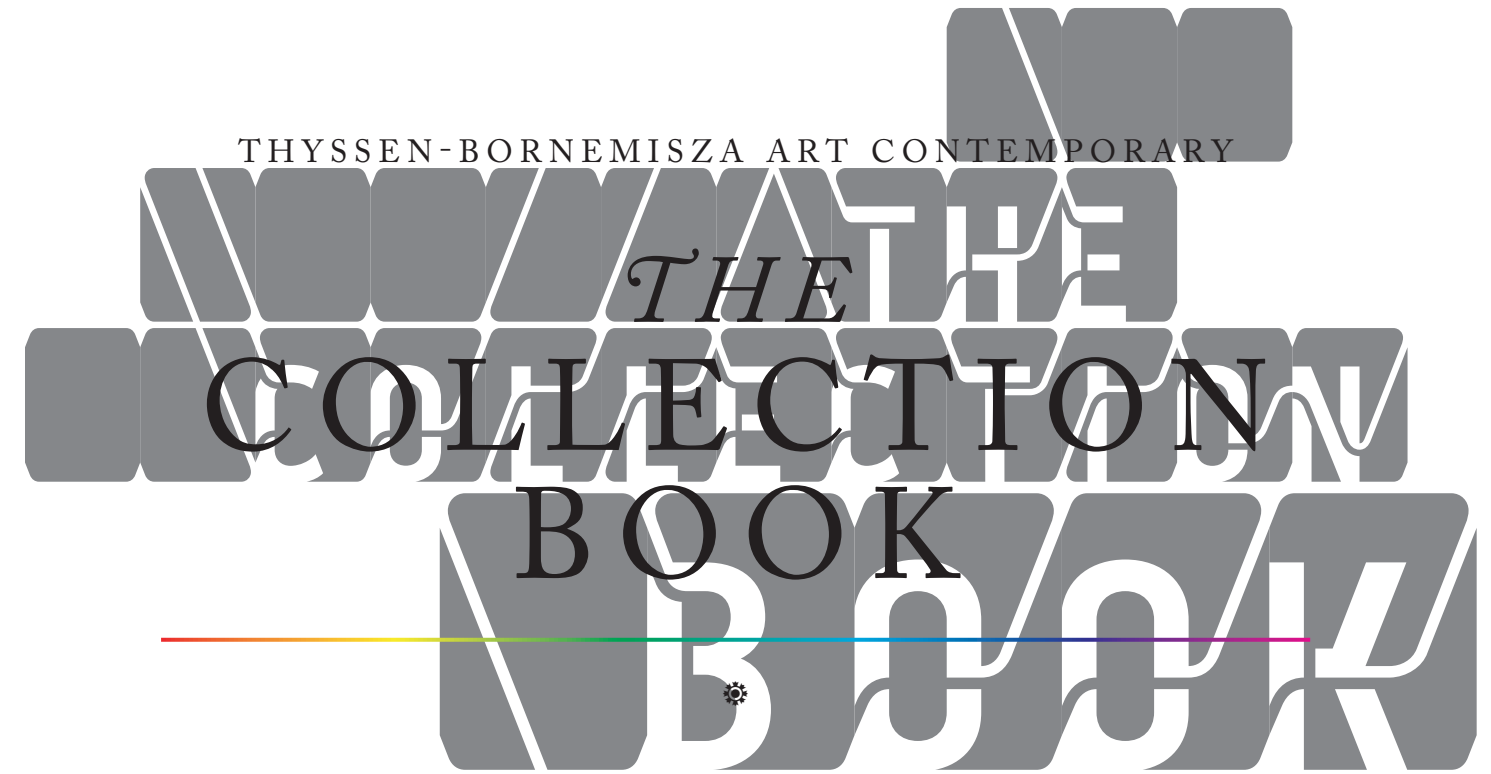


THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA ART CONTEMPORARY

THE
COLLECTION
BOOK



VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG
WALTHER KÖNIG, KÖLN



OLAF NICOLAI

*1962 IN HALLE/SAALE, GERMANY.

LIVES AND WORKS IN BERLIN, GERMANY.



FATE AND CAUSALITY

by BARBARA CLAUSEN

OLAF Nicolai creates art that lets viewers take something back with them into their daily lives. An encounter with his work prompts an exploration of how value systems are generated in the reality and the imaginary of the cultural archive. Working in various media, Nicolai investigates the dichotomies that keep cultural production and its set of values and ideologies in a field of tension, one defined by contingency and causality. His interests are broad and dialectical by nature, dissolving what are thought to be boundaries of deep philosophical opposition within the modernist and humanist traditions. He challenges such binary oppositions as hierarchy and egalitarianism, Marxism and capitalism, nature and science, history and fiction, often using the concepts of originality and reproduction as a starting point. *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence: An Appointment to Watch Falling Stars*, an unlimited edition of a poster and a small booklet from 2005, and *Rodakis*, a short film from 2007, share a desire that is particular to Nicolai's artistic practice: I am speaking of the relationship between the contingency of myth and the causality of reality, governing our perception and understanding of the world.

WELCOME TO THE TEARS OF ST. LAWRENCE: AN APPOINTMENT TO WATCH FALLING STARS

2005

A public art project
Commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

WELCOME to the Tears of St. Lawrence was, despite its ephemeral nature, nearly impossible to miss within the arena of the Fifty-second Venice Biennale in 2005. The work took shape as an unlimited edition of booklets and posters, stacked high on pallets between the Giardini pavilions and posted on billboards throughout town. As an announcement (in Italian and English) the poster captured the unpredictable within the format of the predictable. On one side the poster was an astrological map; on the other was the following text:

"Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence: An Appointment to Watch Falling Stars"

In the early hours after midnight between the 8th and the 13th of August, watch the northern sky facing northeast, in the direction of the constellation of Perseus, which you will find in the sky at an angle of approximately 45° up from the horizon. Look out for a shower of falling stars. They are the tears of St. Lawrence.

RODAKIS

2007

Single-channel video installation; 11:47 min., color, sound

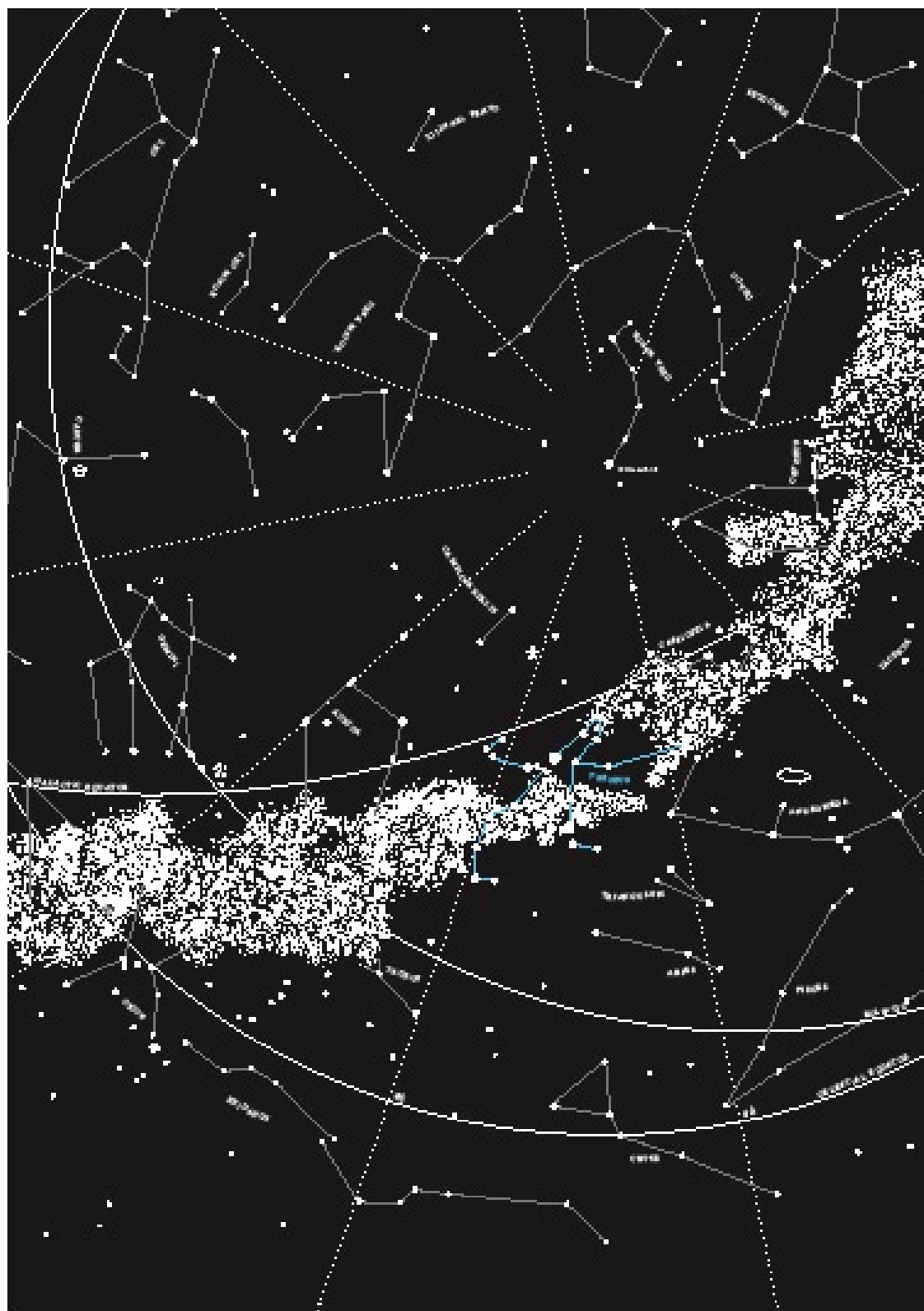
The small publication that Nicolai handed out contained a detailed scientific and historical overview, images of previous meteor showers, a map of the astrological constellation Perseus, several links to scientific Web sites, and a postcard. The latter was to be sent to an astrological archive with comments on the experience. Meteor showers are streaks of light caused by tiny bits of space dust shed long ago by comets. Upon entering the earth's atmosphere, they burn up as meteors, which, in the case of the Perseids, are visible within the astrological constellation Perseus. Nicolai distributed the ephemera announcing an event to come, offering participants an experience. Information spread quickly and widely throughout and beyond Venice as the summer of 2005 went on.

Nicolai appropriated the superstition that a wish comes true when a falling star is seen. In the firmament, as in the art world, stars fall and rise at meteoric speed. Within the framework of one of the oldest art spectacles of the world, he inserted one of the oldest spectacles of nature, recorded and cherished by humans all over the world. Like an instructional piece in the tradition of Fluxus and conceptual art, the work was passed from the artist's hand into those of its spectators. *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence* is about a series of actions *to be taken* and about *to happen*. Seen in performative terms, the spectator becomes the protagonist and producer of the work. Empowering his audience with all information obtainable, Nicolai enabled them not just to observe a spectacle beyond their reach but also to capture it as their own experience.

CRADLED in an equilibrium of history, fiction, and science, Nicolai looks toward the future in *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence* and toward the past in his film *Rodakis*. The artist announces a scenario in which an enlightened revelation meets a dark superstition, both deeply determined by contingency, the context of the encounter, and causality, the consequences that follow the encounter. Through the artist's intervention the works take on a performative dimension, a cognitive experience in which the surreal is absorbed by science and history.

In *Rodakis*, Nicolai tells the story of the life and mysterious death of a famous but little-known man. He is the key protagonist of one of modernism's oldest myths. The setting is a simple Greek farmhouse on the island of Aegina, built around 1880 by the landowner and craftsman Alexis Rodakis. Several years after its construction it was documented by archaeologists for its beauty and simple premodernist structure and design. Soon thereafter it was written into the canon of modernism. Built using materials from the natural surroundings, the house sits on a hill near the Old City of Mesagros. It is a memento mori of modernism's utopia and a metaphor for the ontological yet unfulfilled desire to perpetually go back to the future. Despite the glory bestowed upon the house by architects such as Dimitris Pikionis, Adolf Loos, and Le Corbusier, little or nothing is known of Rodakis's life.

Nicolai's film consists of a series of single-frame shots investigating the house and the absence of its author. The camera is trained on its subject in a static calm, taking the viewer frame by frame through the remains of the house. Gradually overgrown by the surrounding vegetation and earth, the ruin is left to its own destiny in the heat of the summer sun. The house is a masterpiece of folk architecture. We see all sides of the exterior and the ornamental details of the roof before the camera explores the interior. While we hear details of Rodakis's life, the simple yet elegant ornamentation of the walls provides clues, traces of the creator's long-gone presence. In fact, as we are told in the last instant of the film, nothing is known of the life of Alexis Rodakis. Nicolai fills in the lacunae of history by employing a local psychic, referred to only as Antonia S. A voice-over, the kind one would expect



**WELCOME TO THE
›TEARS OF ST. LAWRENCE‹
AN APPOINTMENT TO
WATCH FALLING STARS.**

**IN THE EARLY HOURS AFTER MIDNIGHT,
BETWEEN THE 8TH AND 13TH OF
AUGUST, WATCH THE NORTHERN SKY
FACING NORTHEAST, IN THE DIRECTION
OF THE CONSTELLATION OF PERSEUS,
WHICH YOU WILL FIND IN THE SKY AT
AN ANGLE OF APPROXIMATELY 45°
UP FROM THE HORIZON. LOOK OUT FOR
A SHOWER OF FALLING STARS. THEY
ARE THE ›TEARS OF ST. LAWRENCE‹.**

**UN APPUNTAMENTO PER VEDERE
LE STELLE CADENTI. NELLE PRIME ORE
DOPO LA MEZZANOTTE, TRA L'8 ED IL
13 AGOSTO, GUARDATE VERSO IL CIELO
SETTENTRIONALE, RIVOLTI VERSO
NORDEST, NELLA DIREZIONE DELLA
COSTELLAZIONE DI PERSEO, CHE TROVE-
RETE NEL CIELO AD UN ANGOLO DI
CIRCA 45° SOPRA L'ORIZZONTE. CERCATE
UNA PIOGGIA DI STELLE CADENTI.
SONO LE ›LACRIME DI SAN LORENZO‹.**

from a British documentary, sketches out Rodakis's life as a man of solitude. Born in 1860, he spent almost his entire life on the island of Aegina. From the age of fifteen he was driven by the idea of building a house on land bought with money that his father, who was far away at sea, had sent him and his mother. Rodakis was particular about the materials he used; he was playful as well as clear in the design. His inspiration, we are told, was not imagery but poetry. His life was spent in a continuous state of expectancy, one filled with the tension of a Greek myth. Once the house was roughly completed, Rodakis finished it with the help only of a neighbor's son, who moved into the house after Rodakis mysteriously disappeared on a trip to Piraeus at the age of fifty.

While Antonia S.'s status as an author will fade to irrelevance, her account is as close to the truth as one can get. Perhaps her version of Rodakis's life, offered after reading the house with her eyes and hands, is equal to her daily experience of the island itself, more accurate than we can imagine. There is a good chance that, as the final credits roll and viewers are finally informed of the questionable source, they will not feel betrayed. It is the coincidental, inherent to any linear causality, that informs the historic, just as any fiction bears the shadow of its time. If roles are to be reversed, the contingent relation of truth and fiction potentially could elevate Antonia S. to the ranks of a historian, piecing together a history from a puzzle of details, whereas the architectural historian *Sigfried Giedion*¹►, who emphatically claimed Rodakis to be the founder of modernist architecture, is perhaps more akin to a visionary. Nicolai excavates the story from its past and returns it to the attention of the public. He creates a vessel of projection, reflecting the echo of the voices of its creator, equally with those of its mediators.

By offering an experience of recognition and revelation at the end of *Rodakis*, Nicolai enables observers to judge for themselves. We are visitors to the haunted remains of an archaeological site, abandoned and left with the forgotten soul of its master. Similarly, we experience the ageless yearning to see a falling star, its factual presence, like that of *Rodakis*, long gone by the time we silently make a wish. Both are firmly rooted in the subjective belief that experience has a claim of authenticity. In *Rodakis*, the breaking point is the sensation of finding proof of a biography within a fictional history; in *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence*, it is the sensation of knowing the facts of chance. The

reading of Rodakis's life is closely linked to the tradition of the oracle, a mainstay of Greek mythology and astronomy. The same field of knowledge that gave the northern constellation Perseus its name has held on to the myth of Saint Lawrence's tears of misery falling from the sky. Both myths continue to interlink with the construction of history. Perhaps the dilemma of taking sides between fiction and reality can be illuminated by thinking about the relationship between chance and contingency as simultaneously necessary and insufficient. Challenging a history of linearity, Nicolai's poetic readings of his subjects—whether myth, site, or constellation—are shaped by the contingency of their sightings. Both *Welcome to the Tears of St. Lawrence* and *Rodakis* are emblematic of the artist's conviction that "*the knowledge of how things are is also the knowledge of how things might be.*"¹ Chance offers a way for the artist to enable his audience to reflect upon their own construction of the past and the present within social reality. Nicolai's poetics and criticality appeal to the onlooker's perceptive capacity, whether the work is viewed at a crowded exhibition opening or alone in a dark cinema, raising questions about the authenticity of the spectacular and the meaning of chance.

I A Swiss historian of architecture, Sigfried Giedion (1883–1968) was a student of Heinrich Wölfflin and close associate of Walter Gropius. He was a key figure of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), and taught at MIT and Harvard; in his lectures he broke with the German materialist tradition of nineteenth-century art history and described history in terms of constancy and change. With *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) Giedion wrote an influential standard history of modern architecture. His *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) established a new kind of historiography.

1 *Olaf Nicolai, Show Case* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1999), p. 8.



Rodakis