COMPRESSION: ART'S VALUE, UNDER PRESSURE

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HORMSTON HOUSE

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Ormston House is a meeting place for the arts in the heart of Limerick City. The Sustainability Plan (2017–) is a project creating resources to publish research on the expanded value of Ormston House and other non-commercial or non-governmental cultural spaces and programmes.

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In summer 2015 I curated a group exhibition of British and Irish artists at Ormston House. Entitled *Compression*, the show featured works by nine artists – Stephen Brandes, Maud Cotter, Angela Fulcher, Tom Hackney, Catherine Harty, Caoimhe Kilfeather, Susan Morris, Trevor Shearer, and Alison Turnbull – and was accompanied by a small catalogue with a theoretical essay and some 'notes on making' intended to support reflection upon the works displayed (see below). Having been invited to contribute to the gallery's Sustainability Plan, at a time when Ormston House's survival seems in the balance, the present essay moves out from some of the main preoccupations of *Compression* to sketch a broader defense of the value of making, exhibiting and thinking about contemporary art of a certain kind. Without the attempt to articulate such ideas the danger remains that the category of art lives on only as a kind of collective delusion.

Artworks can usefully be conceived as forms of thinking from which the body and its aesthetic receptivity have not fallen away. The very practice of thinking, conceived as more than the processing of data, is currently under threat, not least from the instrumentalisation of our cognitive capacities and the reduction of language to the conveyance of information. Language as pure instrument would be fully used up in relaying its message; images, words or sounds become interchangeable without remainder, their sensuous particularity sloughed off. Our relationship with language would then fall under the same deadening logic that renders any one object, one stretch of time, one place or person replaceable by another, apparently without consequence.

Art constitutes one (albeit compromised and contingent) public arena in which alternative ways of thinking can be remembered, cultivated, shared

and enjoyed. While it is broadly accepted that dominant sections of the art world are corrupted by the rule of exchange value and the expression of concentrated wealth, it is hardly new to say that artworks need to constitute more than a mere symptom, or to be cannier than to assume the agency to directly effect economic or political change. The artwork should point to more than the deficiencies of its situation and reach beyond the glare of sheer contemporaneity that violently illuminates it.

In a rich and nuanced account of Emily Dickinson's poetry, Cristanne Miller writes that,

> *[Compression] denominates whatever creates density or compactness of meaning in language. It may stem from ellipsis of function words, dense use of metaphor, highly associative vocabulary, abstract vocabulary in complex syntax, or any other language use that reduces the ratio of what is stated to what is implied.*[1]

Though more familiar to the study of poetry than visual art, I became interested in the idea of compression as a way of characterizing formal strategies in contemporary art for three main reasons. Firstly, it expresses the value of doing a lot, both conceptually and aesthetically, with little; and this economy of means becomes part of the content of the artwork. There are many varied and important precursors to such an attitude, from the development of collage, the found object, and abstraction in the historical avant-gardes of the 1910s and '20s, to the elaboration of a distilled formal vocabulary in the work of non-figurative artists such as Agnes Martin and Fred Sandback, to the range of strategies developed by *arte povera* artists in Italy and by the Brazilian avant-garde in the 1960s and '70s, amongst many other examples. Such tactics work to counter the increasing emphasis upon high production values and spectacular effects, which have been encouraged by the need of favoured artists to produce work that can retain impact within ever-larger exhibition

1 Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 24.

spaces, aligning with the priorities of the experience economy.[2]

Secondly, the word 'compression' itself, deriving from the Latin *comprimere*, meaning 'to press together,' conveys the sense of the meeting of forces and materials. This conveys an emphasis upon the continuing potential of physical processes and the making of art *objects*, which exert both an obdurate resistance to an accommodation to verbal language, and a persistence that enables repeated encounters. While in no way set against developments in performance, conceptual art, new media art or post-Internet practices, for example, at the same time object-based production need not be fully eclipsed by these tendencies. Thirdly, the word makes contact with numerous extra-artistic domains: Alongside its usage in medicine and phonetics, for example, 'compression' is perhaps now most familiar in its relation to digital technology (as in 'data compression'), while it also finds a place within the language of psychoanalysis (at times Freud used the German word *Kompression* to talk about dream images).[3] These latter two usages point in different directions, however: on the one hand to the reduction of differentiated informational content to enable more efficient storage and exchange, and on the other – and what I was most interested in here – to a strange and reverberative form of concentrated density.

Thinking about 'compression' also presented a way to frame the endurance of certain aspects of modernist aesthetics within the contemporary field, while at the same time operating at some distance from the unhelpful priority upon 'purity', with which Greenbergian versions of modernism are associated. The idea of compression is suited to thinking about not only the exacting reductions of Piet Mondrian's painting, for example, but also about collage and the readymade, where entire trains of thought

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2 The Manchester-based Czech artist Pavel Büchler's recent description of his practice is apposite here: 'This is perhaps where and how what you call 'distillation' and 'appropriation' and my preference for a technical economy all come together and amount to the same thing. I like to keep things light and simple, without any surplus or extra weight, not because less is more but because just enough is plenty.' 'Words Means Nothing: Interview with Pavel Büchler,' in Nick Thurston, ed. *Somebody's Got to Do It: Selected Writings by Pavel Büchler*. (London: Ridinghouse, 2017), p. 203.

3 For example, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: '[T]he intensity of an entire train of thought can finally be concentrated in a single one of its elements. This is the fact of *compression* or *condensation* which we got to know in the course of the dream-work. It is condensation that is mainly to blame for the disconcerting impression made by dreams, for we are quite unfamiliar with anything analogous to it our normal inner life accessible to consciousness.' Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1900]), p. 391.

and sets of connotations are condensed into an apparently momentary (and not necessarily conscious) decision, or series of decisions. So the idea of compression relates as much to conceptual operations as to visual and material ones, and this reciprocity between sensory and conceptual moments in aesthetic experience was central to the exhibition.[4]

Central, too, was the insistence that the registers of experience sedimented in, referred to, and enabled by artworks are historically conditioned.[5] In *Compression*, this was sometimes acknowledged via the direct incorporation of historical materials themselves: Stephen Brandes' collage, *Slum Clearance* (2010), for example, uses a printed image from a 1930s Austrian travel book and engages its dark connotations; Angela Fulcher salvages old and distinctly outmoded domestic and decorative objects for incorporation into sculpture, confronting gendered and aesthetic categories; and Susan Morris employs Jacquard looms to make her tapestries, making contact with the beginnings of automated industry and digital code. These forms, technologies, and materials all point to the extra-artistic world, its conflicts and its histories at various scales of impact; such concerns are incorporated into artworks, often tacitly or obliquely, rather than depicted by them.

The history of art is another great enabler of compression: Its deep reservoir allows artworks to gather in constellations of thought, feeling and connotation by way of often subtle adjustments and qualitative inflections. In this, again, artworks reach beyond what they literally are, making contact with a whole history of practice retrospectively, and gaining significance from relationships of alignment with and difference from previous (and, indeed, other contemporaneous) contributions. This is not a question of mere referencing: art's histories are brought into play not as a series of name-checking manoeuvres, but in response to the availability (or not) of the kinds of expressive and conceptual capacities that those models embody. Tom Hackney's sustained engagement with the

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4 Implicit in this commitment is the idea that the reception of art does not end with the face-to-face encounter with the work, but is continued in processes of reflection that follow to unfold and bring into focus its significance. As Briony Fer has put it, 'It is sometimes forgotten that the art you carry around in your head is even more important than the art that you see as you see it.' Briony Fer, 'Eva Hesse and Color', *October* 119, (Winter 2007), p. 26.

5 For one of the most substantial explorations of the historical dimension of aesthetic practice, content and experience, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1970/97).

relationship between Marcel Duchamp, chess and abstract painting, for example, is not merely an intelligent 'move' in the discursive field, but is pursued because the crisis of the art object that Duchamp both diagnosed and exacerbated bears upon art's capacity to keep going as a meaningful enterprise today. While relying upon familiarity with the traditions of art, such interventions are not limited in their scope to intra-artistic concerns: Art finds its own way to respond to historical conditions via its particular forms of mediation. Its address to its own conventions, often made less explicitly than in this example, is a key aspect of the artwork's self-reflexivity, its demonstration that it is aware of its situation and its historical condition. While involving free play at various levels, art is nevertheless more like a game (or a world): something structured, enduring and public.

Partly, then, my exhibition was aimed at encouraging a willingness to take seriously art's strange modes of complexity, and to challenge accusations that such complexity is a sign of decadence or obscurantism. This is not to do with presenting intricate games of reference or the appropriation of the specialized language of critical theory, but involves recognition of art's historical condition, which also requires a confrontation with its autonomous aspect. While art's autonomy is always partial and contingent (more a question of choosing its dependencies, perhaps[6]), its lack of full integration into wider social and political processes cannot simply be wished away; and neither is that condition disabling or, indeed, enabling in any absolute sense.

Additionally, and perhaps this is in danger of becoming something of a cliché, it is important to retain the sense of what a huge amount of work can be done with what is apparently almost nothing: Filming a droplet of water arriving, dancing and disappearing on an electric hotplate is enough, as Trevor Shearer's *Elements* (2009, re-edited 2011) makes clear. The massive budgets, enormous physical dimensions, and brigades of congratulatory stakeholders that surround blue-chip artists make it very difficult for such artists to keep making work that is able to either register or sustain much critical pressure.

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6 See Sven Lütticken, *Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017), p. 65.

Since its founding in 2011, and all the while surviving on alarmingly limited means, Ormston House has established itself as a key cultural resource in Limerick City. The vitality, generosity and commitment at the heart of the gallery's public programmes, and its attempts to connect with local communities in a substantial and reciprocal way, have been extremely effective. However, it is of continuing importance that Ormston House puts artists and artworks at the heart of its system of commitments. Offering art as an occasion for the development of social bonds and collective possibilities is most coherent when the value of artworks has itself been reflected upon in a sustained way, under pressure from an acknowledgement that art is not somehow valuable *per se* but that its value arises out of patterns of attention, debate, and commitment amidst what are unpropitious conditions.

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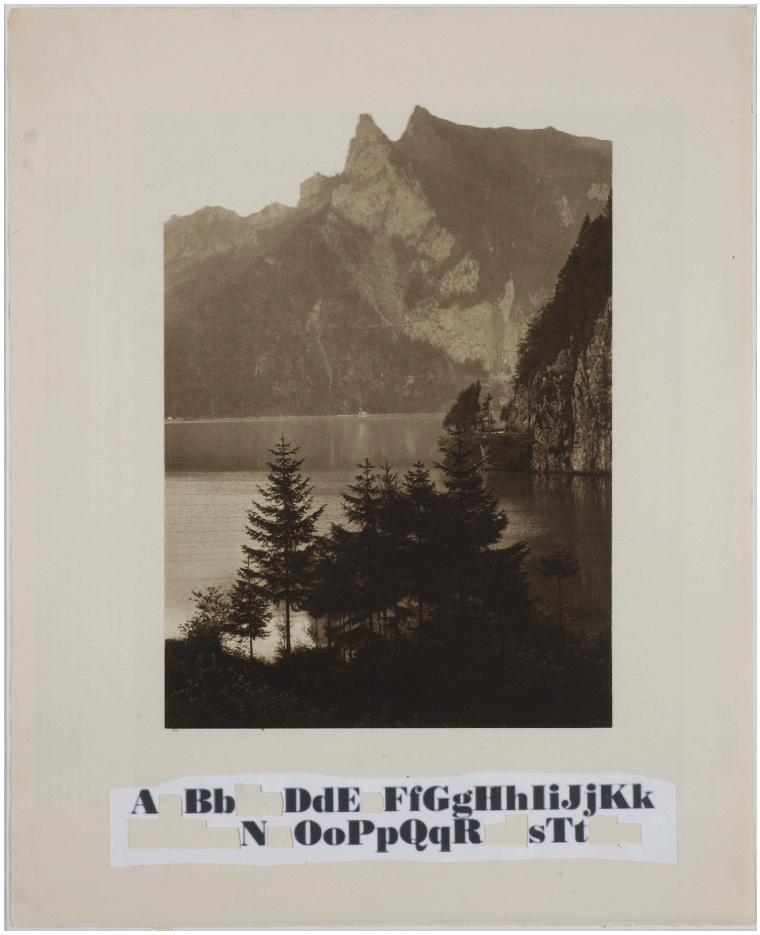
Compression: 'Notes on Making'
Ed Krčma, 2015

Stephen Brandes
Slum Clearance, 2010, collage, 34 x 27.2 cm. Photo by Roland Paschhoff, courtesy of the artist.



'Collage works for me for a number of reasons. Firstly, the paucity of it as a medium. There are contradictions here, because historically, collage came out of the availability of mass-produced imagery, and hence the perception of eradicating preciousness and extolling both immediacy and intuition. In reality the images I use come from rare sources and have very particular materialities to them – I can't simply copy them. This brings me to the second idea that violence is intrinsic to collage. Cutting, ripping and pasting. This is amplified by the fact that the source imagery or material

is often irreplaceable.' (Stephen Brandes, 2015) *Slum Clearance* is a collage consisting of two pasted components: a picturesque image of the Austrian Alps that has been cut from a 1930s travel book, and the alphabet minus those letters required to form the words 'slum clearance'. Graphic power, black humour and dark historical shadows are brought into charged relation by Brandes' precise manipulation of his spare materials.

Maud Cotter
Measure, 2013, mild steel and paint, 168 x 112 x 112 cm. Photo by Jed Niezgoda, courtesy of the artist and DOMOBAAL.

Departing from standardized systems of measurement, each component of *Measure* has been individually wrought by hand to produce a minutely varied imperfect geometry. The steel rods enact a drawing in three dimensions; the literal but slender lines organize and activate space to achieve what Maud Cotter has called 'a very gentle capture'. At once open and grounded, the form of this sculpture is based upon a simple domestic

waste-paper basket, an example of the type of container that interests the artist, owing both to its function as mundane repository for discarded objects, and to the archaic 'fitness' of its form (as with the fiddle, there has been no need to reinvent it). The scale of *Measure* has been calibrated to that of the human body, and its proportional relationships encourage the embodied mind to perceive the virtual embedded in the heart of the actual.

Angela Fulcher
Curtain Tie Backs, 2015, mixed media: found curtain tie back and wall hook, spray-painted cast iron, dimensions variable. Photo by Jed Niezgoda, courtesy of the artist.

Fulcher's first work using cast iron, *Curtain Tie Backs* was conceived during the IRON-R 2 project held at the National Sculpture Factory, Cork, in 2014. Its production involved making a two-part sand mould cast from a pink curtain tie back that had been salvaged from a Limerick charity shop. The mould was then hand-poured from a cupola of molten scrap iron sourced from old fireplaces, radiators and other items that had been broken up with sledgehammers for the furnace. The practice of sourcing mundane and discarded everyday objects enables Fulcher to work with materials that 'are obsolete in terms of fashion and trend cycles', as she puts it. These are then subjected to a new kind of scrutiny and re-working. While the tie back has an important relationship with light and vision, as well as with outdated styles of interior decoration, the heavy iron cast has an awkward and improper presence – 'elegant in the wrong way', as Donald Judd once described the work of John Chamberlain.

Angela Fulcher, *Curtain Tie Backs,* **2015.**
Mixed media: found curtain tie back and wall hook, spray-painted cast iron, dimensions variable.
Photo by Jed Niezgoda, courtesy of the artist.

Tom Hackney
Constellation No.2, 2014, concrete, 60 x 60 x 25 cm; *Chess Painting No. 52 (Smith vs. Duchamp, Paris, 1924),* 2015, gesso on linen, oak frame, 42 x 42 cm; *The Chess Game II (Bertolt Brecht vs. Walter Benjamin, Denmark, 1934)* (pictured), 2013, oil on aluminium panel, 28 x 35 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Since 2009, a crucial material for Tom Hackney's art has been readymade chess data derived from games played by Marcel Duchamp. In 1923, Duchamp famously claimed to have given up art for chess, preferring the latter's abstract beauty to the more concrete exercises of the former. Hackney's choice of this specific material, enlisted in order to further the project of an 'abstract' art, therefore plugs him into a powerful network of historical dynamics. The Chess Paintings are made by translating each move of a chess game into a single layer of black or white gesso applied with a roller to the corresponding masked area of an 8 x 8 square pictorial grid. If no piece passed over a given square throughout the game, the linen support is left untouched; if a square was moved over many times the layers build up to generate a minimal sculptural relief. More recently, Hackney has been experimenting with other ways to figure this data: borrowing Duchamp's own colour code for the chess

pieces, using concrete casting procedures, and creating three-dimensional projection drawings. In a related development, which returns to an earlier moment in his career when he was making photo-paintings, Hackney has adopted digital photographic material as another readymade. The Chess Game II is a painting on aluminium derived from a digital photograph sent to the artist by the Bertolt Brecht Archiv in Berlin, which pictures Brecht playing chess with Walter Benjamin in 1934. Again the historical associations develop the stakes of the work: the relationship of handmade painting to digital pixellation, of the artistic avant-gardes to leftist politics, and of contemporary practices and (art) historical memory.

Catherine Harty
€600 a month max., 2010, photographic transparencies in light boxes (14 parts), each transparency 21 x 29.7 cm. Photo by Jed Niezgoda.

In this series of fourteen photographs Catherine Harty gives visibility to the unspoken yet unmistakable hostility that greets potential tenants of 'low-cost' rental accommodation in Cork City. The images were made using a basic digital camera to photograph a computer screen displaying a series of dismal pictures downloaded from a well-known Irish property website. It is not just that these low-end flats and bedsits are unappealing; it is the frank declaration of the *zero* effort that has been taken to render them even minimally attractive. Their casual and blatant ugliness speaks of a complete disregard for the aspirations and subjective life of the

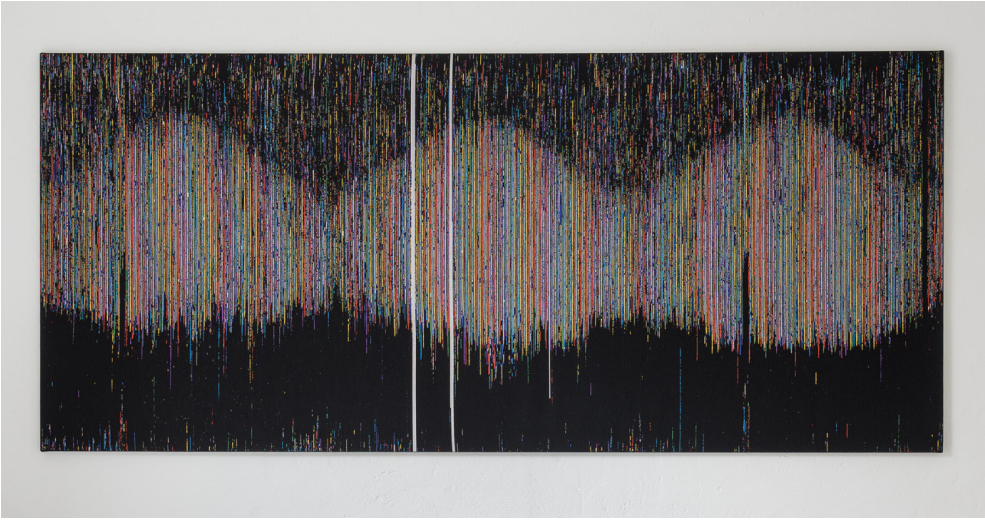
potential tenant. The digital camera used was rudimentary and its auto-focus produces images that are rough and degraded: The callousness of their content is therefore matched by an uneven pixellation and offhand focus. It is as if the camera shares in a stung incomprehension as it strains to understand the miserable images before it.

Caoimhe Kilfeather
Inky Canopy, 2011, polished, carved coal in two parts, 22 x 16 x 60 cm and 45 x 22 x 20 cm; *Pond*, 2015, archival pigment print, 90 x 70 cm, edition of 5. Photo by Jed Niezgoda.

Caoimhe Kilfeather began making a series of carved and polished coal sculptures in 2010. The formal elegance of the finished objects belies a very messy production process: inside an airtight tent, Kilfeather used an angle-grinder to carve the basic forms from large blocks of rock; she then spent weeks smoothing their surfaces in a basin of water using a range of wet and dry sandpapers, before finally polishing them with wool or leather. With their shapes often inspired by the tapering and joining of architectural fragments, it is the aesthetic and conceptual yield of coal as a material that provided the works' chief impetus. Presenting a profound and absorbing

blackness, coal is formed from the physical compression of dense wetland forests, most of which date from the Carboniferous Period. These forests were therefore composed of plant species that are now extinct; a lump of coal is 'Something that you can hold in your hands, which is of a period of time that no longer exists – that is absolutely no more', as Kilfeather puts it.

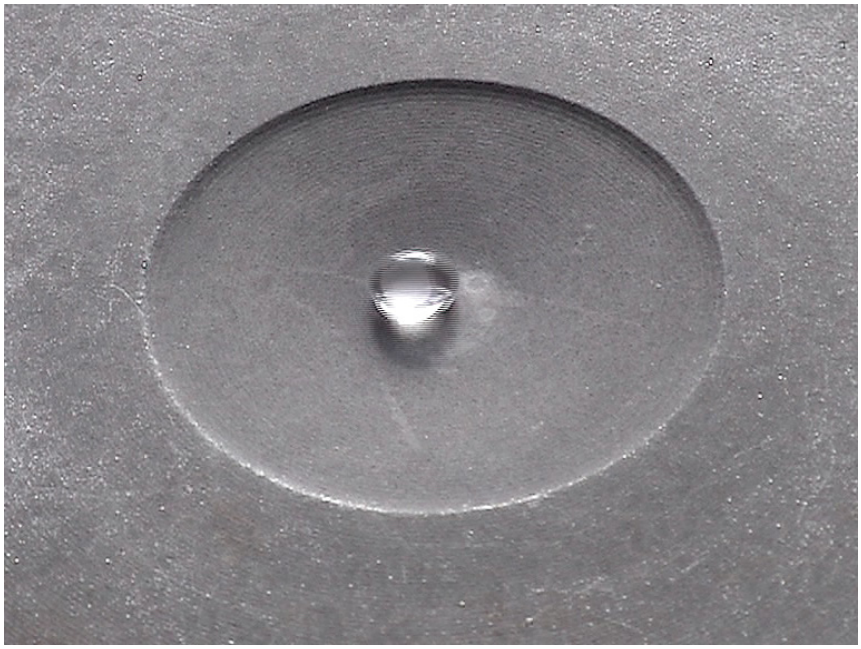
Susan Morris
Untitled (Light Exposure 2010 - 2012), 2014, tapestry: acrylic and linen yarns, 360 x 155 cm. Photo by Jed Niezgoda.



For five years, Susan Morris wore an Actiwatch biometric device designed to provide accurate data regarding activity, sleep, wake, and light exposure. To make her series of tapestries, this data was sent to Jacquard looms in Belgium, which converted the values into a sequence of colour-coded thread patterns, with different colours corresponding to different levels of activity. The Jacquard loom was first presented in 1801, its major innovation being the introduction of a chain of punch cards laced together to provide a fully automated mechanical 'score' for the weave. These punch cards were also of great interest to Charles Babbage when he was designing his Difference Engine, and therefore have an important place at the birth of the modern computer. *Untitled (Light Exposure, 2010-2012)* presents data recording the body's exposure to light every day for three years (with measurements lost for two periods of roughly four days each). Each day is represented by one vertical line, the intermittence of which corresponds to higher or

lower levels of exposure. The title of Morris's work signals a relation with photography and, while the artist combines the most up-to-date digital technologies with those deriving from an early moment in the Industrial Revolution and the mechanization of human labour, it is photography's indexical logic (as direct imprint) to which the work remains faithful. The human becomes that creature caught between the cyclical movements of the sun and the planets, and the enervating tempo of life under advanced capitalism.

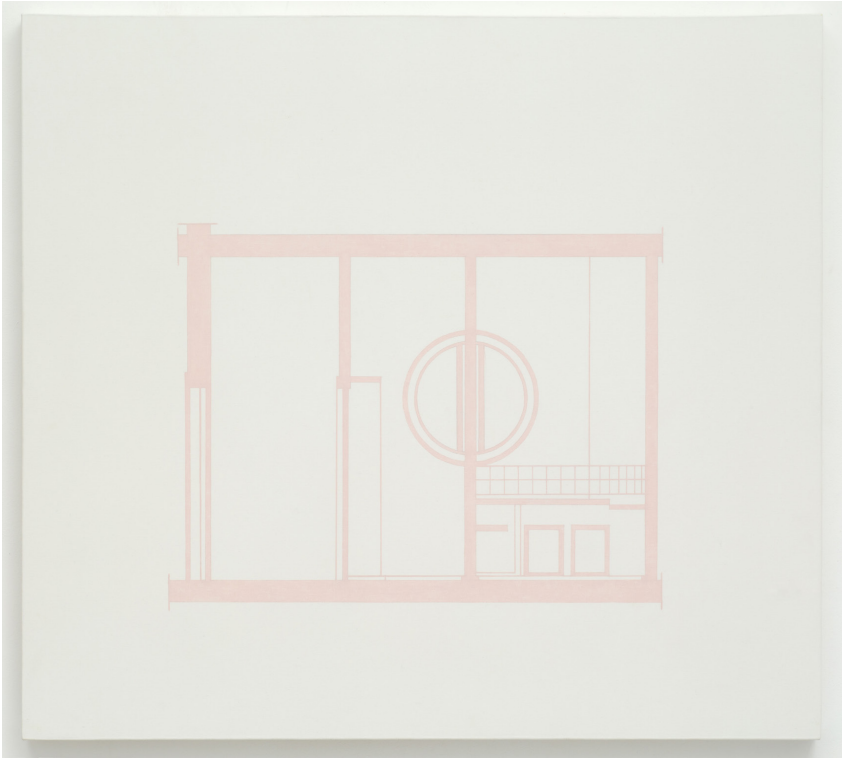
Trevor Shearer
Elements, 2009, re-edited 2011, video, 10 mins, looped, silent. Image courtesy of the artist and Large Glass.



The ten-minute video comprises an edited sequence of ever-shortening versions of the event, which then gradually lengthen, like a mirror image in time, and enable the loop to begin again… The sustained, graphic image of the surface of the hotplate reinforces its sculptural dimension in relation to a screen. The elliptically indented surface also suggests, because of its close framing, other stranger associations – lunar crater, amphitheatre, alchemist's crucible… The structure of repeatedly shortening the filmed event over time is intended to mirror the decay of the droplet itself – perhaps the recorded image is about to disappear

as well? When the sequence gradually lengthens the anticipation of the droplet's returning position is a bit like a child's memory-game where one attempts to recall objects on a tray that has been removed. These aspects contradict the quasi-scientific language of the filmed event and add another dimension. Watching something exist then cease to exist, and the turbulent changes in between, is engaging, heightened, perhaps, by the event's transience and scale. The desire to want to see it played out again seems only natural – *Elements* represents, therefore, a kind of *machine* that plays with the fulfillment of that desire. (Trevor Shearer, 2011)

Alison Turnbull
Pink Kitchen (pictured), 1998, acrylic on canvas on board, 69 x 76 cm; *Hubble 3630*, 2014, acrylic and oil on canvas on board, 48 x 54 cm. Photo by Peter White, courtesy of the artist.



The works by Alison Turnbull presented here derive from two very different moments in her career, a painting made in the late 1990s, and examples from an ongoing series begun last year. One central point of continuity remains, however: the method of transforming readymade

information – plans, diagrams, blueprints, maps – into abstract paintings. *Pink Kitchen* translates an architectural cross-section into a delicate and precise aesthetic construction. The more recent paintings derive from a composite astronomical image made using the Hubble Space Telescope, *eXtreme Deep Field*. Turnbull was sent this image by an artist friend and is working from 162 Photoshop layers, each one designed to mask specific parts of this super-dense image of the cosmos. Turnbull's paintings derive from selected combinations of these layers, and the series continues to spin out in unpredictable ways. For Turnbull the Hubble image, itself a composite of 2,000 different layers, has a strong relationship with painting: 'It's a picture of time that is very densely constructed; if you looked out through a telescope you would never actually see this, and it moves photography far beyond the question of analogue or digital… Here the notion of the 'onement' of painting is set against the infinity of the image. Vast, unfathomable things are there [in e*Xtreme Deep Field*], so the photograph almost takes on the status of an Old Master painting with its concentrated object quality. The terminology too – 'depth', 'surface', and 'field', for example – relates very much to painting. The space it represents is only a very tiny fraction of the cosmos but it's a window onto the night sky, and back into deep time.' (Alison Turnbull, 2015) At moments the conceptual complexity of Turnbull's source material sounds against the aesthetic effects of the paintings themselves, the sensuous qualities of the latter opening onto the great expansiveness of the former.

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