

**STEPHEN G.  
RHODES**  
*The Law of the  
Unknown Neighbor:  
Inferno Romanticized*

February 9–April 21, 2013  
Opening: February 8, 2013, 6–8pm

The sprawling installations of the American artist Stephen G. Rhodes (b. Houston, Texas, 1977; lives and works in Berlin and New Orleans) combine a variety of media and are based on historical and cultural sources. Rhodes creates distinctive restless and elliptical systems in which he addresses issues such as repression and trauma. The Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst presents *The Law of the Unknown Neighbor: Inferno Romanticized*, the artist's first solo show at a European art institution.

The visualization of history plays a central role in the work of Stephen G. Rhodes. His use of the "factual" amounts to a critical misappropriation—nothing is ever only about what it is about. For his installation *The Law of the Unknown Neighbor: Inferno Romanticized*, Rhodes draws on the famous "Lecture on Serpent Ritual: A Travel Report" (also known as "Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America") Aby Warburg (1866–1929) delivered in 1923 at the Bellevue psychiatric hospital in Kreuzlingen, where he was a patient. Warburg examined the serpent ritual of the Hopi in the perspectives of art history, religious studies, and anthropology. His observations pay particular attention to the serpent as a lightning symbol. Generalizing from the serpent as embodying the equivocation of fear and reason, of deathly menace and healing power, Warburg develops the concept of an underlying polarity that, he argues, is discernible in any symbol. But Rhodes is interested in more than just the lecture's content; he also considers its genesis and the historical context: in the late nineteenth century—around the time of Warburg's trip to the American southwest, where he attends the Hopi serpent ritual as an observer—the expulsion and genocide of the native American population, which has been going on throughout the nineteenth century, is gradually coming to an end. In 1921, Warburg, suffering from a bipolar disorder, was compelled to repair to the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen. The psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger believed that Warburg's work on his scholarly endeavors had "therapeutic potential" as part of his stay at the hospital; preparing the lecture, in particular, would be a sort of "healing process." Rhodes also explores Warburg's "Library for the Study of Culture," which had to be relocated from Hamburg to London in 1933—shortly after Warburg's death—to save the books from the National Socialists. Rhodes's interest in Warburg is not limited to the reconstruction of dates and facts, but is more comprehensive. The artist explains: "The biographical détournement in this case is the subject of Aby Warburg. It has to be stated, first of all, that the subject I use of course refers to Warburg, but it is a confabulation of the subject and his westward journey reimagined from the sanatorium, and in turn my sanatorium. I am using the elliptical timeline charted out in Warburg's biography as the underlying grid for my associative drift. There are three events in Warburg's life that I seize upon to generate a formal structure: the Warburg library and its transference out of Hamburg; Warburg's American journey and escape to the Southwest; and his return to Binswanger's Bellevue sanatorium. The elliptical circulation of these events shapes an elusive triangle. They are all formative moments and movements of refuge or transference."

*The Law of the Unknown Neighbor: Inferno Romanticized* consists of a labyrinthine arrangement of furniture objects such as hospital curtains and the shelves of a library. Rhodes also projects short looped sequences onto walls and curtains—a form of presentation that may be seen as drawing on the tradition of Expanded Cinema. As Rhodes puts it: "In my work, [the loop] extends [...] echoing in some cases onto the two-dimensional works, and of course in the choreography of the narration and citation, the storytelling." The consequent lack of control and command on the artist's part also points to the issue of trauma, a central theme in Rhodes's art. In the artist's view, it constitutes a form of historiography distinguished by its non-linear character. Last but not least, the expansive installation features flash sculptures that—as the flickering light emphasizes—are a reference to Walter De Maria's land art installation *The Lightning Field* (1977): 400 polished steel poles, each around eighteen feet long, were arranged on a large piece of land that sees frequent thunderstorms. It is only when a storm draws near and lightning actually strikes the poles that the sculpture is truly activated. As Rhodes laconically notes, "I also think the impotence of *The Lightning Field* is fun—it's an allegory for the writing block Warburg as well as I myself suffer."

Curated by:  
Raphael Gygax,  
Curator, Migros Museum  
für Gegenwartskunst

Catalogue:  
Stephen G. Rhodes: Apologies.  
With contributions by Raphael  
Gygax, Brian Price, John  
David Rhodes, Stephen G.  
Rhodes, Laurence A. Rickels  
and Keston Sutherland.  
English/German, 284 pages,  
JRP|Ringier.

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR  
GEGENWARTSKUNST  
LIMMATSTRASSE 270  
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50  
F +41 44 277 62 86  
INFO@MIGROMUSEUM.CH

MIGROMUSEUM.CH  
MIGROS-CULTURE-PERCENTAGE.CH

Stephen G. Rhodes has presented his art in solo exhibitions at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi (2012), Berlin, the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2010), and elsewhere; in 2009, he contributed to the New Museum Triennial, New York. The exhibition at the Migros Museum will be accompanied by the first monograph about Stephen G. Rhodes; including essays by Raphael Gygax, Brian Price, John David Rhodes, Stephen G. Rhodes, Laurence A. Rickels, and Keston Sutherland, it will be published by JRP|Ringier. The exhibition is curated by Raphael Gygax (curator, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst).

### **The Law of the Unknown Neighbor: Fürst Bismarck, excerpt . . .**

Stephen G. Rhodes

Here is a case involving a debilitated art historian, recovering librarian, or then-anthropologist, whose very transitions from one discipline to another indicate a process that is unable to distinguish cooperation from abandonment. This could be traced to the early disavowal of his birthright to the family bank. The will toward symbolic sacrifice begins here. Try as he might to deny this history, he would carry the practice of confusing one institution for the other—for indeed one thing the bank shares with the library is the system of borrowing and returning. It was the very terms of this sacrifice that financed the library in hopes of future circulation. Now he has been here talking to butterflies for some time while staring at the revolutions of a fan. The inability to rectify transition (butterfly) with circulation (fan, lending library) was incapacitating. Here is a case involving a phobia to assimilate. Phobia teaches our survival and necessitates transition (forced migration). Phobia introduces knowledge as readily as it destroys. It is the unknown neighbor, the book that you didn't want, the object you didn't know, and the subject you must return. Our case is an unnamable genealogy of exchanges, sacrifices, and loans. Our patient is the origin of the recollection of these transferences. Because the birthright to the bank was passed on to the brother, his burden now lay in maintaining the archive of exotic phobias. The task of correlating the dreaded content of these transferred objects was unbearable. He would create elusive systems to track these analogies of separation. The banking genealogy would be denied, but not without the propensity to transfer, borrow, and collect. Accessibility was regularly denied. Identities were sometimes lost. One would have to recover indirectly. One would need to regenerate this loss through a process of surrogation (remove the jacket, peel the skin). One would be forced to lose the house of the unknown neighbor. Our case involves the custodian who conflates the inability of his mind to correlate its contents with the fact that the state (phobia) necessitated its departure. The recollection is insidious (serpent). The house of the unknown neighbor would be vacated, and he would be transferred to the sanatorium. From there, he would talk to butterflies and stare at the fan. We would give him drugs, and the circulation of the fan would encourage the recollection of the cause of his phobic correlations. The venom of the snake would keep him indoors, the medication would take him out. February 22, 1923, two servings 50 Tr. Opium administered. Perhaps the object of his research was not his. The drugs experienced out West are now confused with the shocks from the sanatorium. Transferences are gradually being removed. A weird story is beginning to form. He remembers taking the boat to New York and modernity disgusting him. Phobia led him southward, the books were somewhere behind. He remembered Winnetou 2 so he headed to New Orleans. There he did not find the pagans. The priestess explained that they had been displaced out West long ago. She, too, had been removed from her continent. A triangle was forming. The books were now out of circulation, there was nothing to loan. A. was supplied with a new birthright in exchange for guidance to the unknown land of B. A. was to find B. and exchange C.'s heir for (serpent) and return it South so C. could redirect the weather patterns with X (Lightning)... The reason has been forgotten. The shocks only remind him of the lightning. Hallucinations of Uncle Sam. They all flash in terror. The lightning takes away and restores. The process of rehabilitation and debilitation is serpentine itself, but it is the snake shedding its skin that haunts most. Shedding is a form of losing that regenerates. Is it a form of rehabilitation? But what do we do with the carcass? Why would anybody in 1947 be willing to support this skeleton?

Stephen G. Rhodes  
*The Law of the Unknown Neighbor: Inferno Romanticized*  
2013  
3-channel video installation (color, sound);

hospital curtains, rubber snakes, ceiling fans, aluminum lightning bolts, books, bookshelves, assorted institutional supplies, Nathan Corbin, Jude Matthew, John McAllister, Jaime Szczepanski  
Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR  
GEGENWARTSKUNST  
LIMMATSTRASSE 270  
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50  
F +41 44 277 62 86  
INFO@MIGROSMUSEUM.CH

MIGROSMUSEUM.CH  
MIGROS-CULTURE-PERCENTAGE.CH