

RATS!

RATS!

RATS!

**The Poetic
Grammar
of the Hack**

**"la Caixa" Foundation Collection
Support for Creation. Comisart**

RAT

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With works by

**Elena Asins / Öyvind Fahlström / Grup de Treball /
Zheng Mahler / Gordon Matta-Clark / Antoni Muntadas /
Martha Rosler / Eve Sussman / Werker Collective**

Curated by

Barbara Cueto

RATS! RATS! RATS!

The Poetic Grammar of the Hack

Exhibition	
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RATS!

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RATS!

**The Poetic
Grammar
of the Hack**

Barbara Cueto

In 1903 Guglielmo Marconi set up the first public demonstration that Morse code messages could be sent wirelessly over long distances. His plan was to relay a signal from a clifftop station in Cornwall to an expectant audience in the Royal Institution in London, some 300 miles (480 km) away. Yet before the demonstration could begin, the apparatus in the lecture theatre began to tap out an unexpected message: “Rats! Rats! Rats!”, following by a string of taunts sent by rival engineer and inventor Nevil Maskelyne from a nearby theatre. Although this stream of invective went unnoticed by lecturer John Fleming, his assistant quietly decoded the missive and reported it to Fleming some days later, prompting the physicist to fire off a fuming letter to *The Times* denouncing this act of “scientific hooliganism”. Radio technology wasn’t as private as Marconi had boasted: wireless messages could be intercepted and meddled with. And so this short, impudent message became the first hack in history.

The exhibition *Rats! Rats! Rats!* sees hacking as a poetic and political act and a powerful tool for exploring how artists use virtual grammars to break their way through to reveal liminal spaces where they can imagine alternatives to hegemonic accounts. Like poetry, which uses language to dig deeper into meaning, hacking brings about an increased emotional awareness of the subtleties of virtual vocabularies. A hack becomes a communicative act that stresses the poetic ambiguity of divergent accounts and makes it possible to formulate multiple stories on a substitute reality. Paraphrasing poet Barrett Watten,¹ in the case of a hack, writing has a differential, both concrete and critical, relationship to the horizon of utopia, which, we should remember, is a non-place, an alternative time and space that is only momentarily possible as lived experience. Language itself offers an expansive and holistic medium for poetry as a ground for combinatorial fantasy and potential agency that simultaneously invokes radical particularity, material opacity, spatial alterity and

temporal deferral; language in poetry is a poetic non-site that may be powerfully transformative, if not finally utopian, in its radical potential. As an exercise in political reading and rereading, then, this exhibition brings together disparate acts of translation by exploring the poetic evocation of otherness, the sensitivity of digital code and the power of dissident technological lexicons. By doing so, it creates a fluid terrain where languages represent not reality but possibility.

We tend to talk about hacking in the context of new technologies to refer to the act of gaining unauthorised access to a computer system. But if we broaden its scope, a hack can be any mechanism that interrupts any kind of nature or experience. A hack is a way of forcing us to face up to an alternative reality. For philosopher McKenzie Wark, “To hack is to release the virtual into the actual, to express the difference of the real.”² In this way, hacking is a tool for inserting something virtual—understood as something with an apparent rather than a real presence—into any real aspect, nature or experience. “By abstracting from nature, hacking produces the possibility of another nature, a second nature, a third nature, natures to infinity, doubling and redoubling.”³ As a result, a hack is both a productive and a destructive force, since it conjures up new possibilities, alternative options and new forms of accessing reality, either in parallel or in opposition.

In the words of Jacques Rancière, a hack is a way of “redistributing the sensible”. Rancière considers *the sensible* as a kind of status quo or common sense that articulates what is right or wrong in both actions and subjects. It structures reality experientially and spatially and translates it into a series of norms, cultures, ways of speaking, laws and policies. So the redistribution of the sensible changes the perspective of how we interact with our surroundings. This process is never singular, always multiple, and acts like a hack: an invitation to plural transformation. In the same way, this show

1 Barrett Watten, “Language Writing’s Concrete Utopia”, in *Utopia: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, eds. David Ayers et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 99–100.

2 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004), para. 074.

3 Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, para. 075.

creates a suspended state of possibility, where the pieces question the stability of meanings and redraw new outlines around the edges. This inevitably becomes a political act, opening doors to new demands, expectations and desires. The works encapsulate the potentiality of radical change latent in every apparent dogmatism or hegemonic power. As Michel Foucault would say, wherever there is power, there is also a counterpower. This exhibition presents hacking as a counterpower for transforming the perception of reality through imagination.

Rats! Rats! Rats! explores the idea of hacking as an intervention from an expanded perspective, through a selection of works representing different generations and multiple media. It does not set out to create taxonomies or rankings, and it is not laid out in any particular order: different paths through the show will tease out different dialogues and enrich different levels of conversation. Hacks are fertile ground for an abundance of meanings and interpretations, and the works on display act as a performative expansion of the poetics of the hack. Artists such as **Eve Sussman**, **Zheng Mahler** and **Elena Asins**, for example, place a greater emphasis on post-human agency, whereas others, among them **Gordon Matta-Clark**, **Werker Collective** and **Martha Rosler**, focus on the poetics of the multiple account. Then there are creators who link hacking to the politics of control and the influence of the media, including **Öyvind Fahlström**, **Antoni Muntadas** and **Grup de Treball**. These are obviously fluid categories, fertile terrain for multiple meanings. Martha Rosler, for instance, could easily be included in this last group, with its focus on politics and the media; Elena Asins also has a clear interest in the poetics of the multiple account; and hacking's twofold nature as a constructive and destructive force certainly appears in Eve Sussman's work. In this way, the show aims to spark new synergies and understandings, fresh readings that reveal hacking as an emancipatory strategy for contravening hegemonic accounts.

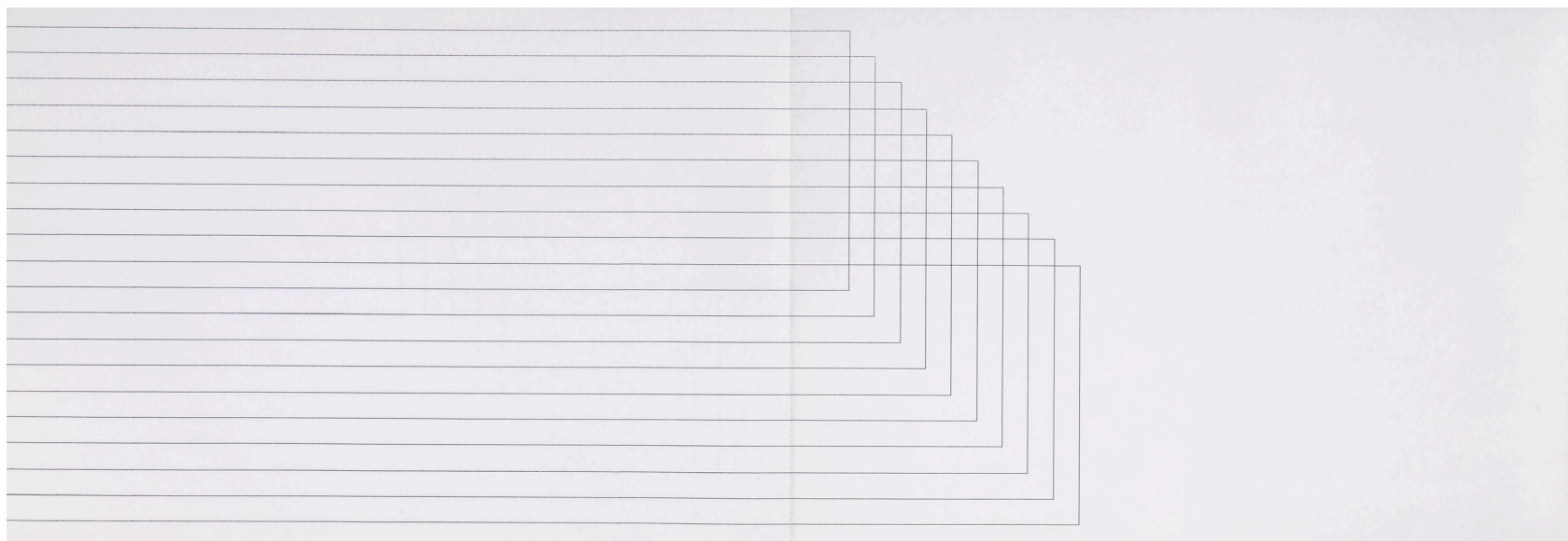
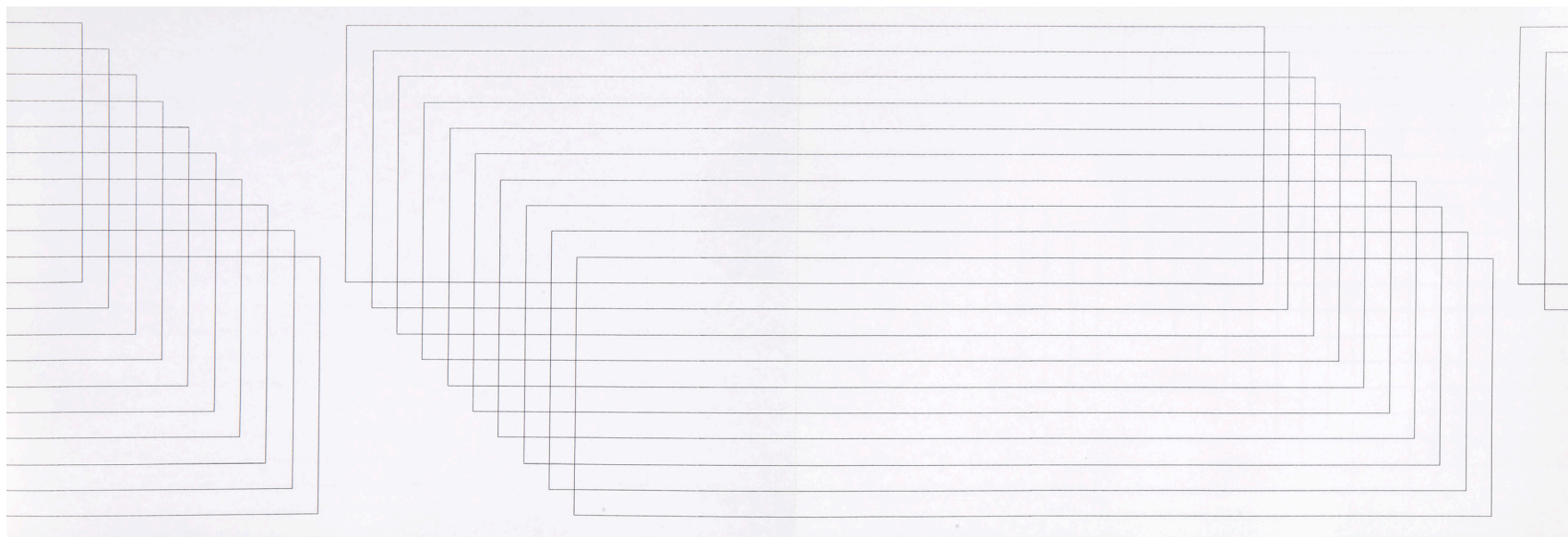
Rats! Rats! Rats! champions hacks as powerful moments of autonomy, when artists can subtly intervene in our reality to carefully subvert our perceptions. The exhibition becomes a formal investigation of the power of hacking as a poetic dissident language that lies just beneath the surface in the multiple accounts that give rise to a new reality.

ELENA ASINS

Shalom Elechen (Shalom Aleichem), 1988

Elena Asins's virtual codes burst into the exhibition space in a work that turns an otherwise unintelligible, unrepresentable and transitory digital lexicon into a visible, palpable and permanent work of art. This visual metaphor endeavours to translate the cadence and form of the algorithm into concrete poetry for the postdigital age. The artist harnesses the expressive power of hacking, and the productive ambiguity of virtual codes, to present us with two languages representing experiences and access to opposing realities.

Artist Elena Asins delved deep into the sublime as she explored the scope of logical thought and algebra in abstract geometry. After a formative period at the Centro de Cálculo at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, which gave her a taste of the crossover between art and technology in the early 1960s, she went on to work with Noam Chomsky at Columbia University. Throughout her work, the notion of time—or the attempt to make us face up to it—is regularly found in a performative guise: her pieces unfold like scores that require spectators to decode them. The passing of time is felt through subtle changes in the flow of lines, meticulous movements, repetition and sequential progressions that conjure up a sense of dancing. With this in mind, in 1978 she wrote the following verses on the void that exists behind all sense of order: *there is no down or up / back, front / to one side / to all sides, to any side / to any side because it's all the same / that's why they dance incessantly / there is no down or up.*



ÖYVIND FAHLSTRÖM

Mao-Hope March, 1966

In *Mao-Hope March*, Öyvind Fahlström intercepts the public space by staging a street protest in New York. A small group of demonstrators march down Fifth Avenue holding placards showing six photos of American comic Bob Hope and one of Chinese communist leader Mao Tse-Tung, while confused and generally unforthcoming bystanders are asked: “Are you happy?” Hinting at the late-1960s unrest in the United States yet to come, the *Mao-Hope March* performance offers a biting satire on the propaganda strategies deployed to create a cult of personality around those in power. The artist juxtaposed uncanny resemblances of a political leader and a showbiz celebrity at a time when the political world was becoming increasingly mixed with the entertainment industry.

Fahlström’s work always has a performative element that requires spectators to play an active role, as reflected in his early works of concrete poetry and in later pieces such as *Mao-Hope March*. His whole oeuvre shows his ever-present interest in the underlying mechanisms governing politics and economics and, in particular, his concern at the ways that information can be manipulated. Often using the metaphor of games to reflect political and economic contexts, his pieces are conceived as poetic-visual arrangements of signs that require active audience participation, and as such offer a plurality of readings.





Öyvind Fahlström. *Mao-Hope March*, 1966

ZHENG MAHLER

The Master Algorithm, 2019

Artist duo Zheng Mahler adopt hacking as a means of speculation for challenging hegemonic discourses about China's relentless economic progress. Qiu Hao, *The Master Algorithm*, is a holographic projection that mutates, grows and disappears into clouds of data which then rematerialise as techno-orientalist nightmares and algorithmic utopias. The artists use this virtual god/monster's multiple tongues to set the stage for future social-credit systems of control. Qiu Hao contains multitudes and takes on different personas to narrate different stories, reciting a chronological sci-fi history of the next industrial revolution. Each techno-utopia is narrated through vignettes moving backwards in time to link the present with its future and thus observe which possibilities gave rise to its future scenarios.

Zheng Mahler are a Hong Kong collective made up of artist Royce Ng and anthropologist Daisy Bisenieks, who work together on artistic research projects on digital media and transnational flows. *The Master Algorithm* is a companion work to *Nostalgia Machines*, an ongoing body of research and exhibitions on the political economy of the fourth industrial revolution in China and its intersection with aesthetic practice.



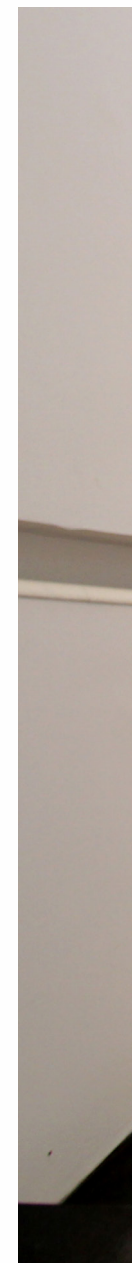


ANTONI MUNTADAS

Paraules: la conferència de premsa, 1991-2017

A collection of newspapers cascades down from a television monitor to an empty, spotlit podium awaiting a spokesperson who never arrives. An invitation to visitors, perhaps? The gap between both realities is paved with newspaper headlines which sketch out a faint, distorted reality that is swept away by loud, dissenting voices offering opposing opinions on events that have already come and gone. Antoni Muntadas's installation *Paraules: la conferència de premsa* is a further setting for his keen interest in the media and his concern at its influence. As in much of his practice, the artist's aim here is to detect and decode the mechanisms of control and power that create hegemonic ways of seeing by exploring the key role played by the media in this process. Muntadas reveals impartiality to be impossible, leaving us permanently at the mercy of the parallel realities that inhabit the national media.

As in many other "media landscapes", Muntadas explores contemporary phenomena linked to political, cultural and educational dynamics by exposing their intrinsic mechanisms as a means of launching a wider scrutiny of the human condition in the age of late capitalism.





Antoni Muntadas. *Paraules: la conferència de premsa, 1991-2017*



Antoni Muntadas. *Paraules: la conferència de premsa, 1991-2017*

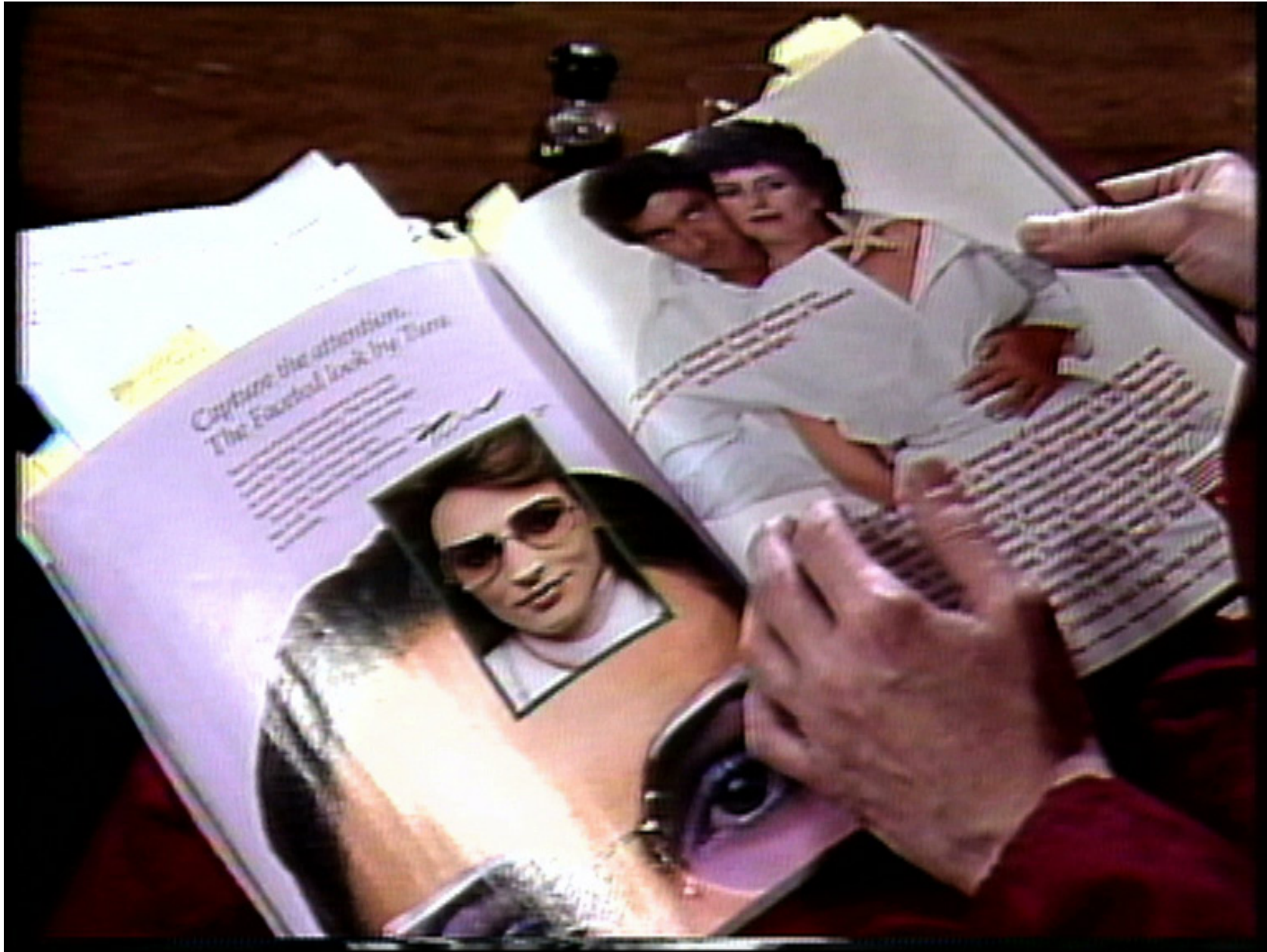
MARTHA ROSLER

Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue', 1982

Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue' is a video performance first broadcast on American public-access cable channel Paper Tiger Television. With its rough-and-ready visual style, Paper Tiger Television is a far cry from major media corporations and has mounted an array of culturally significant critiques of the media from within as it strives to create a fairer way of making moving images. Like many of its programmes, *Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue'* was recorded live and slotted into the channel's regular schedule. In it, the ever-impassive conceptual artist Martha Rosler deconstructs *Vogue* magazine by meticulously dissecting it as an ideological vehicle, while intoning the hopes, fantasies, identities and challenges relentlessly plied by popular patriarchal cultural institutions, of which Condé Nast's flagship publication is a prime example.

After her performance, the show cuts away to a freakish DIY music video in which Blondie's "Die Young Stay Pretty" plays over footage of an underground Manhattan sweatshop where Chinese workers make garments for luxury clothing brand Bloomingdale's. Rosler takes aim at capitalism through a gender perspective to expose the exploitation of women and immigrants.





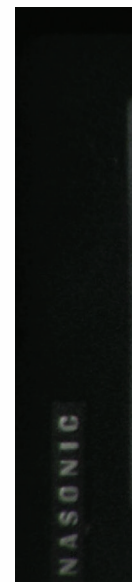
Martha Rosler. *Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue'*, 1982

EVE SUSSMAN

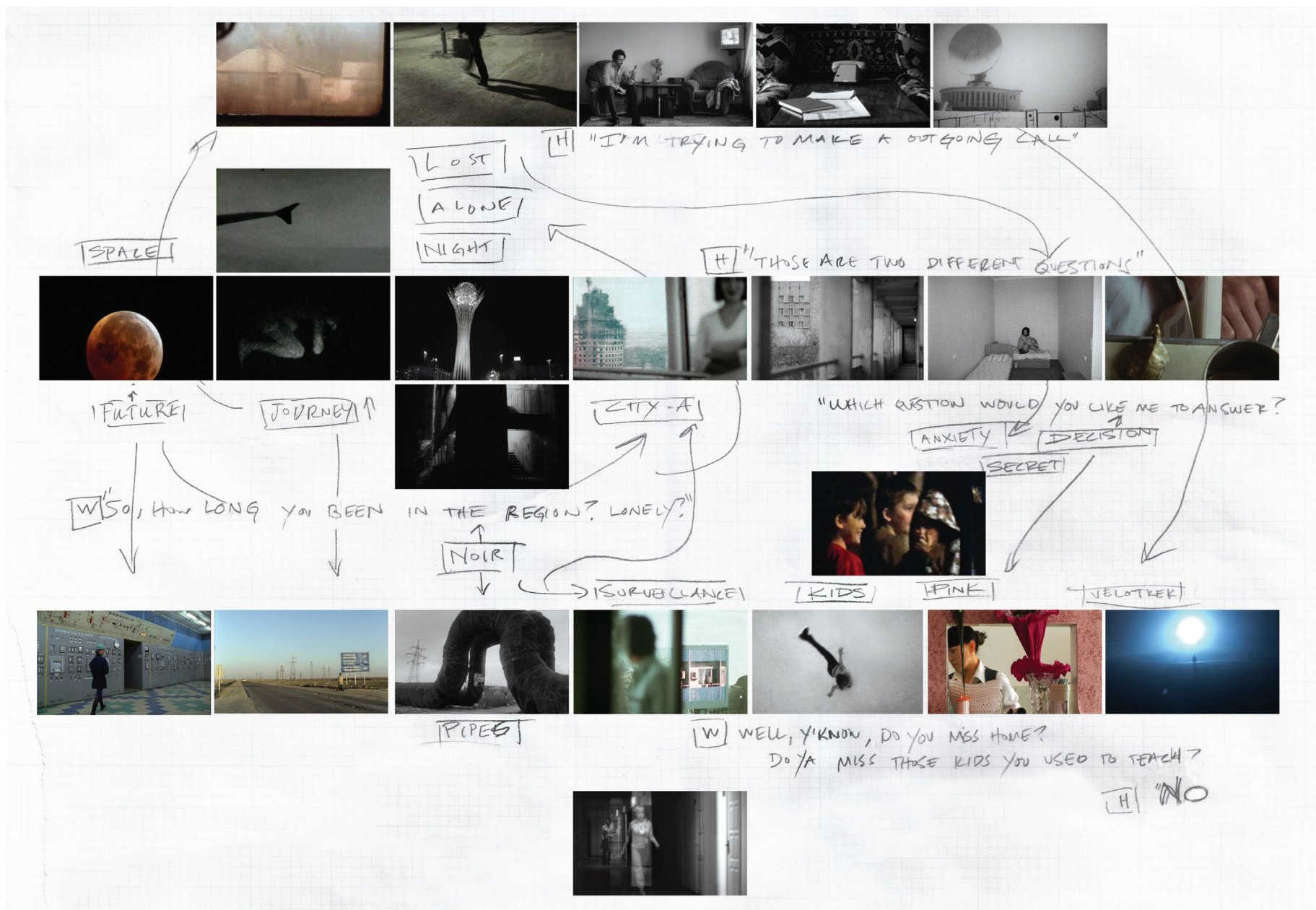
whiteonwhite: algorithmicnoir, 2009–2011

American artist Eve Sussman uses the grammar of algorithms to create a work of poetic ambiguity. *whiteonwhite: algorithmicnoir* presents a post-apocalyptic industrial landscape through a narrative with no clear beginning, middle or end. Instead, it unfolds digitally thanks to a computer program that constantly reedits sequences of footage.

Made up of 3,000 clips, 80 voiceovers and 150 pieces of music recorded on a trip from Moscow to the Caspian Sea, it combines urban landscapes and inhabitants with observations by the main character, Holz, who finds himself trapped in City A facing an ever-changing array of problems thrown up by this disjointed film noir. The result is a kind of failed ethnographic analysis, intercepted by an algorithm the artist calls a Serendipity Machine: a hack that rebuilds the composition through tags that appear on a secondary screen. The unexpected juxtapositions of voice, image and sound create a sense of unyielding suspense that continuously divorces the protagonist from the full course of his own narrative. Sussman took Kazimir Malevich's emblematic 1918 painting *White on White* as the starting point to create a narrative based on the Russian artist's ideas on abstraction and transcendence.







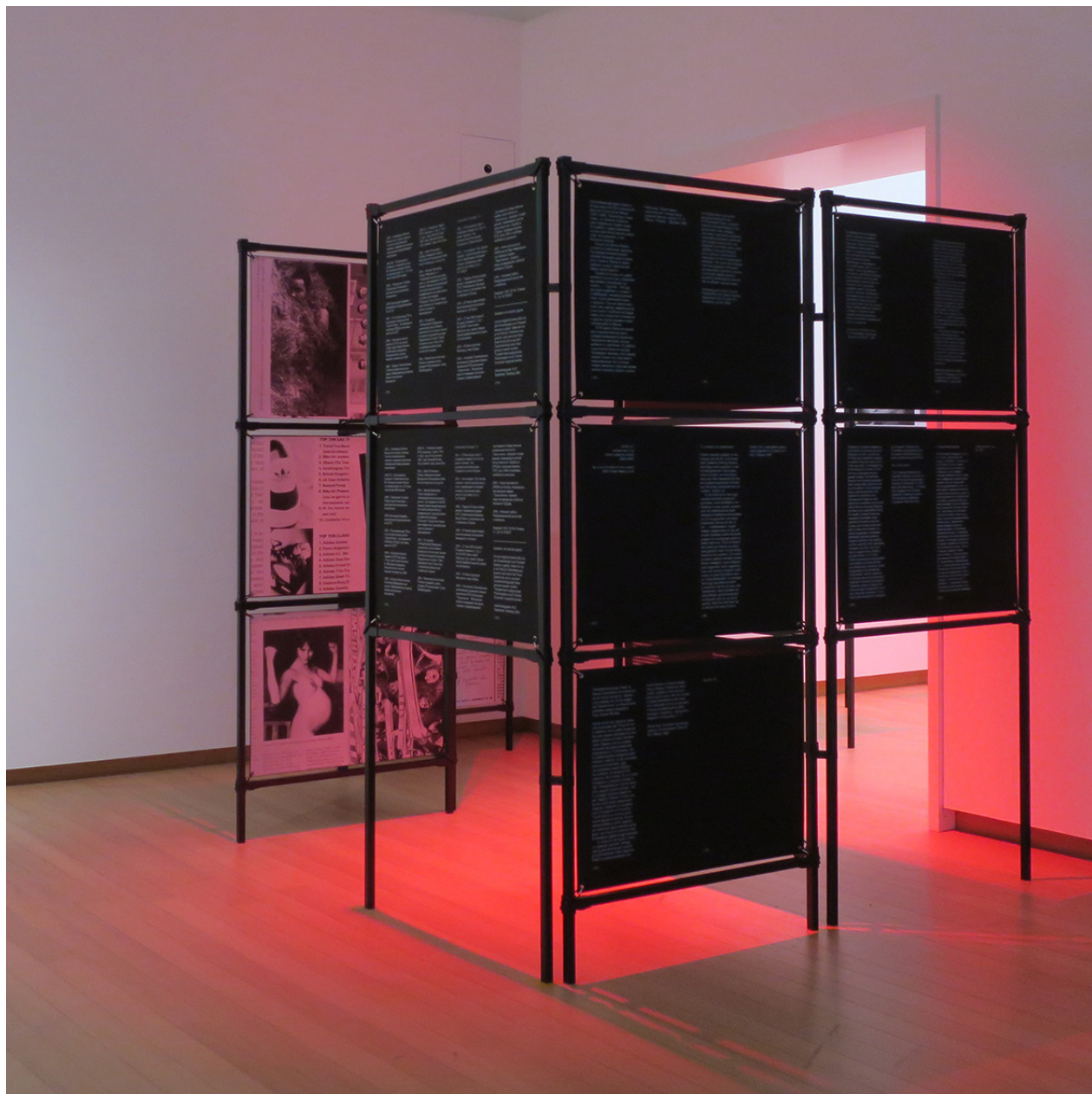
WERKER COLLECTIVE

A Gestural History of a Young Worker, 2019

For the Werker Collective, hacking is a strategy for inserting dissident accounts into wider discourses. In *A Gestural History of a Young Worker* they create a utopian image synthesising work with desire by weaving a queer narrative through a selection of magazines, archives and documentary photographs on the figure of the worker.

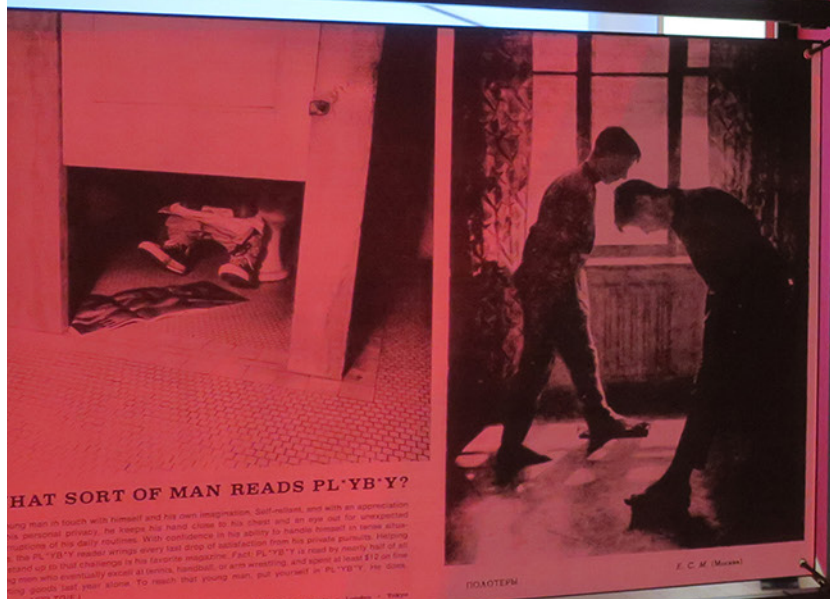
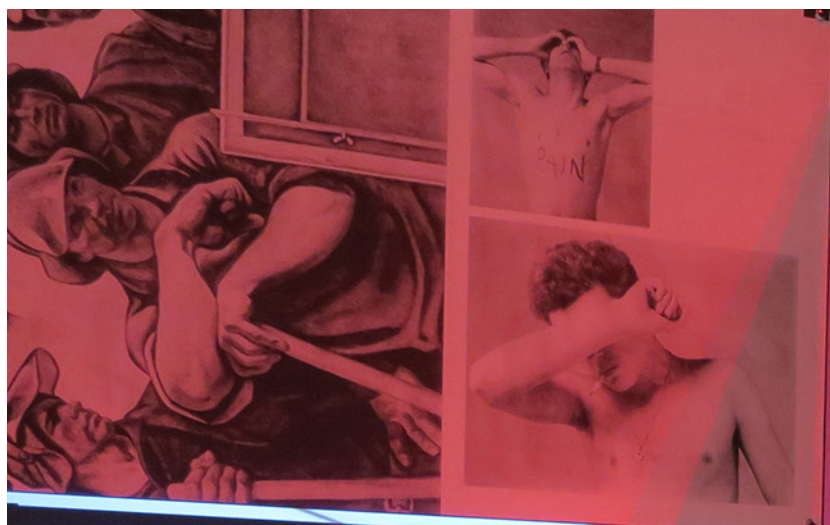
Their work is inspired by the Vereinigung der Arbeiter-Fotografen Deutschlands (German Association of Worker-Photographers), set up in Germany in the 1920s following the example of experimental photography movements in the Soviet Union. Under its auspices, photographers collaborated with workers and trade unions to draw attention to societal and political conditions from a working class perspective. Likewise, *A Gestural History of a Young Worker* uses archive images, magazines, propaganda and Soviet archives as the cement for remoulding workers' bodies, generally depicted as having strong, athletic physiques. When combined with pictures of non-normative bodies, these photographs offer a critical rereading of prescriptive archetypes by deconstructing paradigms of work, gender and sexuality.

This project was developed with the help of Georgy Mamedov, the Kyrgyzstani LGBTQI+ activist and curator who collaborated with the Werker Collective in Russia. It was presented for the first time at the 5th Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art in Yekaterinburg, Russia. However, the country's 2013 "gay propaganda law" meant that the project could only be displayed with an over-18 age warning and, even then, six images had to be censored.



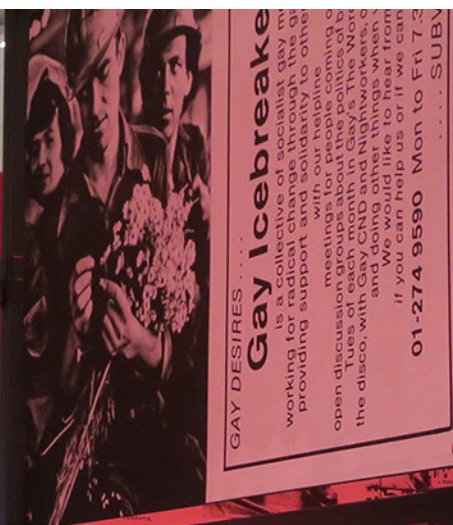
Werker Collective. *A Gestural History of a Young Worker*, 2019





new: 1973 TQIF)

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GORDON MATTA-CLARK

Splitting, 1974 / Conical Intersect, 1975

The two works by Gordon Matta-Clark in the show—the video *Splitting* and the photocollage *Conical Intersect*—belong to what he called “anarchitecture”. They document two different performances with the same means and end: intercepting buildings and slicing them open to destructure them and expose the oppressive nature of urban fabric. Matta-Clark compared his building cuts to “juggling with syntax”, a metaphor that presents his urban hacks not as destructive acts but rather interventions to rethink spaces: eschewing the idea of fixed space innate in the concept of architecture in favour of movement and dialogue with the light let in by the cuts, which open the building up to nature.

Drawing from first-wave institutional critique, nature-based conceptual art and performance art, Matta-Clark worked to deconstruct the physical nature of architecture by literally slicing into abandoned buildings to create dizzying spaces sculpted from voids and fissures. By destructuring existing sites, he sought to reveal the tyranny of urban enclosure.

Conical Intersect, Matta-Clark’s contribution to the 1975 Paris Biennale, exemplifies his critique of urban gentrification at a time when the city was about to demolish two 17th-century buildings to make way for the Centre Georges Pompidou. For this anti-monument, he bored a spiralled hole in one of them, of which only the exhibition photographs remain. Periscope-like, the void offered passersby a view of the buildings’ internal skeletons and revealed the poetics of the civic ruin.

Splitting shows a frame house slated for demolition sliced in half by the artist to let in light, creating a dreamlike image that reveals nature in contact with architecture. It speaks not only to the temporary nature of abandoned buildings but also to the need to reconsider their fundamental principles.





Gordon Matta-Clark. *Splitting*, 1974



Gordon Matta-Clark. *Conical Intersect*, 1975

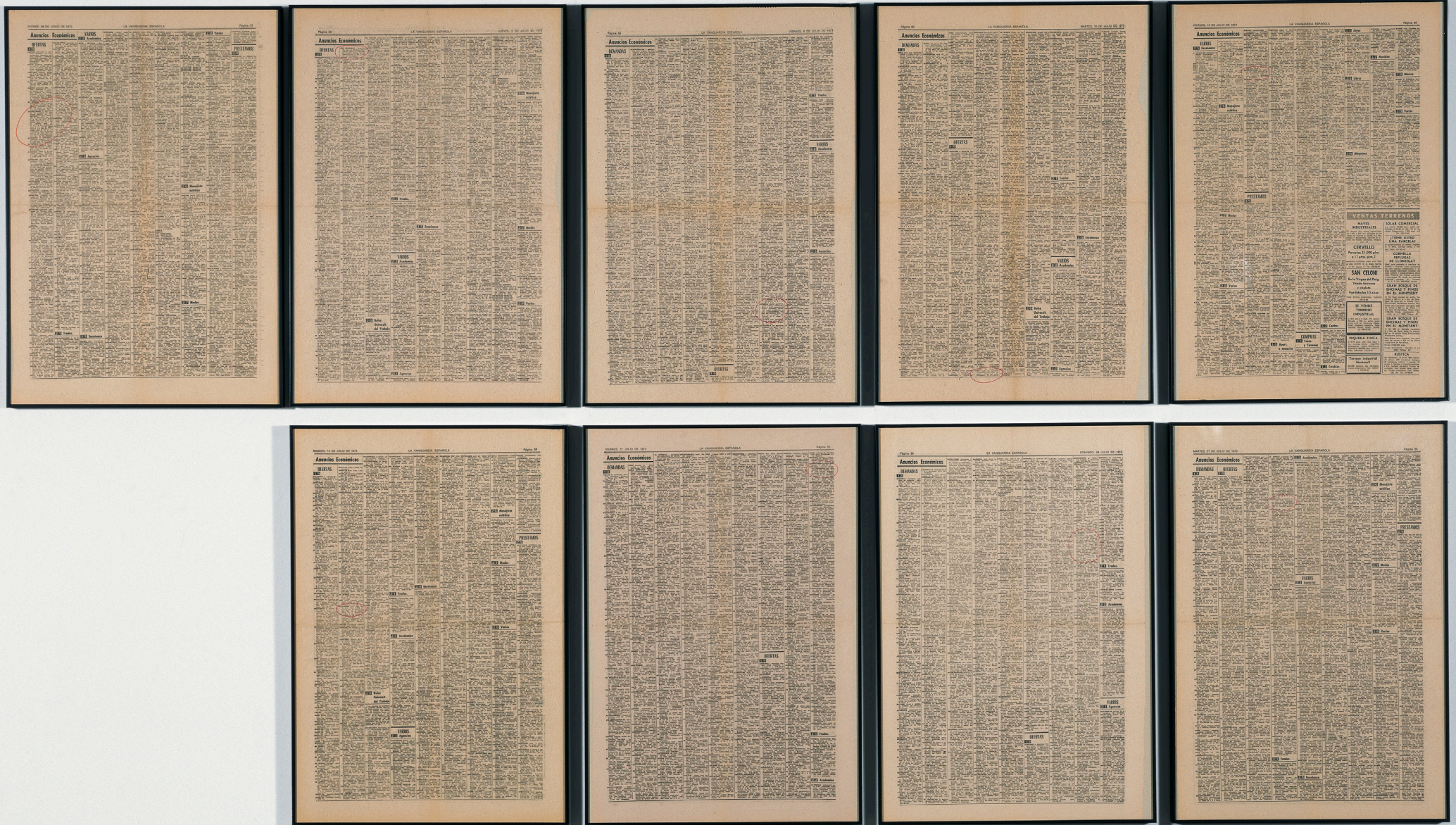
GRUP DE TREBALL

Anunciamos, 1973

“WE ANNOUNCE the appearance of 27 adverts in this section of the newspaper to be placed by 9 people between 1 and 26 July.” Thus began the Grup de Treball collective’s series of adverts in *La Vanguardia*, published between June and July 1973. By inserting this series in the newspaper, Grup de Treball not only hacked into the press but also widened their critique by investigating the power of the word as a political language register. *Anunciamos* uses language to both interfere with reality and parody the visual signs characteristic of censorship.

The *Anunciamos* series belongs to Grup de Treball’s early period, when Jordi Benito, Manuel Rovira, Carles Santos, Francesc Abad, Antoni Mercader, Alicia Fingerhut, Dorothée Selz, Antoni Muntadas and Morera laid the group’s foundations, based on the criticality of language and its capacity to shake people’s conscience. In this context, the press became a key part of their discourse, always as a fundamental factor in shaping public opinion.





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Grup de Treball. *Anunciamos*, 1973

LIST OF WORKS

Elena Asins

Shalom Elechen (Shalom Aleichem)

[Peace Be with You]

1988

Paper. Digital print on continuous stationery

A 236-page book, with each page 21 × 30.5 cm

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Collection

Öyvind Fahlström

Mao-Hope March

1966

16 mm film transferred to video, b/w, sound, 4 min 50 s

Director, producer and sound editor: Öyvind Fahlström

Cameraman and editor: Alfons Schilling

Interviewer: Bob Fass

MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium

Grup de Treball

Anunciamos

[We Announce]

1973

Printed ink and felt-tip pen on paper

13 pages, with each page 49.5 × 34 cm

MACBA Collection. Generalitat de Catalunya long-term loan.

Col·lecció Nacional d'Art. Donated by Grup de Treball

Zheng Mahler

The Master Algorithm

2019

3D animation, 9 holographic ventilators,

Bluetooth sound, 15 min 24 s

Zheng Mahler

Gordon Matta-Clark***Splitting***

1974

Super 8 film transferred to video,
b/w and colour, silent, 11 min 5 s
MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium

Gordon Matta-Clark***Conical Intersect***

1975

Gelatin silver print photocollage
18 × 13.3 cm
MACBA Collection. MACBA Foundation

Antoni Muntadas***Paraules: la conferència de premsa***

[Words: The Press Conference Room]

1991–2017

Audiovisual installation

Varying dimensions

"la Caixa" Foundation Collection of Contemporary Art

Martha Rosler***Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue'***

1982

Single-channel video, colour, sound, 25 min 45 s
MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona long-term loan

Eve Sussman***whiteonwhite: algorithmic noir***

2009–2011

Video projection: software to randomly combine
video clips and voiceovers, computer and LCD monitor
Varying dimensions
"la Caixa" Foundation Collection of Contemporary Art

Werker Collective***A Gestural History of a Young Worker***

2019

Installation

210 × 60 cm boards

Werker Collective

BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Cueto (Oviedo, Asturias) is digital curator at C/O Berlin, a nonprofit foundation that explores lens-based media. She holds a BA in Journalism from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid and an MA in Arts Management from Maastricht University. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, where she is researching blockchain as a tool for radical imagination and its collateral effects on the notion of value.

She has won a number of awards and grants, including the Inéditos Prize for Emerging Curators in Spain in 2017 and the Botín Foundation Scholarship for Young Curators in 2014/2015.

Her projects are at the intersection of contemporary art, new technologies and activism. She has published, convened and curated projects at a wide range of international institutions, including La Casa Encendida in Madrid, Bétonsalon in Paris, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Marres House for Contemporary Culture in Maastricht, Impakt Festival in Utrecht, De Appel Contemporary Arts Centre in Amsterdam, Moscow Museum of Modern Art (as part of the 6th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art), Singapore Art Museum, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and the Asia Culture Centre in Gwangju, South Korea. She has been artist-in-residence at Tokyo Wonder Site in Japan, Rupert in Lithuania and Cité internationale des arts in Paris. She currently lives and works in Berlin.

