

**ROBERT BREER  
MARK GEFFRIAUD**

gb agency,  
Paris

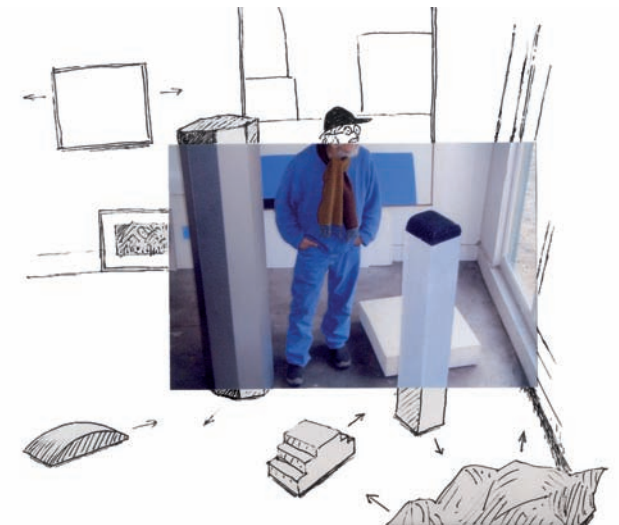
Art 40 Basel  
Art Premiere  
Hall 2.1, Booth A.8

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The exhibition conceived for Art Premiere is based on an original encounter between the work of two artists from different generations, Robert Breer and Mark Geffriaud, whose practices test the way artworks may appear and be perceived. Both artists try to thwart the presence of a unique point of view, revealing an unstable present that is part of a continuous flow. The look of the spectator is in this way constantly veered, his point of view unceasingly displaced.

For the past forty years, Robert Breer has been thwarting formal categories and producing a many-faceted and independent body of work (sculptures, paintings, drawings, films). Exploring the experience of a movement, from an extreme slowness in his motorized sculptures to an amazing fastness in his films which play with our retinal persistence, Robert Breer's work tests and shifts our ways of seeing, questions our perception and breaks our habits with representation. Focusing on images and forms' apparition (circulation) and disappearance (oblivion), Mark Geffriaud's works draw a fragmented archaeology, a climate of thoughts in which the viewer is invited to project his own stories.

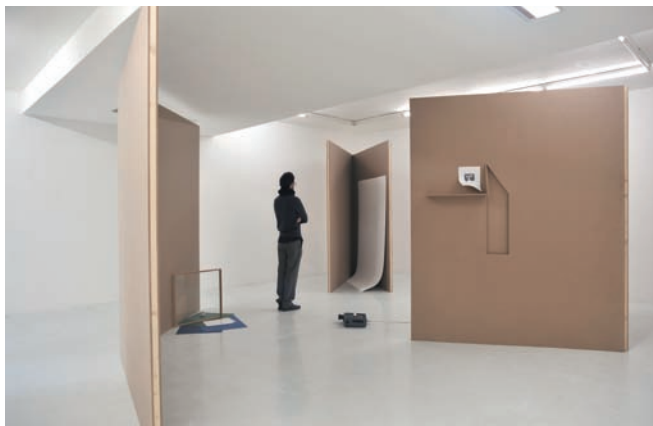
Although different and separated by forty years, the works of these two artists question the way we look at objects, images and artworks, inviting us to experiment a flow, within a space-time unceasingly redefined. What they both propose, is not only a reflection on what our eyes are seeing, but on the way of seeing according to the spirit.



**An interview between gb agency, Robert Breer and Mark Geffriaud**  
**Via email during May 2009**

You are both speaking about some sort of indeterminacy to qualify your work, as if nothing was really ever settled, either with a "floating line" on a canvas or with an on-going out-of-picture manner. Mark, in your solo exhibition at gb agency entitled If one were only an Indian you have created a set with haziness and porous outlines, to suggest a kind of indeterminacy of scale and status. You also qualify your researches as a form of drift. Could you expand on that?

Mark Geffriaud: Yesterday I started a book on modernism whose title somehow seems to me to be related to what we're talking about here. It's called "All that is solid melts into air", a sentence Marshall Berman, the author, borrowed from Karl Marx. I don't know yet what it has to do with either modernism or communism but I like the image it suggests and the consequences it seems to imply. If everything is gently melting, the simple act of defining or framing becomes a real challenge in itself. During the 20th century, the centralized perception of the world inherited from the Renaissance was put into pieces. My generation was born among its fragments. I see my work as a way of wandering in this constellation, looking for new figures like in ancient celestial maps. That movement I think is what is at stake. That's why I like it when things don't have a very clear outline, when you don't know exactly where they start and finish, like in Blaise Pascal's famous sentence: "the



Mark Geffriaud, If one were only an Indian, solo show, partial view of the exhibition, 2009, gb agency, Paris



Mark Geffriaud, If one were only an Indian / cross dissolve, 2009, installation, partial view of the exhibition, gb agency, Paris

universe is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."

The idea of a center in constant movement seems to be something Robert is also interested in. One thing I find remarkable with his sculptures is the way they're always escaping from the classical relation between object and observer, always re-questioning the premises of that experience. I hope to do so a bit myself.

Robert, in a 1983 interview with Yann Beauvais, you explained your gradual emancipation from the "art concret" of the 50's: "by 1955, I continued to paint and I began to introduce elements in the paintings which broke with the neo-plastic orthodoxy, because usually what we were working with then were forms which were locked to one another and it was some sort of religious heresy to have a form which floated free. It was considered a weakness in a painting if there was any suggestion of elastic space. Usually, the space had to be very concrete, very tied down to the frame, tied one to another and so forth. In my case, I introduced a floating line, quite deliberately." How is this notion of "elastic space" related to your work?

Robert Breer: Inspired by glimpses at Mark's work I can see a connection between us - in his case he's taken on established architectual regularity by showing his work outside the "frame".

In my case I've challenged cinematic regularity by ignoring the conventional time durations. That much is obvious. My motivation for disturbing the peace could be different from his.

Cinema, based in technology, is relatively young and has been developed and lucratively exploited for its illusions of reality. Painting, used the same way, goes back centuries. The premises for each have been challenged in recent years and have been developed into new orthodoxies - from "cubism" in painting to start with to so-called "experimental cinema" in film. I hope I have gone a step further in both by radically disrupting continuity in my films and releasing out in the world my slowly roaming sculptures. At first, I brought to film my already established painting and drawing practices - not thinking about narrative but just how to animate my paintings. One day, now 60 years ago, I shot a film in which I radically changed each image 24 times a second, just to see what it would look like. From that first viewing I felt not only liberated from thoughts about narrative continuity but had a radically new visual experience! Of course challenging orthodoxy in art is its own orthodoxy and is to be challenged itself. I hope I have done that in offering something really new to look at and to think about.

Could you tell us more about the notions of time, rhythm and temporality in your work?

Robert: In narrative film, rhythm is based at least to some extent on predictable behavior of recognizable imagery. In my films, without a narrative base, the rhythm is often independent of the mixed images which can, in turn, be in unpredictable relationships with each other.

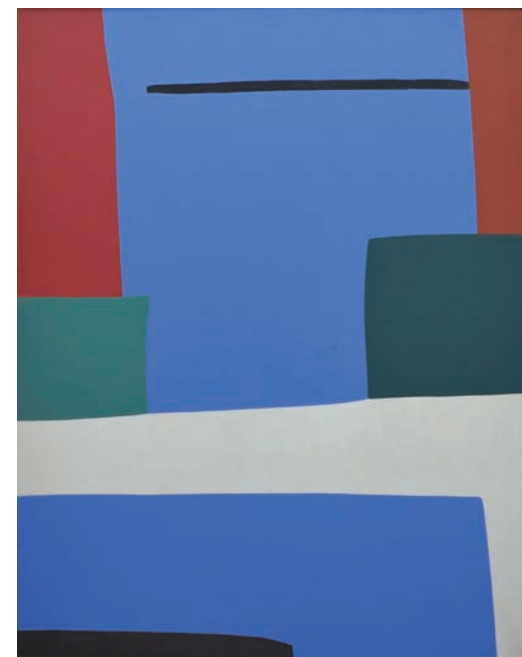


Robert Breer, 3D Mutoscope, 1978-80, sculpture (wood, paper and glass), 20,5 x 56 x 23 cm, unique piece.  
Exhibition view, "3Radicals", TENT, Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2008

My first films were silent until I realized that silent movement of shapes on the screen suggested physical distance. That hadn't been a problem in my paintings. Many previous "abstract" filmmakers added sound because it could establish continuity. Unfortunately, if the sound was coherent or "musical" it often took over and dominated the images. My answer to that has been to clearly give sound its freedom from the imagery and to give visual form its own freedom from sound though both are often coexistent in my films - as in real life! A mix of recognizable images and abstract form is typical in these films, again - just as in real life! Of course with 24 images per second possible, surprise can also be a major ingredient.

Could you expand on why did you stop painting and what did you find in making films? How and when did this transition occur in your work?

Robert: I practiced both for several years, starting film in 1952 and quitting painting in 1957. I think I have already explained my negative reaction to selling my then favorite painting to a collector with the prospect of never seeing it again as opposed to showing a film to an applauding audience and keeping it afterwards. In the first case, I felt robbed, and in the second case I enjoyed group approval and still owned my film. More than that, of course, film was the exciting new medium of the 20th century and, outside popular narrative cinema, had been barely explored. I soon found out however that, except for a few artists such as Hans Richter and Fernand Leger, the medium was not considered "fine art". This suited my plebeian soul in those days even though I also soon realized that informed critical appreciation would be hard to come by.



Robert Breer, Untitled, circa 1950, oil on canvas, 164 x 133,5 cm

After a screening of my films a few years ago, the then fine arts critic for the "New York Times", Hilton Kramer, was followed by the film critic for the "Village Voice", Andrew Sarris, who both confessed in an article appearing in "The Times" to being "unable to judge Breer's films" since for Kramer they involved "moving images" and in Sarris' case he admitted he could only deal with narrative film. So, except for more dedicated critics, it took a long time to get much attention and in a positive way left room for still more radical invention. Unfortunately, I did soon discover that film audiences were usually less prepared in those days for new plastic experiences and I found myself back in the art gallery system - this time with film as well as my slow moving sculptures. I can only hope that my fast and my slow works still give pleasure - even as they continue to challenge expectations.

When you start working on a film, do you start with an idea or do you first compile images and drawings?

Robert: My habit has been to make about one film a year involving from 3 to 4 thousand separate images for each film. Back in 1957, after an attempt to capitalize on my excitement in producing REcreation which was a dense collage of 24 radically different images per second, I made an insipid sequel, REcreation II. From that mistake I learned to wait long enough after making each film to digest it and, if possible, start fresh on something entirely different and new. After some minor essays, Jamestown Balloos was next, and after another wait, it was followed by A Man and his Dog Out for Air with different experiments in between - no more sequels!

To help maintain my focus on each new project, I would conjure up an overall feeling for it, an identifying aura that would survive all distraction, i.e. teaching, for however long it took to finish. Then, after a pause, I would embark again on another "new" project in film or other media. This went on for years as I gradually realized that repeating myself, in film at least, was inevitable. Not tragic!

Mark, you also seem to be more interested in the relationships between images than in the images themselves. Something that could be related to what Aby Warburg called the "law of the good neighbour" but also to Eisenstein's theories on film editing.

Mark: William James argues that the world presents itself as a sort of compact court, an overwhelming flood in which there are neither persons nor objects, but a confused mix of smells, colors, sounds, contacts, sensations, temperatures... The mental activity, he says, mainly consists in cutting out elements from that continuous whole and grouping them under the functional classifications of objects, people, animals, plants...

So in a sense that basic process can be seen as the very first step towards narration. My relation to narrative and non-narrative processes is very influenced by this archaic type of editing. I guess I'm generally more interested in what's going on in that editing room than what comes out of it, meaning the way we select, classify and make associations. In a sense, I could say that my work deals with the left-overs of these operations.

Robert Breer, REcreation, 1956-57, 16 mm film color, optical sound, soundtrack by Noël Burch, 2 minutes



Robert Breer, A Man and his Dog Out for Air, 1957, 16 mm film, black & white, optical sound, 3 minutes

You both hold strong positions toward (conventional) narration in your work, or rather with non-linear, disruptive or fragmentary narratives.

Mark: Conventional narration implies chronology ; its aim is to get to the point. For some reason, I prefer not to give my works a specific direction, or at least no clear destination. This relation to intentions is I think one of the major difference between linear and fragmented narratives, leading to different logics, either of succession or of expanse.

I like it when everything is given at once and to see how you can transform the global picture by moving things around, finding new neighborhoods and associations, like when you rearrange and pile up documents on your desk to make some space and end up with a new landscape, a new climate, obviously influencing your approach to the work you intended to carry out. It has to do with releasing a potential, like when you unfold a map.

In Les Renseignements Généraux series in which you invite to create associations between images, do you know from the beginning what kind of associations you want to create or do you leave room for chance? The above question could also lead to your general relationships with images and objects. You both work with already existing images. What are your relationships with recycling, found images and archives?



Mark Geffriaud, Les Renseignements Généraux, 2007, photographs (silver prints), variable dimensions.  
Right : exhibition view "Le Jardin de Cyrus", EMBA Manet, Gennevilliers, 2007 ; Left : detail, photograph, 63 x 83 cm

Mark: By drawing found images out of their usual context and proceeding to unexpected associations I look for shortcuts through periods and fields of knowledge, suggesting the possibility of an underground non-linear story.

The way I choose these images depends more on their attraction than in any preconceived idea I would want to illustrate. I found it amazing how certain neighborhoods can be puzzling and evident at the same time. I like to think of images, but also ideas and theories as characters. Like people, they have their own presence and temper. You can't just make them sit next to one another and expect them to get on well. I think the double sense of the word "correspondence" matches this feeling pretty well.

How will this idea of correspondance be related to the works presented at Art Premiere?

Mark: The works I'm planning to show are somehow all related like clues of a riddle with no clear solution. They all echo with one another, making it hard to tell where one ends and where the other one starts. After my show at the gallery this year, called If one were only an Indian, I was amused to realize that several documents I was gathering for this show in Basel had to do with arrows, not so much as an object than a complex symbol. I first remembered a sentence from Nietzsche saying that thinkers and artists throw arrows like bottles in the sea, and that others, later, will pick them up or not and throw them elsewhere. Then I thought of Zenon's paradox: to get from the bow to the tree, the arrow has first to cover half of this distance, and before that half of this new distance, etc. So that it will never manage to cover the infinite distance that separates it from the tree. The story was getting complex.



Robert Breer, Floats, 1966, photo by Peter Moore

It got even more when I started reading "Cosmos" from Witold Gombrowicz, in which the narrator discovers an arrow drawn on the ceiling of his room, pointing towards a small stick tied up to a fragment of brick in the garden, reminding him of a bird he saw hanged on a tree in the forest and getting himself tied up to an unsolvable series of other puzzling signs, transforming a rather common situation into an obsessive investigation.

It suddenly struck me that this simple pointed stick was growing into a forest of signs that I could use to exercise myself at archery. So in a way my main concern was to build a set of correspondences that would somehow deviate from the traditional cause and effect circuit and create its own chaotic and slippery logic. Like in quantum science, hazard only occurs when there's someone to observe it. To quote Gombrowicz, "as we build our worlds by associating phenomena, I wouldn't be surprised that at the very beginning of times a fortuitous and repeated association was made, giving a direction in the chaos and establishing an order. There is something in the conscience that makes it a trap for itself."

Robert, in an interview with Guy L. Côté in 1962, you were referring to the word "unrelationship" to describe your work that offers as an alternative to the rational, word-and-meaning based structures of literature, "a type of cinema built around the art of the non-rational, non-reasonable associations of images".



Robert Breer, "3Radicals", exhibition view  
TENT, Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2008

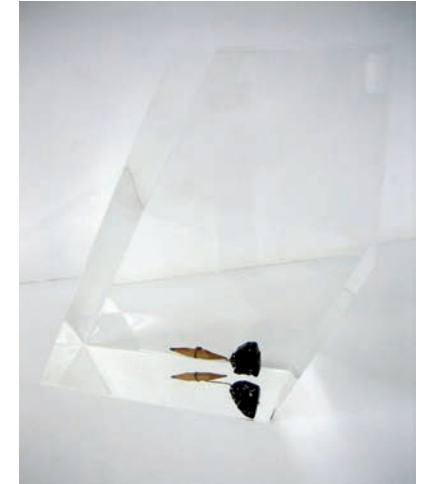
You also stated that "Once I avoided conventional narration and replaced it with real time I could put the images together in non sequitur impositions. This might be what you call daily seeing. It might be similar to the visual and aural experience of ordinary daily life — collision of experiences — not necessarily chaotic."

Robert: The only change in my thinking that I perceive between 1962 and now is that I have become less articulate. Otherwise, everything I said then about my work still holds true. Besides my own and Mark's work I'm not aware of our outside approach being so widely shared by other artists though there seems to be a generally broader view of what can qualify as "fine art". My own images tend to be ordinary, sometimes conventional geometric forms, other times a mix of "snapshots" of daily life, figurative drawings, blank or color frames, as diverse as possible in some cases, and as confined to a particular mode in other cases since the true content is almost static experience - not determined by narrative but by often fractious interaction between single frames.

Do your sculptures also extend this recognition of time and temporality and what you explained on "disrupting continuity" about your films?

Robert: In contrast, my slow and randomly moving sculptures continually recompose their rapport with each other and the space they occupy and likewise escape conclusive and final composition. In the case of film, my intent was to eliminate narrative in favor of formal composition and in sculpture to include random evolution in otherwise formal compositions.

In both cases I wanted to challenge all limiting conventions, by now a convention in itself, of course.



Mark Geffriaud, Untitled, 2009, pencil and stone  
included into Plexiglas, 27 x 29 x 20 cm, unique piece

Can you talk a bit about your project of building a moving conference center?

Robert: There was a dance group in Sweden which was going to ask Yvonne Rainer and some other avant-garde people to go there, this was in 1965, and I was invited to maybe take part and I conceived a project for it. It never got past the proposal because what happened is that the whole thing fell through and became Nine Evenings that took place in New York in 1966. "Experiments in Art and Technology" was responsible and was a group with whom I did the Pavilion at Osaka 70. Before that, a thing at the Old Armory, Nine Evenings of interaction between science and art. A kind of a critical disaster at the time but really an interesting set of events. Anyhow, that's what finally became of the original Swedish thing. My project was to construct a building for meetings that would be self-propelled and mobile, that would be like a building but would roam around in Stockholm, in the city, and when people had conferences in it they would never know where they were going to be when the meeting was over. They'd be some place else. And this of course, was anti-structure, anti-authority, it was anti-positive thinking really. That's a very important ingredient: destruction of authority, destruction of logic, these are all typical anarchist thoughts. So there is a certain provocation in these sculptures for the same reason; it exists and it defies categorizing.



Robert Breer, Untitled, 1969, drawing on paper, 21,5 x 53 cm

Your work puts man at the centre of a changing world that is subjective and ruleless. Does the necessity of being part of a permanent flux have some non-western influence in your work?

Robert: I see myself as midwestern. I do resist authority except my own.

Like your sculptures? They seem to be always in the same time at periphery and center, in between, half way between two banks.

Robert: My sculptures activate the space around them more than they seem to be doing anything themselves. They isolate motion itself, they are dealing with thresholds. It's the thresholds of experiencing them, it has to do with thresholds of definition. In other words, challenging film and challenging sculpture is done by going to the limit of the definition and going past it. You have to call my films, films even though there are conventions, well I'm talking about original films. Of course I have come back within all kinds of bounds. They're not very radical my films, many of them. But my original step anyhow was that way and the same with these sculptures. For one thing the sculpture has been taken off the stand and not only that but its connection between itself and the floor is a very active area and this has no precedent for sculptural concern, there is no way to deal with this, the bottom of this piece that is sliding along and its relationship to the floor. That's a very intense area of unresolved aesthetic.



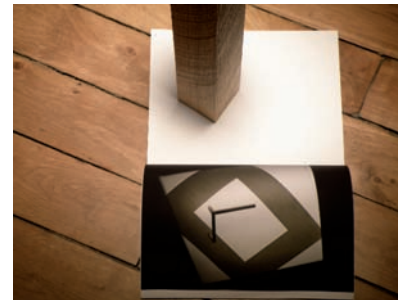
Robert Breer, Float, 1970, motorized sculpture (fiberglass, motors, wheels, batteries), 180 x 180 cm, exhibition view, "Genesis Sculpture", Domaine de Pommery, Reims, 2004

Robert seems to be part of a generation which shared the idea of modernity constructing itself through ruptures - a way of taking position towards history. Mark, your generation is very different and doesn't seem to have this rupture relationship with the past, but more, as you described earlier, to be in the middle of a constellation of fragments. As if, in front of the complexity of the history today, taking position was based on the fact to adopt a fragmented reading of the past through a practice of editing elements of memory, in order, let's say, to project to the future - by creating new narratives thanks to the editing. Do you agree with this?

Mark: Well yes, maybe that comes from the postmodern legacy and the idea that History is no longer heading towards a specific end or goal, that the whole thing has blown up, leading to a fragmented and polyphonic narration. In a way we don't hope as much for the future as, let's say, in the 60's. The issue seems somehow more geographical now, as if the question had shifted from "how can we replace the situation with a new one" to "how can we rearrange things so that they'll fit our aspirations". The distinction is somewhat syntactic. So as you said, this has much to do with editing.



Robert Breer, *Floor Drawing*, set of four motorized sculptures (plastic, metal, acrylic paint, motors, wheels, batteries), 1970, unique piece



Mark Geffriaud, *A River Twice*, 2009, installation, variable dimensions  
exhibition views, "Nous tournons en rond dans la nuit...", Musée départemental de Rochechouart, 2009

It reminds me of André Bazin's famous sentence about cinema substituting "to our gaze a world that corresponds to our desires". Now this can sound like a denial of reality, the kind of stuff we usually hear about escaping in a fictional world.

But I see it more as a manner of rewriting the same story from another point of view; history as told by secondary characters maybe. I have often heard people saying that my generation is nostalgic because we use images and theories of the past. But I think we're mostly expressing a doubt on what we were told and attempting to re-appropriate History, trying to change the present by rethinking the logic of the sequence that supposedly leads to it. Anyway that's how I feel about it. I try to deal with what surrounds me, which includes old images, old stories. As far as I know, Romans didn't live in ruins. Ruins are contemporary.

Robert Breer was born in 1926 (U.S.A.), he lives and works in Tucson, Arizona.  
Mark Geffriaud was born in 1977 (France), he lives and works in Paris.

gb agency represents :

**Mac Adams**  
**Robert Breer**  
**Elina Brotherus**  
**Omer Fast**  
**Mark Geffriaud**  
**Július Koller**  
**Jirí Kovanda**  
**Deimantas Narkevicius**  
**Roman Ondak**  
**Dominique Petitgand**  
**Pratchaya Phinthong**  
**Pia Rönicke**  
**Yann Sérandour**

## NEWS:

### **Mac Adams:**

- "Glass Tapestry", Commissioned project, Rutgers University Law School, Camden, USA (solo)

### **Robert Breer:**

- "The Death of the Audience", Secession, Vienna, July 3 — September 6

### **Elina Brotherus:**

- "Correspondances (with Hannele Rantala)", Hippolyte Photographic gallery, Helsinki, July 2 - August 7 (solo)

### **Omer Fast:**

- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from December (solo)  
- South London Gallery, London, mid-October to mid-December (solo)

### **Mark Geffriaud:**

- "Au pied de la lettre", Domaine départemental de Chamarande, Chamarande, May 17 - September 20

### **Július Koller:**

- "The Death of the Audience", Secession, Vienna, July 3 — September 6  
- "Julius Koller & Jiri Kovanda", Ludlow 38, New York, July 7 - August 16

### **Jirí Kovanda:**

- "The Death of the Audience", Secession, Vienna, July 3 — September 6  
- "Julius Koller & Jiri Kovanda", Ludlow 38, New York, July 7 - August 16

### **Deimantas Narkevicius:**

- "The Unanimous Life", Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, October 24 - December 6 (solo)  
- "2 sur 3", Mamco, Geneva, June 24 - September 27 (solo)

### **Roman Ondak:**

- "Loop", 53rd Venice Biennale, CZ/SK pavillion, Venice, June 7 - November 22 (solo)  
- "Measuring the Universe", MoMA, New York, June 23 - August 2 (solo)

### **Dominique Petitgand:**

- "Quelqu'un est tombé", Abbaye de Maubuisson, Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, April 1st - August 31 (solo)  
- "Stutter", Level 2 gallery, Tate Modern, London, April 22 - August 16

### **Pratchaya Phinthong:**

- "New Silk Roads", Bangkok University Gallery, Bangkok, August 27 - September 29

### **Pia Rönicke:**

- "Facing", Centro Cultural Montehermoso, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, May 23 - August 30 (solo)

### **Yann Sérandour:**

- "Au pied de la lettre", Domaine départemental de Chamarande, Chamarande, May 17 - September 20