

COM-

PRESSION

COMPRESSION

ED KRČMA

Dichten = condensare.

Ezra Pound¹

This exhibition brings together contemporary artworks that achieve density and compactness of meaning through the use of spare and concentrated means. While much recent art has depended upon high production values and spectacular effects, *Compression* explores strategies for the generation of aesthetic and conceptual magnitude via the articulation of more modest artistic materials.²

While such work develops the exacting standards of modernist aesthetics in the visual arts, in which elements deemed inessential were radically expunged, the term ‘compression’ is more familiar to poetic discourse. For Cristanne Miller, writing on Emily Dickinson’s poetry, ‘compression’ denominates ‘[any] language use that reduces the ratio of what is stated to what is implied.’³ In his celebrated 1918 text, ‘A Retrospect’, Ezra Pound encouraged poets ‘To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.’⁴ Pound would demonstrate the salutary and medicinal effects of this principle

in his 'Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord' (1914), for example, which distilled a stodgy ten-line translation of a Chinese poem by Howard Giles into the following tercet:

O fan of white silk,
Clear as the frost on the grass-blade,
You also are laid aside.⁵

The crystalline directness of such poems has affinities with contemporaneous experiments in modernist visual art. To take an example from beyond Pound's immediate circle of Vorticists: in reducing his means to orthogonal axes, white rectangles, black bars of varying width and extension, and unmodulated blocks of primary colour, Piet Mondrian created a pictorial system of great rigour and flexibility. Seeking to reach decisively beyond a significance that was merely subjective, Mondrian cancelled the fluid, autographic mark – the chief conventional signifier of intense emotional engagement – in favour of a concentrated set of discrete parts rendered under tight manual control. The paintings hold a different kind of dynamism and potency, achieved through the precise calibration of pictorial units that are all the more enigmatic for being so openly declared.

By both specifying and integrating his terms, Mondrian brought painting to the structural condition of language, considered as a mobile system that generates significance through the differential relation of its parts. The effect of his iconoclastic purge was to dramatically increase the

value of those pictorial elements that remained.⁶ In a 1979 essay, Rosalind Krauss argued that the crucial structure sustaining this kind of aesthetic project in the visual arts was the grid.⁷ While resistant to the referential aspects of verbal language, the grid nevertheless provided a kind of fundamental pictorial grammar, which allowed painting to train attention relentlessly upon the organization of visual experience:

This structure, impervious to both time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence. This silence is not due simply to the extreme effectiveness of the grid as a barricade against speech, but to the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusions from outside.⁸

In a documentary filmed in New York at the end of 1963, Marcel Duchamp referred to chess as a ‘school of silence’.⁹ Models of art making associated with the ‘anti-retinal’ legacy of Duchamp are often set in opposition to the rigorous probing of the conditions of vision by modernist artists.¹⁰ Indeed, the avant-garde strategies of collage and the readymade, emerging in the years just prior to the outbreak of World War I, constituted major challenges to the authority of painting.¹¹ In part an extension of both collage’s rejection of manual virtuosity and its embrace of everyday ephemera, the readymade foregrounded skills associated more directly with conceptual moves: selection, placement, ordering, naming.¹² While

registering the radical import of such challenges, it is nevertheless fruitful to consider the readymade and abstraction as neither antithetical nor mutually exclusive, but rather as two different modes of compression in art.¹³ Indeed, many of the artists in the current exhibition explicitly dramatize the way in which readymade elements now constitute not so much a critique of painting and sculpture, but a means for their reinvigoration.

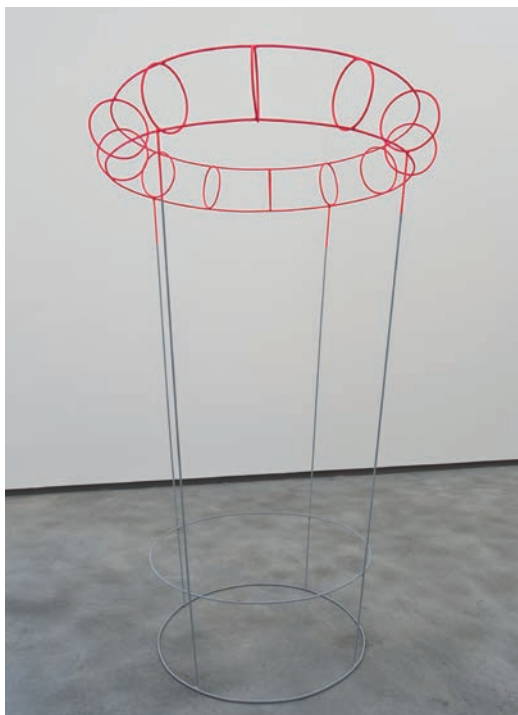
Decisive within the production of such artworks is the selection of the specific readymade element that will ground its logic. One thing and not another: what is the best way to think of the nature and duration of such a decision? In one sense it is made in an instant: this image, object, data set, architectural plan, predetermined procedure, or material structure is suddenly recognized as singularly apposite. But an entire style of thinking and working informs this moment, a parsing and weighing according to criteria that are not always consciously articulable or even recognized. These are decisions embedded within a particular historical and cultural circumstance, and their meaning is established in relation to a wider field of emergent, dominant and residual formations: of established artistic conventions and lines of flight; of viable tactics of affirmation and negation; of patterns of cliché and circuits of available reference. Such a decision is a long time in preparation, but the event that supplies its immediate occasion might more closely resemble the logic of a chance encounter, or a dream.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud characterized the workings of the primary psychic processes in the following terms:

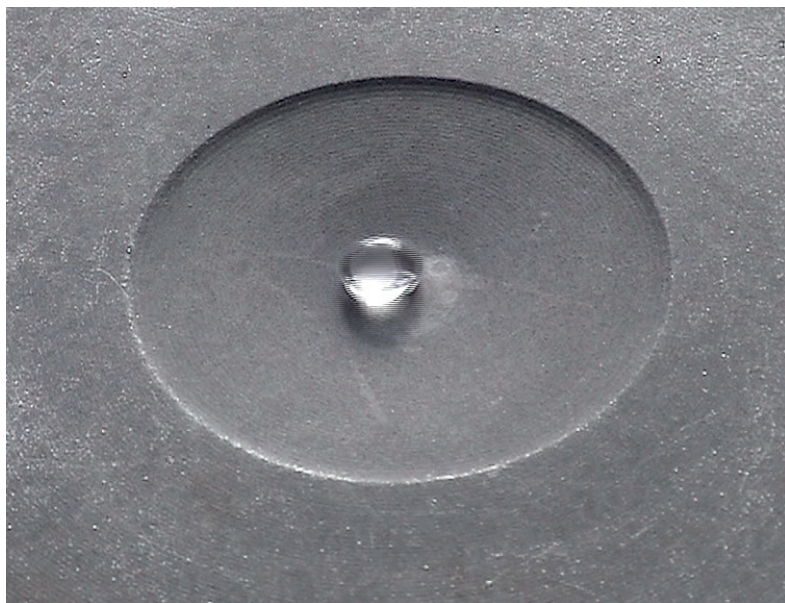
[T]he intensity of an entire train of thought can finally be concentrated in a single one of its elements. This is the fact of *compression* or *condensation* which we got to know in the course of the dream-work. It is condensation that is mainly to blame for the disconcerting impression made by dreams, for we are quite unfamiliar with anything analogous to it our normal inner life accessible to consciousness.¹⁴

Such a statement raises the question of how we understand the term ‘normal inner life’, of art’s proximity to that idea and, alternately, of art’s affinities with the strangeness of oneiric impressions. Making a space for contingent everyday events in his interpretive theory, Freud argued that the ‘day’s residues’ formed a crucial if subordinate component of the dream-image. The latter he compared to hieroglyphs and rebuses, which required deciphering.¹⁵ While not expecting to find the end of every thread of its significance, Freud nevertheless retained confidence in his ability to solve the ‘picture puzzle’ posed by the dream. It is the resistance of artworks, however, to the protection of a specific solution that is in need of interpretation in the modern period.¹⁶ Perhaps like the dream, still, the artwork embodies a form of compression that is not reducible to rational propositions and explanations; it holds a stranger kind of density.





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.



'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)





2014 Concrete, 60×60×25 cm

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,



2013 Oil on aluminium panel, 28 x 35 cm

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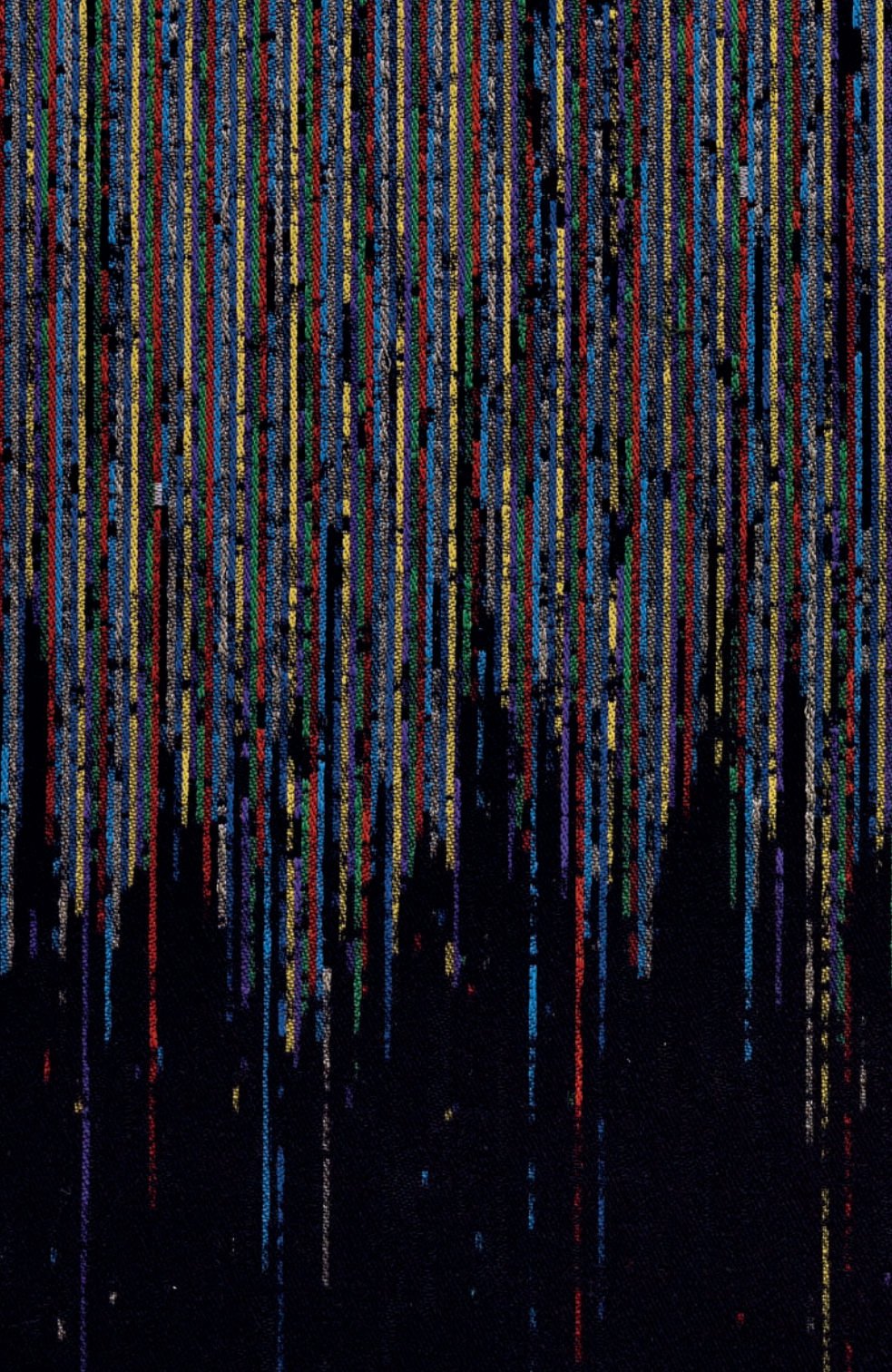
and creating three-dimensional projection drawings. In a related development, which returns to an earlier moment in his career when he was making photo-paintings, Hackney has adopted digital photographic material as another readymade. *The Chess Game II* is a painting on aluminium derived from a digital 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.

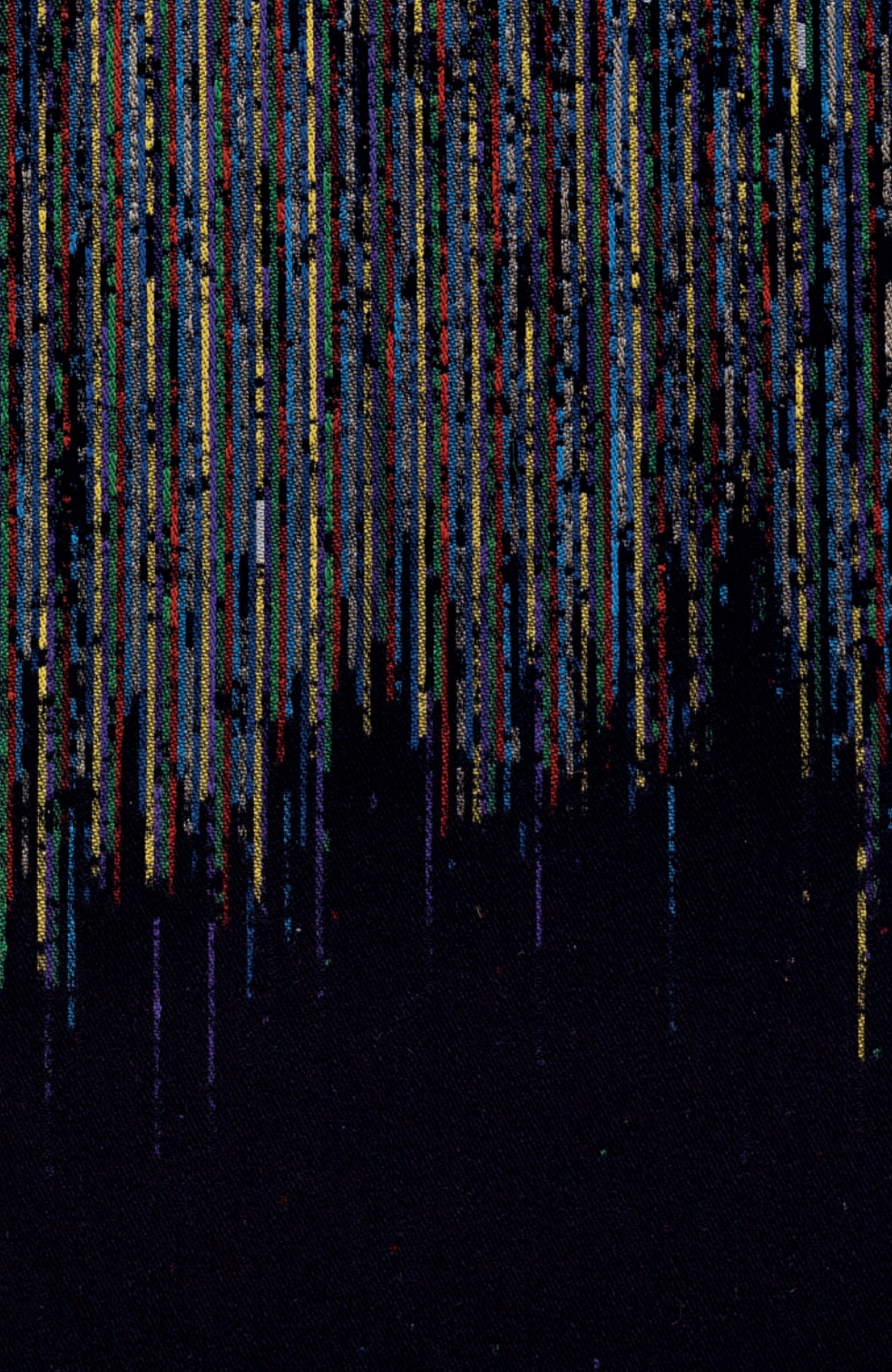
Photographic source material courtesy of Akademie der Künste, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv, Berlin (photographer unknown).

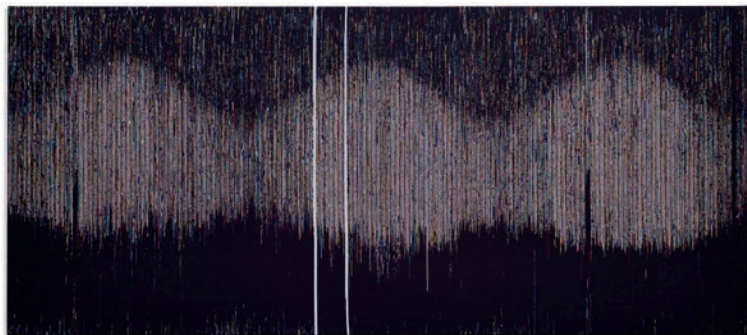


2015 Mixed media: found curtain tie back and wall hook, spraypainted cast iron. Dimensions variable

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.







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.



'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.'

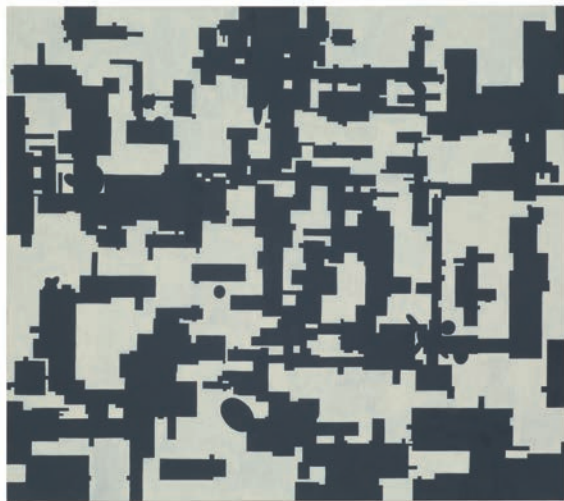
(Stephen Brandes, 2015) *Slum Clearance* is a collage consisting of two pasted components: a picturesque image of the Austrian Alps that has been cut from a 1930s travel book, and the alphabet minus those letters required to form the words 'slum clearance'. Graphic power, black humour and dark historical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



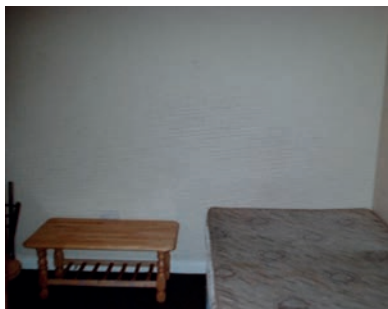
1998 Acrylic on canvas on board, 69 x 76 cm

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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 *eXtreme 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.



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.



2011 Polished, carved coal in two parts, 22 x 16 x 60 cm and 45 x 22 x 20 cm

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.



In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno explored the riddling, language-like, enigmatical character of artworks in relation to the disenchantment of social life and the hardening of what he and Max Horkheimer had called 'instrumental reason'.¹⁷ Here the idea of compression can be set in relation to another type of abstraction, which has less to do with a formal mode of art making and instead describes a cognitive operation. This other idea of abstraction signals the bringing of sensible particulars under general concepts, an operation achieved by sacrificing singular qualities for shared and exchangeable properties. The reduction of things to a numerical monetary value, for example, constitutes an extreme yet ubiquitous example of abstraction, whereby the particular qualities of objects and activities are subsumed in order to enable exchange. 'Viewed from the standpoint of the objective relations of capitalist society,' Mikhail Lifshitz wrote in his 1933 book, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, 'the greatest work of art is equal to a certain quantity of manure.'¹⁸

The power of abstract reasoning constituted a means of liberation from the powerful grip of superstition, mystification and blindly inherited wisdom. However, driven on by its own mythical aspect, it also accelerated the annihilation of tradition, intensified modes of exploitation, and prepared the way for the desiccation of experience. In 1944 Adorno and Horkheimer theorized this formation as the 'dialectic of enlightenment'.¹⁹ While by no means preferring those mystified forms of thought

corroded by the forces of enlightenment, and keeping faith with the emancipatory impulse of that project, they aimed their critical energies against the hegemony of an abstract reasoning that remained at the service of domination, a trajectory that continues to penetrate the conditions of contemporary life.²⁰

The rapid ascendancy of digital technology over the last twenty years can be viewed as part of a new moment in this dialectic, and it is from within this realm that the term 'compression' derives one of its most common contemporary usages. Digital data is based upon the most fundamental of binary oppositions: 0/1. The extraordinary speed, availability, and democratic potential of this technology are enabled by vast sequences of this basic expression of difference. Data compression allows this information to be stored more efficiently (either by identifying and removing data deemed unnecessary, or by a 'lossless' technique of using algorithms to compress data files with no loss of information). Replacing any motivated relationship between informational content and technological medium, digital data is convertible, reproducible, and alterable to an unprecedented degree. A digital image file, for example, has no material dimensions or necessary output format; the material specificity of pictures (although not necessarily of computer hardware and display devices) gives way to the extraordinary mobility of data flows on which contemporary social life has increasingly come to depend.²¹

In its very etymology, the word ‘compression’ carries with it an emphatically material connotation, however (the Latin verb *comprimere* means ‘to press together’). Indeed, while in no way rejecting the capacities of digital technology – and indeed often making critical and inventive use of it – many works in this exhibition employ modes of making that strive to maintain a direct relation with physical objects and processes, via strategies such as casting, transcription, photographing, and unedited recording.

‘It is futile to reject general concepts’, Horkheimer and Adorno argued, while at the same time insisting that, ‘Classification is a condition for cognition and not cognition itself; cognition in turn dispels classification.’²² The modes of thought and practice presented in this exhibition share more with that other direction in thinking: having assimilated forms of symbolic ordering, the task is to attend again to the material singularities around which our abstractions constellate.²³ Exceeding the rule of abstraction at the service of exchange, the compressed artwork reverberates from sites of qualitative concentration that are materially specific, formally spare, conceptually precise, and imaginatively rich.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber, 1951), p.36. My thanks to Trevor Joyce for pointing me to this reference.
- 2 I follow Theodor W. Adorno's capacious conception of what constitutes artistic 'material': 'Material... is what artists work with: It is the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colours, sounds, associations of every sort and every technique ever developed. To this extent, forms too can become material; it is everything that artists encounter about which they must make a decision...' Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997 [1970]), pp.147-8.
- 3 Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.24.
- 4 Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p.3.
- 5 See James Longenbach, 'Poetic Compression', *New England Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2011, pp.164-72.
- 6 Here I am indebted to the analysis of Yve-Alain Bois; see his *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1993), and his introductory essay, 'Formalism and Structuralism', in Rosalind Krauss et. al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp.32-9.
- 7 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), pp.8-22.
- 8 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', in *Ibid.* p.158
- 9 Marcel Duchamp in *Jeu d'échecs avec Marcel Duchamp* (dir. Jean-Marie Drot, 1963, broadcast on 8 June 1964, ORTV) http://www.ubu.com/film/duchamp_chess.html
- 10 An influential early example is Michael Fried's 1965 essay, 'Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella', in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood, Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.213-67.
- 11 See, for example, Louis Aragon's 'The Challenge to Painting' (1930), in Pontus Holtén (ed.), *The Surrealists Look at Art* (Venice: Lapis Press, 1990), pp.47-73.
- 12 See John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form - Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp.81ff.
- 13 On Duchamp's relationship with modernism, see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996).
- 14 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1900]), p.391.
- 15 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.212.
- 16 'We have already had to note that actually one is never certain of having interpreted a dream in its entirety; even when the solution seems satisfying and complete, it is always possible for a further meaning to announce its presence through the same dream. *The quota of condensation* is thus, strictly speaking, indeterminable.' (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.212, italics in

- original). I borrow the phrase, 'the protection of a specific solution', from Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 2007 [1985]), p.35.
- 17 Discussing the work of Samuel Beckett, Adorno declared, 'the increasing opacity [of artworks] is itself a function of transformed content... [C]ontent has become the critique of the omnipotence of reason, and it can therefore no longer be reasonable according to the norms set by discursive thought. The darkness of the absurd is the old darkness of the new. This darkness must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning.' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.27) Indeed, Adorno argued that 'Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without remainder are not artworks.' (p.121)
 - 18 Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, trans. by Ralph B. Winn (London: Pluto Press, 1973 [1933]), p.93.
 - 19 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1972 [1944]).
 - 20 See, for example, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1999], esp. pp.443ff), and Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).
 - 21 Paul Hegarty has recently argued that some kinds of video art – specifically, here, that of Ryan Trecartin – present another way of being in 'digital times' which, instead of assuming the hegemony of digital technology over contemporary life, suggests that 'we are not beholden to it, but dwell in it, and that we can best occupy its spaces by not allowing it to be thought of as the dominant Imaginary of "our times". Instead, the digital is a source, a method, a staging, area and a set of practices and materials as much as it is an apparently dematerialized source of cultural wonder or fatigue.' Paul Hegarty, *Rumour and Radiation: Sound in Video Art* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.179.
 - 22 Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp.219–20.
 - 23 Indeed, Adorno's own theoretical system was frequently grounded in the smallest, most contingent details of everyday life. It was in such apparently inconsequential particulars that entire frameworks of thought and practice could be seen condensed: slip-on shoes, the material layout of books, or the astrology column in the *Los Angeles Times*. See, in particular, Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1951]).

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Published by Enclave Books on the occasion of the exhibition, 'COMPRESSION', featuring Stephen Brandes, Maud Cotter, Angela Fulcher, Tom Hackney, Catherine Harty, Caoimhe Kilfeather, Susan Morris, Alison Turnbull, and Trevor Shearer.

Ormston House, 9 July–7 August 2015

Ormston House 9–10 Patrick Street, Limerick City Ireland
Enclave Books 7 The Crescent, Cork Ireland

First Published 2015 © Ed Krčma

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Design: Simon Elvins and Tom Mower

Photography: Angela Fulcher: Jed Niezgoda, Alison Turnbull: Peter White, Stephen Brandes: Roland Paschhoff, Susan Morris: Stephen White and Maud Cotter: Jordan Hutchings.

Printed in England by Aldgate Press, London.

Many thanks to the following people for their generous support of this catalogue: Valeria Biondo, Flavio Boggi, Patrick Crowley, Jimmy Cummins, Margaret Iversen, Fiona Kearney, John Krčma, Sally Krčma, Sofia Mendes, Richard Mumford, Linda Owen-Lloyd, Richard Taws, David Warrilow, and Rachel Warriner.

Thanks to all at Ormston House: Chris Boland, Niamh Brown, Mary Conlon, Simon Corcoran, Chris Hayes, Billy Lingwood, Marta Luque, Caoimhe MacAllister, Lorraine Masters, Eilish Murrihy, Aislinn O'Keefe, Eimear Redmond, Marta Slawinska, Aintzane Usandizaga

ISBN: 978-0-9933232-0-1



ISBN 978-0-9933232-0-1

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