

Cerith Wyn Evans

The What If ?... Scenario (after LG)

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Preface

I revel in the prospect of seeing in one wonderful space all the works by Cerith Wyn Evans from TBA21's collection put together in one coherent show. When I started collecting, one of the first works that Max Wigram brought to my attention was Cerith's *Cleave 01* (2001). It completely blew me away with its complexity, which miraculously coexisted with a stunning simplicity that brought to mind the great works of the Minimalists. Like Sarah Lucas's *Bunny Gets Snookered #3* (1997), which I acquired the same day, *Cleave 01* made me grow up nearly instantly. Cerith's work has continued to fascinate me ever since, as indeed he does as a person. The foundation's chief curator, Daniela Zyman, and I have noticed that the seven works in this exhibition mark a particular trajectory in Cerith's artistic oeuvre, and this catalogue is a genuine testimony of this great body of work. We are especially pleased to present *No night No day*, Cerith's collaboration with Florian Hecker, which was commissioned by TBA21 and premiered during the 2009 Venice Biennale, curated by Daniel Birnbaum. "What Wagner managed to do in five hours, we will do in forty minutes; namely, bore you to tears!" exclaimed Cerith in his introductory speech to a packed Teatro Goldoni. No one left the theater without a strong reaction.

I admire Cerith's work beyond description, because again and again he treads the fine line between sheer romantic beauty and radical abstraction. Apart from owning a facsimile of the world's most superb Murano chandelier, which flickers to Morse code, the collection claims four superb columns of light that any ancient Greek architect would have been proud of over 2,500 years ago.

But Cerith's work does not stop there: a new commission has emerged from our joint fascination with particle physics. I certainly don't claim to understand everything that my scientist friends at CERN tell me, but I was so inspired by my first visit there five years ago that I desperately wanted to find a way of collaborating on a project. I did not think that the search for dark matter would lend itself to visual expression, until Cerith accepted Daniela's request to create a new neon work. I then remembered how excited he had been to penetrate CERN's Large Hadron Collider only a few weeks after I had. I asked my friend Maria Spiropulu, an amazingly inspired physicist who has researched elementary particles at CERN, to work with Cerith on this new commission. For someone who never finds time to sleep, she gave this project a great deal of attention and support. It felt as if I had collided two geniuses together. I am especially grateful to Maria for this amazing opportunity.

I am deeply indebted to all the contributors to this extraordinary catalogue. The photography does justice to the works, which look truly superb in the TBA-Augarten thanks to our very talented team. I am very happy to have as part of this show Florian Hecker's collaborative work with Cerith, who introduced me to Florian in the first place. Over the years that I have known Cerith, he has brought many other wonderful things into my life, including an exquisite Japanese porcelain vase which I treasure. I immerse myself in Cerith's words when he speaks because he tells stories and anecdotes like no one else, recounts poetry by drawing on texts that bring tears to one's eyes, and sings like an angel. This is a very special exhibition to me, as it truly touches my soul. I hope it does yours too.

Nothing Is More Real Than Nothing

Wild trajectories discharging in various directions, some traces curling back in semi-circles toward the nucleus of the collision, recoiling from an invisible force field, others splitting into the room, down to the visitor's eye level, baring each minute wire, fixture, fluorescent tube. Myriad filigree cables carry the weight of this weightless object and seemingly give life to it much like a marionette while projecting onto the ceiling an accumulation of joints and fixtures resembling a celestial map.

A Community Predicated on the Basic Fact Nothing Really Matters, the new abstract neon work created by Cerith Wyn Evans for *The What If?... Scenario* (after LG) at the Augarten, is in fact a communality of dynamic forces and forms without recognizable hierarchy or sequence, except for a definite centrifugal urge. A representation of a particle collision resulting in a Higgs boson event served as the visual evocation for Wyn Evans's new work. This underlying image visualizes a simulation of a Higgs event as projected a few years ago, before the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) began producing actual data at CERN's beam point under the auspiciously green fields of the Swiss canton of Geneva. Most of the trajectories adopted and recreated as the physical elements of the neon are, in the words of the particle physicist Maria Spiropulu, "just the junk." Only four of the beams in the simulation (the beams of four muons) represent indicators of a possible Higgs event and are as such of interest to the scientists. The rest are traces of particles that have been observed since the 1960s and no longer stop the hearts of CERN's researchers. Only one collision in ten billion results in a Higgs event.

Nonetheless the junk has become an integral part of a work of art, having caught the eye of an artist who by no means arbitrarily captures the weak links, the nonevents, the flickers, the paraphernalia of the cosmos surrounding him. The other main element of the neon work is an adumbration of a molecular structure inspired by the chiral (i.e., not superimposable on its mirror image) compound lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, the psychotropic agent synthesized by Albert Hofmann in 1938. It presents an anamorphic distortion of the actual diagram, staging a perspectival shift that hints at an impossible ideal angle to be adopted by the observer or else at the fact that perspective is always relative, especially if you are looking at a hallucinogen.

It is in this fissure—in this rupture of the definitely recognizable, the measurable, the calibration, the text, the equation—that Wyn Evans's works comfortably situate themselves. In his new work, as in the method of the exhibition itself, he offers not so much estimations of *The What If?... Scenario* but rather its tools, playground equipment for endless experiments, dreamachines (in reference to Brion

Gysin and following conceptual ancestors such as Raoul Hausmann's untitled basket light, 1928, and László Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator*, 1930). Using the remarkable hybrid structures of LSD and the Higgs, he has created an extraordinary agent for these field trips.

The catalogue published on occasion of the Augarten exhibition follows the trajectories of multiple beams and attempts not to explicate but rather to implicate, complicate, and be complicit in a number of what-if scenarios. The LHC lends itself to the idea that it constitutes the ultimate dreamachine and *What If?... Scenario* (a term borrowed from Liam Gillick, whose Scenario Reports from 1996 are published here). The Higgs boson—as we learned on our field trip to CERN—is the particle that supposedly gives mass to the universe, that possibly validates the Standard Model of particle physics (conceived in the 1960s and “too beautiful” to abandon for the small flaw that it postulates an inconceivable universe without mass). Without the Higgs, *nothing really matters*.

The Higgs itself, however, is an afterthought, the materialization of wishful thinking in the sense that the LHC at CERN—the largest laboratory ever built—is constructed entirely on the fiction of a simulated projection of this missing particle whose necessity was postulated long before its discovery. Following data that showed a strong concurrence of the simulated scenarios with the detector's actual results, on July 4, 2012, contingently one year to the day before the opening of *The What If?... Scenario*, the discovery of the Higgs boson was publicly announced. Spiropulu, however, explains: “The events we call ‘Higgs events’ are actually Higgs candidate events. They do not come with a label that says, ‘I am a Higgs for sure.’ They have a high probability of being a Higgs (according to the selection rules we apply). The analysis of the events is statistical.”¹

What Wyn Evans offers, along these lines, are candidate events: on “hinterlogical” paths (to quote Carsten Höller), we make our way to a psychotropical paradise. At CERN, we are shown an oblong object that is as clear as glass and as heavy as lead. This lead tungstate crystal, which has the ability to stop particles due to its high density but also yields light, allowing photodetectors to record the particles, seems to be a kind of hinterlogical being, a form of ephemeral gravity, its own antithesis and a marriage of opposites, which also seems to attract Wyn Evans. The epiphany of CERN—the evidence that reality now confirms the simulation—is a future anterior, a nostalgic temporal loop that has again deeply interested the artist. Conversations with Cerith are always also eulogies of times and companions past. (*And if I don't meet you no more in this world / Then I'll, I'll meet you in the next one / And don't be late, don't be late.*) At his studio in London (which used to be the headquarters of the International Society for Krishna Awareness, cofounded by George Harrison), we watch Wyn Evans's film *Epiphany* (1984). It has unwittingly become a memorial to a generation of young men, many of whom were lost to the AIDS virus. There is a painful melancholia in the experience of Wyn Evans reciting Molly Nesbit quoting Elizabeth Bishop rephrasing Felicia Hemans's poem “Casabianca” (“Love's the boy stood on the burning deck / trying to recite ‘The boy

stood on / the burning deck.' Love's the son / stood stammering elocution / while the poor ship in flames went down.") There is an ecstasy in watching the Dior spring/summer 2003 haute couture show on YouTube with him or Grace Jones's Hula-Hooping performance of "Slave to the Rhythm" for the Queen's Jubilee. "I'm so spot off," says Cerith.

In a conversation with Molly Nesbit for this catalogue, Wyn Evans inquires about Duchamp's use of the word *nothing*. Is it written with a capital *N* or not? Nesbit replies with a quote by Max Stirner: "Je n'ai mis ma cause en Rien" ("Ich hab' mein Sach' auf nichts gestellt," I have based my cause on Nothing). Martin Prinzhorn ponders the ambiguity of the new neon's title, "which may refer either to a Nothing that is of great consequence or to the notion that nothing at all is of consequence." Olaf Nicolai states that "there cannot be an aesthetic experience 'as such'—in other words, without object." Jeannie Moser, in contrast, discussing Hofmann's first encounter with LSD, writes: "Depending on the dose and the 'set and setting,' the chemical agent may even produce sensory experiences lacking any objective correspondence. Separating themselves from their spatial points of reference, the objects become atopic." Wyn Evans (along with Florian Hecker, in the artists' collaboration for *No night No day*) is monadically busy "unmaking worlds," in the words of Robin Mackay. A game of severed references and objects without a story—"the rubbing of nothing against nothing," as Wyn Evans describes the structural-materialist films of his friend and tutor Peter Gidal—but nonetheless there is something that causes all these voices to reflect on the lack, disturbance, or overdrive of reference, on the relation between the inner and outer sensorium, and to create their own polyvocal cacophony of universes, be they aesthetic, scientific, psychotropic, simulated, structural, statistical, or otherwise. "Nothing is more real than nothing."²

The What If?... Scenario is a futurist utopian endeavor of highly nostalgic nature, which embraces and celebrates failure, miscommunication, and polyphonic smudges while presenting itself in the most glamorous fashion imaginable. It conjures a plethora of background voices and draws visitors closer to the glowing heat of the light columns like doomed insects. One of its main traits, although this becomes noticeable only with a latency, is rhythm, timing, pulse. Not only the Morse code–animated lights silently flitter their beats, the untitled columns too are structured into cadenced elements, and the reader, finally, following the slow communiqués of the machines, becomes "slave to the rhythm." One of the polyrhythmic voices never completely missing from Wyn Evans's pulsating universe is Samuel Beckett. And he too, it seems, has anticipated the crucial importance of the Higgs boson for *A Community Predicated on the Basic Fact Nothing Really Matters*: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."³

2. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (New York: Grove, 1956), 16.

3. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983), 7.

SPACE 1

CERITH WYN EVANS

“Astrophotography-Stages of photographic development” by Siegfried Marx (1987), 2007
Untitled, 2008

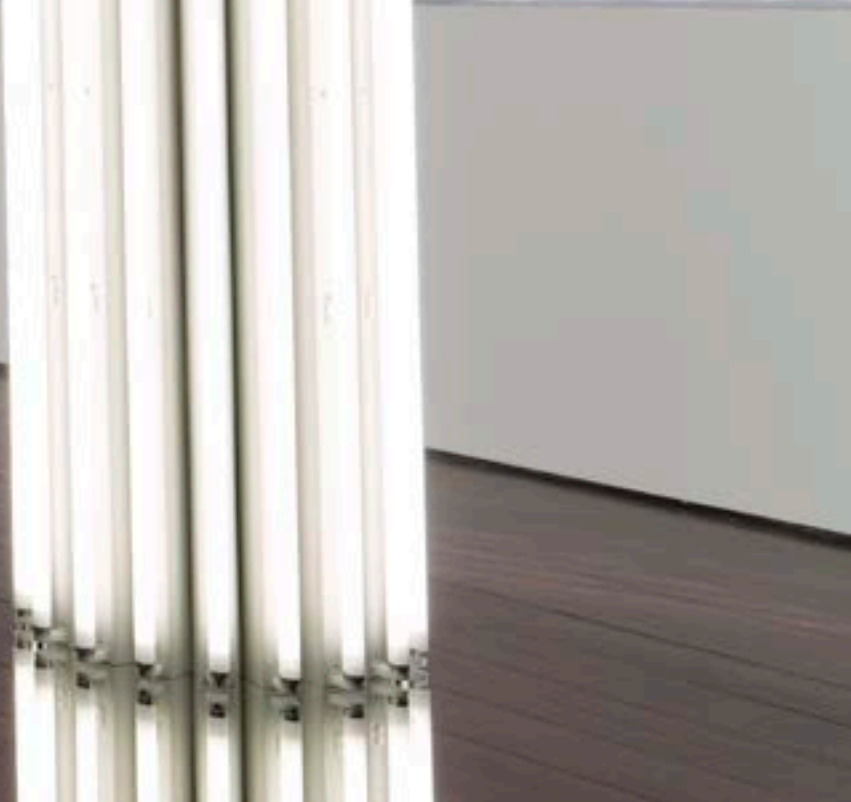
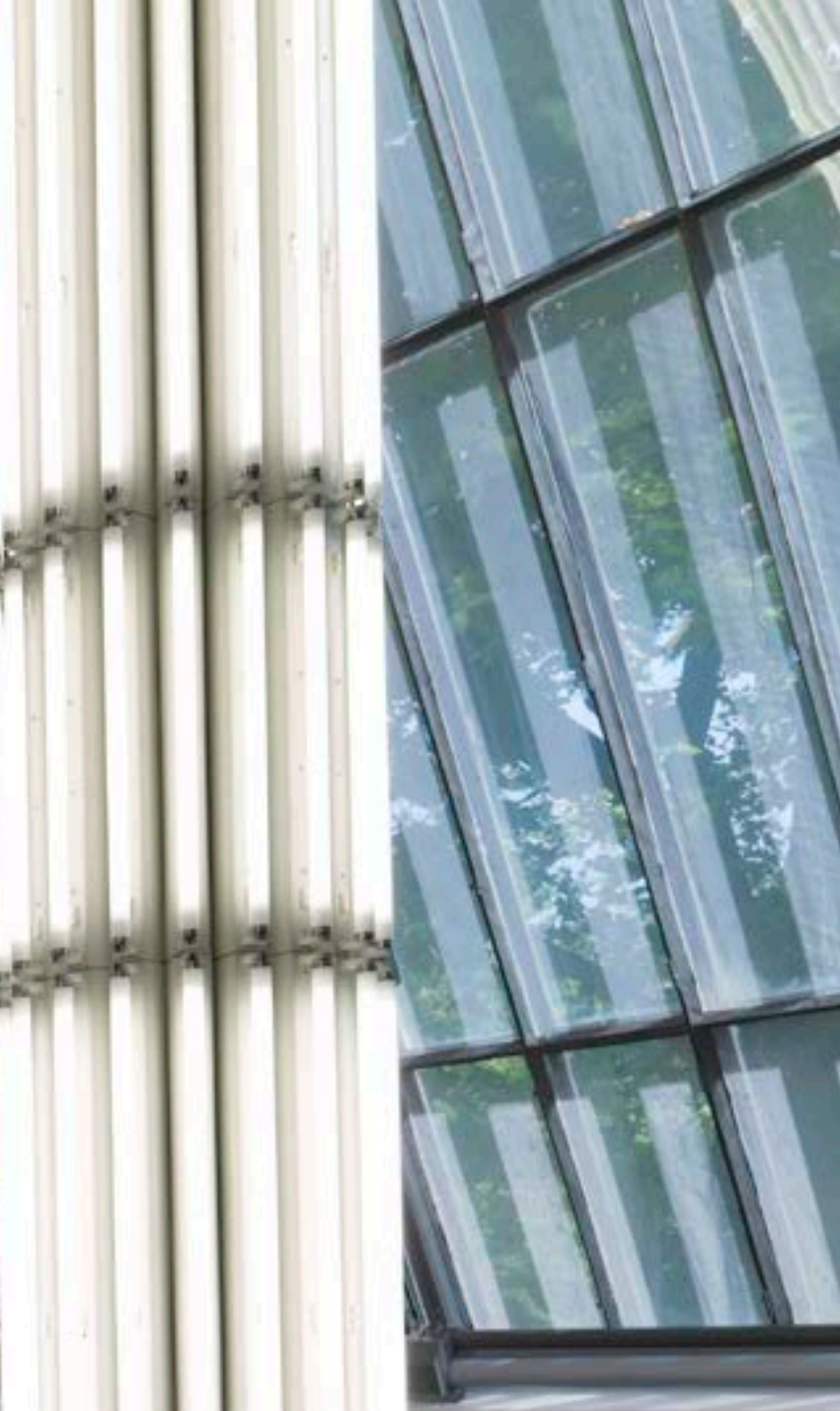






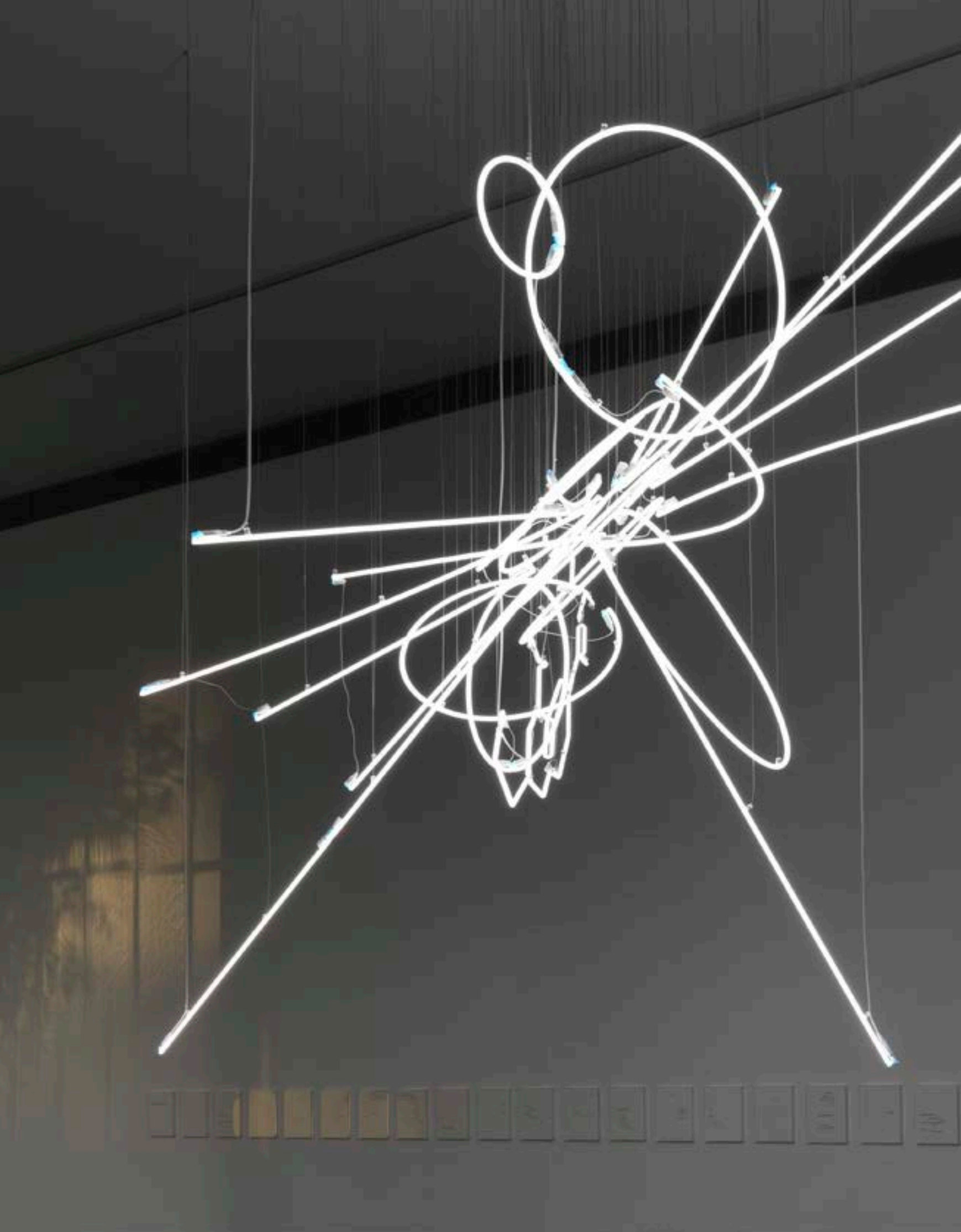


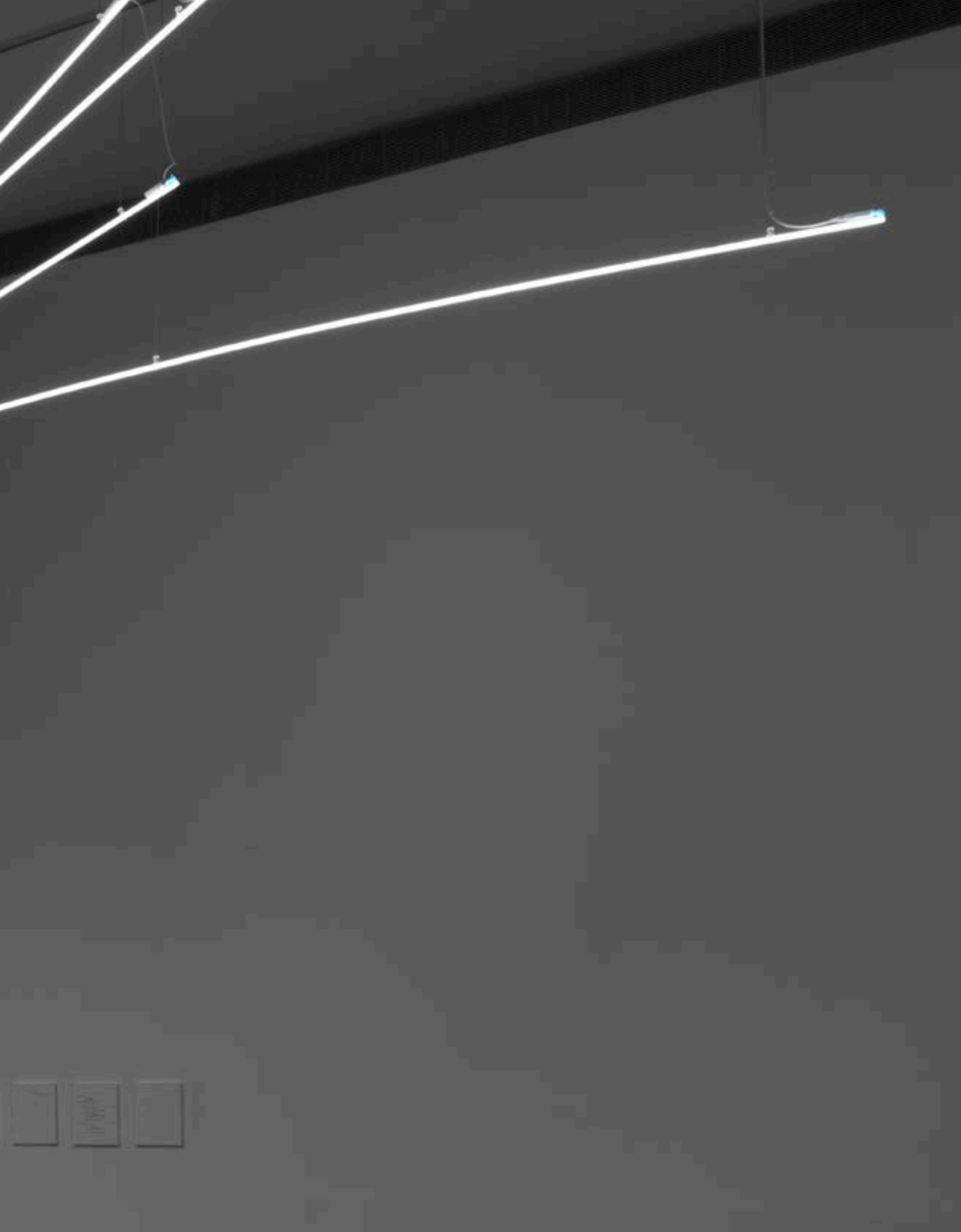












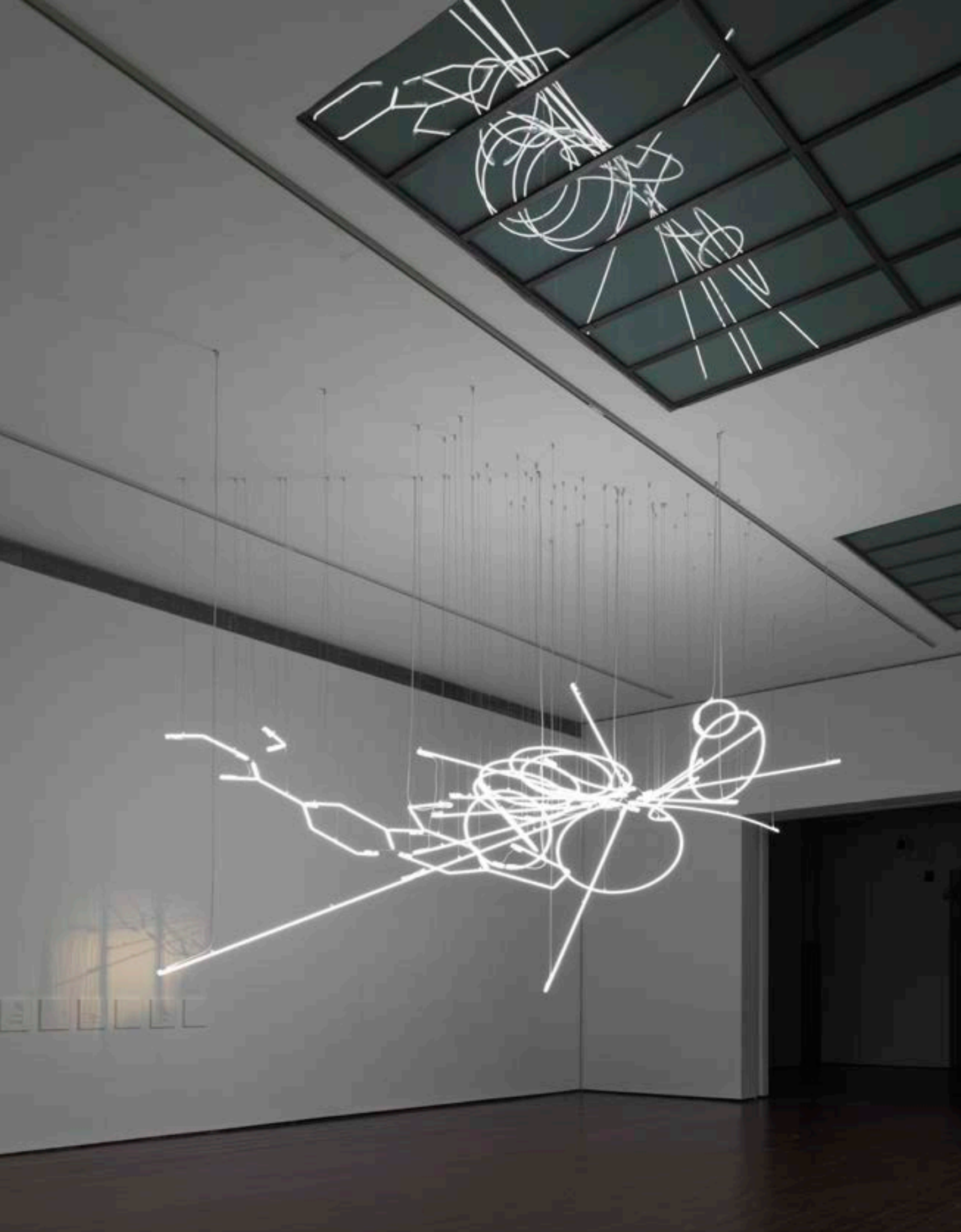
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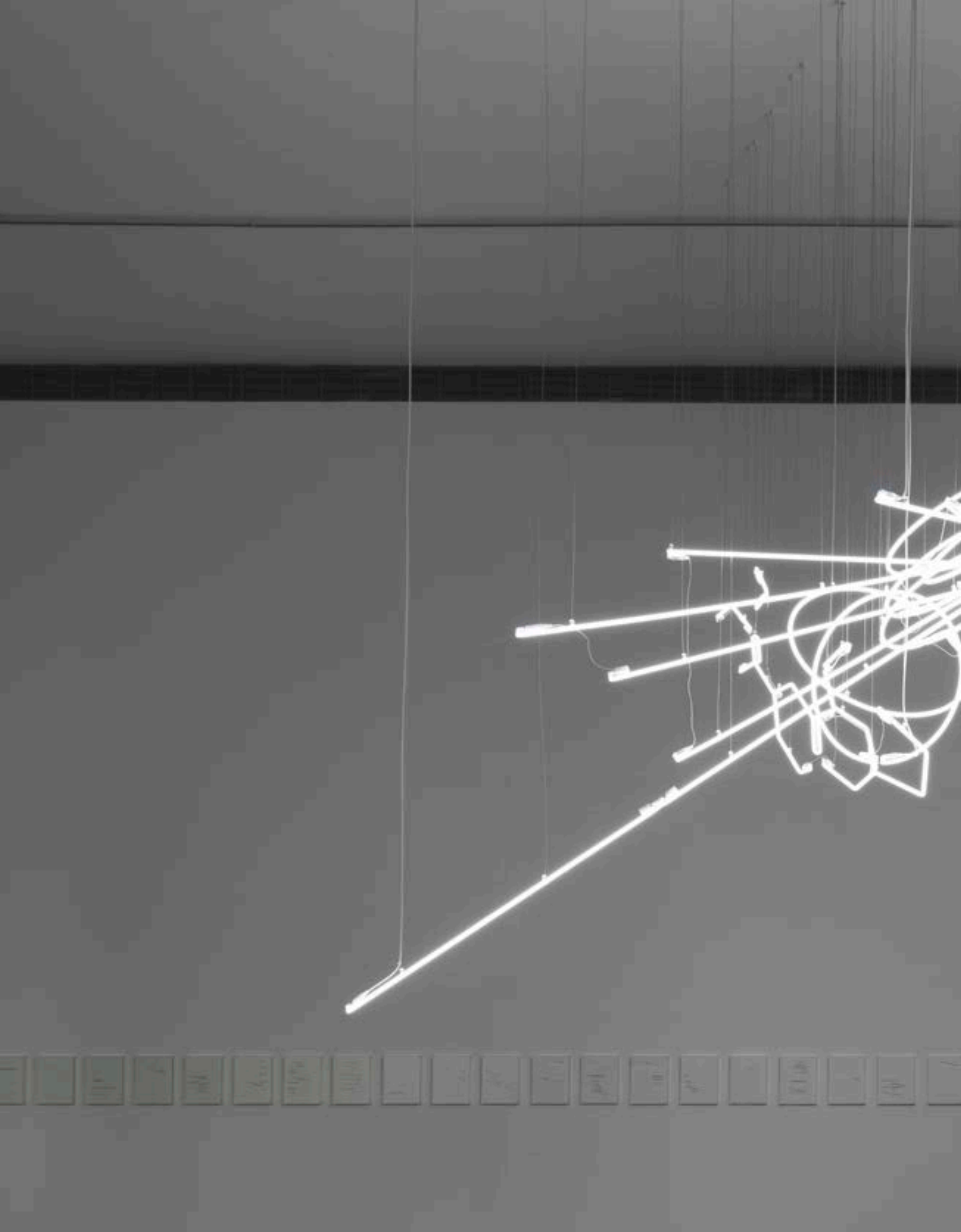
CERITH WYN EVANS

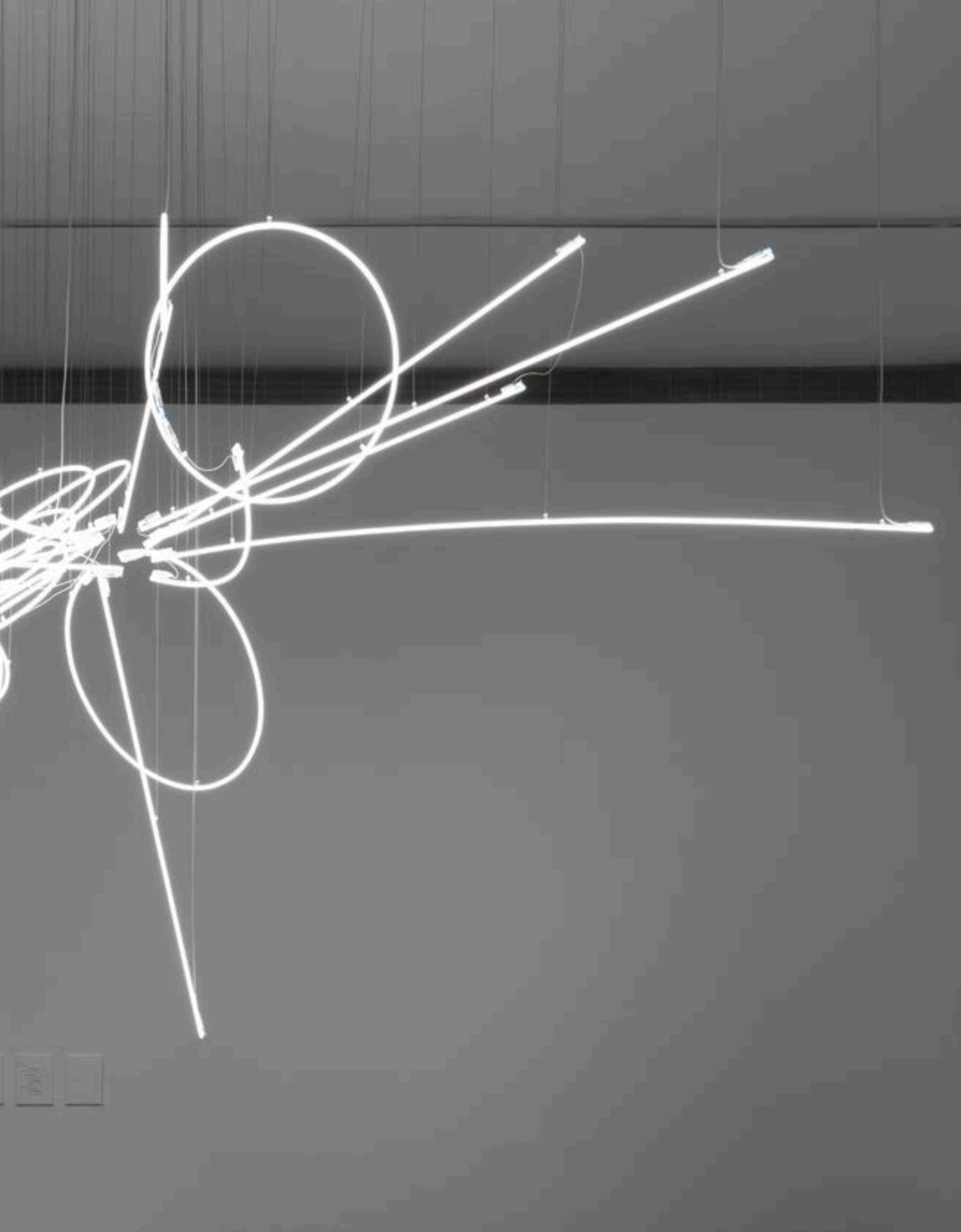
A Community Predicated on the Basic Fact Nothing Really Matters, 2013

Shadow, 2012

Untitled, 2008

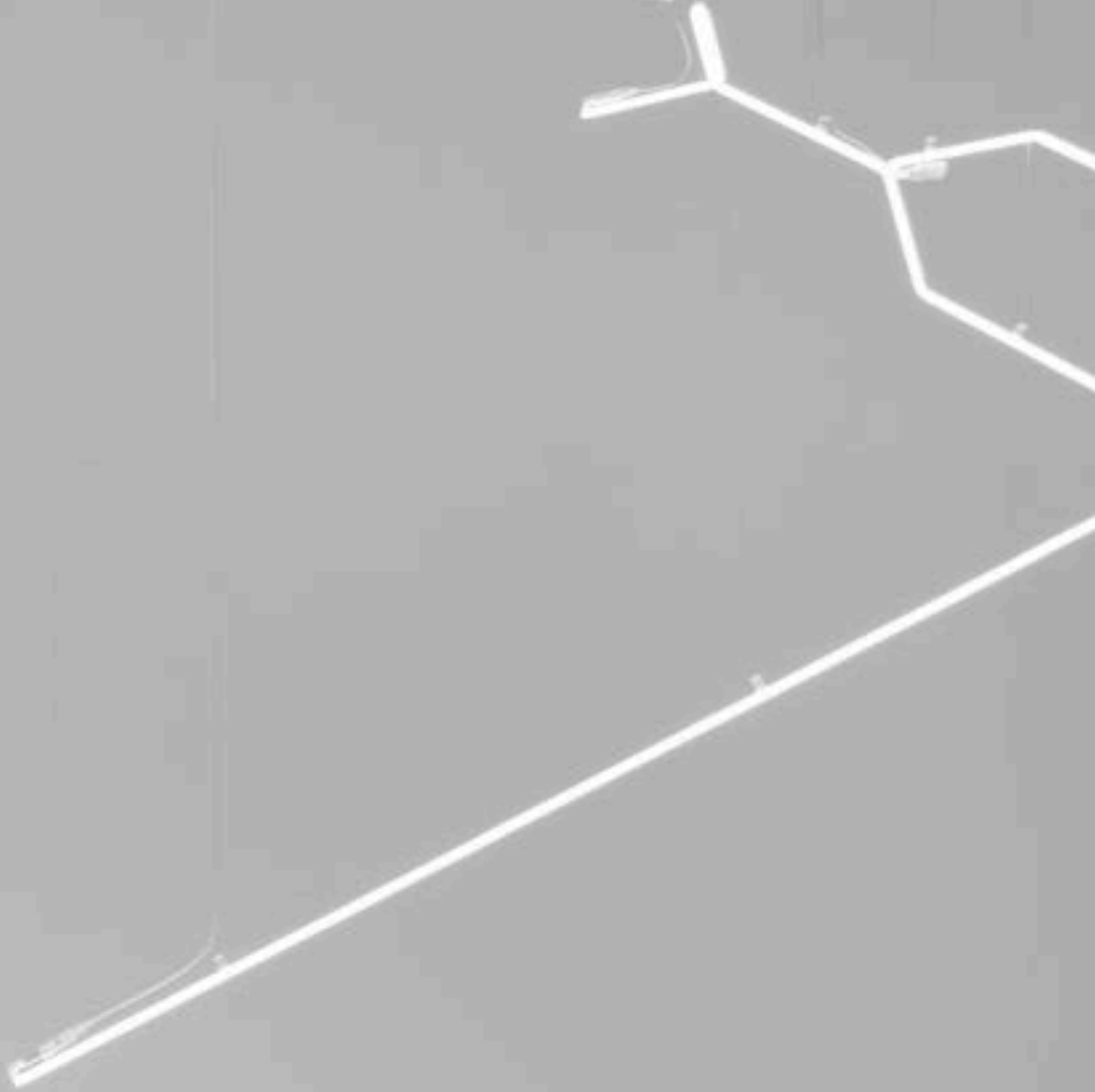








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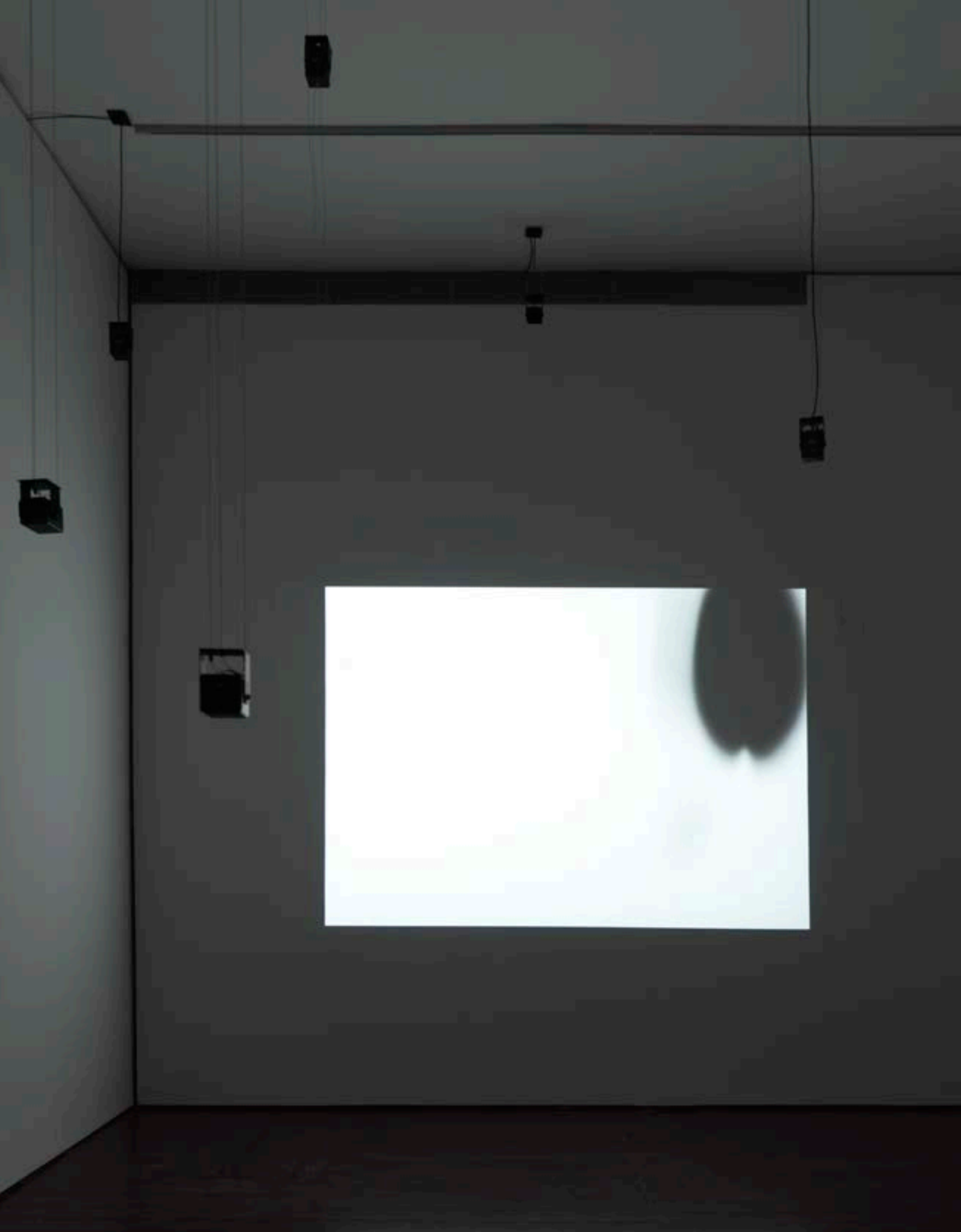
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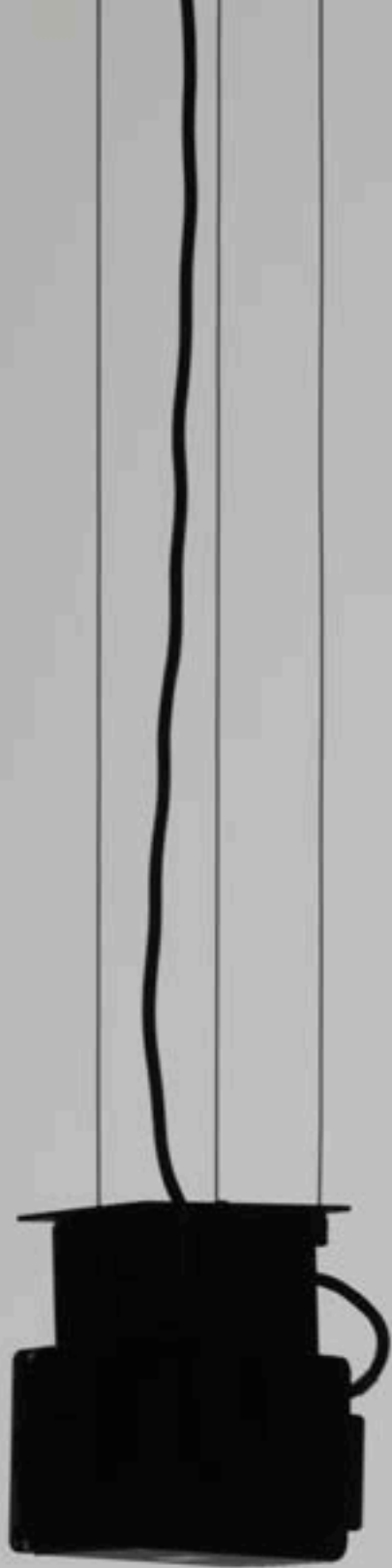
FOLLOWING PAGES:

CERITH WYN EVANS AND FLORIAN HECKER

No night No day, 2009/2013







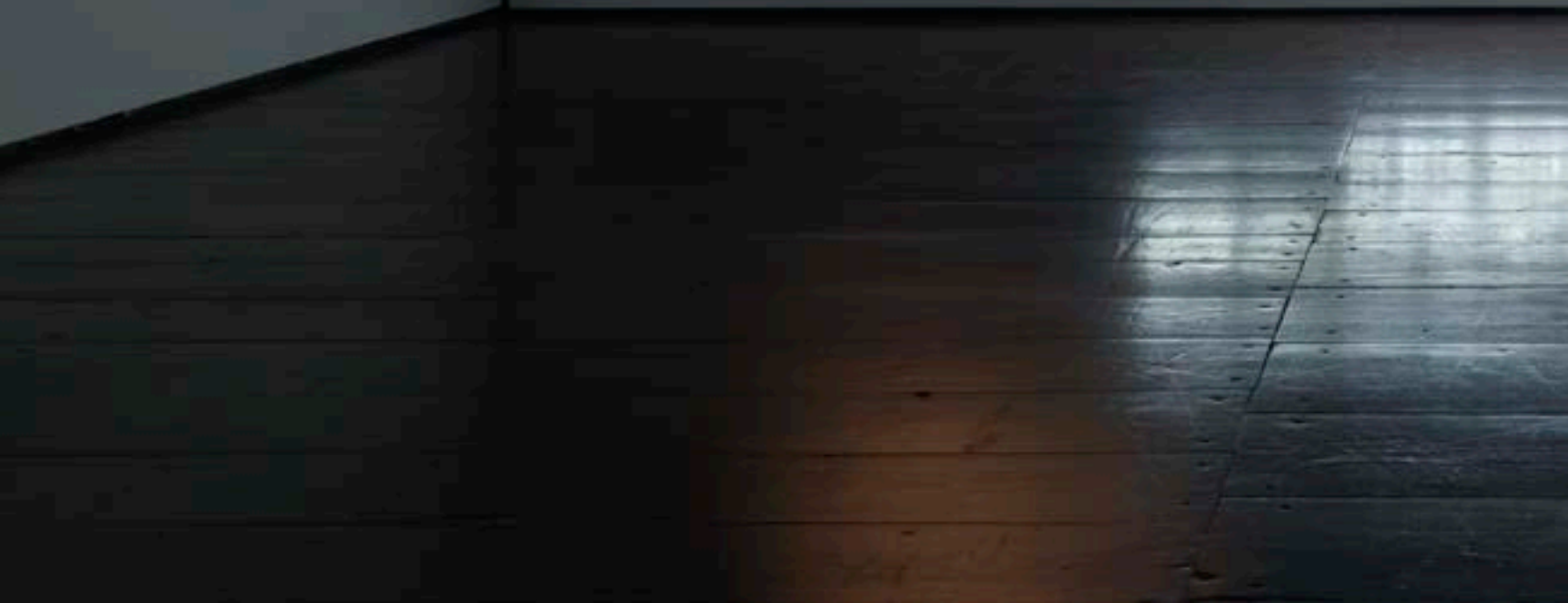
SPACE 4

CERITH WYN EVANS
Cleave 01, 2001





Now let's see what's
in the Sup



happening
superimposed Vision Scene...

ENTRANCE

CERITH WYN EVANS

One evening late in the war..., 2008



One evening late in the war he was at the crowded bar of the Officers' and Gentlemen's Club, in uniform, and behaving quite outrageously. Among the observers an elderly American admiral had been growing more and more incensed. He now went over and tapped Teddie on the shoulder. "Lieutenant, you are a disgrace to the Service. I must insist on having your name and squadron." An awful silence fell. Teddie's newly-won wings glinted. He snapped shut his thin gold compact (from Venus) and narrowed his eyes at the admiral. "My name," he said distinctly, "is Mrs. Smith."

On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Period of Time

Within the large body of critical writing on Cerith Wyn Evans's artistic practice, one finds merely a few references to the ambitious opus *No night No day*, created in collaboration with the artist Florian Hecker. The lack of attention to this significant endeavor in the years since its original staging at the Teatro Goldoni during the opening of the 53rd Venice Biennale calls for a closer interrogation. This *abstract opera*—a designation that may account for the work's predicament and some critical irritation but one that was intended merely as an indignant reference to its genesis—was originally commissioned by TBA21 for the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin but was ultimately realized in collaboration with Daniel Birnbaum in Venice. And while the restaging of *No night No day* for *The What If?... Scenario (after LG)* in the exhibition setting at TBA21–Augarten remains an experiment, the work is of singular relevance in this context, as it projects “the very screen where the major principles or rules of perceptual organization of the interweaving structural elements apply to both vision and hearing.”¹

Commissioned to produce a collaborative work, the two artists departed from the tradition of a cohesive audiovisual synthesis, addressing the division of labor between director and composer to the breaking point. Tom Holert has described the process of production: “Neither artist knew what the other would bring to the collaboration. This mutual nonknowledge became a constitutive factor of the project; its methodology hinged on anticipation and speculation, on empathizing with the partner's decisions.”²

Firstly at the level of the collaboration itself—a film screening and the diffusion of a pluriphonic soundpiece—a collaboration which is as much argument as dialogue, which refuses complementarity or seamless integration, instead producing a complex interference pattern in which, aperiodically, each element takes the upper hand, creating distinct peaks, points of tension, waves, tides, advances and retreats.³

Violating the conceptual frame of the work of art as it “must be,” Wyn Evans and Hecker have worked together, separately, within an account of “what

could be.” Anticipating or speculating about the other's autonomously taken decisions, each artist has independently composed his part, relying on the “chance operation” of the future event that would unite the two elements.

Chance operation is a procedural method famously adopted by John Cage, who employed it as compositional tool in music, performance, and film, often relying on the prescriptions of the *I Ching* to generate randomness. Although Cage's collaboration with Merce Cunningham is cited as an evident source of inspiration, his idea of randomness is perhaps less significant at this point than the understanding of the collaborative process as described by the artists. For one, the two artists were allegedly in intense exchange and continuous conversation about their ideas and readings and about what they did *not* want to do. One of the books that lubricated the process of permeability between two authorial minds was Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold*, specifically chapter six, titled “What Is an Event?”

What are the conditions that make an event possible? Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of a screen intervenes.

Chaos does not exist; it is an abstraction because it is inseparable from a screen that makes something—something rather than nothing—emerge from it. Chaos would be a pure *Many*, a purely disjunctive diversity, while the something is a *One*, not a pre-given unity, but instead the indefinite article that designates a certain singularity. How can the Many become the One? A great screen has to be placed in between them. Like a formless elastic membrane, an electromagnetic field, or the receptacle of the *Timaeus*, the screen makes something issue from chaos, and *even if this something differs only slightly*.⁴

One can contend that what matters here is not the Deleuzian philosophical definition or invocation of the “event” but the function it has in the process and the realization of *No night No day*. A work of art does not “argue” a text or a philosophical precept, so that a close reading of Deleuze—which

is perhaps an all-the-more-distant reading, or an appropriated reading, or an intertextual looting—brings to the fore only in retrospect some elemental particles of the work, or perhaps merely rhetorically powerful liner notes. Possibly *No night No day* is, more than anything else, an investigation of the basic notion of the object as a visual, auditory, and experiential category and its perception. The object mobilizes a heavy arsenal of “sensations,” destabilizing the rather compact notions of hearing, seeing, and experiencing. What exactly it is that we hear and see can only be approximated or interpolated and may be best described, as Holert puts it, as “a somewhat aggressive, or regressive, refusal of meaning.”⁵

So what do we make of the processes of collaboration, quotation, even the straight-out appropriation that we are constantly reminded of in the work of Wyn Evans? Is the collaboration that he embarked on with Hecker different from his alliances with Brion Gysin, Guy Debord, and Samuel Beckett—to name a few—or the close encounters with Peter Gidal and Liam Gillick?

The least recovery of attention persuades me, that this other who invades me, is made only of my own substance.⁶

It’s a kind of radical erasure of difference really. It’s a place where empathy and, by extension, community and eventually the birth of intimacy can be formed. Recognising that by the least recovery of attention.⁷

One of the things that it is possible to understand perfection as somehow being constituted by, is its inherent moment of imperfection.⁸

These two quotations from Hans Ulrich Obrist’s book of interviews with Wyn Evans serve as conjecture on our path to unraveling some of the intertextual and interpersonal affiliations in the labyrinthine scenarios that he draws up. Permeability and precarious perfection, or rather imperfection within perfection, create the architecture of an argument that builds on the invasion of the other via empathy, the address to the other through the movement of separation and therefore the intimation of publicness (or, by extension, community), and the speculative erasure of difference.

In *No night No day*, we stumble upon another collaborator. John Cage’s *One*¹¹ is in fact the primary filmic source material that Wyn Evans has used, manipulated, solarized, truncated, and transformed for this commission. Cage’s only feature-length film was created in 1992 and is a film without subject, in black and white, a meditation on

emptiness and randomness. Furthermore, *One*¹¹ comes with a musical *sound track*, a composition for orchestra of the same duration that runs in parallel, without relating to the film directly, called *103* and composed in 1991.

What I propose to do is to leave the TV studio, or wherever it is made, empty but leave the lights that are ordinarily in a TV studio present at the roof, at the ceiling, but also have lights available that can be on the floor or at other points.

The film will actually be about the effect of light on an empty room. But no room is actually empty; light will actually begin to show what is actually in it. And the lights in interaction, and it is of course the production of shadows, and all of that space and light will be used directly by means of chance operation. It’s very curious.

What has interested me very much both in sound and sight, graphic arts and music, and so forth is to experience each sound or each thing we see as itself rather than as representative of something else, so that we look even as we do two things which we think are identical. If we actually look, we see that they are not.⁹

To make things even more confusing and misleading in a commonsense reading is that Wyn Evans and Hecker have chosen to name the abstract opera after Peter Gidal’s 1997 film *No Night No Day*. The British Swiss structural-materialist filmmaker, onetime tutor of the Welsh artist, describes his work as in essence “a film where there is almost no light and yet just enough light to see, except for two or three moments.... This is, from way in the beginning, like with the film *Room Film 1973* (1973), that light can eradicate the objects of the world and the object world as much as darkness. Without using the words ‘about light,’ that is as much about light that I will be willing to say: light eradicates image as much as darkness.”¹⁰

The question of making things difficult for the spectator in my films is absolutely crucial and historically so, because that is where the break always comes. In the cinema, more than any other art form, the question of difficulty is always raised. With other things there are conventions: for example, it’s okay to spend until two o’clock in the morning checking a difficult footnote in a book; difficult paintings are okay because you can walk past them in seconds. But film has an authoritarian structure built into its mechanism in terms of time, being held

there for a period of time, which is why most film goes out of its way to avoid precisely that as an issue, whereas my work goes out of its way to raise it as one.¹¹

The uncanny encounter of the Deleuzian One with the Cagean *One*¹¹ and Gidal's title (altered only in its capitalization) and the latter's claim of "making things difficult for the spectator" aggregate to the vibrant ready-made substrate of Wyn Evans's *No night No day* experiment arranged to Florian Hecker's pluriphonic sound composition. But why, one is then led to ask, why would an artist who has produced a diverse group of films between 1979 and 1989 use such an arsenal of references and revisit existing material to produce one of the rarer filmic works of the past twenty years? When asked in a recent interview about what has become of his early filmic works and why he doesn't screen them any longer, Wyn Evans responded:

They had their lifespan. And now they are at least for the moment out of my life. I have screened things over the years. The first film was made in 1979. I don't want to walk around like my own tribute band, doing this stuff over and over. There are boxes and boxes and boxes. I have given them to the BFI archive. They look after them, and so they have become documents of a certain period of time of something, as Guy Debord says in *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief period of time*. I wanted to move through and on and see things differently. There is relatively little that I am embarrassed about in the films. It's not like, "what was I wearing..." Or rather, "what was I not wearing," probably. There are pirate prints and copies that surface from time to time. But I don't really show them anymore. [...]

Nothing really changes, and a lot of the values and concerns that those films evoke or produce are still very much part of how I look at the world. But the articulation changes and the language—this is all very clunky in terms of syntax—the language that you use mutates and continues too, I feel, I hope. It's quite good to have consistency if you are a fashion designer or an architect, but as an artist I don't know. People change their minds and come back to the same place. I just don't have much interest in seeing them again.¹²

Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps (1959), the filmic work by Debord that Wyn Evans refers to, contains appropriated material and draws on a favorite Situationist technique known as *détournement*.

As Martin Jay has explained, "Anticipated by Lautréamont's creative plagiarism, Dada photomontages, Duchamp's readymades, and Brecht's principle of *Umfunktionierung*, it meant confronting the Spectacle with its own effluvia and reversing their normal ideological function."¹³

Does Wyn Evans invoke Debord's Situationist *détournement* to "confront" the most spectacular spectacle of the opera, to frustrate the expectations of an art-savvy Biennale audience, and to reinvigorate the critics in their quest for locating historic references, inspiration, and source material? Is the frustrating incongruity of form and incompatibility with the expected format of operatic entertainment an experience of erasure and erosion of the conditional/false promise of the spectacle and the ideological function that it embraces? Using *appropriated* material as a reservoir of possible meanings on an uncharted discursive journey instigates the creation of a new field of consistencies, one that does not replicate truth or truthfulness but invokes the enigmatic character of art. So, do the earlier creators, writers, and thinkers who often inhabit (or cohabit with) Wyn Evans's work form a bridge between past and future? Do their ideas and words that are kept in play or brought back to life harness future thought and pleasure? Are these untimely collaborators, to quote Jalal Toufic once again, acting in the present by being outside space and time?

To a certain extent my first epiphany is a literal one in that I learned the meaning of the word *epiphany* and made a film called *Epiphany*. In a literal sense the epiphany was the epiphany that I learned from the works of James Joyce, that which happens outside space and time. Only subsequently did I learn that epiphany is a religious term for the moment in religious Judeo-Christian mythology when the star is seen above the birthplace of Christ. [...] The epiphany is a state, in a sense, outside space and time.¹⁴

1. Booklet published by TBA21 on the occasion of *No night No day* (Vienna: Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, 2009), unpagued.
2. Tom Holert, "Double Negative," *Artforum* 48 (September 2009): 238.
3. Florian Hecker with Robin Mackay and Sónia Matos, "Event—Stream — Object," in TBA21 booklet (see note 1).
4. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2006), 86.
5. Holert, "Double Negative," 238.
6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 11.
7. Cerith Wyn Evans in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Cerith Wyn Evans: The Conversation Series* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), 135.
8. Wyn Evans, in *ibid.*
9. "The Making of One¹¹—John Cage," Vimeo video, 43:08, posted by "off the text," 2011, <http://vimeo.com/14869738>.
10. Peter Gidal, in conversation with Evans and Obrist, in Obrist, *Cerith Wyn Evans*, 115.
11. Peter Gidal, quoted in "Gidal, Peter (1946–)," British Film Institute, *screenonline*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/472632/>.
12. Cerith Wyn Evans, in conversation with Eva Wilson and Daniela Zyman, May 21, 2013.
13. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 424.
14. "Architecture Biennale—Cerith Wyn Evans (NOW interviews)," YouTube video, 2:37, interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist at the Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010, posted by "Biennale Channel," September 2, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btJsA4jMIO0>.

Daniela Zyman and Florian Hecker

Folds and Nuits— A Conversation around *No night No day*

Daniela Zyman: Florian, what have you been doing in the past few years since we worked together on *No night No day* in Venice?

Florian Hecker: Most recently on a deepening of the "chimera pieces" that I started in 2010. For *Chimerization*, produced for documenta 13 in Kassel, and *Hinge*, which I made for an exhibition at Lumiar Cité in Lisbon, I've been working with Reza Negarestani, the Iranian writer and philosopher. Reza wrote the "experimental" libretti for those two pieces.

While I was starting to work on the *Chimerization* project I described to Reza the process of auditory chimerization, a concept from psychoacoustics and audiology, in which temporal and spectral features of several source sounds are mapped and exchanged among one another.

What do you mean by *mapped*?

Mapped is a very weak term that I'm using as a substitute for a better word; maybe *topological deformation* is more appropriate. The volume of the sonic object remains equal, though its surface layout, its shape, has been changed. I have to make a slight detour: in the eighties, particularly in the academic electroacoustic music scene, the idea of sound morphing became quite prominent. One example would be the sound of a flute being transformed into the sound of a voice being transformed into the sound of an oboe and so on ... Often with these examples, I got the impression that the intensity and the particularities of the input sound were lost. In my own practice I've been looking deeply into the idea of synthesis for many years or, more accurately, what would be the initial, synthetic, high-modernistic process to create a new sound. For years, I wasn't really interested in what it might be to take an existing sound and process it into something else. While I was working on the

Chisenhale Gallery exhibition in London in 2010, Brian C. J. Moore, the author of one of the key publications in the field of psychoacoustics, pointed out to me a process called “auditory chimera,” which Bertrand Delgutte was looking into with some colleagues to better understand how hearing with a cochlear implant functions and what are the criteria that make you differentiate voice from nonvoice.

This links to some ideas that started to appear in *No night No day*: these different psychoacoustic notions of sound, namely, to distinguish the event, the stream, or the auditory object, coming from three different distinct perspectives and decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I like Robin Mackay’s suggestion that psychoacoustics is a possible science or a complicated interrelationship between different disciplines. For one, it’s a very young field of investigation with so many open questions, which of course is much more interesting to me than looking into the idea of an illustration of a scientific concept with a sound piece.

What was of interest to you while you were making *No night No day*?

Before coming here, I was looking at my bookshelf to bring something to the table, and all I found was Iannis Xenakis’s *Nuits*, a choral piece he wrote in 1967/68 while he was in Bloomington, Indiana, and Paris. I bought it in Berlin the day before our meeting with the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. This was the only reference to the format of music; everything else happened in oral exchange. Cerith and I had initially started working together when he extended the invitation to contribute something autonomous to his exhibition at the Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris in 2006. In regard to *No night No day*, we had been speaking a lot about what we didn’t want to do, although I’m not sure whether this helped to clarify what it actually could be. Nevertheless we managed to eliminate some directions, like working with a choir or humans onstage.

Cerith ultimately used the John Cage film *One*¹¹ from 1992—the first and last film that Cage made—as primary material for the film that he produced, of course altering the material quite significantly. *One*¹¹ also incorporates the split between the visual and the acoustic, as the “sound track” to the film is a piece Cage wrote in 1991 called *103*. Do you see his

choice as complementary to your thinking? Did the recursiveness on Cerith’s part, adapting the work of another composer and musician as the visual basis, this kind of stealing of (or least applying a process of appropriation to) the filmic work by another composer and transposing a compositional moment to the screen influence you in any way?

I remember us speaking about the Cage film but never as something that would get a particularly prominent role in our work. And then when I saw it in Venice, it didn’t have this kind of heaviness to it that Cage can get very quickly.

Cerith never chooses things randomly. I don’t think we can claim that he is a chance operator. Where he possibly found the collaboration with you very interesting was in regard to the notion of what we can call the object, for the lack of any better term. On the one hand, his works are extremely objectified, because the objectual presence is what you see and perceive on a statuary level in a very explicit way. Many of his works operate on the level of beauty, luminosity, and illumination, etc. But on the other hand, he wishes so much to break that objectivity by complicating it and, in this process of complication, to question whether the object is really an object.

I’m sure you are aiming toward Deleuze and his notion of the “event,” as he elaborated it in *The Fold*. Cerith gave me this book as a present here in Vienna. This was a recurring reference, so I have to correct myself: I could have brought a second book, besides the *Nuits* score. The first few sentences in Deleuze’s comment on the notion of the event, as well as in the term that Mackay introduced to me, is the idea of dramatizing an idea instead of illustrating it. These are things that came to mind with increasing frequency, the more we went toward the situation in Venice.

How was it for you to conceive something for a large auditorium and for an occasion that actually was not just a perceptual event but a full-scale artistic and public event? How did you approach that? Did it matter to a certain degree and, if so, in what way?

Many of the situations that I was confronted with there triggered something. In regard to my own pieces, the idea of a given perspective in a piece is something that has been puzzling me and that I can’t find a satisfactory answer to. I mean perspective in terms of an audience to be seated, for loudspeaker

positions, what could be done beyond the idea of immersiveness of sound, working with the vertical plane in the Goldoni, and the half circle of the theater rather than the full circle. These are all questions that are still around.

It was always very important for you that the audience would move around, that there would be movement, different levels of perceptions and abilities to perceive the work in various positions. All that collapsed the moment that people were seated, occupied fixed positions. Generally it created a structural solidification of the role of the audience versus the sonic experience they could have in the exhibition space. That is not really something that you have continued to be interested in, is it?

That's not entirely true. There was a performance of *Speculative Solution* recently in the auditorium at the Centre Pompidou. It was bizarre: I had to stop after twenty-two minutes, due to extreme reactions by some members of the audience. At the same time, when working with Reza Negarestani and Joan La Barbara last year in New York at the Abrons Art Center, we also had a seated audience. The audience members' decision about where to sit had a direct effect on what they experienced in the piece. At some point there was a bifurcated split of the sound in the space into two halves. Cerith spoke about a performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Gruppen* at the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall in London, where the piece was performed twice during the same evening, allowing the audience to change seats. Now I am working on a piece with Reza for Performa this fall in New York, which will again have a seated audience and several sound sources among them.

What I was trying to get at was the experiment of *No night No day* being installed differently at the Augarten. This new installation will probably offer a more familiar format that both you and Cerith are used to working in, the exhibition format, the smaller scale, suggesting the possibility of coming in and going out, these far more flexible dispositives that you can design in the exhibition situation. This is why I felt so strongly about proposing to bring the piece to the exhibition.

The ability to move also contains the element of intimacy, or "one-to-one." Sometimes your pieces get very intense, and so you can move out of the center; you can calibrate the experience for yourself, the intensity and variability of the process of hearing—all the more important in relation to

plurisonic compositions. These are all elements that I associate with your work in installation and performance and that are obviously very different from live concerts and events. Visitors will be able to have that sort of experience with *No night No day* at the Augarten, although it will still preserve a strong frontality in the placement of the sound, as well as the directedness of the film screening. As a prognosis, it will be a very different experience from Venice. How do you see that?

How could the "audiovisual contract," as Michel Chion puts it, be broken and how can things be stretched in time and space without becoming one audiovisual something? In Cerith's Paris show, one would move from one room to the other, you would encounter chandeliers, neon pieces, plants, dreamachines, Brion Gysin's drawings, and so on. This one-to-the-next experience still feels really necessary—to stretch things out—and we will have that here again in the sequence of different pieces installed before or in front of *No night No day*. At this moment, art spaces and museums, which are essentially nonmusical spaces, are in fact the last places of true experimentation when it comes to sound. You can start from scratch, propose constellations that are acoustically not correct or odd, that don't fulfill the normalizations of mono-stereo-surround-what-ever formats.

Is Cerith interested in psychoacoustics?

I don't know. I'm not really interested in psychoacoustics as a label or genre. My first encounter with psychoacoustics was through Curtis Roads's *Computer Music Tutorial*, and Curtis also pointed me to Brian C. J. Moore's *Introduction to the Psychology of Hearing*. In 2004 I spent some time in Los Angeles on a Schindler residency and got it there, and I first encountered musical psychology via Carsten Höller. He sent me a CD with Diana Deutsch's demonstrations of her auditory illusions and paradoxes. Carsten invited me to contribute a piece to his exhibition in Marseille that year, and these two encounters opened up the field for me. Up until 2004 I was fascinated with stereo as a format, how stereo became the format of choice for CDs in most cases. At the same time I had a deep interest in synthesis and the synthetic quality of sound; I was curious about how one could intensify the experience of sound without superimposing additional processes,

process here meaning additional secondary effects. Looking further into psychoacoustics, I realized that working with such elementary units as loudness, time differences between one source and another, and certain frequency relations can intensify the listening experience already in a stereo setup without compromising the intensity of the sound and its underlying synthesis. This then only started the dilemma: Deutsch's research was far too musical for me, with all its notions of notes and pitch relations.

At the same time, the traditional psychoacoustics would work with sound stimuli, consisting of pure tones or technical noises, pink, white, etc. What I'm doing sits somewhere between such notions, a psychoacoustics of sounds and timbre. In the late seventies Albert Bregman and Stephen McAdams called timbre "the psychoacoustician's multidimensional waste-basket category for everything that cannot be labeled pitch or loudness." I found this to be a beautiful metaphor, that the multidimensional wastebasket is a kind of container of possibilities. This phenomenal gap, that happens all the time in *No night No day* ...

Why would you say that you're not particularly interested in psychoacoustics?

In psychoacoustics as a label. Merely illustrating such phenomena is problematic, sonically, conceptually ... and you also have to keep in mind that this body of work is research that happens in laboratories. What I'm doing is investigatory; in most cases it happens outside of a laboratory setup, and when you take it out of the laboratory setting into a messy environment—for example, an exhibition space or a concert venue or make it into a CD or record publication, really everything outside of the lab that is messy—it turns into something that is not psychoacoustics anymore but something else. Maryanne Amacher used the expression "crackpot acoustics" for this. When you take this body of work and play with the concept, it becomes something else. So all the things that happen in *No night No day* of course become something entirely different, and I think this distortion is really important also in relation to Cerith's use of Cage as a visual reference. Eventually I'll have some sound patterns that look into Bregman's auditory scene analysis; some others will be a dramatization of Deutsch's octave illusion.

There are many micropointers to other levels that could be taken apart musicologically; there are plenty of different layers to decipher. But I think this "playing" with the concept and the "twisting"—a term that Reza Negarestani uses a lot in his writings—the topological twisting of something is really an essential part of this piece and what it is doing.