

FOUNTAINS OF MOUNTAINS

BY NIKOLAJ RECKE

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Nikolaj Recke

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A special heart to Flemming, Liva and Vincent.

FOUNTAINS OF MOUNTAINS

BY NIKOLAJ RECKE

**Portrait of the Artist as a
Contemporary Artist:
Personal Attempts, Social Invitations
and Other Creative Behaviors in the
Work of Nikolaj Recke**

By Jacob Lillemose

'Everyone is an artist' – Joseph Beuys

'I'm an absolute beginner' – David Bowie



For Nikolaj Recke, being a contemporary artist – or rather, choosing to call oneself a contemporary artist and making art works – is an ambiguous task that involves continuous questioning on both an aesthetic and personal level. As a ‘member’ of the young generation of Nordic artists that emerged from the Copenhagen scene in the mid 90s Recke embraces a conceptual approach in which neither art nor the role of the artist can be taken for granted, i.e.



based on absolute definitions and histories. He understands art and the role of the artist to be a ‘continuous project altered daily’, to quote Robert Morris, an artist

whom Recke has ‘corresponded’ with on many levels in his work. Through the correspondence with Morris and the tradition of conceptual art of the 60s and 70s, Recke



has found an approach that is open-ended and very personal, characterized by equal parts of doubt and excitement, challenges and possibilities. According to Recke embracing this ambivalence is the most honest, credible and forceful approach to art and the role of the artist after the authority and certainties of modernist ideology have left the institution.



The thing formerly known as modern art

Talk about leaving the institution: For his first solo exhibition, Nicky-Dicky in 1995, Recke made the work *The Invisible Man*, where he covered himself in gauze bandage from head to toe and literally walked out of the gallery in front of the audience. The exit was filmed and shown as a video loop. With a large portion of self-irony and an awkward performance style like that found in early Bruce Nauman videos, the work reflects the frustrations of a young and up-coming artist trying to enter the scene and make something of value within the framework of the established aesthetic paradigms. The work also very honestly showed that – however radical and

paradoxical it may seem – avoiding being an artist – and in a metaphorical sense, avoiding making art – is in principle a real possibility for a contemporary artist. An escape of some kind from the traditional framework is, in any case, a necessity for continuing the discussion and development of contemporary art, both in general and for the individual.

The Invisible Man also made subtle reference to Yves Klein's 1958 exhibition *The Void*, where he emptied the Iris Clert Gallery and painted it completely white. Recke's notion of the empty gallery space is nevertheless quite different from that of Klein. It is, in one sense, more literal, and it signifies that his point of departure is a concrete and personal practice informed by pre-existing concepts and the history of art, rather than by transcendental and avant-garde ideas.

Two other early works by Recke are worth mentioning in this regard: *Skater-Klein* (1996), where Recke painted his nose red



with lipstick and skated face first directly into a wall to mimic another of Klein's famous works, the *Anthropometries* series. And *Giving Back* (1996), for which Recke made a boxing bag out of white canvas filled with cotton, hung it in his living room and started punching it – the sand bag, in this context, obviously being a banal stand-in for the monochrome, the crux of the disembodied aesthetics of modernism. Again, with both self-irony and honesty, these two works illustrate that escaping



from, or just coming to terms with, the traditional art framework is hard and difficult work. You either repeatedly skate into a wall or get exhausted from punching an 'opponent' that remains almost unaffected. So Recke, as a contemporary artist, presents himself as a somewhat tragic-comical character – a street-wise clown with a bloody nose – but also as an unimpressed fighter who does not accept retreat as an answer to the challenge. Instead, his response takes the form of a counter-challenge within a contexts defined by himself. Recke uses his own inane everyday activities – interactions with his physical and non-institutionalized surroundings



– as a medium for making art in more-or-less direct dialogue with both the ideals and the masters of modernism and their conceptual predecessors. With all sorts of ambivalences and liberties he engages in exchanges with the



That is his way of escaping the framework: By making it dynamic through personal re-contextualization, re-staging and re-interpretation.

Keep doing it

A recurrent figure in Recke's work that

Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975) to Peter Land's *Step Ladder Blues* (1995). Having realized that, as a contemporary artist, he will not succeed in making (and does not want to make) the ultimate work of art that modernism championed, he turns towards the attempt – the personal act and process of trying – as a working method, and as an end result that in and of itself contains significant artistic potential and value.

Recke's attempts are often formally unperformed. In *Looking for 4-Leaf Clovers* (1998), Recke pans slowly with a camera at close range over a field of clover in search



contemporary art of the previous 50 years where it is not a question of winning the fight – being original in an avant-gardistic sense. The point is rather to create new connections and meanings in terms of the discourse as well as the practice across the aesthetic field which art encompasses.

springs from this unorthodox understanding of art and the role of the artist, is that of the attempt. The attempt is a recurrent but

also very diverse figure in contemporary art, from Richard Serra's *Catching Lead* (1969) and Jan Bas





of the rare specimens, and presents the video as a loop to indicate the endless nature of the search. Finding and presenting the 4-Leaf clover is not the point in and of the work. Recke wants us to search ourselves. He creates an open situation where our senses, perceptions and thinking are liberated from notions of a fixed object and the rationalities that it induces. In this way he urges us to engage in the activity of searching more intuitively, freely and openly with 'irrational' phenomena such as dreams, affections and hopes taken into account. Although we might never find the clover that will bring one good luck, we will also never not-find it. And this is what Recke is interested in: To present us with an expanded and abstract sense of time and space in a state of potentiality, where the real and the virtual are forever interconnected. Through this conception of time and space Recke enables another presence in the world – the imaginary presence of the attempt.

Recke's most symbolic attempt in this respect is his breakthrough work *Knowing You, Knowing Me* (1997), an email correspondence with Robert Morris about his famous felt sculptures and the possibilities of a rendezvous, transformed into a silent video with text and slow-motion images. The correspondence turns into a combination of a farce and a melodrama. Morris is reluctant to participate in the project but nevertheless keeps responding to Recke's emails. The two never do get to talk about the sculptures and when Recke goes to

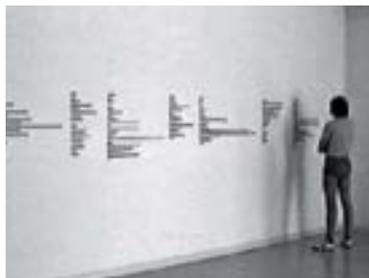


New York to meet Morris at his studio on a set date, it is only to find out, after six days, that Morris has already left the city and stood him up. In the end, the 'readymade' correspondence – the attempt to have a conversation – becomes a conversation in itself and consequently replaces the intended work. The attempt allows the processual notion of an open-ended and interchangeable work-in-progress – certainly a fundamental aspect of communication – to replace the notion of the finished product.

A more recent example of Recke's aesthetic of the attempt is *Capturing Sand Martins* (2003). The Sand Martin is the fastest flying bird in Denmark and Recke went to one of their natural habitats by the coast to see if he could follow them with his handheld camera, if only for a few seconds. The result is a video with a lot of blue sky and an occasional tiny brown-black spot moving rapidly across the picture frame. As a piece of documentation the work is absurd nonsense. But as art – as a symbolic and conceptual gesture – the work expresses a

complex interplay of meanings. With precision and simple means, Recke shows that, from his point of view art and the world in which it takes place, as represented by the Sand Martins, is difficult if not downright impossible to get a grip on.

So, for Recke, art is a continuous attempt to make art, and to reflect on and challenge this condition – to turn the attempt to do the impossible into an aesthetic possibility and an existential statement; a possibility to talk about and comprehend the impossible; and a statement that allow us to live and perform the impossible and eventually reach beyond it.



Dear...

Another motif in Recke's work that runs parallel to, supplements and in some cases (as in *Knowing You, Knowing Me*) even overlaps the figure of the attempt, is the invitation. The invitation works as an open effort to generate different forms of interaction, such as communicating, sharing and identifying, on an imaginary as well as physical level, most often both at the same time.

One example of this is *A Room With Thousand Thoughts* (2002) where Recke took a window from his apartment and installed it as a replacement for one window of the gallery. This installed window



is more than a mere object of biographical fetishism because Recke has often thought about art in general, or been inspired to actually make new art, while looking through it. The work presents art as an open and transparent frame that provides viewers with an opportunity to reflect upon the moment of creation and to observe the world. Metaphorically speaking, the window acts as a membrane between the inside and the outside, the institution and reality. And Recke is saying that this is where art (and the art of existence) begins – by paying attention to the surrounding world and connecting it with one's inner self.

A more straightforward and direct dialogue-based example of an invitation is *Conversations* (1996), where Recke called up 200 random people and presented himself as his own or other artists' art works, then printed out the conversations as Dymo-stickers and taped them to the walls of the gallery. Apart from general confusion and irritation, the reactions at the

other end of the line varied from concern about his psychological state to refusals to let him enter the living room through the telephone.

These works are exemplary for Recke's use of his person and the figure of the contemporary artist, to create a more-or-less direct discussion of art that challenges social situations and generates ambiguous meanings that challenge us to rethink and expand our understanding of the situation, of art, and eventually, of the world.

Recke has also worked with these invitational aesthetics in a series of installations, such as *Bus 7 to EveryWhere* (2001), which consists of a simple, yellow Danish bus stop sign placed on the sidewalk in Copenhagen next to an ordinary bus stop. The number 7 is a non-existing line in the Copenhagen transit system. As the name



of the destination indicates, *Bus 7* is an imaginary line and if we take a closer look at the route plan – a stylized world map – we realize that it does not accommodate physical travel like regular public transportation. Like *A Room With Thousand Thoughts*, the work presents art as the medium for imaginary travels of the mind that take place within, and interact with, a physical environment, thus adding an extra immaterial layer to our perception of that environment.

In *I could be so lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky* (2001), done at a church in collaboration with Swedish artist Lene Malm, Recke stretched out a net 10 feet above the floor, in which people could stretch out on their backs, alone or with someone, and look at a projection on the church ceiling. The projection showed a video documentation borrowed from NASA of an extraordinary night sky during a meteor storm. Filled with hundreds of shooting stars, the sky invited people to make wishes endlessly, just as if they were walking in a field cove-

red with only 4-leaf clovers – a related but never-realized work considered by Recke. Another collaboration that quite literally uses the figure of the invitation is *Tiptoe on the boards of love* (2002), done with Danish artist Kirstine Roepstorff. The work consists of a wooden dancing stage decorated with colored light bulbs and music playing so that everyone can step onto the boards and have a sentimental dance to a handful of familiar tunes speaking of lost love.

All three of these works show how Recke, informed by pop-romantic thinking, invites us to attempt to make something extraordinary happen by opening our minds and hearts. And making us believe that this is possible, despite the improbability of such an event actually taking place, is the conceptual vigor, imaginary beauty and human generosity of Recke's invitational art.

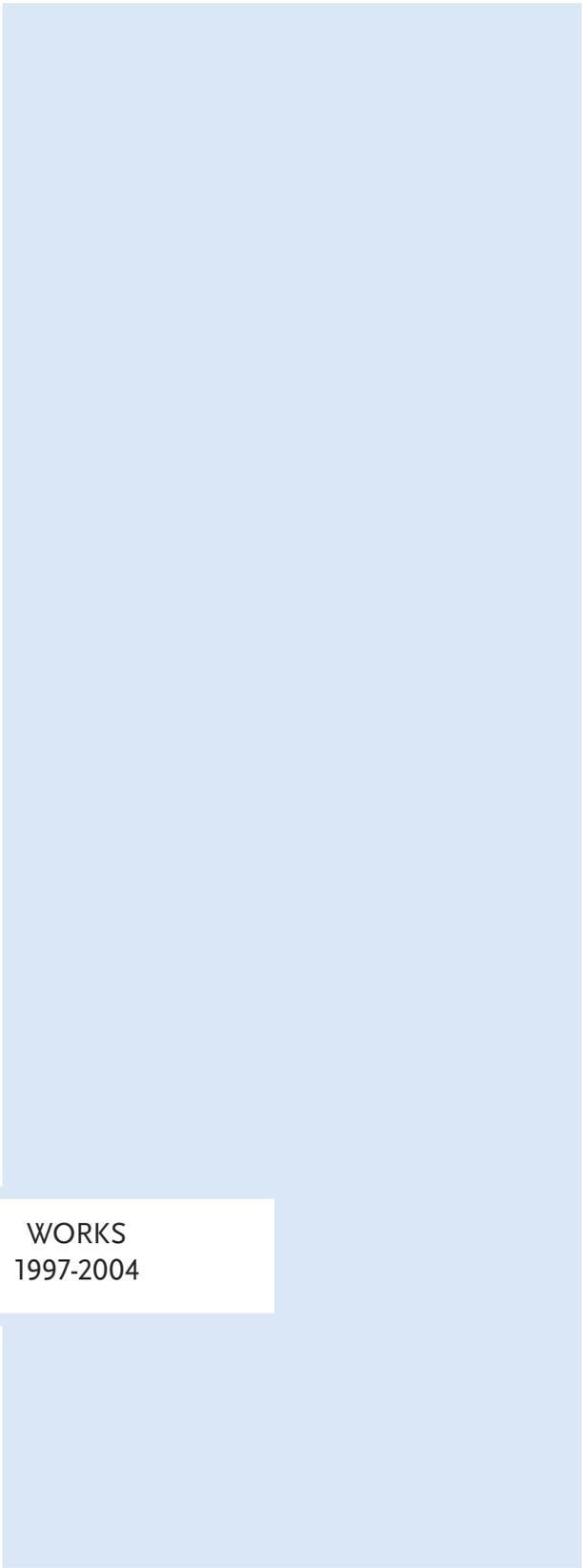
A new world

Whereas a number of his contemporaries emphasize the political and culture-critical

dimension of art, Nikolaj Recke is more involved with the emotional and imaginary qualities of art as a part of everyday life and experience. He often uses stories and events from his personal life in his work (including mourning over the death of loved ones and dedications to former partners in *Crystal Tears* (1993) and *Ponds of Waterlilies* (2004)), but these emotional and imaginary qualities are neither defined by, nor restricted to, the private sphere only. They address our shared experiences and represent instead common models for perceiving and relating to the world anew, and consequently, for conceiving of a new world. All we have to do is accept the invitations and make the attempt ourselves.







WORKS
1997-2004

PARTY NEXT DOOR

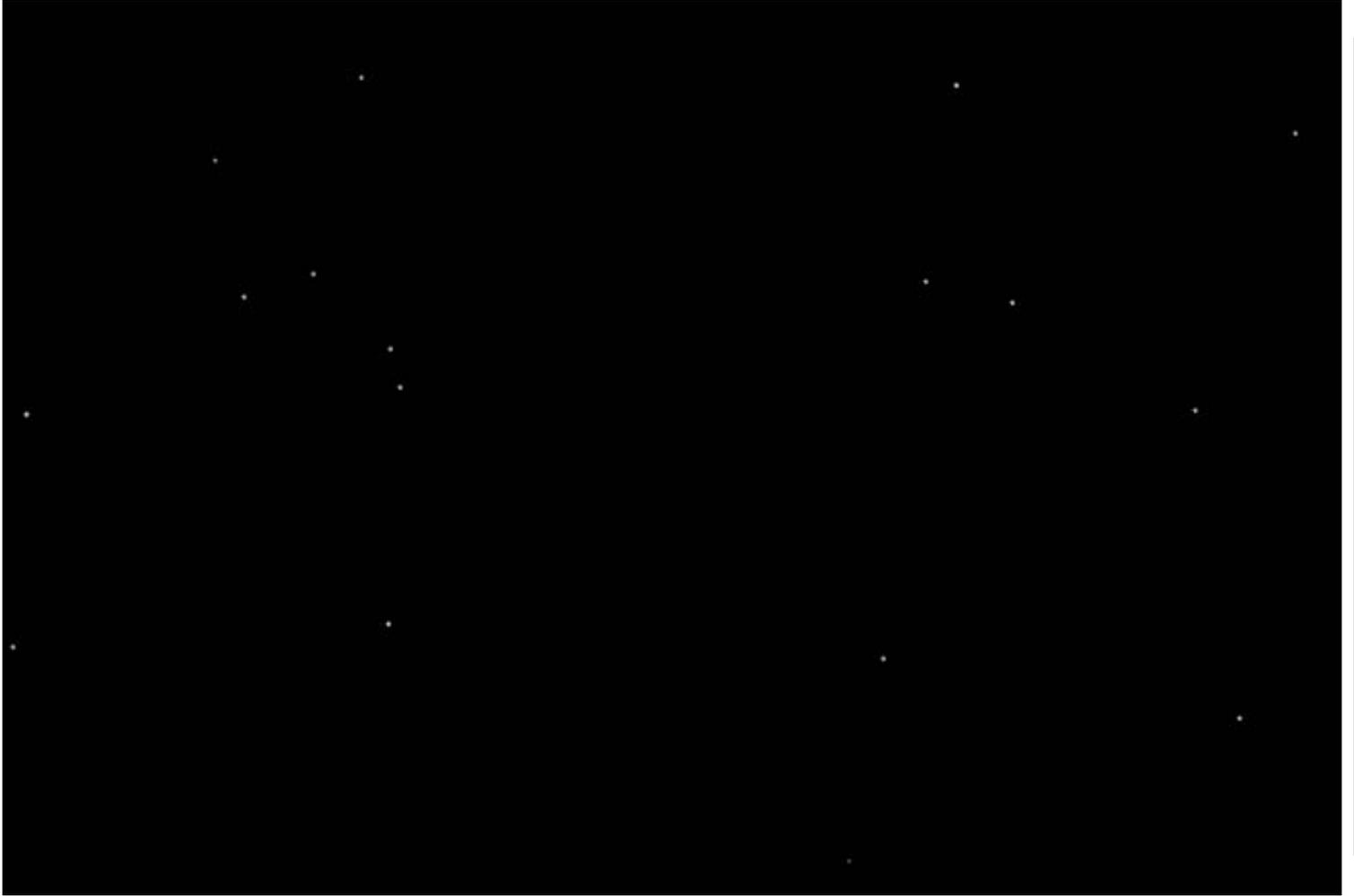


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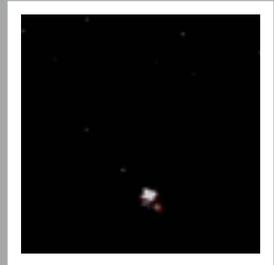


1998 | A sound installation based on a recording of the sound from a party held in the artist's own apartment. The artist was not 'invited' to the party and the sound – with distortion and distance – was recorded through the facing wall of his next-door neighbor's apartment.

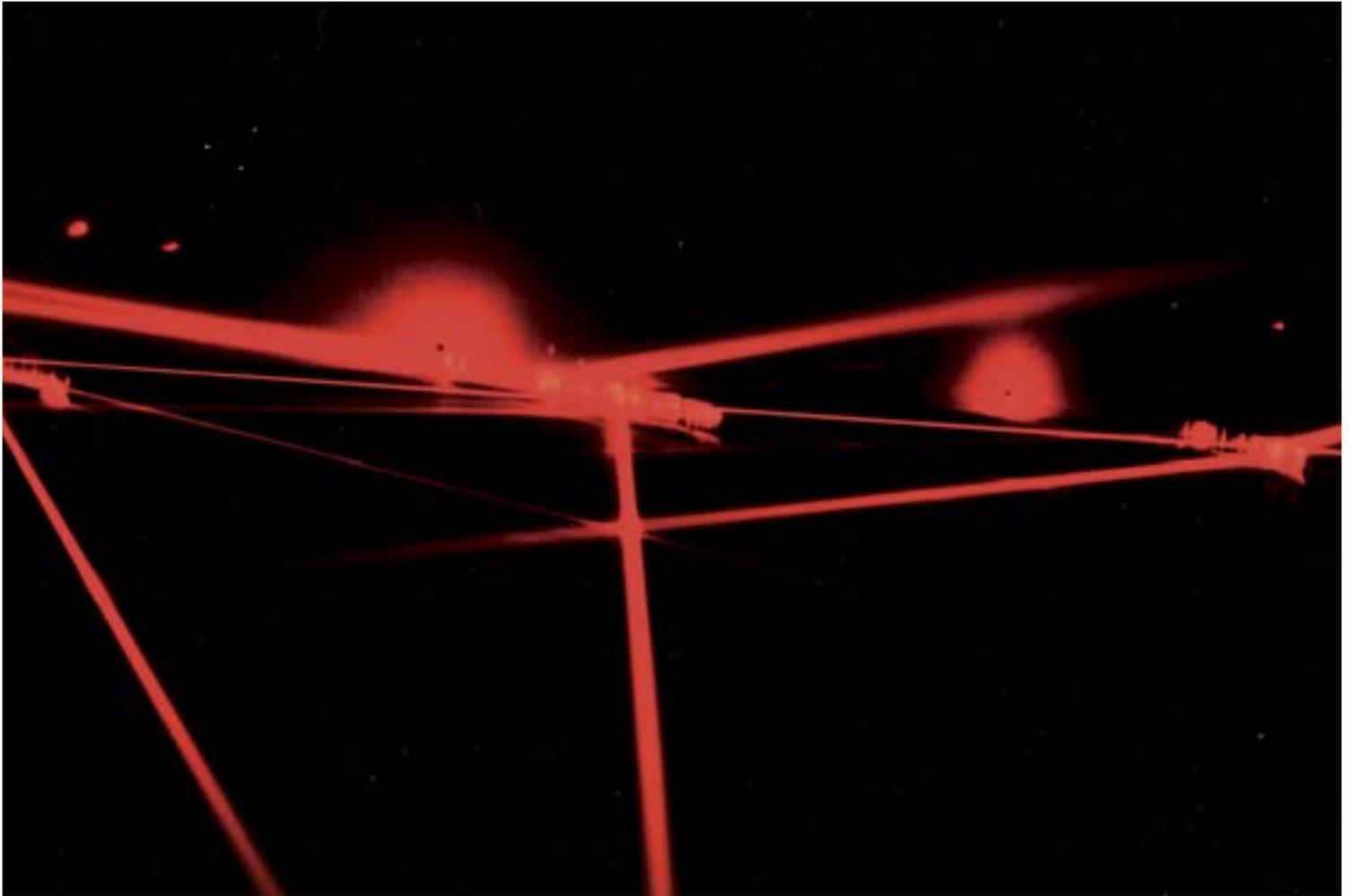
DIALOGUE 1 | TALKING WITH FIREFLIES



2002 | A video of a night's attempt to communicate – get in sync – with the firefly *Pteroptyx Tener* by flashing a flashlight. The video was shot by the Salangor River in Malaysia, where one can find up to two thousand fireflies blinking synchronously in a single tree and the local boatmen use them for navigation at night.

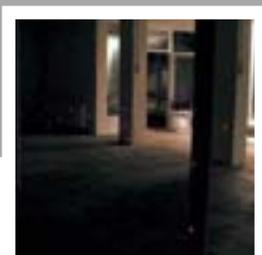


BROKEN KILOMETER

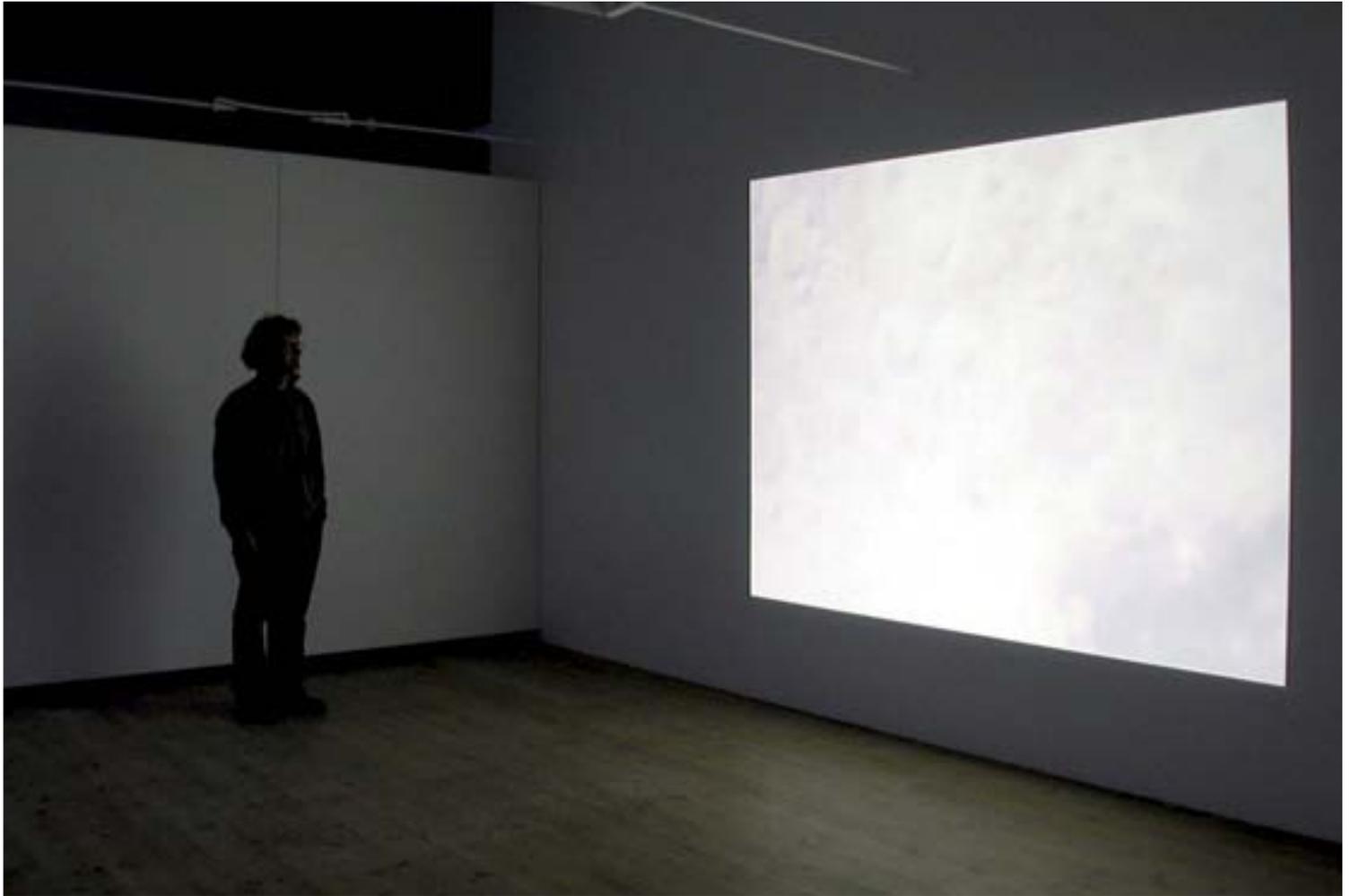


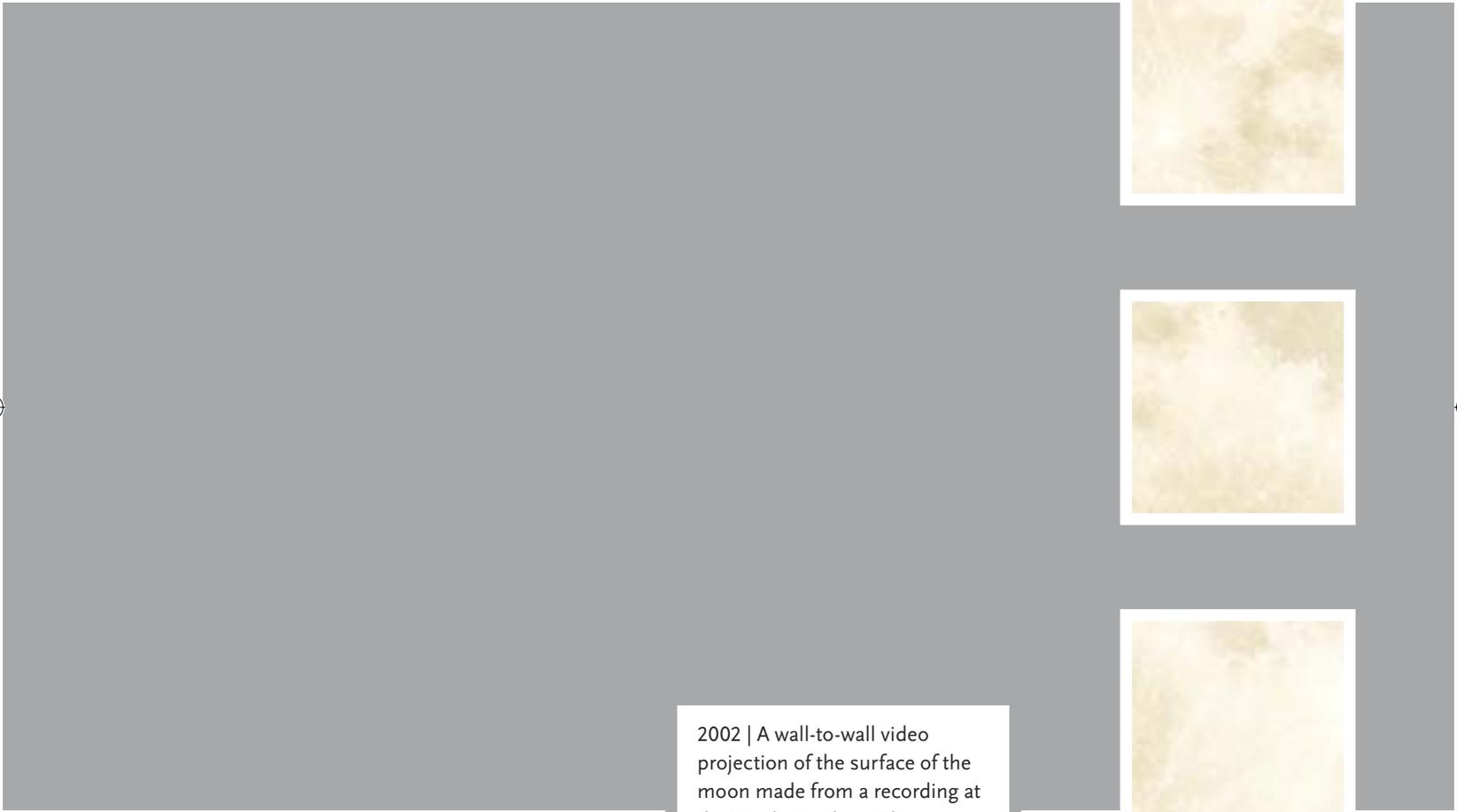


2002 | A light installation where exactly one kilometer of laser beams criss-cross the gallery space. As the viewers enter the space and interact with the installation the otherwise invisible beams appear as tiny red spots on the lower parts of the viewers' legs.



LUNATIC





2002 | A wall-to-wall video projection of the surface of the moon made from a recording at the Wieth-Knudsen Observatory, Denmark. The projection bathes the room in moonlight.



PACING IN CIRCLES





2000 | A performance sculpture where the artist created a circle on the gallery floor by walking the same circular path for ten days with sandpaper taped to the soles of his shoes. The viewers were invited to follow in the footsteps of the artist and reenact the meditative walk.

THE NONSENSE OF WHITE



2002 | Collaboration with Kirstine Roepstorff.

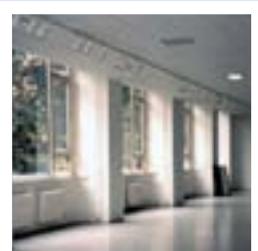
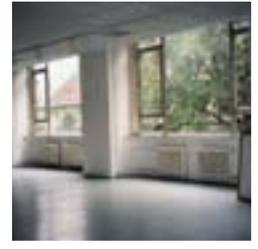
An installation in the open where three sheep were placed in a fold next to the exhibition space. The sheep were bleached totally white to correspond to our notions of their ideal and innocent whiteness.



RAINFOIL

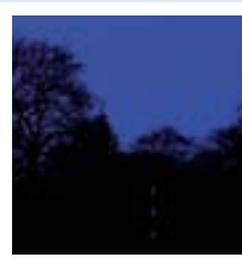


1996 | An installation where hundreds of small transparent acrylic plastic raindrops were put on the inside of all of the windows in the exhibition space. The installation created the illusion – or rather the feeling – that it was constantly raining even when the summer sun was shining outside.



FROM A CERTAIN DISTANCE
EVERYTHING LOOKS GOOD





2001 | A video of animated fireflies flashing outside the artist's bedroom window on a cold evening in January.



MOONLIGHT MOMENTS



2004 | A series of photographs in which the full moon was used as a lightpen to write words about love and sorrow onto the night sky.



TOUCHED BY YOUR PRESENCE



2000 | Collaboration with Christian Heide

An installation of a curved white wall with a 'built-in' echo. When speaking at the curved wall the viewer hear her voices echoed with a short delay and a little distortion.



HOMEMADE LIGHT

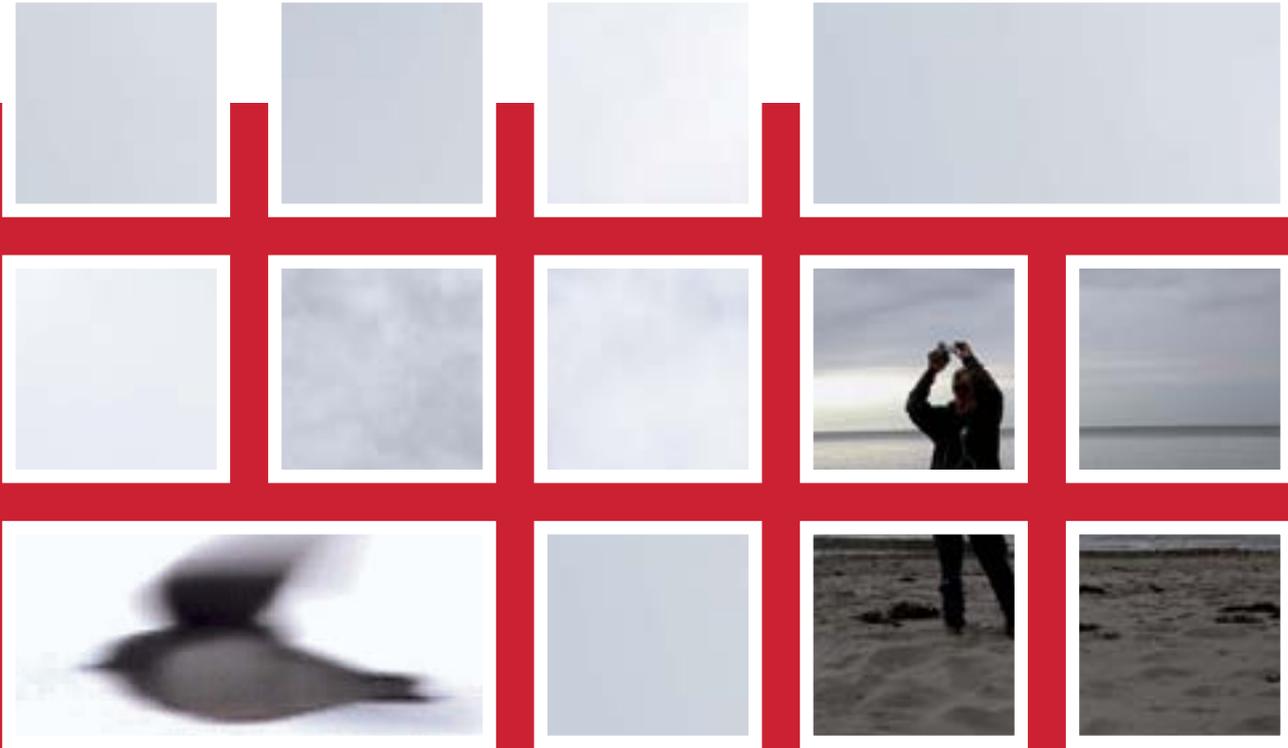


2000 | A series of primitive and homemade electric bulbs that attempts to light up the gallery space. The light sources are produced from simple everyday materials – household jars in different shapes and sizes – and emit from 2 seconds to 4 minutes of light.



CAPTURING SAND MARTINS





2003 | A video showing the attempt to film Sand Martins in flight at one of their natural habitats on the coast of Denmark. The Sand Martin is a swallow and the fastest bird in Denmark. The three days of attempts resulted in only a few seconds of 'captured' flight.

BUS 7 TO EVERYWHERE





2001 | A replica of a regular Danish bus stop sign placed on the sidewalk of a street in the center of Copenhagen. The destination of the bus line 7 – a non-existent line in the Copenhagen transit system – is the imaginary place EveryWhere. The Copenhagen City Council removed the piece from the street because they were worried that tourists would wait for the bus and get lost or confused.

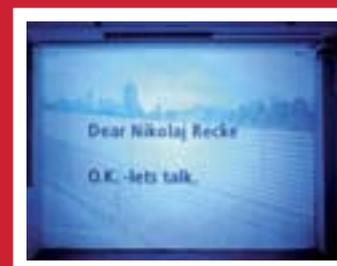
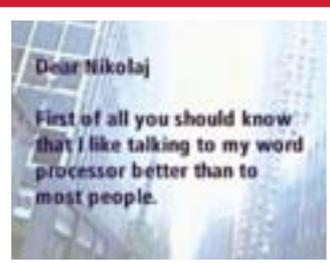
KNOWING YOU, KNOWING ME

Dear Robert Morris

**You just turned me into
a frog!**

Dear Robert Morris.

**Three years ago I had a
strange experience with you.
I saw three of your feltpieces
in a Gallery in Cologne.**



1997 | An email correspondence with Robert Morris about his famous felt sculptures and the possibilities of a rendezvous transformed into a silent video with text and slow-motion images. The two never got to talk about the sculptures and they never met up. The artist transformed the failed attempt into a 'readymade' communication.

POND OF WATERLILIES





2004 | An installation consisting of white plastic buckets filled with different kinds of waterlilies – including the Tiger Lily, Dancing Star and Blue Moon – and placed in a formation resembling a little pond.

I COULD BE SO LUCKY,
LUCKY, LUCKY, LUCKY





2001 | Collaboration with Lena Malm

An installation in a church where a net was stretched out 10 feet above the floor so that people could lie on their backs and make wishes while looking up at a projection of shooting stars on the church's dome ceiling. The projection showed a documentary borrowed from NASA of an extraordinary night sky with hundreds of shooting stars due to a meteor storm.

A ROOM WITH THOUSAND THOUGHTS



2002 | An installation where a window from the artist's apartment was exchanged with one of the windows in the gallery. Through this exchange the artist established an 'invisible' presence across the usual boundaries of time and place.



4-LEAF CLOVER PRODUCTION



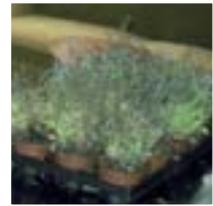
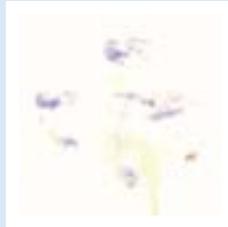
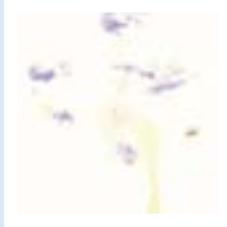
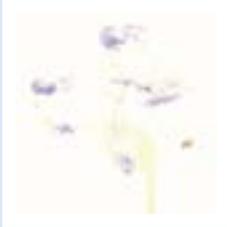


1999 | A playground for experiments with clover at the DLF-Trifolium Research Division that the artist visited regularly for a period of two years. Due to practical reasons genetic manipulation of the clover turned out to be impossible and the attempt to produce 4-leaf clover was made solely by crossbreeding refinements.

FORGETMENOT



50



1998 | A wallpaper installation made from the sap of 200 Forget-me-nots cultivated in the artist's apartment. When they bloomed the flowers were cut at the stem and pressed separately against the wall leaving delicate semi-transparent traces that formed a pattern of an almost invisible presence.

CLOVERFIELD





1999 | A 140 square meter indoor cloverfield on the 7th floor of the exhibition space. People could walk, sit and play on this green field of potential good luck.

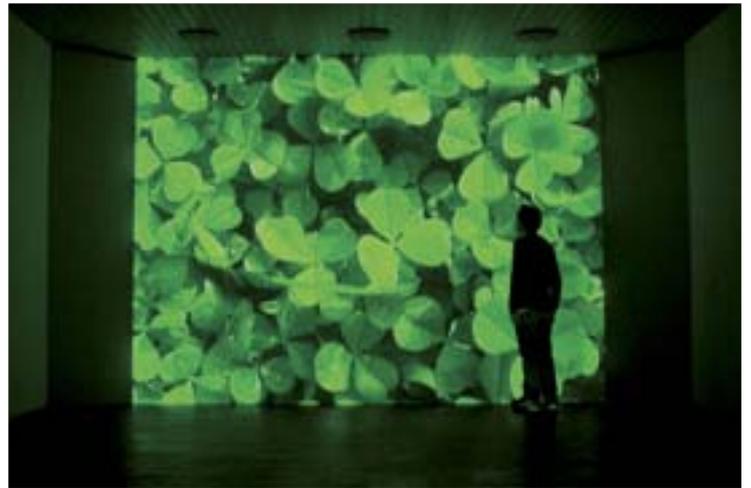
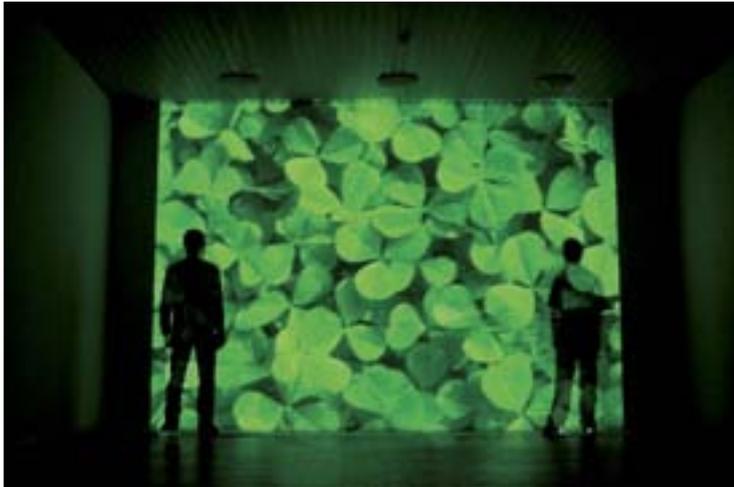
TIPTOE ON THE BOARDS OF LOVE

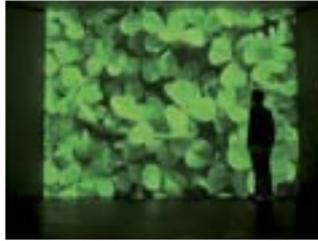
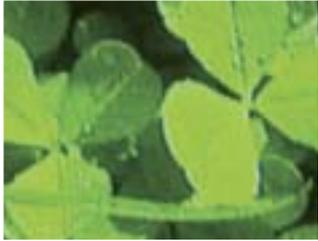


2002 | Collaboration with Kirstine Roepstorff
A wooden dancing stage decorated with colored light bulbs and music playing so that everyone can step onto the boards and have a sentimental dance to a handful of familiar tunes speaking of lost love.



LOOKING FOR 4-LEAF CLOVER





1998 | A video of a super-slow-motion pan over a cloverfield. The pan allows the viewers to take a close look for the rare 4-leafed plant of good luck.



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- p. 52-53: Cloverfield 1999. Installation view from Melbourne Biennial & Kunstpanorama, Lucern
- p. 54-55: Tiptoe on the Boards of Love 2001 (with Kirstine Roepstorff), Knabstrup Factory
- p. 56-57: Looking for 4-Leaf Clovers 1998. Video stills & installation view from Akershus Kunstcenter & Århus Art Museum

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Born 1969 in Copenhagen

Selected solo shows:

- 2003: Gathering Flowers to a Delicate Girl. Stalke/Sonnerup Gallery
2002: Fountains of Mountains. artagents gallery, Hamburg
2001: I Could be so Lucky, Lucky, Lucky, Lucky. Enkehuset, Stockholm
Users Club. (Artnode) National Museum of Contemporary art, Copenhagen
2000: Touched by Your Presence. Nagamine Projects, Tokyo
Stalke Gallery, Copenhagen
1998: Akershus Artcenter. Oslo

Selected groupshows:

- 2005: deLUX. Licht als Medium der Kunst, ZKM, Karlsruhe
Reality. Stalke/ Kirke Sonnerup Gallery
2/15. Overgaden Institute for Contemporary art, Copenhagen
2004: Canolfan. Nagoya
PASSWORD. CCGA Museum
SuperDanish. Harbourfront Centre, Toronto
RICE+. Tokyo
SKIF-B. St. Petersburg, Russia
2003: Rotho. Menegh Museum, St. Petersburg
Urban Realities, JP galleri, Copenhagen
COURTisane. Gent/Belgium
Nordic live Art. Göteborg Museum
IdéBoxing. Institute for Contemporary art, Copenhagen
2002: MIRAGES une pratique de l'espace projeté. Maison de Danemark, Paris
Eukabeuk. Chiangmai University Art Museum
Art for Young Men. Art Museum Tennispalatsi, Helsinki
Blind Date. Brandts Klædefabrik, Odense
On a clear day. Sophienholm/Copenhagen
2001: Techno-landscape. ICC Museum, Tokyo
10 Years Anniversary. Stalke Out of Space, Copenhagen
Take-off 20:01. Århus Artmuseum
Dansk Videomanifesta. Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen
Vaerk. Knabstrup Factory
2000: Wonderful Copenhagen. Stadtgalerie Kiel
Wunderwelt. art agents gallery, Hamburg
Dive In. Kunstpanorama, Lucern
Portraitartig. Thomas Rehbein Gallerie, Cologne
Sparwasser HQ, Berlin
On the trace off. Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center
Shoot. Malmø Kunsthall, Malmø



1999: Utopia/distopia. Ex Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico City
Signs of Life. 1st Melbourne International Biennial, Melbourne
New Life. Nagamine projects, Tokyo
Young & Seriuos. Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest
Cities On the Move. Nasubi Gallery, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art
Artnode. National Museum of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen
1998: Out of the North. Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart
Wrapped. West Zealand Art Museum
1997: Louisiana-exhibition. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art
Stalke Gallery. Copenhagen
1996: Electronic Undercurrents. National Museum of Contemporary Art
Artgenda. First Eastsea Biennial, Copenhagen

Selected articles:

Jacob Lillemose: Full moon, Divided Heart 2004
Rohto, Straight Forward Medicin Art, NIFCA 2003
Jacob Lillemose: Light my Fire, you Fly 2003
Rohto in St. Petersburg, Nordic Council of Ministers 2003
NU, Nordic Artmagazine, May 2001
Flash Art no 215. & Flash Art no. 207
Barbara Nemitz: Trans'plant. Cantz Verlag 2000
Itaru Hirano: The delayed Self 2000
Frieze: Issue 48 1999. pp. 100
Juliana Engberg: Nikolaj Recke Signs of Life 1999
Ralf Christofori: Hallo... - who's there? Out of the North catalogue pp. 98-101. 1998
Catsou Roberts: Interview Wrapped catalogue 1998
Kristine Kern: Displacement of Signification 1998
Ralf Chrisofori: Reality Bites. Wrapped catalogue 1998
Åsa Nacking, Lars Grambye & Tone O. Nielsen: Louisiana exhibition catalogue 1997



