

This essay accompanies the exhibition *In May (After October)* featuring Andreas Bunte, Duncan Campbell, Thea Djordjadze, Matias Faldbakken, Claire Fontaine, Luca Frei, Cyprien Gaillard, Luis Jacob, Pia Rönicke, and Nora Schultz  
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## In May (After October)

by Kathrin Meyer

Victory will be for those who will be able to create disorder without loving it.

- Guy Debord, "Theses on Cultural Revolution," June 1958

In May 1968, students marched the streets of Paris and more than ten million workers all over France went out on strike. In October 1917, militant revolutionaries in Russia overthrew the government and subsequently established a communist state. *In May (After October)* makes reference to two moments in the 20th Century where artists were actively involved in expressing desires for change, inventing new aesthetic forms and alternative models of community and refusing to affirm the status quo: the Situationist International in France and the Russian avant-garde in the time of the October Revolution. The exhibition does not seek to give answers to questions regarding the efficacy of these events. Nor is it directly about the Situationist International, May 1968, or October 1917. These two moments in history rather provide a platform for looking at ways to express refusal and critique in art.

In the years directly after October 1917, the Russian avant-garde contributed to the formation of the new life by developing radical aesthetic departures in graphic design, painting, photography and film that materialized and fostered the social upheaval. For a while, art and the state appeared to be walking hand in hand towards the common goal of designing a different life. But soon problems in this relationship manifested, as illustrated by an anecdote about Kasimir Malevich's design for a monument to Lenin in 1924. Instead of a realistic figure, Malevich had included a simple cube on top of the structure...

But where's Lenin?" the artist was asked. With an injured air he pointed to the cube. "Anybody could see that if they had a soul," he added. But the judges without hesitation turned down the work of art. There must be a real figure of Lenin, they reason, if the single-minded peasant is to be inspired.<sup>1</sup>

The anecdote underscores the division between the avant-garde's beliefs in the potential of abstraction and the state's ideas about propaganda through the figurative art of Socialist Realism. The end of the first "October" was reached. Artistic activities became heavily controlled and censored by a Soviet state that did not allow for experiments and critique outside of set parameters.

The Parisian May of 1968 was another attempt at a new "October," to make a radical departure and bring about social change. The riots and strikes were the climax of the



Duncan Campbell, *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles Poster* (Detail), 2007, Screen print on paper

growing dissatisfaction with President Charles de Gaulle's administration. Starting in March of 1968, demonstrations took place at several universities. Workers subsequently joined the students in their protest for better conditions. And at the end of May, the movement had spread out so that more than ten million French workers were on strike. Members of the Situationist International (SI), a group of artists founded in 1957, were on the Parisian strike committees. In addition to creating and distributing texts and flyers, the SI was directly involved in the organization of the protests, contributing to moving and perpetuating it.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the SI did not see itself as an art movement but as "an organization of professional revolutionaries in culture."<sup>3</sup> Writing, making collages and films were means to an end. They wanted to change culture, the "compound of aesthetics, feelings and manners, that is, a period's reaction to everyday life"<sup>4</sup> in all of its aspects, not just in the realm of the arts. One of their main strategies to destabilize and pressure the mechanics of everyday life and politics was *détournement*: undermining consumer culture by re-using and altering pre-existent mass cultural material (e.g. comics, advertising, film footage).<sup>5</sup> *Détournement* can be understood as an effective way of turning the representational tools of consumer culture on their heads.

A central aspect of their activities and theories was the critique of the built world and urbanism, namely of housing projects and suburbia. They argued for psychogeography: an understanding that (urban) space is a network of interconnected social relations. One of the SI's practices for engaging with the built world was *dérive*: a kind of purposeless but attentive drifting (through the city) that brought about experimental – psychogeographical – experiences of space. The main aim of these spatial strategies was to contest the unifying and rationalist aspects of urban planning and to make alienated, abstract space a social one. In this way, the theories and actions of the SI were directed at provoking



Andreas Bunte, Still from *O.T. (Wohnung)*, 2006, 16mm, b/w, silent



Cyprien Gaillard, *Field of Rest*, 2008, Polaroid

changes in lives of individuals and thus changing dominant social conditions.

The May 68 demonstrations ended with President de Gaulle calling for an election in June, which he won with a 78% majority of the vote. The SI dissolved in 1972. Whatever the Situationists' role was in and before May 1968, their writings and actions still resonate and continue to influence artists working today – as in the celebration of the subversive, the realization of experimentation and play, the refusal to surrender to passive spectatorship and repetition in society or accept social conditions as unchangeable.

Some of the SI's concerns resonate in the works of *In May (After October)*. For example, Andreas Bunte's film installation *Die letzten Tage der Gegenwart* [The Last

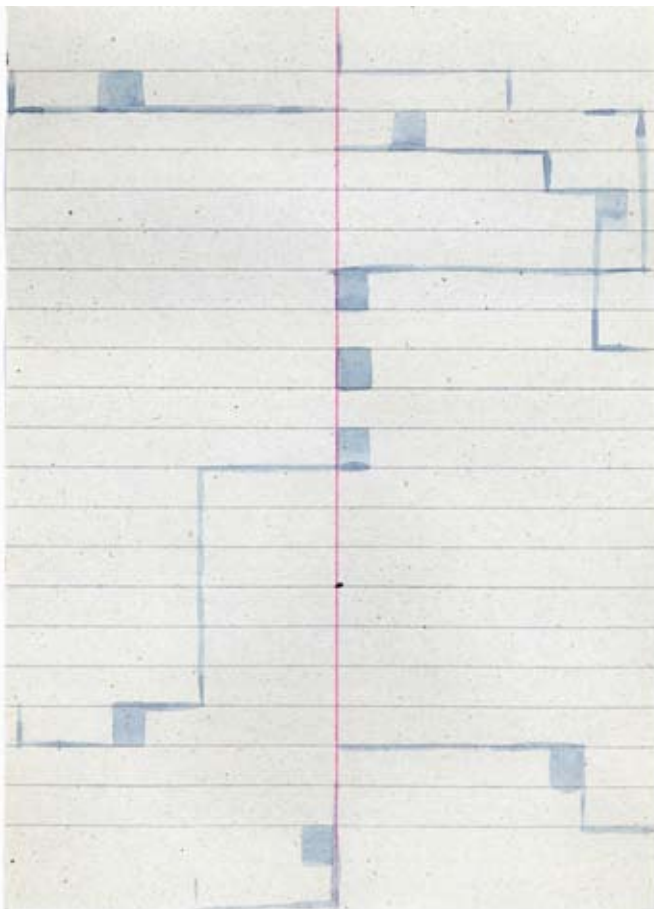


Andreas Bunte, *Die letzten Tage der Gegenwart*, 2006, Installation view at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, 2008

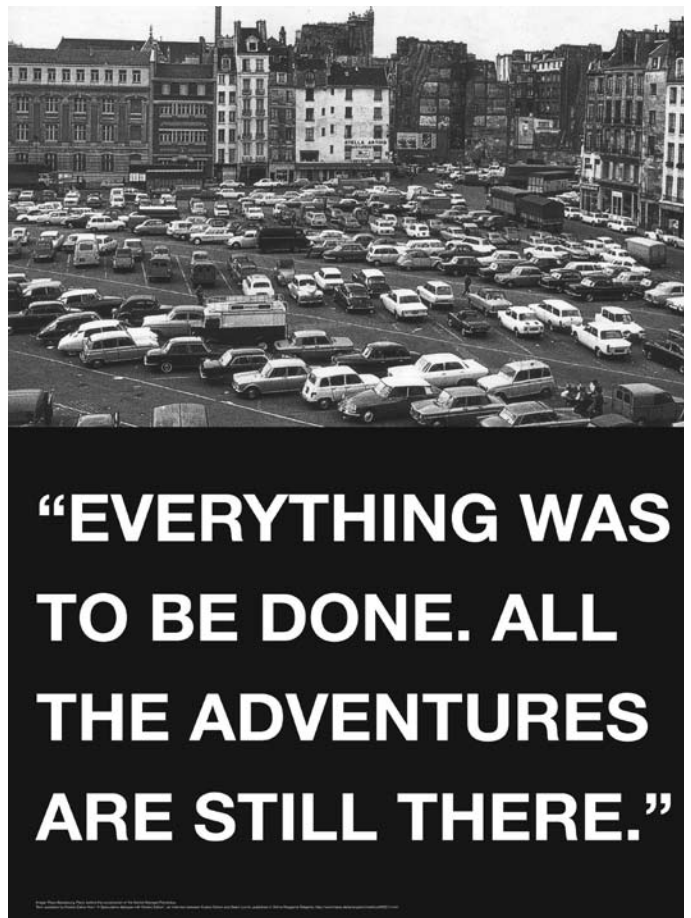
Days of the Present Time] (2006) references the RAF (Red Army Fraction), a German terrorist group active in the 1970s and 1980s whose goal was to overthrow bourgeois society. While living in hiding in large apartment complexes, members of the RAF set up “conspiratorial apartments,” in which their terrorist activities were disguised in the furniture and wallpaper of a normal life. One of Bunte’s two simultaneously playing 16mm films depicts the rooms of a furnished apartment. Behind closed flower-patterned curtains, traces of a conspiratorial workshop are scattered throughout: tools used to create flyers like Letraset-letters, cut-outs from magazines, scissors and glue. The second film shows modernist urban houses, as well as examples of fascist architecture and communist monuments. Mounted on the dividing wall that separates the two projectors are photocopied collages resembling the ones produced in the apartment of the first film. These consist of images and text fragments written in the style of the Situationist International: poetical-political slogans about man, architecture, and the desire for change and liberation. At the core of this work stands Walter Benjamin’s image of the apartment as an “étui for men” – the bourgeois apartment as a container that envelops its inhabitant.<sup>6</sup> Bunte radicalized

the phrase, suggesting that a space might also shape the way one thinks. He says that he was “interested in the normative power of architecture and how it is integrated into every detail of architecture, an architecture that accommodated the German “Spießler” [petty bourgeois] as well as the terrorists who were in hiding.”<sup>7</sup>

Cyprien Gaillard’s video *Desniansky Raion* (2007) experimentally “documents” examples of the bureaucratic side of urbanism as manifested in the form of large-scale housing projects and brutalist architecture. *Desniansky Raion* opens with a view of the “Genex Tower” (or “Western City Gate”), a 35-storey brutalist skyscraper in Belgrade, Serbia. The second part shows a battle which takes place in the Soviet architecture of a suburb of St. Petersburg, followed by images of a spectacular detonation of a Parisian apartment complex accompanied by a lightshow, fireworks and music. An aerial perspective of a desolate housing complex in the Desniansky Raion district of Kiev makes up the last sequence. Gaillard registers the existence, decay, and demolition of modernist and brutalist buildings and housing projects whose disappearance is a sign of a change of cultural paradigms. His series of framed Polaroids *Field of Rest* (2008) uses the dying Polaroid technology to depict abandoned



Thea Djordjadze, Part of: *Time Future Contained in Time Past II*, 2008, Watercolor on paper



Luca Frei, *Everything was to be done. All the adventures are still there*, 2007, Poster



and decaying urban sites whose present status is uncertain. The Polaroids function as last entries that are bound to fade away, eventually disappearing like the buildings and sites they depict.

Duncan Campbell's *Falls Burns Malone Fiddles* (2003) is comprised of still and moving images taken in the 1970s and 1980s in Northern Ireland. Obtained from different archives, the collection of images – private snapshots, bits of interviews and newspaper photos – originate from the time of “The Troubles,” the conflict between Northern Ireland’s Roman Catholic nationalist minority and the unionist Protestant majority. By examining what kind of information the images and accounts of the past are able to convey, Campbell’s video conducts a careful consideration of the limits of representation. Snapshots of young people hanging out in the streets, photos of car wrecks and IRA-related graffiti are accompanied by an almost incomprehensible voiceover that considers the impossibility of understanding what life was like at that time. Narrator Ewen Bremner’s strong Scottish accent makes the commentary incredibly difficult to grasp. The viewer is left to make sense of images and texts whose relation is further complicated, rather than clarified, by the addition of language.

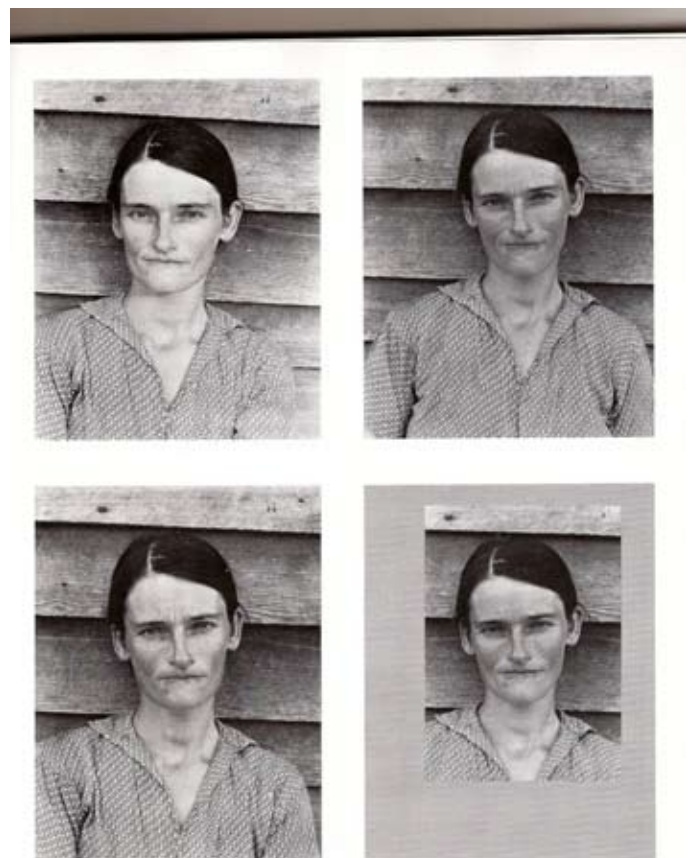
Pia Rönicke and Luca Frei’s pieces relate to historical frameworks as “works in progress,” engaging with the potentially endless processes of interpretation that generate unstable and continuously unfinished constructions. Luca Frei has conducted broad research on the actual, alternative and imaginary existence of the cultural center “Centre Pompidou” in Paris. The “Beaubourg,” as it is colloquially called in France, opened in 1977 and hosts the largest collection of contemporary and modern art in Europe, as well as a library, movie theaters and other spaces dedicated to the performing arts. In 1976, sociologist Albert Meister published a fictional account of the institution that Frei has translated and interpreted. *The so-called utopia of the centre beaubourg – An interpretation* presents a fictive history of the Beaubourg, one in which an alternative society is established under the building that totally differs from the state-produced cultural program of the world above.<sup>8</sup> Frei’s ongoing research regarding the potential of alternative community models – as exemplified by Albert Meister’s book – is materialized in his re-distribution and interpretation of the text as well as in collages and installations. By presenting poetic proposals that introduce alternatives to the status quo, Frei’s works point at the conditions and effects of capitalism and evoke the idea that indeed it could all be different.

Pia Rönicke’s *Rosa’s Letters – Telling a Story* (2006) is based on letters written by communist Rosa Luxemburg (1871-

1919), who was murdered in Berlin during the riots that ignited during the collapse of the monarchy and the ascension to Weimar Republic. Rönicke’s work consists of three pieces – two videos and a slide-show with an architectural model – that relate to each other like the skins of an onion without a core, containing each other without reaching a final point. The first video shows a woman building a small replica of the room she is in. The accompanying voiceover is composed of sections from different letters, which Luxemburg wrote



Pia Rönicke, *Rosa’s Letters – Telling a Story / Model*, 2006, Slide show (80 slides) and model (cardboard, paper, color prints)



Nora Schultz, *After Walker Evans After Sherrie Levine*, 2009, Digital print

from prison to friends and lovers. Another piece consists of a slideshow of still images from this video projected onto the architectural model that we see being built in the video. Lastly, another projection features an assortment of rooms and landscapes, the places Rosa Luxemburg mentioned in her letters and the respective ambient sounds. These three pieces don't offer a representation of Rosa Luxemburg's life but rather mirror the process of imagining and approaching it through the letters she has left and other historical facts about her life. Thinking about her own position as a reader of documents, Röncke grapples with the interpretation of Luxemburg's life, presenting it as a never ending story.

Nora Schultz's *After Walker Evans After Sherrie Levine* (2009) – an appropriation of an appropriation – mirrors the changing functions of images. The poster is a scanned book page containing four versions of Walker Evans' famous photograph of Allie Mae Burroughs taken during the Great Depression. It is taken from a book that shows Evans' canonic work alongside versions that did not make it into circulation. His documentary photographs of an under-represented group of people have long found their way into the canon and market of art where they are shown and sold as single pieces. In 1981, Sherrie Levine presented photographs of catalogue pages containing Evans' works in her series *After Walker Evans*. Viewing Schultz appropriation alongside Levine's underscores how Levine's famous appropriation of Evans' work – her very critique of the commodification and institutionalization of images – has become institutionalized and commodified as well. It also addresses the status of Evans' photographs as singular iconic images and their former function as testimonies – historical documents – of living conditions during the Depression. In this way, Schultz reiterates the idea that artworks, as parts of historical and social contexts, are situated in a "series of cultural relationships" and thus subject to changing interpretations

and social functions.<sup>9</sup>

Luis Jacob is well known for his appropriative works. His *Albums* (ongoing since 2000) reuse and recombine images drawn from various sources. Here, his images are assembled according to an arbitrary criteria, such as similarity of subject matter, colour, or composition. The images do not illustrate a specific text or represent a scene, person or item anymore, but have been detached from their original context; they are "dysfunctional" – ceasing to represent anything outside of themselves. In this negative gesture Jacob isolates the intrinsic pictorial qualities of these images. New ways of understanding and seeing them open up, making room for association and play. Jacob's new work *Manual* (2009) consists of a grid of reproductions of abstract paintings by artists such as Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, Kasimir Malevich and Lucio Fontana. By turning to the "empty pictures" of abstract painting, Jacob offers nothing but colour and structure and leaves the viewer to ponder the "holes" in reality that these works effect.

Thea Djordjadze's work is one of the few in the exhibition that does not employ appropriated material. Her *Time Future Contained in Time Past II* (2009) comprises a little plaster block alongside abstract drawings of amorphous shapes and geometrical structures. The object echoes something familiar but remains undetermined; the drawings, executed on lined notebook-paper, seem like sketches for something yet to be done, a reminder of some unsettled potentiality. Djordjadze's explorations of the anti-form are like shadows of something real, an imagination of the life of objects before they are named and defined. But her works are anything else but virtual, rather insisting on their thingness, presence and factitiousness. "What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation," continues T. S. Eliot's poem *Burnt Norton* whose first line provides the title for Djordjadze's work in



Luis Jacob, Selection from: *Album V*, 2007,  
Image montage in plastic laminate, 1 of 10 panels



Luis Jacob, *Manual*, 2009,  
Collage sequence on 76 masonite panels

the exhibition that mirrors the balance between presence and potential that characterizes her works.

Matias Faldbakken is known both as a novelist and as a visual artist. His hilarious and appalling stories delve deep into exaggerated clichés of political activism, idealism, sexual repression and excess. He goes to extremes, negating the literary and social conventions of good taste. His art works refuse to communicate any content by blurring and distorting images and signs faintly resembling letters or making directly negative statements. Included in the exhibition is *Newspaper Ad # 01* (2007), a work from a series based on images culled from newspapers. The image has been altered so that the depicted subject is rendered indecipherable. Only title and the characteristic grid of newspaper images point back at its origin and former function in a communication process. Faldbakken expresses the idea of incorporating the negative into his art and to make works that “refer to nullification, works that annul extremes, works that absorb political and social tensions, but which in the same gesture refer to themselves, their position within the art world and the art institution’s ability to empty works of all meaning – and reduce them to art.”<sup>10</sup>

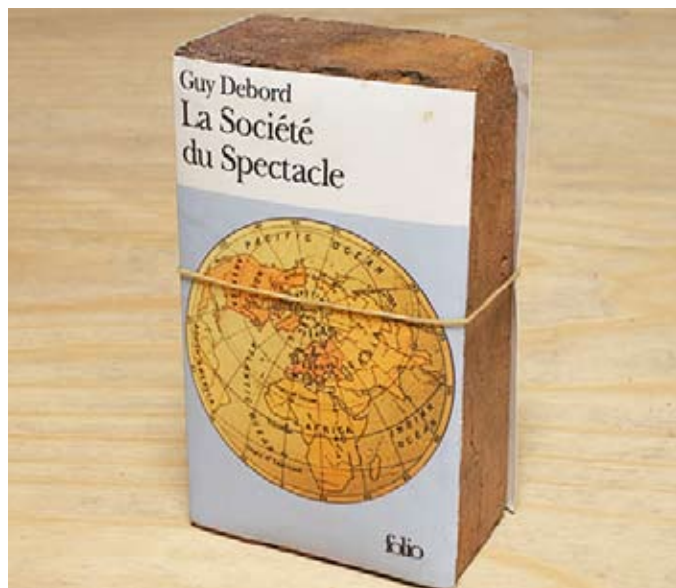
This reduction, on the other hand, is art’s unique potential: as its function is not to fulfill tasks like providing an argument, being useful, logical and true, it offers room for negation and refusal, irrational experiments, alternatives and oppositions to the status quo and allows for the trespass against social conventions and for experimentation with radically divergent or suppressed practices and forms. The collective Claire Fontaine’s work calls precisely upon the freedom that the limitations of the art world entail. They understand art as a “land for political refugees.”<sup>11</sup> For the

work *First Flight* (2001) (2005) Claire Fontaine has taken two US-American quarters engraved with an airplane out of circulation and has rendered them useless by attaching small sickle-shaped knife blades to the coins. The American currency is transformed so that it functions as a symbol of anti-capitalist sentiment. Also featured in the exhibition is one of Claire Fontaine’s *Brickbats*, a series of bricks wrapped in colour reproductions of real and fictitious book covers. The piece shown here makes use of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (2007). The title *Brickbat* plays with the double meaning of the word that can stand for a brick used as a weapon and blunt verbal criticism. Situationist Debord’s book was published in 1967 and is considered the primer for the Situationists. It criticizes the overwhelming presence of the spectacle that envelops individuals and keeps them in a state of total passivity. “Disguising” a brick – a basic weapon associated with demonstrations and strikes – within Debord’s text, might call for action and/or metaphorically define the book as a weapon against that which neutralizes the potential for change in society. Claire Fontaine uses objects and language – in ways that can be provocative, direct and irrational – as vehicles to express an explicit and radical critique of society, aiming at breaking with consent and resignation.

The works in the exhibition *In May (After October)* reiterate art’s liberty and disruptive function – its ability to (re)organize and (re)present images, texts and objects in ways that are neither illustrative and rational, nor immediately accessible. They write their own histories and stories on the basis of texts and images that have possibly been interpreted numerous times but never in this way. Rather than making statements about singular moments,



Claire Fontaine, *First Flight* (2001), 2005,  
Two twenty-five cent coins, steel box-cutter blades, solder and rivets



Claire Fontaine, *La Société du Spectacle Brickbat*, 2006,  
Brick and brick fragments, elastic band, and archival print on archival paper



the works in this exhibition relate to culture as a constantly evolving draft that is developed in continuous, at times antagonistic interpretations. Rather than simplifying, they seek to complicate the mechanics of representation and interpretation. As such, the works continue a project begun

by others: to interrupt common understandings and refuse to accept them, to write their own interpretations and stand in the way of trivialization and simplification – to find new ways to say “no.”

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 TJ Clark. *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 225. (*Art News*, 5 April 1924)
- 2 See Greil Marcus. *Lipstick Traces. A Secret History of the 20th Century*. 12th ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 428-29.
- 3 Guy Debord. “Theses on Cultural Revolution.” *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*. Ed. Tom McDonough. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (An October Book), 2004, p. 62.
- 4 Guy Debord. “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency.” Trans. Tom McDonough. McDonough 2004, p. 30.
- 5 See TJ Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith. “Why art can’t kill the Situationist International.” McDonough 2004, p. 485.
- 6 “Architecture, Terrorism and Enlightenment. Andreas Bunte and Kathrin Meyer in Conversation.” Andreas Bunte: *May the Circle Remain Unbroken*. Eds. Vanessa Adler and Kathrin Meyer. Berlin: argobooks, 2009, p. 5.
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Luca Frei. *The so-called utopia of the centre beaubourg – An Interpretation*. London: Bookworks, 2007. (Interpretation of the text *La soi-disant utopie du Centre Beaubourg* by Albert Meister, published under the pseudonym Gustave Affeulpin, Paris: Editions Entente, 1976.)
- 9 Howard Singerman. “Sherrie Levine, Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery.” *Artforum*, No. 22. September 1983, p. 80.
- 10 Matias Faldbakken, “The Absence of Absolute Freedom.” *F.R. David*, No. 2 (*Stuff and Nonsense*). Winter 2008, pp. 225-26.
- 11 “Interview Macht Arbeit. An Interview with Claire Fontaine by Stefanie Kleefeld.” *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 73. March 2009, p. 161.

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## ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS

**Kathrin Meyer** lives in Berlin, Germany, where she works as an editor for argobooks. She has worked on several artist books and exhibition catalogs and was a curatorial assistant for the exhibition *Between Two Deaths* at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2006.

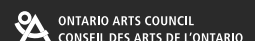
**Tim Saltarelli** is an artist and curator living in Brooklyn, NY. He is a graduate of the Image Arts program at Ryerson University, Toronto, holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and works at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, where he organizes exhibitions.

*In May (After October)* is presented in association with the Goethe-Institut, Toronto and the Contact Toronto Photography Festival ([contactphoto.com](http://contactphoto.com)).

**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

56 Ossington Avenue, Toronto ON M6J 2Y7  
T 416.645.1066 F 416.645.1681 E [info@gallerytpw.ca](mailto:info@gallerytpw.ca)  
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