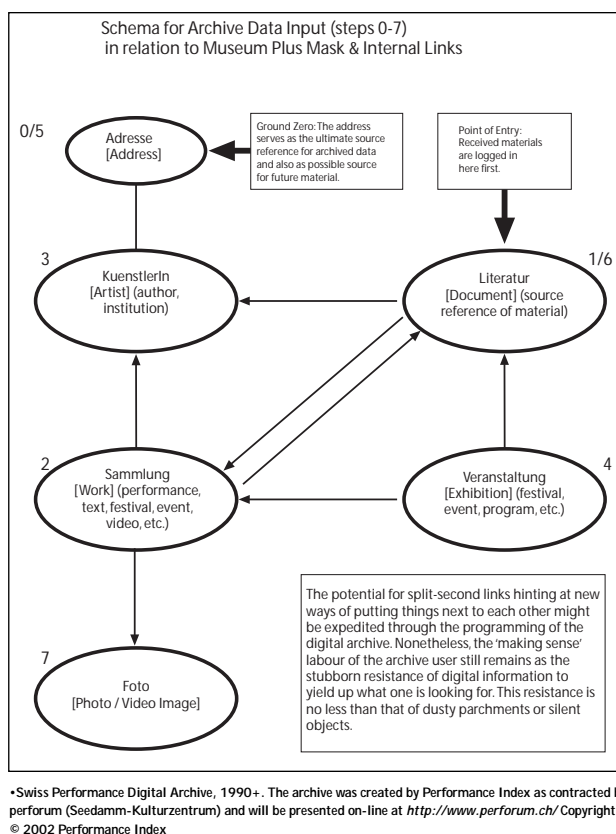
problem putting a football game alongside a Catholic Mass next to Internet sex games. Politically correct, inter- and multidisciplinary, humanistic, and broad, but practical? Another possible reference point could be Michael Kirby. Informed by his involvement with formalism and semantics, his more reductive approach makes it initially seem easier to sort performance in terms of singular elements, such as 'acting', 'costume', 'movement',

'music', etc. If we explore this notion further, for example in the case of collecting and sorting performances by costume, at one extreme would be '0' with everyday dress, and at the other extreme – at '10' or even '100', depending on the desired extent of the range – could be forms such as Kabuki or Kathakali. Of course, this would imply a Sisyphean task of gathering and registering works. Before even beginning, one would need to define the various semantic elements of performance and

set up proportional scales. But more fundamentally, dissected into its separate parts – e.g. body, image, movement, space, sound, smell, etc. – and laid out next to each other with their labels, would such an archive of performance really yield up any secrets? Grouped according to common features and thus already completely analysed, nothing would be left but names. Michel Foucault (1970) explains that such a method came into being with the Enlightenment when the circular procession

of the theatrical 'show' was replaced with the arrangement of things in a 'table'.

One problem with archiving performance then seems to be a lack of manageable principles that could help one in deciding what is worth gathering and keeping, and what belongs where. According to Bianchi (1999a), this is a problem which is already inherent within the process of archiving itself. It may be helpful in this context to remember that



Katharin von Alexandria (d. 307) is the patron saint of archivists, philosophers, speakers and the drowned alike.

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The initiative for the Digital Archive of Swiss Performance Art 1990+ began with a commission through *perforum*, a special division of the Seedamm-Kulturzentrum in Pfäffikon/SZ, Switzerland. The utopian aim was to collect everything to do with performance art realized in Switzerland since 1990. The digital archive was to be a complement to *perforum*'s basic body of research material, the legendary *Schwarze Lade* (Black Kit), a unique collection assembled over many years by Boris Nieslony (see Allsopp 1998). This collection had been donated to *perforum* in 2000 and includes documents, manuscripts, audio materials, images, videos and publications, covering performance art from 1975 right through to the 1980s. It also features some materials from the 1990s, which we digitalized and used in our new archive.

As well as incorporating material from the *Schwarze Lade*, we started our gathering process based upon our previous experience and activities as **Performance Index**:

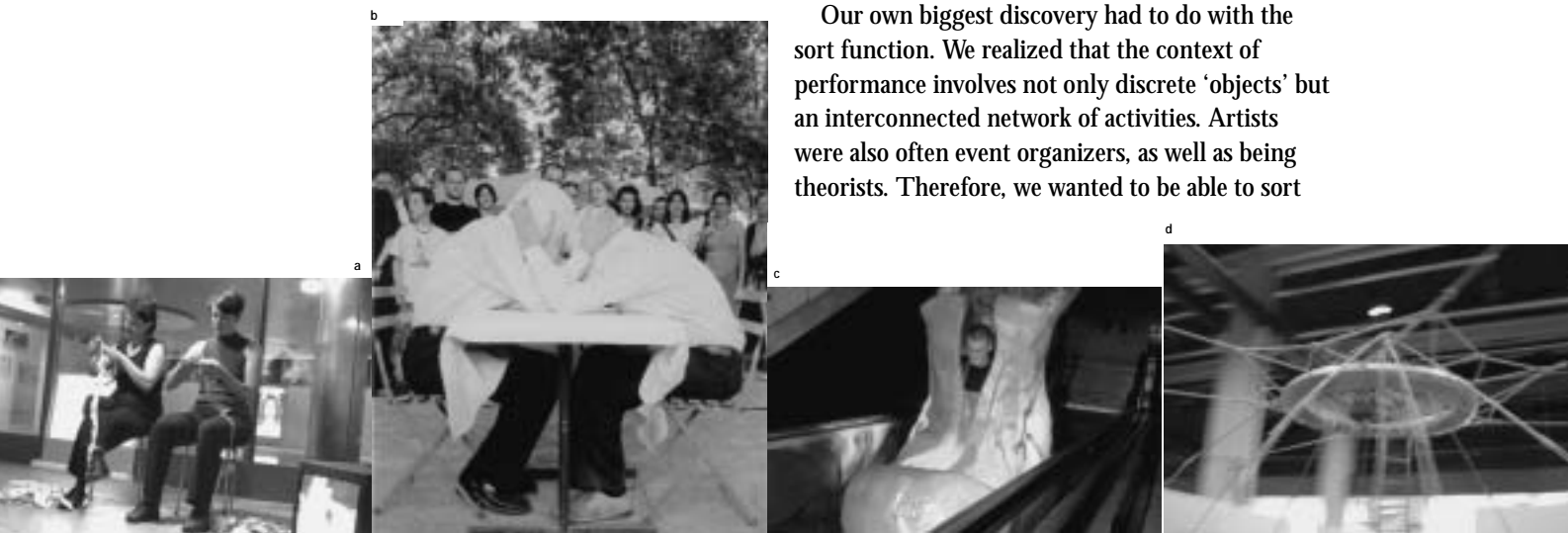
- Performance Index Festival 1995
- Performance Index Publication 1995
- Performance Index Website 1995
- National and International Performance Art Network 1995–2001
- Performance Index Publication 1997
- Performance Index Festival 1999

More concretely, we used our own network by contacting artists and institutions to solicit materials

for the archive. We also took the opportunity to gather everything we had ever worked on, although this would probably be considered a violation of the International Council on Archives' Code of Ethics, which specifies that 'archivists should be impartial'. Our ideology for digitally sorting and storing the material was largely determined by pragmatic necessity. Our sponsor, the *Charles and Agnes Vögele Foundation*, provided us with a lump sum plus an option to temporarily use and minimally adapt a software normally used by institutions for archiving art objects, *Museum Plus*. The gift of the Foundation included technical support provided by the software-creator Zetcom, which coached us in using the program and minimally adapting it to our aims. In this initial phase we decided that developing a new software was beyond the limits of our budget and, frankly, our expertise. We decided to risk 'learning by archiving', i.e. to stay more-or-less within the given structure of *Museum Plus*, before deciding in a second phase whether we needed a different program. At least 40 hours were required initially for figuring out the existing set-up alone and rethinking what kind of terminology would be useful for us. It became necessary not only to change the terminology of the program, but to somehow adapt the implicit ideology behind the masks and internal sorting functions.

Our basic priority was that as much material as possible be included without any kind of filtering. The archive was to be somehow 'researchable' or accessible without precluding new inter-pretations in the future. For this reason we decided, after hefty debate, not to use any keywords in labeling the works. The primary filter was to be the artists and institutions themselves, and anyone who submitted material was to be included.

Our own biggest discovery had to do with the sort function. We realized that the context of performance involves not only discrete 'objects' but an interconnected network of activities. Artists were also often event organizers, as well as being theorists. Therefore, we wanted to be able to sort



and see together not only performances as artworks, but also to treat festivals, events, programmes and certain kinds of lectures and texts as discrete, sortable groups. Under the category 'Sammlung' (collection), we thus included documents/lectures, events, performances and performance video/slides (the latter only if it was a work in-and-of-itself).

While most of our software adaptations had to do with terminology within the given masks (and sorting functions as described above), we also deviated from the intended use of the major categories. For example, in *Museum Plus* the category 'Literatur' (literature) is meant to be used like a card catalogue to refer to any published material about the art work. We used it as a register to record the various sources of our material: material from the *Schwarze Lade*, that we had sorted and digitalized ourselves (e.g. invitation cards, images, documentation catalogues, video stills, etc.); cuttings from newspapers featuring artists, performances or events, taken from the data bank of the Swiss Institute for Art Research (*Schweizer Institut für Kunstwissenschaft SIK*); grant requests made by performance artists or events and submitted to the Federal Department of Culture (*Schweizer Bundesamt für Kultur*); but especially catalogues, photos, videos, project descriptions, biographies, etc., sent to us by individual artists.

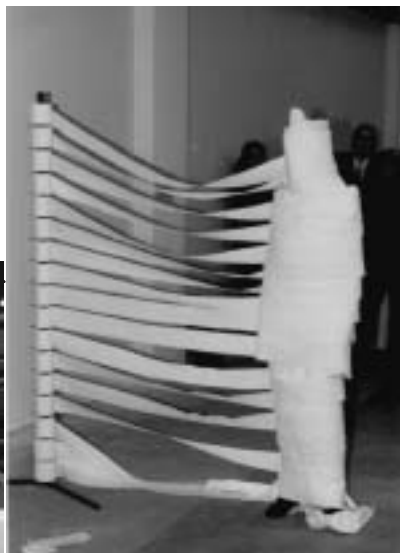
Initially euphoric about the prospects, we found the tedium of soliciting materials – three rounds of

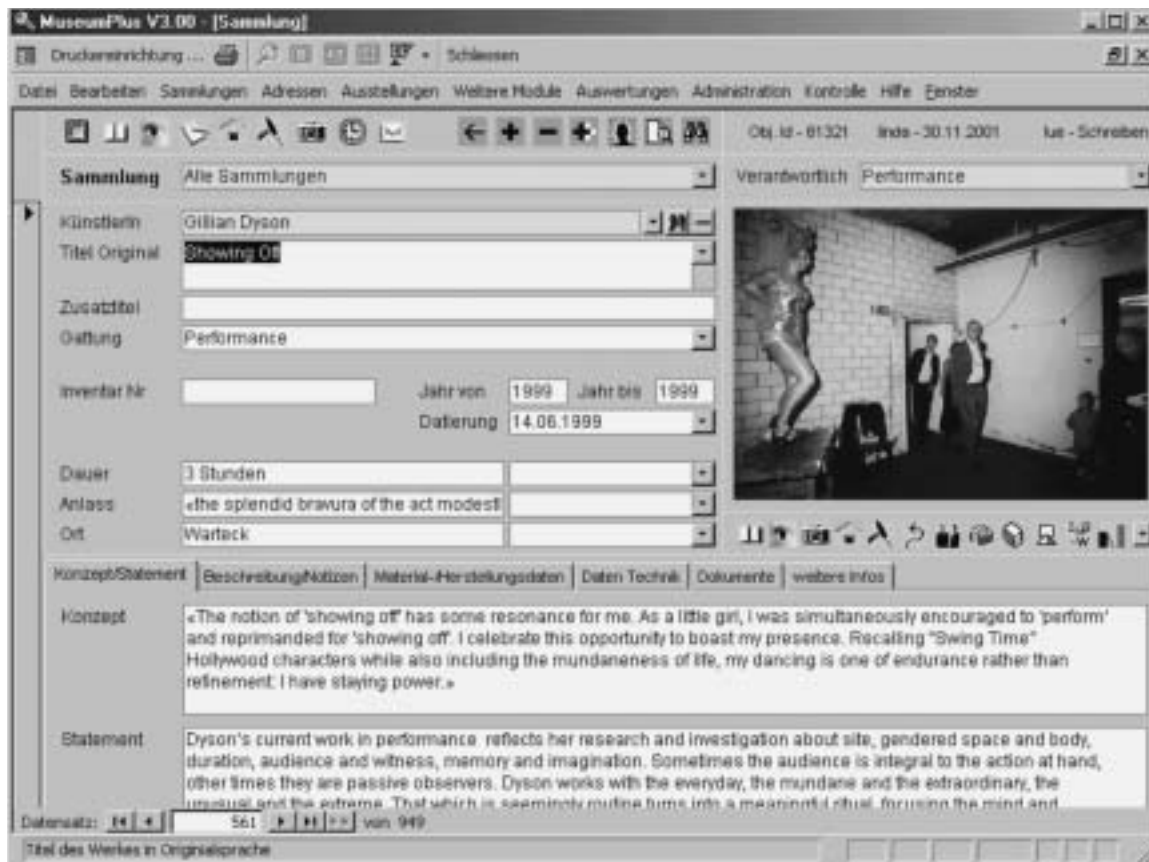
contacting and re-contacting persons and institutions – and then the experience of the flattening distortion of a performance as it went from live event to document and then into the *Museum Plus* structure, was discouraging (although some works actually seemed more interesting in their digital version!). While we aimed not to filter, the structure of the program, the masks, the links seemed to press the live performance into a given mould. Therefore, the major issues which we encountered, and hope to address in a further phase of development, include:

- What, if anything, do present methods of documenting performance – statements, project and work descriptions, press reports, portfolios, catalogue texts, programmes, photos, videos – have to do: (1) with the live experience of performance; (2) with the actual generating of performance; (3) with the perception and mediation of the works?
- Where are methods of documenting and archiving performance being thematized, worked through or reflected upon?
- What material might be tracked and used as indicators concerning trends or special qualities of performance in Switzerland?

We have further material for at least another 2000 entries to hand. The initial phase of the archive is scheduled for presentation on the web next year [at <http://www.perforum.ch>] in a web version to be developed by *Museum Plus*.

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•Swiss Performance Digital Archive web page, showing the arrangement of data and image. Copyright © 2002 Performance Index

The cultural basis of the archive, according to Bianchi (1999a), is a paradoxical claim for, as well as against, history. The archival document is history, but also his [her] story, a piece in a bigger picture puzzle that can never be put together. If, like Bianchi, one considers that the overall condition of the archive is movement and that the real business of the archive has to do with process rather than product, then archiving as a process becomes the main point here.

The means and justifications for archiving performance don't have to be only 'official', i.e. to try to get performance out of the no-man's-land of the transient into the mainstream discourse of the permanent art object. To recapitulate what was suggested at the beginning of this article, archiving

performance is essentially different from archiving the art object in that it cannot, to date, be placed in the archive directly as the archivable thing itself. So, what other thing really corresponds to it? This is certainly an interesting point of departure, not only for the archivist as historian/theorist, but for the artist as creator: 'Out of nothing the archivist creates his history and secures his own identity' (Bianchi 1999b: 55; original in German). Rather than banging at the door of the history and theory of art objects, the real work of archiving performance may have to do with discovering side-entrances to the backstage of a larger discourse. The archival documents of other disciplines, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, etc., actually do not have to represent their objects, but only to



provide a surplus of language in addition to the object which conveniently stands for itself. Performance doesn't need to mimetically generate these surplus documents, especially as it generally aims to defy or at least question these very disciplines. Rather, performance might take advantage of its own paradoxical condition and be recognized instead as a special, privileged field for the artist-archivist.

It is remarkable that the archive of the artist (thinker, novelist, musician, etc.) very often represents a contra-archive in relation to 'official' archives – not a collaboration with history, but rather resistance.

(Bianchi 1999a: 52, original in German)

Like Yves Klein's infamous documentation of his leap into the void, Hayley Newman, British performance artist and teacher, produced a series of photographs (*Connotations* 1994–8) documenting performances which never actually took place.

The modern human is not only someone who archives gladly and abundantly, rather the modern human is someone who will also be archived, whether he or she likes it or not.

(Boris Groys in Bianchi 1999b: 63, original in German)

Archiving and being archived can be interpreted as an underlying preoccupation of the contemporary artist. Robert Smithson's documentary film of his *Spiral Jetty*, an artwork in itself, comments not only on the artwork but upon the artistic documentary process. Re-enacting a scene from Hitchcock's film *North by Northwest*, in which the protagonist is chased by a plane, Smithson runs along his own artwork chased by the documenting, aircraft-born camera. This scene demonstrates the self-reflective paranoia of the artist-archivist who intuitively understands that any process of ordering reflection, as in the archive, inherently entails the negation of its own objects. As Foucault (1972) asserts, it is not possible to describe our own archive because we speak within its own rules. However, the paradoxical process of engaging in

this semblance of distancing provides a certain perspective on things:

The collector collects himself as he collects. Ideally, this allows him to collect himself internally. Not only does he gain distance in this way, but also acquires a measure by which he can judge and change the world.

(Urs Sommer in Bianchi 1999a: 53, original in German)

The archive poses a special space in which diverse things can be juxtaposed. In this space the possibility arises not only of *naming* but especially of *seeing* the same things in another way. Placed together, the things reveal that they already were in communication with one another. Both alike and yet distinct, in fact, no further commentary is necessary. In his *Order of Things*, Foucault tells us that, according to the Greeks, the historian was originally one who *saw* and *recounted* from the perspective of his own sight (Foucault 1970: 130). Therefore, up until the mid-17th century, the historian's job was to collect and re-tell. Only with the age of classicism did historians – especially natural historians – begin to examine things in themselves.

The documents of this new history are not other words, texts or records, but unencumbered spaces in which things are juxtaposed: herbariums, collections, gardens, the locus of this history is a non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside the other.

(Foucault 1970: 131)

Ah, we sigh in longing for the performance festival!

In a further stage of developing the Digital Archive of Swiss Art 1990+ our goal is to set up the means whereby artists can directly submit their own works to an on-going, on-line database. This would satisfy our desire to continue the development of the 1995 **Performance Index** publication, a flexible 3-ring binder portfolio of resumés and statements submitted by artists, which formed the main body of material on the **Performance Index**



website 1995–2001. At the same time, however, we intend to raise questions about our own archiving structure, including a rethink of the digital program masks, terminology and especially the sorting function. Alongside this process we aim to produce another festival in order to put the two modes of archiving performance next to each other, to see their underlying strategies in relation to each other. Eventually, an archive of performance art archives could also be interesting . . . maybe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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For further information, see <http://www.perforum.ch>, an ongoing (per)forum for discussions and critical reviews of festivals and publications and a calendar of live-art events. At this stage, **Performance Index**/Basel comprises Linda Cassens Stoian, Sabine Gebhardt-Fink and Heinrich Lüber.

Picture credits for pp.130–3

- a Pascale Grau and Andrea Saemann, 'textile Hilfestellung' [textile aid station] *Jäger und Sammler*, Zurich, 1997. Photo: Thomas Ehrat
- b Franz Gratwohl and Johannes Deimling 'Das Gesicht Verlieren' [Losing Face], 2000, Stadelhofer Zurich, ICA London
- c ASS Abschuss, 'Ich denke also gehe ich' [I'm thinking, i.e. I'm leaving], *Jäger & Sammler*, Zurich, 1997
- d airline, 'Cocoon', *Eidgenössischer Wettbewerb für Freie Kunst*, 2001
- e Irene Maag [no title], *Jahresausstellung der Kunstklassen*, HGK Basel, 1998
- f Pascale Grau, 'Ei Sprung' [direct translation, Egg Leap: meaning 'ovulation'] *Performancetage* 1997, Seedamm-Kulturzentrum Pfäffikon/SZ, 1997
- g Franz Gratwohl and Johannes Deimling, 'back to the roots', Rote Fabrik, Zurich, 2000
- h GABI, 'hawaiianische Begrüssung' [Hawaiian Greeting], *view assistance*, Boswil, 2000
- i Art Clay, 'Gespannte Gefährten' [Eager Companions], 1997. Photo: Art Clay
- j Gerhard Johann Lischka, 'Körpersprache: Sprachkörper' [Body Language: Language Body] 1999, 7. *Performance-Konferenz*, Kunsthaus Glarus. Photo: copyright © Lorenzo Pusterla
- k Chen Tan, 'Haircut', Kaskadenkondensator Basel, 2001
- l Heinrich Lüber. *Eidgenössischer Wettbewerb für Freie Kunst*, Basel, 2000. Photo: Johann Neuhaus
- m Monika Günther & Ruedi Schill, 'Gründeln', *Performance Index Festival*, Warteck Basel, 1995
- n Allan Kaprow, Workshop, *Kunsthalle Palazzo*, Liestal, 1996. Photo: Linda Cassens Stoian
- o Chantal Michel, 'Aus nahen und fernen Gärten' [From Near and Far Away Gardens], *White Night*, Kunstmuseum Bern, 1999
- p CPX/Lukas Bardill, 'Gastfreundschaft' [Hospitality], Projekt Herz Bern, 1994