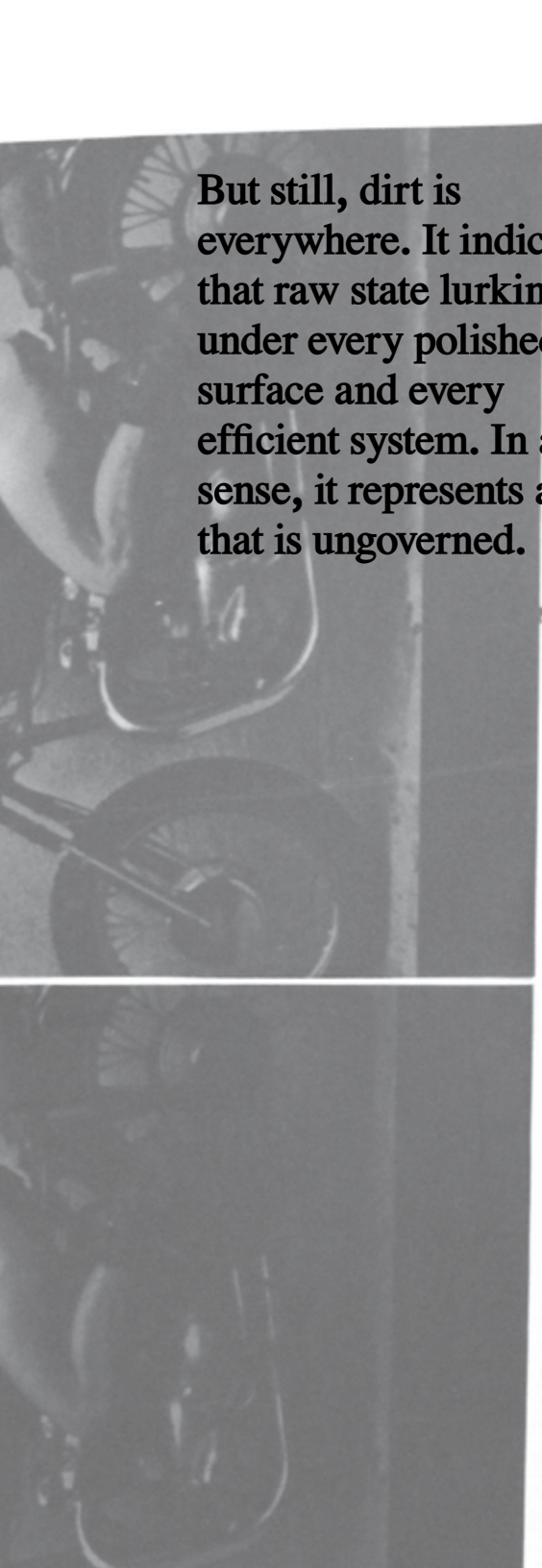


The Walk is an exhibition
of new and existing work
by Henrik Olesen.



Underneath everything,
there's dirt. Most of the
time, we regulate and
contain it. We cover it
up with floors, roads,
buildings, even entire
cities. When it spills,
we sweep it up—it's as
if we were hiding or
repressing it.



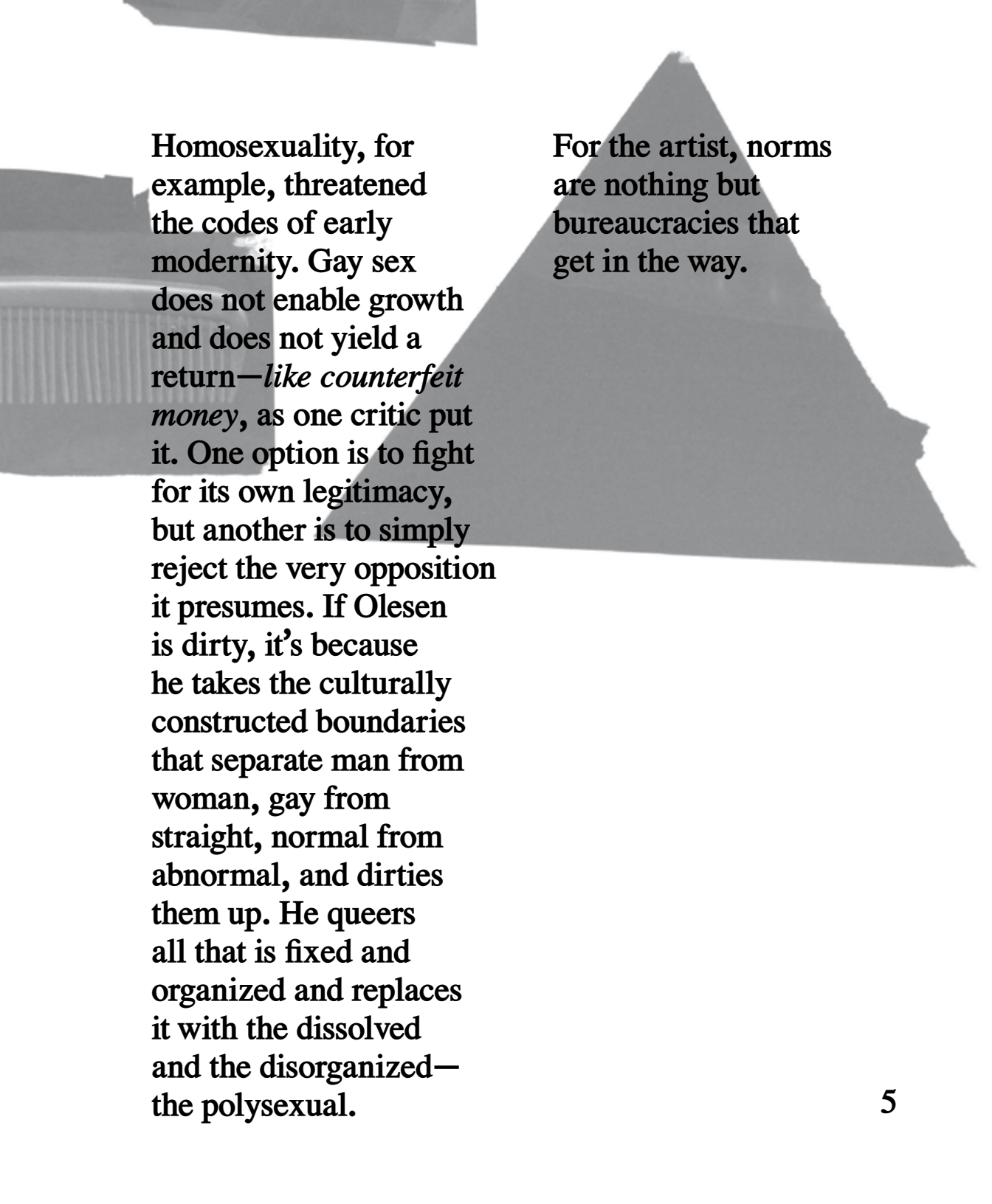


But still, dirt is everywhere. It indicates that raw state lurking under every polished surface and every efficient system. In a sense, it represents all that is ungoverned.

And yet dirt is all over government, too. It's all over people like *grab-them-by-the-pussy* Donald Trump, like ex-IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn, like ex-Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, or even like the impeached Bill Clinton. Hell, it's all over the Catholic Church. And while there is nothing inherently dirty about any of these people, certain aspects of their conduct stand in stark contrast to their claims on power, legitimacy, and authority. They are only dirty insofar as they fray from a normative standard of behavior expected of those who make such claims.

Henrik Olesen adds dirt to the neatness of conceptual art. He is drawn to surfaces that are scarred, deformed, and uneven. His exhibitions often include or highlight unfinished walls, blocked doorways, or empty rooms—as if a backstage was demanding its rightful place within the public realm. His paintings, sculptures, and collages are deliberately rough.

At the same time, Olesen adds dirt to the sexlessness of conceptual art. He works against all that is antiseptic and toward an art that recognizes desire, profanity, obscenity, perversion, and *jouissance* as productive and emancipatory forces. He wants the thin cracks in a concrete floor to suddenly feel erotic. His work calls for a messiness of exceeded extremes—or, in the words of one of his favorite writers, San Francisco's own Dodie Bellamy, “where pathology meets pleasure.” Jean Genet and George Bataille would surely concur.



Homosexuality, for example, threatened the codes of early modernity. Gay sex does not enable growth and does not yield a return—*like counterfeit money*, as one critic put it. One option is to fight for its own legitimacy, but another is to simply reject the very opposition it presumes. If Olesen is dirty, it's because he takes the culturally constructed boundaries that separate man from woman, gay from straight, normal from abnormal, and dirties them up. He queers all that is fixed and organized and replaces it with the dissolved and the disorganized—the polysexual.

For the artist, norms are nothing but bureaucracies that get in the way.

Olesen likes to tell the story of Simeon Solomon, a Pre-Raphaelite painter in late 19th-century England who was repeatedly arrested for having sex with other men in public restrooms. Despite the criminalization of homosexuality, and despite having been arrested several times, Solomon kept having sex with other men in public restrooms.

“He acted on desire as opposed to obedience,” Olesen notes, and it’s thanks to this excess, this uncontainable drive, and this confrontation with a hostile authority that he could construct his

sexual self-awareness—one that emerges from a Hegelian master–slave dialectic.

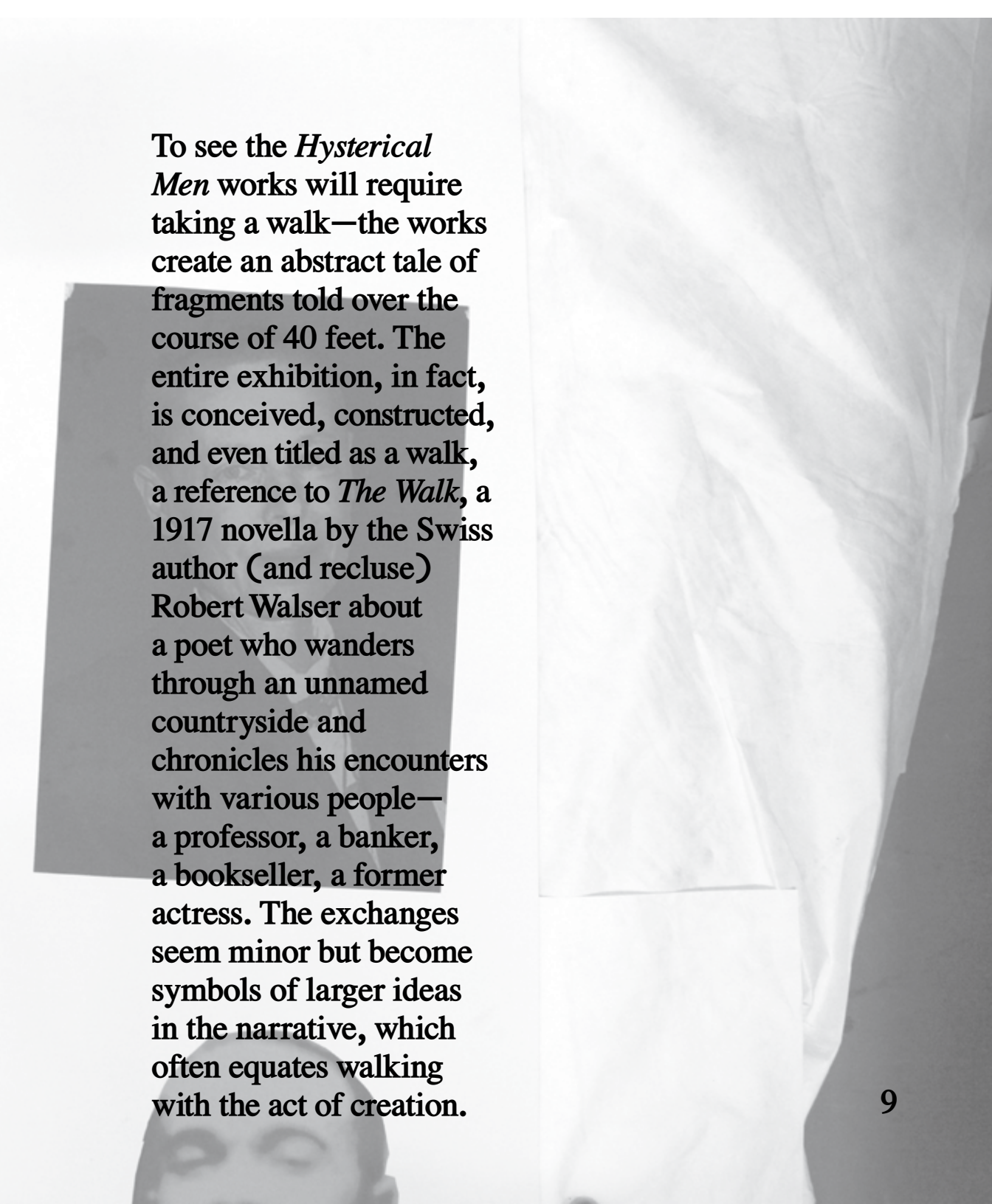
Hysterical Men 1 and *Hysterical Men 2* (2013) are filled with masters and slaves, although it's difficult to tell them apart. The two large-scale pieces on unstretched canvas are each more than 20 feet long and include scattered and fragmented images of celebrities and other headline-making figures of notoriety, including Tony Blair, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, popes Benedict XVI and Francis, club DJ icon Ron Hardy, Chelsea Manning, Monica Lewinsky, and Karima El Mahroug (aka Ruby Rubacuori), the Moroccan escort involved with Berlusconi, among many others. Nearby, T-shirts lie in

boxes, featuring some of the depicted fragments, and are available to be purchased by anyone who would like to wear them on their own bodies.

The works underline the many ways that scandal and indiscretion run through the veins of leadership and power—an apt portrait set against the backdrop of the recent American presidential election, where the lines between law and lawlessness have proven impossible to enforce or even understand. As you read this, CNN and Breitbart are both busy generating a confused American self-consciousness where masters and slaves endlessly swap places.

Please forgive the interruption, but as I write this, it's hard not to think of the artist Zoe Leonard's poem *I Want a President* (1992). Here is an excerpt:

I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmV, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harrassed and gaybashed and deported.

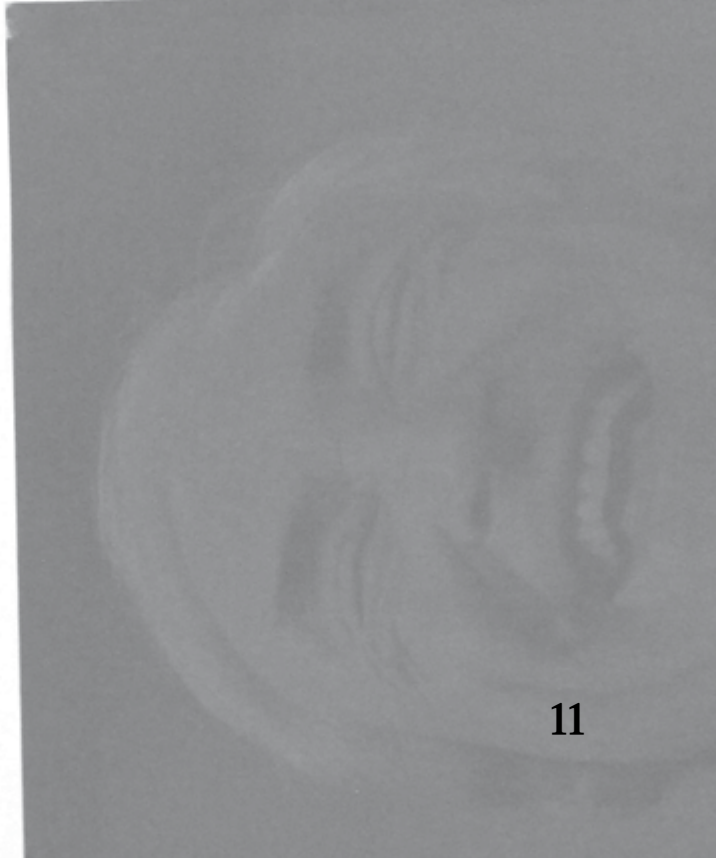


To see the *Hysterical Men* works will require taking a walk—the works create an abstract tale of fragments told over the course of 40 feet. The entire exhibition, in fact, is conceived, constructed, and even titled as a walk, a reference to *The Walk*, a 1917 novella by the Swiss author (and recluse) Robert Walser about a poet who wanders through an unnamed countryside and chronicles his encounters with various people—a professor, a banker, a bookseller, a former actress. The exchanges seem minor but become symbols of larger ideas in the narrative, which often equates walking with the act of creation.

Next stop: screw paintings. The screw is usually slave to the screwdriver, which determines where it goes and how it behaves. Olesen loosens that grip and fixes his metal screws onto canvas with thick sticky globs of glue instead. Sexual innuendo aside (although it's clearly not meant to be put aside), the objects are left naked and only marginally contained, as if they had been released from serving a function within a larger system and allowed to speak for themselves. They are free to be connected to both pain and pleasure.



*I understand things
through contradictions.
I like to argue with
myself. (Olesen)*



Then comes darkness. In 2016, Olesen made a series of collages on wood panels inspired by the first few lines of Dante's *Inferno*, which describes being lost in a dark forest—*savage, rough, and stern*. The four black-on-black collages, 1, 2, 3, and 4 (2016), each feature black images printed on transparent sheets that have been stapled onto wood painted black, and while they appear muted in their imagery, they are biting in their affect. They contain but conceal all that is kept underground—the nasty, the twisted, the vulgar, the fucked up. They are the dungeons of the show.

Collage, more generally, is central not only to Olesen's way of working but to his way of thinking. Collage is when all that is bi- becomes poly-. It collapses information, injecting ambivalence and disjuncture into it. Like William Burroughs's cut-ups, collage makes language dirty, in both the erotic and the distorted sense. Olesen's work insists that one can be reductive while also being generative—his is a productive politics of refusal.

Finally, the onion is fully peeled and we arrive at the center of the exhibition and the end of the walk.

But Olesen doesn't peel onions the same way Freud does. In his work, screwing mom and killing dad is not what's at the end of the road—that would be far too symmetrical. He sides with Michel Foucault instead, who once quoted the 19th-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot as saying: "The father is sometimes just as unbearable as the mother: it is best, then, to get rid of them both."

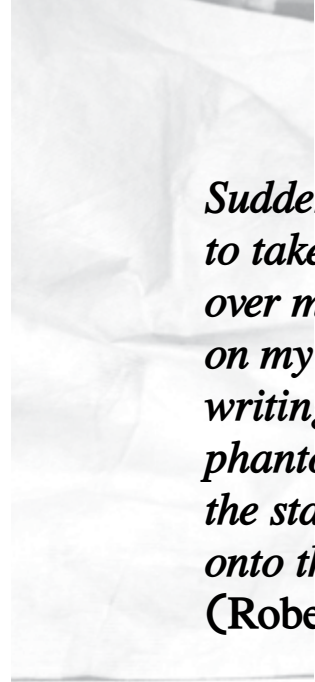
The last room is one made of wood, almost a shed. Inside are new works, raw materials, and vibrant colors that the artist has assembled during a month-long stay in San Francisco. It is a fully undefined space of self-invention. It is no one else's property but his.

Sex, like dirt, is everywhere. It's practically kitsch. It's

“in the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on.”

(Deleuze & Guattari)

The battleground for subjectivity, in other words, is not on street marches but within the body itself. To work against the violent regulations set forth by the biopower of capitalism, it is our gestures, urges, and languages that need to disobey. Olesen's work aims to re-complicate the body and scramble its codes by recombining it according to a different (and even invented) set of norms and boundaries. Autonomy, the artist has written, arises from desire—a place where no standards have inscribed themselves.



*Suddenly, the desire
to take a walk came
over me. I put my hat
on my head, left my
writing room, or room of
phantoms, and ran down
the stairs to hurry out
onto the street.*

(Robert Walser)

Henrik Olesen: The Walk is on view at CCA Wattis Institute from March 16 to May 14, 2017.

Henrik Olesen (b. 1967, Denmark) lives and works in Berlin. He studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Solo exhibitions include Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2012); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011); Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel (2011); Malmö Konsthall, Sweden (2010); Migros Museum, Zurich (2007); Secession, Vienna (2004); and Kunstverein Salzburg (2003), among others. Notable group exhibitions include the 2016 Sao Paulo Biennial, Massimiliano Gioni's *The Keeper* at the New Museum, New York (2016), and the 2013 Venice Biennale, among others.

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;' The Wattis Institute