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Small Fires

SINT-LUKASGALERIE, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM



Ed Ruscha, from the book *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964)

Fire holds a primitive fascination over us. It is as much associated with passion and love – which also might have devastating effects – as it is with revolutions and political turmoil. Besides these symbolic or metaphoric readings, it also offers pure visual allure. Conceived by curator Filip Luyckx, the group show ‘Small Fires’ brings together a number of art works that explicitly reference fire, along with others that function more autonomously.

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by *Sam Steverlynck*

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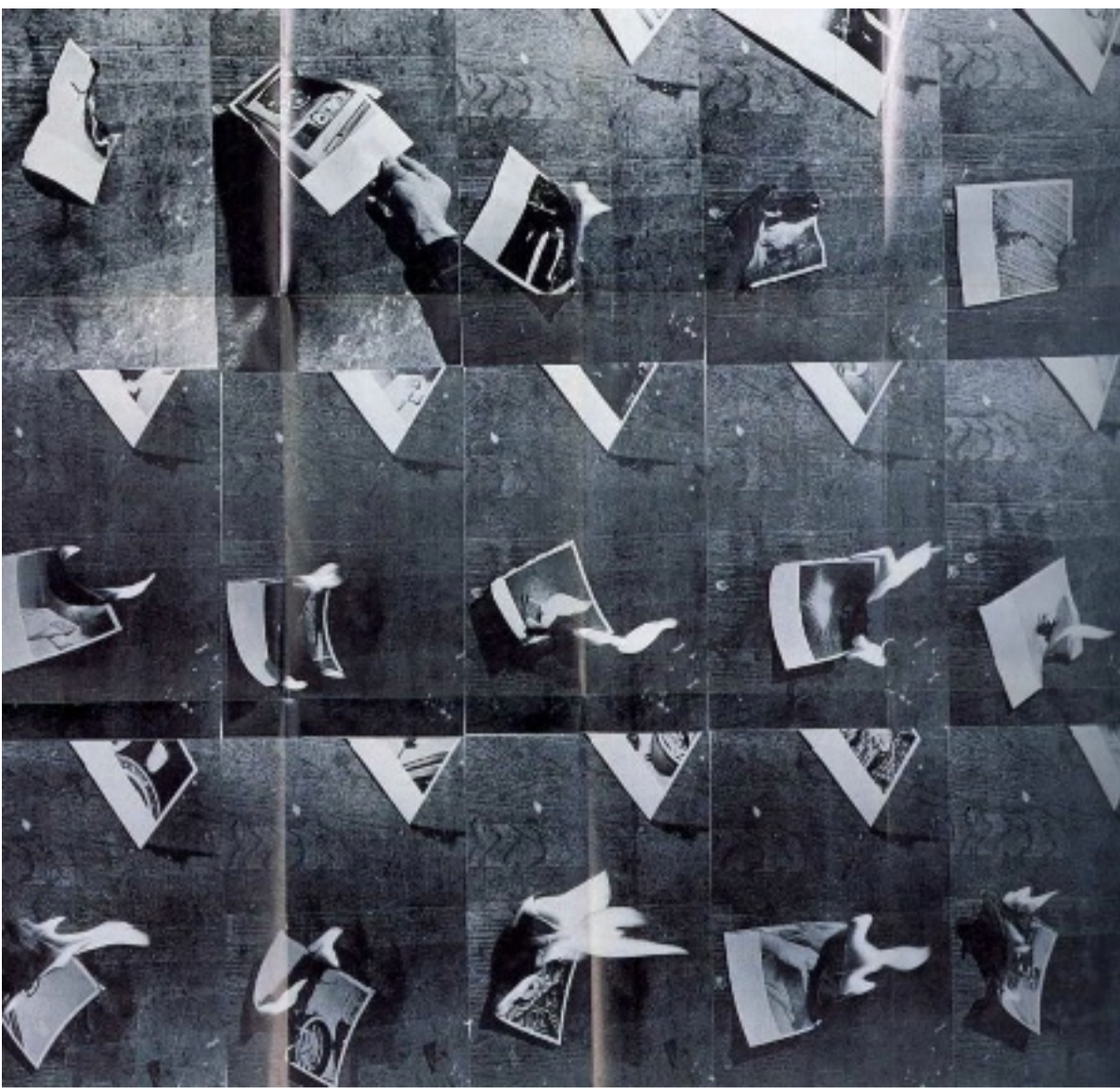
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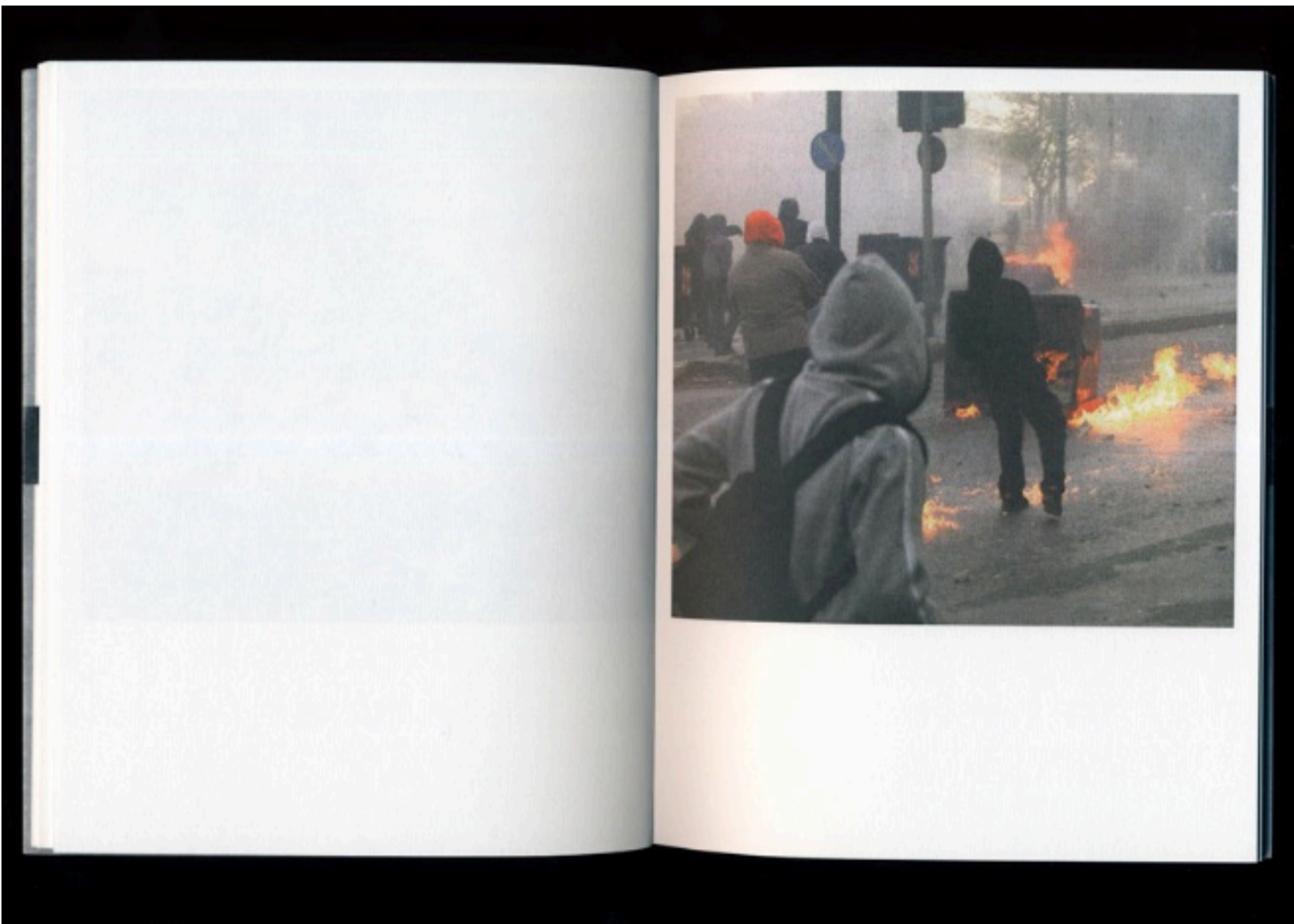
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Bruce Nauman, *Burning Small Fires* (1969)

The starting point for the project was Ed Ruscha's *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), an artist's book in which Ruscha photographed various forms of fire, such as a burning cigarette or a fireplace, in a dead-pan, documentary way. In 1969, Bruce Nauman burned the book, photographed it and edited an artist's book of his own, called *Burning Small Fires* (1969). That, in turn, inspired Jonathan Monk to burn Nauman's book and make a 16mm film of it, a poster for which is presented in the show (*small fires burning [after Ed Ruscha after Bruce Nauman after]*, 2003).



Thomas Galler, *Various Fires and Four Running Boys* (2009)

Thomas Galler also formulated a response to Ruscha's work by producing his own book, entitled *Various Fires and Four Running Boys* (2009), in which he presents not only the sources of fire but also its consequences and casualties. The inclusion of these two last works reveals the limitations of the show's curatorial stance: such a chain of associations and references only works if each new contribution has something substantial to add to the original. If not, it becomes a predictable form of self-

reflexive *Spielerei*, narrowing down the concept instead of opening it up from various thematic angles.



Reynold Reynolds, *Burn* (2002)

Luckily, the exhibition is not restricted to this navel-gazing, intertextual practice. Erich Weiss presents the diptych *Even Small Fires Can Prove Dangerous* (2011), which, through text and image, tells the story of a man falling deeply in love with an ‘angel faced redhead’ – a love that turns out to be fatal. Fire’s associations with political turmoil are addressed in Galler’s *Ecstatic Fire* (2007), a film in which a compilation of news images from political unrest and violence succeed one another at great speed. Superflex’s film *Burning Car* (2008) also symbolically refers to political protest by showing a car set aflame. Strangely enough, it evokes the same calmness you’d feel if you were staring into a fireplace. A comparable sense of the uncanny beauty of destruction emanates from Reynold Reynolds’ brilliant video *Burn* (2002), in which a house burns down while its occupants calmly continue their daily activities.



Superflex, *Burning Car* (2008)

‘Small Fires’ is an exhibition that is as mesmerizing as staring at a fire. However, by omitting some works – Rosemary Laings’ picture of yet another burning car, for example – it could have avoided the unnecessary repetition from which it sometimes suffers. Nevertheless, these are only minor flaws in what is otherwise a captivating show.

Sam Steverlynck

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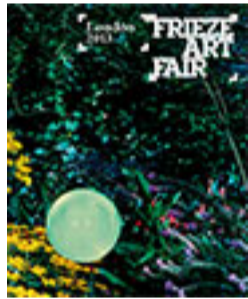
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