

RICHARD KRAFT

SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Charlie James Gallery is pleased to present LA artist Richard Kraft's first solo show in Los Angeles, entitled *Something With Birds In It*. A site-specific installation composed of four elements, *Something With Birds In It* invokes the friction and fluidity between familiar polarities—between the sacred and profane, sense and nonsense, play and violence, reflection and action. Using a variety of media—including photography, drawing, collage, and sculpture—as well as acts of alteration and appropriation, *Something With Birds In It* conjures a visual environment where anticipated meanings are called into question and in which contradictions and nonsense point to other kinds of truths.

Richard Kraft grew up in London and lives in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited in galleries such as L.A. Louver (Venice, CA), Rosamund Felsen (Santa Monica, CA), Greg Kucera (Seattle, WA) and non-profit spaces including the Portland Art Museum, Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE), the Photographic Resource Center (Boston, MA), among others. He has frequently used public spaces for installations with work appearing on the sides of buses and in library aisles, as well for performances such as at Oxford Circus in London and along the full length of Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. In the summer of 2009, he conducted a series of performances at Speakers' Corner in London and at several rural sites in Scotland and Northern England. Most recently he has embarked on a series of walking performances (for anywhere from one to one hundred walkers) in Los Angeles. Siglio Press will publish an artist's monograph in 2012 and has already released four multiples (*100 Soldiers for a Revolution*, *Untitled: Kapitan Kloss*, *Two Tube Portraits* and *R.S. A Library Portrait*) and has scheduled another for this year.



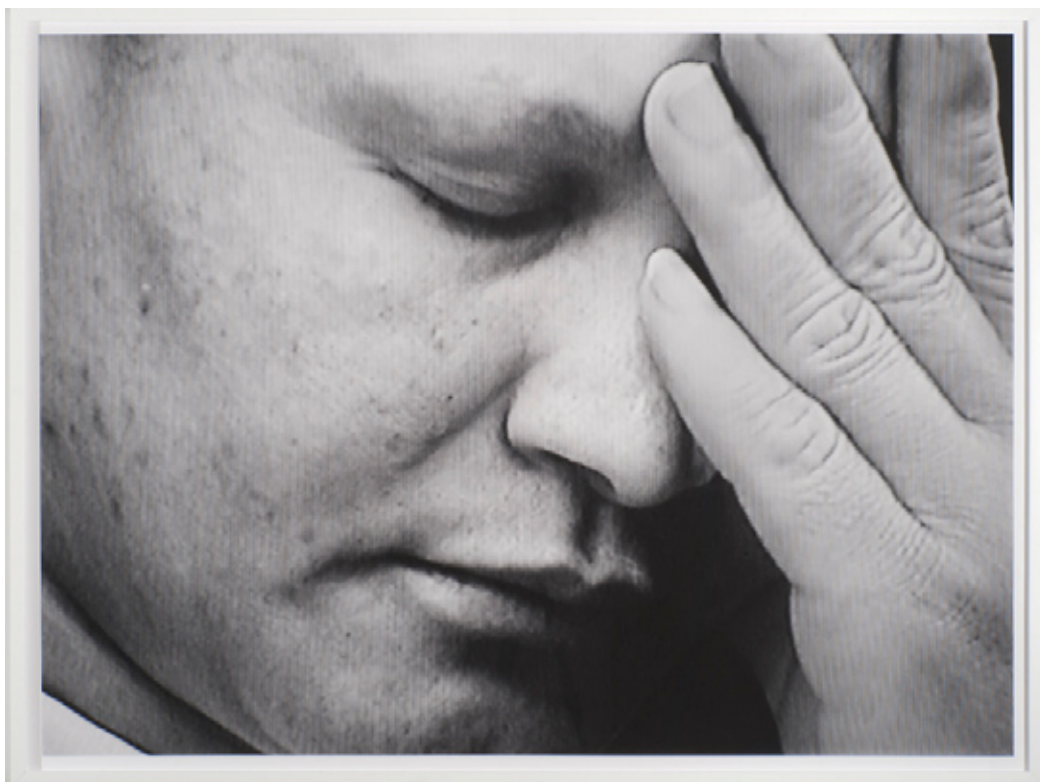
RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

The Tube Portraits

At the back of the gallery hang two large-scale photographic portraits that express the acts of looking: one outward, taking in and assessing the world, the other inward, contemplating or even retreating from it. Taken from Kraft's Tube Portraits series (inspired by Walker Evans's seminal book of photographs *Many Are Called*), both photographs are stills from video taken surreptitiously on the London Underground. They reveal something unmediated, almost naked, in this very public space in which people sit and wait, en route from one place to another.



RICHARD KRAFT
SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Conturbatio

Two large grids of drawings and collages flank the photographs on opposite walls, one side with works on white paper, the other with works on black. On white, Conturbatio (from the Latin word for agitation and disorder) is driven by contradiction, subversion, an aggressive sense of humor, and various forces of motion: spinning, falling, flying, shooting, pouncing. Lunacy and terror intertwine with rogue soldiers appearing on a field of words collaged into nonsense. Figureheads are radically altered into the ridiculous. Cricket Umpires issue rulings on unseen play. Here the world is deeply physical and the borders between power and powerlessness and meaning and meaningless are permeable.

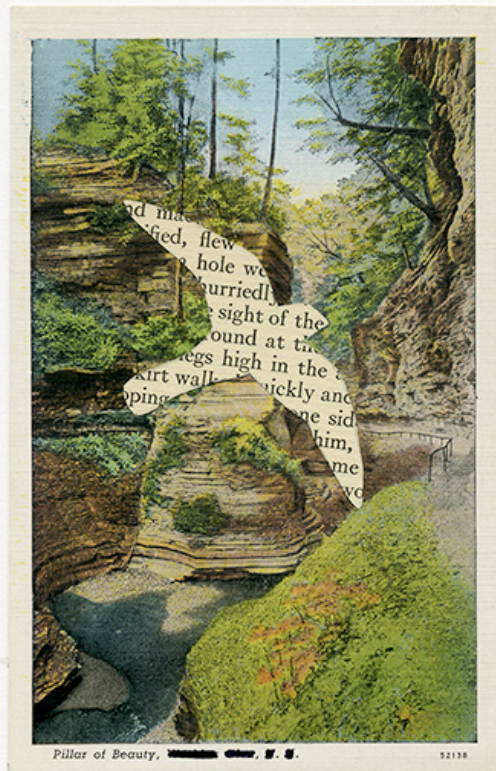


RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Conturbatio Details



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Nocturne (for R.S.)

On the other side, Nocturne (for R.S.), summons the space of the interior mind and imagination, the amorphousness of memory, and the vortex of longing, melancholy, and grief. Inside the grid, tinier grids of dots suggest pinholes through which to view other, unreachable worlds. Bodies, heads, and objects float, unmoored from the physical world. The sensation of transience and mutability pervades.



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Nocturne (for R.S.) Details



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Nocturne (for R.S.) Details



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Nocturne (for R.S.) Details



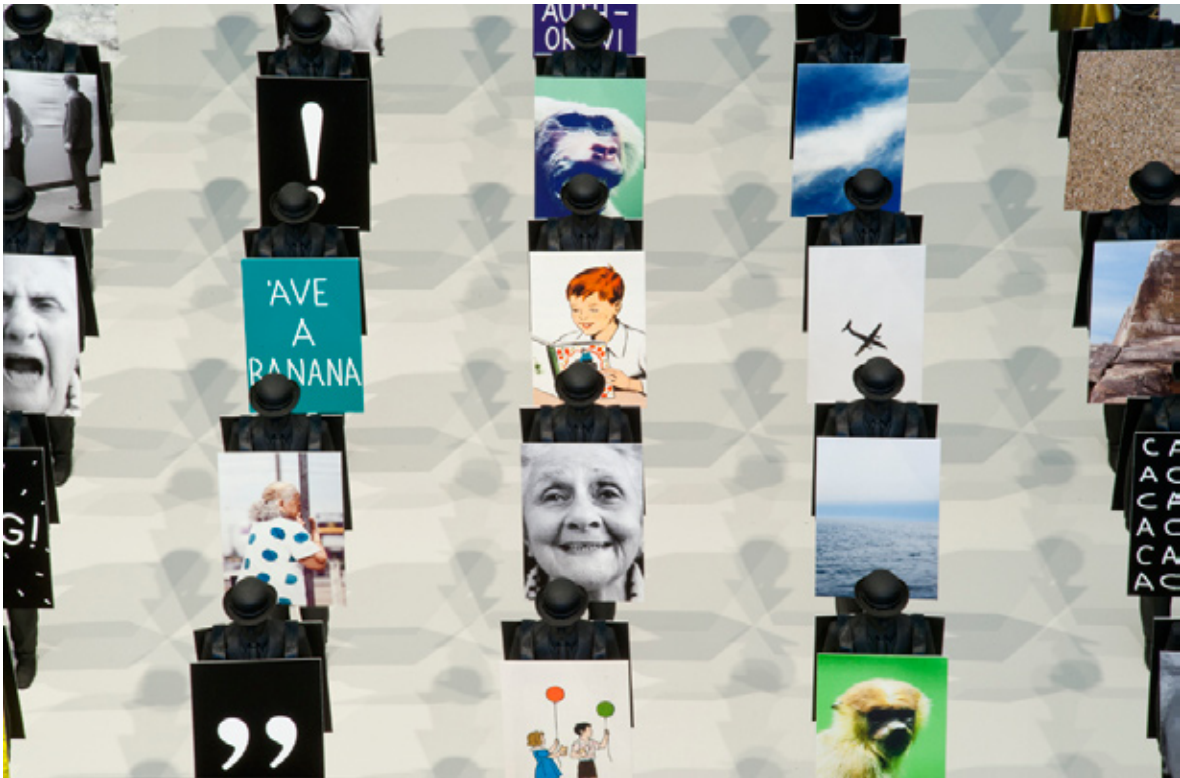
RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

100 Walkers: Los Angeles (for Stanley Green)

100 Walkers: Los Angeles (for Stanley Green) is at center of the room, serving as a fulcrum for the entire installation. In this grid of one hundred 8-inch cast figures in suits and bowler hats, each wears a unique miniature sandwich board, that—subverting a form traditionally associated with advertising and proselytizing—has nothing to sell. Drawing from various visual and verbal lexica, some sandwich boards share imagery with Conturbatio, Nocturne, and Tube Portraits, and create their own collage, connecting disparate pieces of the world. Poised as if to animate at any moment, they might walk out into the world to interrupt the familiar with humor, distortion, and unexpected juxtapositions. This work is also part of the larger Walkers series that includes performances in which actual walkers with sandwich boards create startling incongruities in environments as diverse as Hollywood, Death Valley, Speaker's Corner in London, and the Las Vegas Strip.



RICHARD KRAFT
SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT



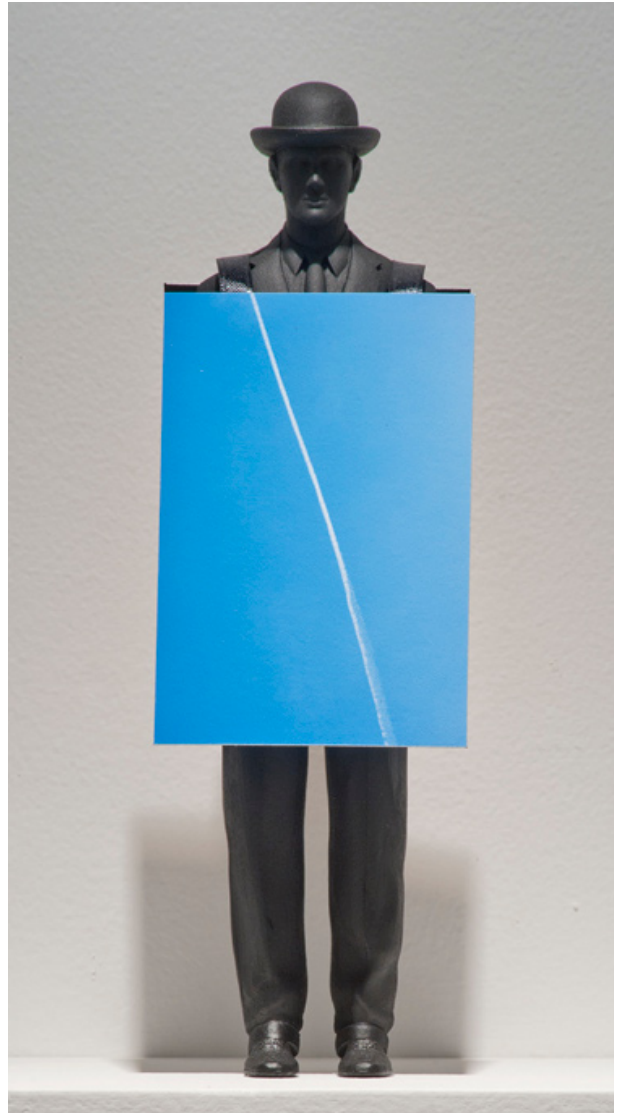
RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

100 Walkers Details



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

100 Walkers Details



RICHARD KRAFT SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

(Pages from a Yiddish Primer)

Bb



Bris

Kk



Knish

Gg



Gelt

Ff



Fortz

Nn



Nudnik

Ff



Fliegel

Ee



Emes

Ss



Shtup

Ss



Shikseh

RICHARD KRAFT

SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

[He] tried all his life to represent the world as a knot, a tangled skein of yarn; to represent it without in the least diminishing the inextricable complexity or, to put it better, the simultaneous presence of the most disparate elements that converge to determine every event.

—from “Multiplicity” in Six Memos for the Next Millenium by Italo Calvino

I set out now
in a box upon the sea.

—from The Maximus Poems by Charles Olsen

When I stand outside the gallery looking in through the window, there is a woman staring back at me. Her freckled face, closed mouth and dark eyes are unyielding, and this ambiguity of her expression is riveting. I look at the enormous photograph, cropped tightly so that she seems so very close, and I wonder who she is, what she is thinking at this moment, where she has been and where she is going. She wears not even the thinnest veil of welcome, yet she insistently looks straight at me—at anyone, at everyone who passes by. There is almost an equanimity in her watchfulness and an unrelenting intimacy in her gaze that—rather than causing the world to fall away leaving the two of us alone—brings the world suddenly, acutely alive. The world is right in front of her and she sees it. She sees not only me, and the child rocketing down the sidewalk on a scooter, and the red lanterns strung between buildings, and the two guys smoking on the wood stairs, but all of the world, far, far beyond Chung King Road. It this act of looking that here evokes not omniscience but multiplicity: a fantastic leap into the world as it is— infinite, inscrutable, mutable, indeterminate.

This woman is one totem for Richard Kraft’s installation Something With Birds In It, a work in which multiplicity is a formal strategy, a subject, and a means of experience. There is no linear sequence, no cause and effect, no consequence, no static symbolism, no figurative representation of one thing that isn’t also something else. The seemingly disparate pieces of the universe represented here strive for an authenticity of experience—look and you will find the world and the convergences to which Calvino refers. And yet the other totem, an equally large photograph, is a man lost in his own thoughts, eyes closed, head in hand. He is looking inward, perhaps even retreating from the world. What he sees may be wholly within.

There is much in Richard Kraft’s installation Something With Birds In It that has this kind of looking-glass effect. These two photographs on the back wall (from Kraft’s series Tube Portraits) embody the acts of looking—outward and inward—as well as the twins of observation and imagination, scrutiny and contemplation. On the perpendicular walls, a grid of 104 works on black paper entitled Nocturne (for R.S.) opposes a grid of 128 works on white paper called Conturbatio. Night pervades in Nocturne, rich in dreaming, melancholy, grief, and the interiority of the mind; day in Conturbatio is clearly physical, teetering between play and violence, a sense of humor and a sense of horror. They are reflections, too, in their formal composition: both grids originate in music, its abstract structure and beauty, its use of counterpoint and the development of variations of “themes.” At the center of the room is 100 Walkers, Los Angeles (for Stanley Green), a grid of one hundred identical, miniature

RICHARD KRAFT

SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

figures in bowler hats and suits, wearing sandwich boards that couple disparate images on front and back. The four elements, on their own and in tandem, kindle frictions between familiar polarities as well as create fluidity between them—the sacred and profane, reflection and action, sense and nonsense, life and death. These things are closer than they often seem.

Something With Birds In It is a visual work with novelistic expanse—the many pieces of a life alongside pieces of many lives; certain places and people captured at certain times, but also emotional states bound by neither time nor place; images that metamorphose and shape-shift so that, like memories or dreams, they cannot be fixed; and patterns and structures deftly woven so that they appear and disappear depending on where one focuses one's attention or the light falls. Something With Birds It is a visual environment that evokes and interrupts the everyday, that uses play and imagination to fuse connections between unexpected things, that questions and subverts received meaning while deploying contradiction and nonsense to yield—not a tight conclusion or definitive meaning—but a different kind of knowledge, a different way of making sense of the world and its disarray.

*

Once inside the gallery—and inside the work, I feel as if I have not left the world but rather re-entered it through a different portal: perspective and scale rearranged, the visual and musical merging, language shaped into image, meaning emanating not from a single signifier but from strange juxtapositions and the spaces in between things. Just as a reader reads between the lines, responds emotionally to one detail over another, makes connections that a writer has never made explicit, I expect, as a viewer, to have a similar experience here: Something With Birds In It is meant to be experienced as if starting from page one, knowing nothing.

In Nocturne, the grid of works on black paper, that space between things distends and gravity dissipates. Objects float unmoored from the physical world. Fields of black are speckled as if with stars or stratified as if a slice of the earth. Shadows are cast unattached to any person or thing. Tiny grids of dots seem to be pinholes through which to view other, unreachable worlds. And strange, unreal amalgamations feel like emotional golems. Nocturne embodies loss and longing and the ways in which the mind seeks to conjure the dead and the memories of them. It summons the sensation of how amorphous memory can be: reaching and reaching for the unreachable. Dedicated to the collage artist Robert Seydel, a friend of Kraft who died unexpectedly earlier this year, it does not memorialize him but instead investigates the space of his absence and confronts the inexplicability of his death though its cause (a heart attack) is known. Some of the motifs in Nocturne echo those in Seydel's own work (such as the hare and the diver); some of the collaged elements are from scraps he had saved but not yet used; some of the dot grids are made from photographs of his tremendous library. Seydel spent his summers in Los Angeles, and his and Kraft's work often cross-fertilized. In Nocturne there is the simultaneity of attempting to extend that conversation while contending with the reality of a certain and unbreakable silence.

Whereas Nocturne summons the space at the center of a vortex, Conturbatio (from the Latin word for disorder and agitation) employs the centrifugal

RICHARD KRAFT

SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

forces of spinning and propelling within daybright white, the shimmer of silver, and schoolbook colors. Here things are often in motion: flying, falling, shooting, pouncing, gesturing, etc. More aggressive in its humor and subversions, as well as in its sense of outrage and horror, *Conturbatio* manifests a different multiplicity. In this work men and boys co-exist, as do mischief and war. The figure of Noam Friedman, a 22-year-old Israeli soldier who raked Palestinian shopkeepers and customers with M-16 gunfire as his fellow soldiers were already withdrawing from Hebron, appears twice, lunacy and terror intertwined. Figureheads (Martin Luther, George Washington) are radically altered into the ridiculous. An “anti-primer” of Yiddish words points to both the precariousness of meaning and the richness of suggestion in nonsense. And cricket umpires seem to issue arbitrary rulings on whatever surrounds them. But the power of knowledge is undermined by the power of not-knowing: the gestures of the cricket umpires may reveal more in what they suggest than in what they actually mean; the absence of a correlation between the objects in the anti-primer and the Yiddish words may yield a more potent association; and children’s stories of hungry trolls, wolves, and babies—interrupted by telescopic images—point to untidy and unknown outcomes. The force of divergence here drives convergences.

The physical world and the permeable borders between power and powerlessness, play and violence, meaning and meaninglessness in *Conturbatio* is mirrored in *Nocturne*, in its interior world and the transience and mutability of imagination and emotion. Just as in life, these two worlds are not so far apart, and Kraft has created multi-layered connections between them. Various visual motifs populate both, but often in different forms: A chorus of singing boys accumulates; animals (birds, particularly) abound; ships and boats, as if in perpetual route to and from nowhere, occupy fields that are not quite water; and wounded heads, elegantly bandaged, exist with and without bodies. Seydel’s hare is uncontainable and ubiquitous, his heart transplanted. The cricket umpire signaling “6 Runs” in *Conturbatio* becomes, in shadow in *Nocturne*, a man pleading for his life or surrendering to some unseen force. A swallow in silhouette flying into nothingness transforms and soars with wings of words in a verdant canyon across the room. A little devil is called into being in *Nocturne* and then dances over to *Conturbatio*, leaping over rivers, churches, and stands of palms.

The multiplicity of meaning also lives in multiple acts of reading. Not only do both grids seem to be pages torn from some lost encyclopedia, they also contain two kinds of inscrutable but deeply resonant texts: one kind drawn and the other collaged. The spirit of Lettrist Isidore Isou infuses both. In his manifesto, he says: “It consists of teaching that letters have a destination other than words . . . Each poet will integrate everything into Everything.” Kraft’s drawings are lines of text (excerpted from novels, poems, news reports, children’s books, and personal writings) that he has written and rewritten over and over again by hand until the language is rendered illegible but illuminated with the presence of meaning. The initial act of copying the text derives from the tradition of Medieval scribes, but each new layer of writing in effect cancels the other beneath it, burying it, suggesting the possibility of meaning, and thus translating not meaning but the possibility of it to image. One might imagine not only what words were once there but what they now resemble: markings that record heart beats, seismic activity, noise, etc. The act of reading has shifted to an act of looking, and one can see many things at once.

RICHARD KRAFT

SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

Also in his manifesto: "Isidore Isou: wants letters to pull in among themselves all desires. Isidore Isou makes people stop using foregone conclusions, words." In the text collages, Kraft slices up pages from children's fairytales and primers, Biblical "reportage," and the writings of Maupassant, then reconstitutes them as fields of words and phrases that connect and disconnect—fields in which one finds Egyptians, Amorites, and idols, wages in barley, pale hands, perfidy, laughter and drowning, lost dogs, kings and cats, and the force of the North Wind. On one hand, sentence are incomplete, words are amputated (does it say "gable" or "fable"?), nonsense swirls; on the other, things surface in the maelstrom—divorced from their original context—before being sucked back under: predator and prey, animal necessity and human emotion, heaven and earth, fate and the force of will.

Throughout *Something With Birds In It*, language is illegible, scrambled, deceitful, playful. While Dada and Alfred Jarry infuse Kraft's subversion of authority and the deployment of nonsense and non sequitur, Kraft's disruptions of signifier and signified (specifically in the visual elegance of the Yiddish primer pages) are clearly influenced by Marcel Broodthaers. In *Conturbatio* particularly, but in *Something With Birds In It* as a whole—the influence of the Situationists is pervasive. Kraft uses his own *détournement* ("the fluid language of anti-ideology"—Guy Debord), a strategy of appropriation, alteration, revolt, and play, in individual collages, in the larger juxtaposition of all the elements of the installation, and most definitively in *100 Walkers Los Angeles* (for Stanley Green).

In this grid of one hundred 8" cast figures in suits and bowler hats, each wears a unique miniature sandwich board with images on front and back. Subverting a form traditionally associated with advertising (whether for a product or an ideology), the sandwich boards here have nothing to sell. Instead, they invite multiple associations and connections by looking at the grid as a single collage or reading it as a kind of text (with some sandwich boards serving literally as punctuation). The figures' toy-like size suggests they may be simply imagined yet their number brings a different force into play. Poised as if to animate at any moment and walk out into the world (into a kind of Situationist *dérive*), they are an unusual army of incongruities and juxtapositions which inject humor, commentary, distortion, as well as glimpses of parallel moments in space and time as they (potentially) move through the city. (In the rear of the gallery, there are photographs of performances in which an actual walker, with bowler hat and sandwich board, walks along the Las Vegas strip and across a salt plain in Death Valley.)

Known to most Londoners, Stanley Green was a regular fixture on Oxford Street for years, carrying a sign to admonish passersby to curb their lustful passions through dietary restrictions. He merited this description in Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography*, "Stanley Green, 'the protein man' . . . was commonly ignored by the great tide of people who washed around him, and thus became a poignant symbol of the city's incuriosity and forgetfulness." His sign read: "Less Passion from Less Protein: Less Fish Meat Bird Cheese Egg: Peas Beans, Nuts, and Sitting," and he sold a pamphlet on his ideology for ten pence. Kraft's first sighting of Green was when his mother took him, at the age of five or six, to Selfridge's, and the many years since of seeing him persistently pacing a stretch of Oxford Street stoked Kraft's fascination with the contrary (and unintentionally humorous) nature of his message, the stark contrast of his asceticism with the unabashed material culture and throngs of

RICHARD KRAFT

SOMETHING WITH BIRDS IN IT

shoppers, and simply his unwavering obsession and ideology. Using the incongruity of Green (but not the literalness of his message), Kraft has imagined his own army of anti-ideologues moving through the city, capturing attention for just a blink, enough to interrupt daily life and shift one's awareness of the world.

The sandwich boards draw on various lexica, both visual and verbal, that include London street calls, aphorisms, "sounds" from comic books, hand gestures appropriated from European paintings, imagery from old children's books, photographs of the elemental (water, earth, and sky), Los Angeles landscapes, and a wide variety of portraits (including those of Kraft's aunt, Mercia Mansfield, proselytizers at Speaker's Corner in London, of people in Los Angeles en route—walking, driving, waiting for a bus, of people on escalators, and of people on the London Underground.) Here, as well as in other elements of *Something With Birds In It*, these lexica transform into taxonomies of sorts as images appear and reappear, inhabiting different spaces and taking on different forms (a rabbit here runs across on open place, another rabbit sheds tears; birds—and planes and helicopters—take flight; taxidermied animals seem almost alive). The two enlarged photographs on the back wall belong to Kraft's *Tube Portrait* series, from which another dozen images on sandwich boards derive. Here, tiny, their faces suggest the sea of humanity, and an intimacy with it. *100 Walkers* serves as fulcrum for the entire installation with the other elements radiating out and expanding from it. And just as there is a musical structure to *Nocturne* and *Conturbatio*, there is also another kind of music in *100 Walkers* in the form of the street calls and sounds. Just as the umpires seem to comment on the world at play in *Conturbatio*, so do the comic and tragic portraits of Mercia Mansfield serve as a kind of one-person Greek chorus.

*

Something With Birds In It reaches for a representation of the world that is as full of provocation, wonder, and ambiguity as the world itself. It refuses a single answer to a single question but instead offers multiple questions and interpretations. What binds it is the particular vision of the artist, selecting, arranging, transforming familiar pieces of the world so that when one steps outside, one can see it anew.

—Lisa Pearson
Publisher, Siglio Press