

**Faculty of Humanities  
School of Design and Art**

**Critical Anachronism:  
The recovery of the everyday in the context of Non-objective painting**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
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### **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material, which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

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This research specifically describes how a non-objective inspired painting practice can facilitate the innovation and expansion of knowledge in an area of under-examined cultural terrain, and specifically, what theories, materials and processes pertaining to the discourse of *the everyday* are best used to concretely investigate this context. Ultimately, the new concept of 'critical anachronism' as a form of artistic engagement is presented herein.

I examine the trajectory of my own established non-objective art practice alongside investigation of the history of non-objective art as it has been involved with subject matter drawn from 'the everyday' in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Western quotidian experience. Examining various strategies that modern and contemporary artists have used to break down the division between art and life informs three main projects that I have undertaken to extend this area of art practice—presented herein with exegetical reflection.

My creative production reaches an apogee in examining the phenomena of record cover design subculture of the period from the 1940s-1960s. This everyday cultural material punctuated my own everyday experience as an artist during the period of this research from 2013-2017. I reflect on this experience and ultimately re-conceptualise the medium of non-objective painting as a means of exploring the anachronisms of an 'antiquated everyday' and an 'overlapping of everyday experiences.' This doctoral study provides for how such anachronism might be understood more broadly to play a critical role in expanding non-objective practices steeped in the everyday for the artist-practitioner more generally. The first two projects provided the platform that allowed this shift to take place. They initiated a deepening critical investigation of the potential for intervention in the processes of mass cultural consumption. However, examining *critical anachronism* as a viable non-objective artistic methodology ultimately comes to fruition here via the final project involving the record covers.



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Figure 1. Caspar David Friedrich, *Das Eismeer* (*The Sea of Ice aka Polar Sea, also known as The Wreck of Hope in reference to an early North Pole Expedition*), 1824. Oil on canvas, 96.7 x 126.9 cm. Kunsthalle Hamburg.

As a young boy, I had an unexpected experience when standing in front of Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice/Failed Hope* (1824) (*Figure 1*). I was so keenly impressed with the drama of the chaotic and jagged shapes of the ice floes that I failed to notice the broken shipwreck. It took several visits to the Hamburger Kunsthalle and repeated viewings before I discovered this crucial aspect of the painting, which was the most likely reason for the painting in the first place, as Friedrich's works explored the place of humanity within nature and our insignificance with regard to the universe—a particular concern of my generation.

Once I noticed the shipwreck it was incomprehensible to me that I had missed seeing it. It made me doubt my own eyes, my ability to perceive and comprehend the visible world. In hindsight, this experience was the beginning of my interest in painting and visual perception.

James Elkins (2005, 14) writes of this phenomenon:

Seeing is rapid: it can be so quick it leaves words behind—at least that is our common notion. Usually, I think we see pictures in less than ten seconds. When the Metropolitan Museum of Art bought Velazquez's portrait of Juan de Pareja it was the most expensive painting in the world, and large crowds came to see it. When I visited I couldn't spend much time in front of the painting, and so I amused myself by sitting on a bench and timing how long each person looked at it. On average, most people looked for two seconds, read the plaque for twenty seconds, and then looked up once or twice more for less than a second.

Here, Elkins (2005, 14) asks: "What do we actually see? What is the focus of our attention? It is also worth asking: How far are we prepared to go when what we see takes us to a different place?" These questions continue to motivate my artistic practice. Many years after seeing the Friedrich painting, when I attended art school, I intensified my inquiry into painting. What is painting? What does it consist of? How does it work? All my works are contingent on this inquiry. My interest in non-objective, concrete and analytical art is a consequence of this fascination.

Non-objective art appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century and inaugurated a radical development away from figuration, beyond abstraction even, towards a self-contained and self-reflexive inquiry. Non-objective artists turned away from representational images towards an exploration of the pictorial means themselves. For these artists, art ceased to be a metaphor and became a material reality. Theo van Doesburg (1930), the inventor of the term Concrete Art, wrote in the "Manifesto of Concrete Art": "painting should be constructed entirely from purely

plastic elements, that is to say, planes and colours.<sup>1</sup> A pictorial element has no other significance than itself and consequently the painting possesses no other significance than itself."

These radical ideas had an enormous influence on painting, architecture, design and all the creative arts. However, viewers were soon alienated by the austere enquiries of the non-objective (Krauss 1999, 11). They did not see their lives reflected in these works, which seemed to be mindless play of colours, lines and shapes. Over time, non-objective painting came to be associated with "formalism," implying that it lacked meaningful content. Despite this, the influence of non-objectivism has quietly permeated most aspects of life, in terms of design. From city planning, housing construction, manufacturing of goods to packaging design, the rational, efficient and non-sentimental attitudes of the non-objective have become part of our culture, and like water for fish, they are practically invisible to us today.

#### **Note on use of the term 'everyday'**

Although artists have worked with materials from 'the everyday' previously, I posit that it is the specific combination of unassuming materials and experimental processes *calibrated to radical strategies of painting* that can provide possibilities for new knowledge. I combine the tradition of non-objective art with the quotidian materials and processes of 'the everyday' in a new body of works developed throughout this research to examine a critical interface between the non-objective and the everyday, which has a wider cultural significance beyond my own art practice.

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1 For the purposes of this exegesis, Non-objective art is an umbrella term and Concrete art is more specific.

The ways artworks engage the contemporary world defines their core contribution to culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was abstraction and consequently, non-objective art—and art practice came to rely upon concrete experience. This established 'the everyday' as a central art discourse in modernism. Concomitantly, the idea of 'closing the gap' between art and life gathered momentum throughout the century. European and North American artists of the mid-twentieth century were often at the forefront of social experiments that tested the nature and validity of the cultural upheavals occurring during this period. They turned from examining their own subjective psychology, as the Abstract Expressionists had done, and began to observe the extrinsic, ordinary realities of life around them. From Andy Warhol's video *Sleep* to Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures, artists took questions of time seriously, engaging with duration, repetition, photography, illustration, comics, and the media. Previously excluded from fine art discourse, these media became new resources for art practice. Divisions between high art and everyday life diminished, and the abstract, self-expressive investigations of the previous generation gave way to a critical inquiry of the contemporary environment. The work of Marcel Duchamp was momentous here. His introduction in the 1910s and 1920s of everyday objects into the sphere of visual arts via the Readymade emphasised the importance of critical thinking, and subsequently influenced the emergence of neo-Dadaists, such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

As a professional art practitioner going about my everyday life, I experienced a moment when I became acutely aware of the ubiquity of cardboard boxes; nearly all manufactured goods are packaged in cardboard boxes. I recognised a strong resemblance between the geometry of the boxes and the materiality of non-objective art. The boxes formed cuboids, dominated by straight lines, rectangular shapes and orthogonal angles. Instead of discarding them, I began to collect and integrate them into my artistic inquiry. I analysed them, turned them inside out, took

them apart and reconfigured them, and eventually cardboard boxes became the grounds for my experimental painting practice. Following Nicolas Bourriaud (2007, 16-17), who suggests that the modernist idea of originality presents only one possible course of action, I embraced the boxes as already existing forms of information, data and visual signals that can be re-interpreted, re-focused, transformed and re-presented.

This research challenges the association of non-objective art with formalism and re-evaluates the history of non-objective art in order to re-vitalize its connection with the concepts of the everyday. I trace the history of non-objective art practice from its inception at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was a revolutionary movement that challenged previous attitudes and belief-systems, to the present day, when it seems to have lost much of its revolutionary potential. I investigate the work of contemporary artists who work within the parameters of non-objective art and integrate the concepts of 'the everyday' within their practice to appraise and expand the continued significance of this practice. I also examine my own experimental painting practice as an important indicator of the relevance of contemporary non-objective art. The combination of historical research into the theories of the everyday and the practical investigation into the relationship between everyday objects and experimental painting processes provides a method for critical engagement with late capitalist consumer society. The integration of everyday objects into the practice of experimental painting processes enriches and stimulates associations regarding our daily lives, but also and more importantly, alters perceptions of the experience of ordinary life itself. I argue that the ideas and practice of non-objective painting have a limited capacity to transcend formal concerns to communicate specific issues that relate to our human condition. This narrative possibility is only possible through the integration of everyday.

The first chapter of this exegesis examines the inception and development of non-objective art in the early twentieth century. I focus on the utopian intentions that guided non-objective artists and their failure to realise them. In particular, I examine the conditions of analytic painting and its differences from non-objective art. I then develop a way of applying these distinctions in my own practice. I discuss how the reception of paintings changed once frames were removed and they were no longer seen as vistas into another world. This transformation of the perception of paintings from pictures into objects was completed by the Minimalist artists of the 1960s, who prioritised three-dimensional forms and brought about the collapse of distinctions such as painting and sculpture, while at the same time revitalising the ideas of non-objective art in a new era. The subsequent rise of Conceptual art resulted in the dematerialisation of the art object, which posed great difficulties for painting. Finally, I discuss the currency of painting within postmodernism.

In the second chapter, I investigate the characteristics of the everyday which are so important for contemporary non-objective artmaking, particularly in relation to consumer culture. I discuss how the everyday has been theorised by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau in terms of the exploitation of producers and consumers by corporations. Henri Lefebvre (2008) distinguishes natural life cycles from repetitious industrialised processes, whereas Michel de Certeau (1988) asserts the strength of the individual and minority groups. de Certeau (1988, xix). explores possibilities of creative resistance to the "networks of discipline" that surround us, and asserts that tactics to evade the strategies of the powerful can be simple everyday practices such as walking, reading, cooking or painting. I then explore how everyday materials found their way into art works, starting with the collages of Braque, Picasso and Kurt Schwitters. I discuss the widespread use of everyday materials during the 1960s, by artists from the Italian Arte Povera movement as well as American Pop Art and Minimalist artists and examine how the international Fluxus movement set out to

break down the barriers between disciplines and had a significant influence on the convergence of art and life. I discuss the unusual approach to sculpture of my own teacher, Professor F. E. Walther, who made works that included instructions to participants to execute simple mundane tasks such as standing, lying and walking. Finally, I appraise the different working methods of a number of contemporary artists who use everyday materials to successfully blur the boundaries between art and life.

In the third chapter, I explore the nature of time and the influence of cosmic cycles on our daily existence. The experience of time is subjective and fluctuates, while the measurement of time is constant and dominates our lives in fundamental ways. I examine historical aspects of timekeeping and how it influenced the rise of industrialisation and the exploitation of the working class. I explore the historical precedents of time based artworks by looking at the work of artists On Kawara and Tehching Hsieh. I then examine two very different attitudes towards the passage of time in the contemporary works of Roman Opalka and Julije Knifer. Finally, I explore the role time plays in my own experimental painting practice and articulate how the daily repetition of painting processes over months and sometimes years materialises time and gives it shape and form.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss my 2011 exhibition *Wrong Angles* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, which was the starting point of this research. I explore the relationships between the principles of non-objective art and consumer packaging material, through de Certeau's assertion that consumers reinterpret products by using them, turning them from passive consumers into active producers (quoted in Bourriaud 2007, 24). By integrating the cardboard boxes into my experimental painting practice, I propose a method for becoming an active producer, and argue for the continued relevance of painting in contemporary culture.

In the fifth chapter, I appraise the fundamentals of my experimental painting practice. I identify several conditions of painting and discuss the reasons behind the choices I have made. This chapter elucidates the major bodies of work produced during this research. These works engage the modernist device of the grid and explore the transformation of time into matter through repetitive painting processes and the re-interpretation of everyday consumer objects. I discuss the relationship between these works and non-objective art, through Michel Serres' theories of topological time. Serres asserts that time is not linear rather it is chaotic and turbulent and behaves like a river where not all waters flow in the same direction. The chapter comes to show my artwork for this project equally strives to reconstitute a sense of time as non-linear.

Finally, chapter six is an exploration of my *ReCover* project, which uses record covers as painting grounds. This project juxtaposes the incursion of the past into the present with the present's re-interpretation of the past. In this anachronism, time lapses and becomes liquid, flowing forwards and backwards simultaneously. We live in a digital world where all images are standardised by their pixilation. Images in this pixilated reality are much less cohesive and pixels can easily migrate and form new alliances with other pixels. The new images that emerge generate contextual confusion which leads to the destabilisation of values and invokes realities parallel to those we inhabit. I propose this project as a contemporary example of the critical capacity of non-objective art when combined with everyday objects.

This investigation extends the history and theories of non-objective art by re-evaluating the primary intentions of this movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (1997, 221) argue that avant-garde artists at that time felt a desire to integrate rather than separate art-practice from everyday life. Through an exploration of the shifting imperative to integrate art and the everyday, I recalibrate the terms of non-objective painting again, but related to everyday lives in the contemporary context. This compares a past desire to integrate rather than separate art-practice from everyday life with the present desire to do so. I do this specifically by exploring several important examples of painting from Piet Mondrian to Donald Judd. It becomes clear there is a persistent phenomenon that I ultimately apply in my own art practice.

Non-objective painting was a consequential development from abstraction, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. While abstract painting retained a tenuous connection to representation, non-objective painting eschewed all illusionism, and instead employed geometric designs that were devoid of any reference to the figurative or the symbolic approach. Initially, the insistence on the autonomy of pictorial means, such as ground, surface, space, paint, colour, line, contrast and movement, presented a severe limitation, but subsequently opened up a rich new domain of investigation freed from the need for external references (Lauter 2002, 17).

While the artworks involved in these experiments did not relate to an external reality, the artists referenced various philosophical contexts that drove their practices. Harrison and Wood (1997, 221) explain how in 1915, the Russian Kasimir Malevich (*Figure 2*), invented the term "Suprematism" for his specific brand of geometric abstraction based on the utopian ideas of Pyotr Ouspensky and George Gurdjieff. Suprematism quickly morphed into Constructivism, becoming more closely related to the ideals of Marxism and the goals of the Russian Revolution.

Harrison and Wood go on to explain that, for Malevich, if realized, these ideals would have ultimately led to the "dissolution of art into life," and "art as it was currently practised would cease, not because it had been subsumed into life but because the whole of life would have been rendered artistic."

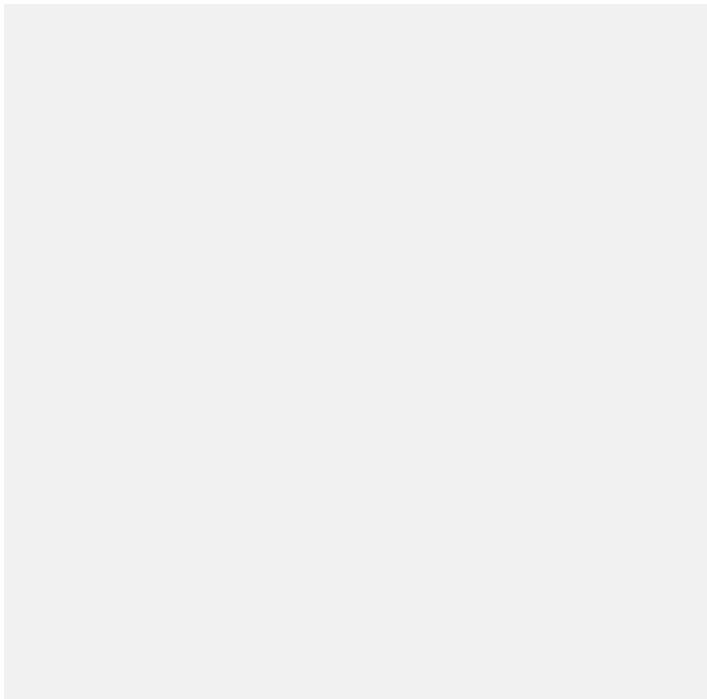


Figure 2. Kasimir Malevich, *18th Construction*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 53 x 53 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

At the same time, in Holland, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and other artists of the De Stijl group advanced "abstract art as the spiritual precursor of utopian social harmony" (Harrison and Wood 1997, 221). In his philosophy as well as in his paintings, Mondrian tried to achieve harmony through equilibrium (*Figure 3*). By employing only primary colours, as well as black and white horizontals and verticals, he experimented with balancing opposing forces, such as the individual and the universal or the conscious with the unconscious, to achieve a harmonious unified whole. Although beginning as a representational painter he moved in a non-objective direction.

The first autonomous paintings were made by Kasimir Malevich in Russia and Piet Mondrian in Holland (*Figures 2 and 3*). However, they were both strongly motivated by humanist interests, related to combining art with life. Subsequent in postwar period artists began to more rigorously investigate their materials: specify the painting-ground, the substance of paint and the instruments. The material properties of the oil medium were more deeply explored, rather than their colours being used to represent an external referent. The importance of materials and processes were acknowledged in the making of the works. Harrison and Wood (1997, 280) argue that, by exploring materials, measurement, paints and formal design, non-objective artists engaged less with illusion than their traditional antecedents who fabricated miniaturized illusionistic models of reality. Concrete art, with its focus on materials, and analytic painting, with its focus on process, emerged.

An associate of Mondrian and the De Stijl group, Theo van Doesburg became known as the inventor of the term 'concrete art,' which he coined in his 1930 "Manifesto of Concrete Art." Concrete art signalled a radical turning away from the understanding of abstract art as metaphor, and asserted that the interpretation of an artwork goes

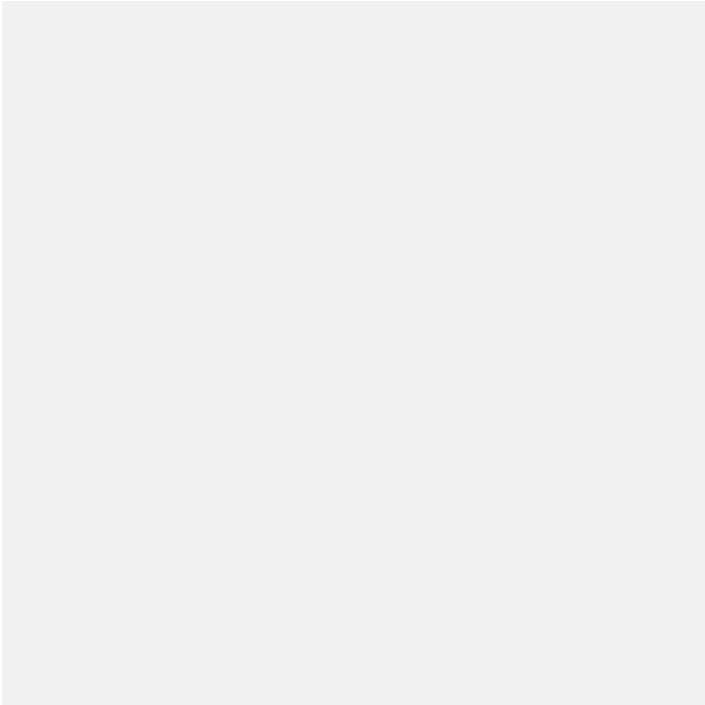


Figure 3. Piet Mondrian, *Composition in Red, Blue and Yellow*, 1930.  
Oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm. Kunsthau Zurich.

beyond the materiality of the art-object. Unlike abstract art, concrete art asserted the autonomy of pictorial means—surface, colour, light, contrast, line, space and movement—constituting a reality in and of itself (Lauter 2002, 13).

Concrete artists designed their works in their entirety before they executed them; the methodology was wholly premeditated and the actual process of painting was like an exercise of filling in. Once the design was complete, no surprises were anticipated and the outcomes were more stringent, severe and, to a certain extent, inflexible. Analytic painting, on the other hand, did not proceed from a perfected design.<sup>2</sup> The outcomes resulted from the process of painting, by combining the

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2 The idea of analytic painting is an interpretation of phenomena in painting at the time (around 1970s). An obvious example of this approach is the work of Robert Ryman. However, it also refers to many other European artists.

concepts and attitudes of the artist with the chosen materials. Analytic painting accepted the marks and traces that occurred throughout the process. It was therefore more open to accidents and the inherent characteristics of the materials.

Both analytic painting and concrete art were conceptual practices, manifestations of visual thinking. As Klaus Honnef and Catherine Millet (1975, 3) argue:

In such work, process, subject and means of the analysis always remain identical, and what is analysed is, at the same time, the instrument of the analysis. The analysis does not take place in the theoretic superstructure, but only in the production process of the investigation, whereas the theoretic reflection is the embracing attempt of systematization, exclusively crystallized by the artistic practice...In Analytic Painting the artwork is realized as an open happening, its particular components become visible in the painterly result by virtue of the production process.

Honnef (1975) describes the five<sup>3</sup> most important criteria for analytic painting to be that:

1. **The painterly result always takes shape during the production process,**  
i.e. it is not definitively preconceived;
2. **The painterly result is at no time final in the literal meaning of the word,**  
i.e. every painterly result is only one of several potential results;

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3 Honeff describes eight criteria, however the three which are not included here are not strictly relevant to this discussion as they accentuate the importance of using non-art materials to disconnect painting from its traditional references and to examine it according to practical and analogous criteria.

3. **The painterly result is not only a reflection about the painting of pictures, but by stressing the production process, it also becomes a foil, which bears the traces of production.** These traces are not suppressed, as for example in concrete painting where the form appears in an anonymous shape. Rather, they are a constituent of the painterly result;
4. **The painterly result is characterized by the dialectic relation between the painterly materials,** i.e. the finished painting is a result of relating the painterly means throughout the production process; and
5. **The painterly result is an analytic artistic statement,** i.e. the validity of the statement expressed in an analytic painting depends on the special use of the painterly materials demonstrated in the paintings.

In other words, in analytic painting, the choices of painterly means determine the painterly result to a large degree. The size and proportions of every ground are as significant as the materials that have been chosen. The selection of canvas, wood, or any other carrier are alternatives of great consequence. The choices of paints or substances as well as the instruments with which these substances are applied to the ground are important, and of course so too is the attitude with which they are applied. Together, these choices amount to myriad quite banal decisions having major influences on the final outcome, often producing series' of works rather than singular achievements.

As a result of the focus on materials and attitude, an artistic work process became possible which did not need to fall back on extra-medial categories. In this work process, the subject and means of analysis always remain identical, and the subject of analysis is at the same time the instrument of analysis. The analysis does not take place in a theoretical superstructure, but in the production process of the investigation. The theoretical reflection occurs in the attempt to embrace systematization, crystallized by the artistic practice (Honnef 1975, 3).

After the 1930s, non-objective artists rejected the romantic notions of naturalistic painting, dismissing them as individualistic and expressionistic (Pestorius 1997). They favoured an objective, analytical and conceptual approach, implementing the "systematization of the means of expression to produce results that are universally comprehensible" (Pestorius 1997, 12). The simplicity and neutrality of geometric forms, "sympathetic to the spirit of contemporary developments in science and industry" (Pestorius 1997, 12), were instrumental in breaking down barriers of elitism and eased the integration of art with everyday life.

The rejection of the picture frame, which for centuries had supported the illusion of representational painting by separating it from its environment, was a crucial development in this integration. By abandoning the frame, a painting became part of the everyday world. It was transformed into an object that was *looked at*, rather than a window that *looked through* into another reality. Artists could now examine the stretcher (a painting's support) and its physical properties, and simultaneously consider the image. Without the confinement of the frame, a painting extended its sphere of influence and created new relationships with the world of objects and everyday life (Pestorius 1997, 20).

This significant shift occurred in 1959 when the North American artist Frank Stella showed his *Black Paintings* (Figure 4). In response to the emotionally loaded, gestural expressions of the Abstract Expressionists, these works reduced the language of painting to its formal elements. These and subsequent works were devoid of meaning, emotion and narrative, countering the illusionistic characteristics of traditional painting and brazenly celebrating the object character of painting. As Stella said in an interview with Brian Glaser in 1964, "all I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion...What you see is what you see" (quoted in Meyer 2000, 199).

Stella rejected the notion of flatness that Clement Greenberg advocated. Stella emphasised the connection between the support and the content of the painting. Greenberg (1960, 2) advocated flatness to be painting's specific condition:

It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained, however, more fundamental than anything else to the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art. The enclosing shape of the picture was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theatre; colour was a norm and a means shared not only with the theatre, but also with sculpture. Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.

Stella surpassed this thinking by treating the painting as an object.

Apart from establishing paintings as objects, Stella also created a tight alliance between the ground and the painted marks that appear on that surface. As can be seen in *Figure 4*, the black stripes strictly follow the shape of the canvas. There are no emotional diversions and no spontaneous brushstrokes. These are paintings that adhere to their initial conception. The only precedence for that kind of discipline can be found in Mondrian's later works of the 1920s, where the horizontal and vertical bands follow the rectangular shape of the canvas. The works are about the relationship between the raw canvas (the ground) and the stark black marks. Stella extended his exploration of this relationship by varying the shapes of his grounds and introducing metallic paints. Stella's contemporary Donald Judd (1965, 3) argued that:

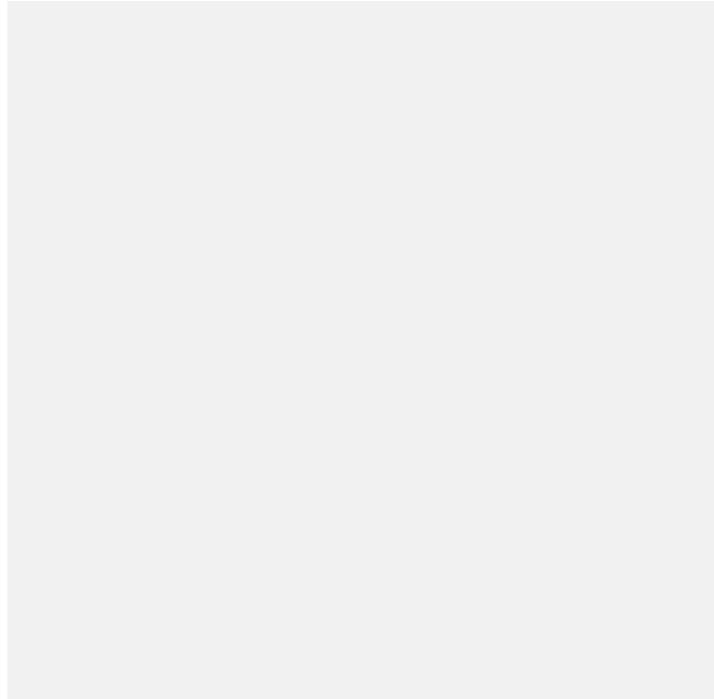


Figure 4. Hollis Frampton, *The Secret World of Frank Stella* (painting *Getty Tomb*, unpublished print, 1958–1962, printed 1991, gelatin silver print, Addison Gallery of Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts).

Stella's shaped paintings involve several important characteristics of three-dimensional work. The periphery of a piece and the lines inside correspond. The stripes are nowhere near being discrete parts. The surface is farther from the wall than usual, though it remains parallel to it. Since the surface is exceptionally unified and involves little or no space, the parallel plane is unusually distinct. The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another. A painting isn't an image. The shapes, the unity, projection, order and color are specific, aggressive and powerful.

For Judd, Stella's paintings opened the possibility of utilizing architectural space for painting. The essence of Stella's black canvases resided purely in their physical characteristics, a "deductive geometry of the frame." Hence, Judd was inspired to argue that painting had become an object, just like any other three-dimensional thing. Judd turned to making three-dimensional objects that occupied physical space (*Figure 5*); even works conceived for walls jutted out from the wall and engaged the viewer's physical environment. Judd reasoned that painting could no longer be differentiated from sculpture, and he named the hybrids that formed out of this collapse, "Specific Objects" (Krauss 1999, 10). However, these objects related to the conversation of painting rather than sculpture. Agee (2000, 35) argues that "Judd began as a painter at the Art Students League in New York in the early 1950s, and even after turning to three dimensions, he always thought as one. It was the history of painting that interested him, not sculpture."

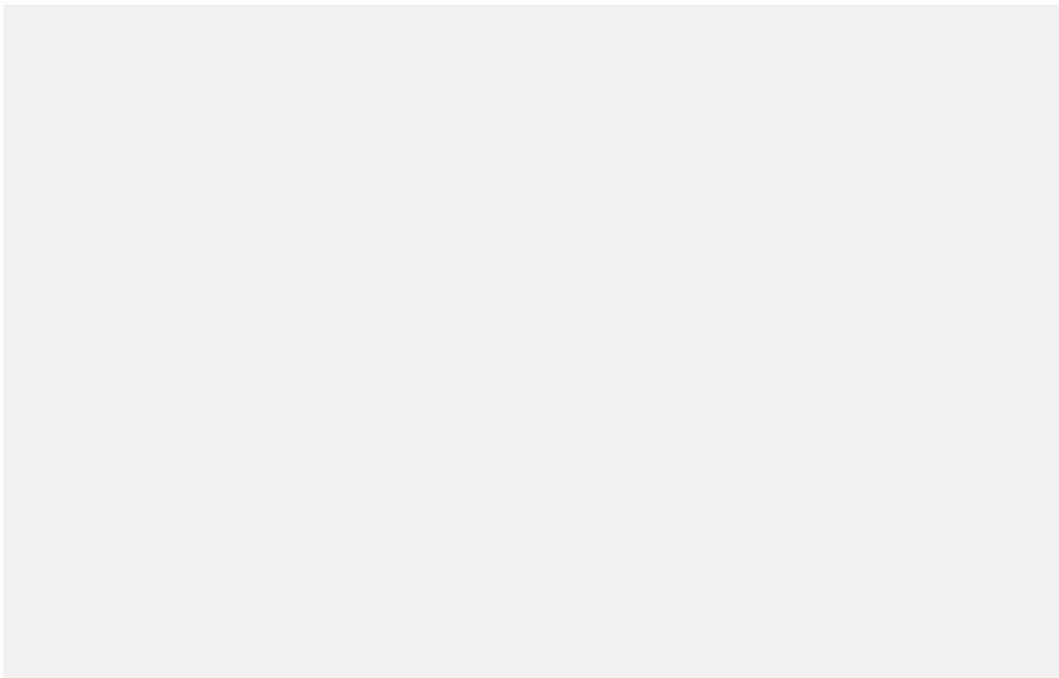


Figure 5. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1964. Light cadmium red enamel on galvanised iron, 39.4 x 236.2 x 198.2 cm.

Judd was very critical of European abstraction and especially of the tradition in painting of creating illusionistic space, arguing that "three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colours – which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art" (1965, 3). Not only did he reject the European tradition of oil painting on canvas, he also abandoned the artist's personal signature brushwork. Gianfranco Zappettini, an analytic painter, (quoted in Honnef 1975, 145) describes this avoidance of the personal signature thus:

The house-painter's roller functions this way and becomes the specific instrument of these doings; i.e. as the "stroke" of the brush always tends to be a gesture, to be an autobiographic statement, the house-painter's roller does not produce any gesture but an impersonal, uniform movement which afterwards cannot be recognized any more. Gesture corresponds to expressivity, emotivity, existential declarations on the part of the author, whereas movement does not longer refer to the author but the work.

Judd had his objects manufactured in industrial workshops and used a variety of architectural materials that could be found in a modern city environment at the time, such as aluminium, fluorescent Plexiglas, brass, stainless steel, Formica etc. This gave his works a look of objectivity and referenced a belief in science, technical rationality and by extension a belief in the "superiority of American civilization" (Moss 2007, 35).

Minimalist artists like Judd, focused on the materiality of their works, on simple geometric formulas and were not interested in otherworldly allusions and metaphors. Apart from their scepticism in depicting humanist values, they were also

critical of the European Constructivist tradition and what they identified as 'relational paintings,' where marks in one corner are balanced by marks in another corner. For the Minimalists, symmetry was the solution to this problem (Meyer 2000, 197-199). Minimalism became known for its pared back, clear forms and use of industrial materials. The artists employed materials that were being used in the construction of new urban environments, including steel, brick, plywood, aluminium, copper, fluorescent light and mirrored glass (Batchelor 2009, 13).

Notwithstanding their critical stance towards the European Constructivist tradition, Minimalism reconnected with the interrupted investigations of 'non-objective' art practice initiated by Malevich and Mondrian at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it had very different intentions, as Kirk Varnedoe (2006, 86) argues:

It [Minimalism] is a classic split between European and American views of the world: between rationalism and empiricism, between an idealist hope for a universal language of forms and a pragmatic insistence on particular realities ("what you see is what you see"), between the belief that you make art more democratic by reducing it to the essence of form and the belief that you make it democratic by rejecting the whole idea of essence.

Minimalism was the pinnacle of purity, self-reliance and complete independence from anything external to the artwork. The artists eschewed traditional notions of formal composition and conventional notions of beauty. They experimented with restructuring their methods by using systems as guiding principles. Sol LeWitt argued that "the idea becomes a machine that makes art" (quoted in Lippard 1997, XIV), implying that the goal of art was to achieve neutrality without emotional or personal preferences.

Minimalist artists interrupted the tradition of two-dimensional painting. They saw no possibility of renewing the tradition of painting on a flat surface. They treated paintings as objects, arguing that the only alternative was to move into the third dimension. They developed 'installations' that took the conceptual elements of geometry, symmetry, colour and materiality, and unfolded them into a relationship with the spatial situation of the actual environment—their site. Michael Fried (1998, 149) asserts that this was painting on the verge of exhaustion. Possibilities were severely restricted when relational composition and pictorial illusion paintings were abandoned and Fried (1998, 153) argues that the only choice left was the movement into space:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships.

Because the beholder encountered the works in actual circumstances, Fried (1998, 153) asserts, the works became theatrical, not unlike a stage, which is a negation of art. Jettisoning pedestals and positioning objects directly on the gallery floor had a similar effect to the removal of the picture frame from paintings. Just like a painting without a frame becomes an object like any other object, a sculpture without a pedestal becomes an object, a specific object. Artworks were situated in the 'real world' of the everyday, rather than in the artificial world of metaphors, symbols and representations.

Despite this move out of metaphor and symbol, many viewers were alienated by the cool, slick, manufactured look of the works. Although the artists used materials from the world around them, the Minimalist interest in purity and autonomy distanced the works from ordinary people. Rosalind Krauss (1999, 11) argues that:

The specific mediums – painting, sculpture, drawing – had vested their claims to purity in being autonomous, which is to say that in their declaration of being about nothing but their own essence, they were necessarily disengaged from everything outside their frames.

Consequently, although Minimal art emerged as a response to the introspective endeavours of the Abstract Expressionists, in many ways it connected with the formalist ideas of the non-objective and revitalised the notion of the autonomous artwork. It focused discussions on the identity between the formal aspects of an artwork and its contents. By denying emotive narratives in their work, the Minimalists, just like the non-objective artists before them, were unable to connect with the lives of ordinary people. The consequence of these reductive tendencies and their emphasis on the materiality of the "specific object" caused an even more severe reaction from Conceptual artists: the abandonment of the medium *per se*.

The rise of Conceptual art in the late 1960s severed the connection between the medium and the message, between form and content.<sup>4</sup> Materiality was abandoned in favour of words, thoughts, texts and information. The overwhelming emphasis on ideas by conceptual artists marked the beginning of the postmodern period. As Jan Verwoert (2005, 2) points out, "the refutation of the primacy of medium-specificity by Conceptual Art marks a historical caesura with normative effect and consequences

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4 Joseph Kosuth expanded on this significant shift away from the object and towards an analytical inquiry into the essence of art in his 1969 book *Art after Philosophy*.

that must inevitably be faced. It represents a threshold that no one can step back over." This uncoupling opened the possibility for all kinds of material to be used as media. It shifted the emphasis from a medium-specific enquiry to an inquiry into the nature of art itself. Any medium that could communicate the intention of the artist was open for investigation. As Verwoert (2005, 2) argues, the Conceptual artist "dismisses the relevance of a medium specific practice in favour of a general and fundamental inquiry into the nature of art - in whatever medium." Conceptual Art was the final stage in what Lucy Lippard (1997) has called "the dematerialization of the art object."

Conceptual artists since the late 1960s questioned the relationship between process and product, instead of focusing on the traditional classifications of painting and sculpture and the accompanying concerns of physical presence, composition, colour and technique. They rejected the notion of the artwork as commodity and were more interested in imagination and ideas, in visualizing information, and using systems to reveal social structures and political realities (Lippard 1997, x). Robert Barry summed up this development in 1968 when he said, "for years people have been concerned with what goes on inside the frame. Maybe there's something going on outside the frame that could be considered an artistic idea" (quoted in Lippard 1997, xii). This embrace of conceptual questioning was the shift that makes a project like my research conceivable.

Although Conceptual art seems to be the logical consequence of the reductionism of Minimal art, its fundamental assumptions were quite different. Minimal artists reacted against the self-expressive symbolisms and desire for transcendence of the Abstract Expressionists, and consequently avoided any personal signature. They revolted against Greenberg's dictate of the flatness of the canvas. Their response was to move into the third dimension, to emphasize painting as object, and to break

down the distinctions between painting and sculpture. Minimalist artists found inspiration in the everyday industrial materials used by architects and designers and were fascinated by modular fabrication. They championed artworks produced by factories and workshops, not by artists in their studios (Batchelor 2009, 13).

Conceptual artists, however, were not interested in concrete objects. For them, Minimalism belonged to the consumer culture of the capitalist system. They were more engaged in fundamental questions about the nature of art and established aesthetic skill as primarily cognitive rather than visual. It was important to convey the information and meaning of a work with simple statements that initiated thought processes in the recipient. Minimalism formally expressed "less is more," whereas Conceptual art was about saying more with less. As Robert Huot said in a 1977 billboard piece: "Less is more, but it's not enough" (quoted in Lippard 1997, xiii).

In his 1998 book *Painting as Model*, Yve-Alain Bois develops the idea of painting as a conceptual practice in which he describes painting as a 'strategic model' within a network of references. "Like chess- pieces, like phonemes in language," he argues:

a work has significance, as Levi- Strauss shows, first by what it is not and what it opposes, that is, in each case according to its position, its value, within a field – itself living and stratified – which has above all to be circumscribed by defining its rules (254/255).

Bois (quoted in Verwoert 2005, 7) distinguishes two kinds of painting practices, a traditional practice that uncritically relies on conventions, and a progressive practice, which continually scrutinizes itself and develops its conceptual potential and contextual relations. He argues further (quoted in Verwoert 2005, 7):

that the medium of painting is essentially conceptual when it self-referentially and self-critically addresses its material qualities as well as the symbolic grammar of its own formal language. In relation to this immanent criticality, the strategic instalment of painting in a network of external references has the status of meta-critical gesture. This means that this gesture essentially derives its critical force from the structural self-inquiry of a medium-specific art practice it simply takes it to another level. This conceptuality, however, only exists as a potential.

The rise of Conceptual art questioned the validity of the medium specific discipline of painting and opened up the potential of society to interrogation. Spheres such as architecture (Dan Graham), the environment (Robert Smithson), the body (Vito Acconci), time (On Kawara), process (Richard Serra), politics (Hans Haacke), the everyday (Stanley Brouwn), among others, were integrated into the process of artistic thought and action. Ephemeral performances by the Fluxus group in Europe and Happenings by artists in the United States were united by their aversion to the making of objects. A whole new era rejected the modernist conversation between painting and sculpture and redoubled investment in the purely investigative and critical power of art. For example, Eva Hesse, who worked with elements such as the circle, the cube and the grid, used soft and malleable materials to question and examine confidence in rationality and order. Her works were informed by an attitude of experimentation with malleable and impermanent materials such as latex, vinyl, cardboard, fibreglass etc. The results visually communicated the process of their making as well as reflecting on the passage of time and upon temporality itself (Fer 2004, 140).

The notion of the artist-genius was also strongly challenged during this period. Rosalind Krauss (1989, 157) argues that the understanding of the artist as genius developed as artistic efforts were based on an elevated quality of originality. Immanuel Kant (1951, 150) for example, suggested that genius is an inherent quality. Mary Kelly (1981, 48) remarked that, "with reference to Kant's *Critique*, genius is the mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art." The perception that tenets of originality and genius were not teachable established an unassailable reputation of 'the artist.' Genius was seen to be synonymous with superior skill—a specific kind of technical ability used to achieve highly realistic compositions in painting and sculpture. However, Minimalism rejected self-expression, as these artists set out to explore their everyday realities and the prevalent consumer culture that thrived in the post-war years. The rise of feminism also prompted a re-examination of the myth of the 'male genius' artist (Parker & Pollock 1987, 84-85). Art movements such as Arte Povera in Italy and Minimalism, Pop Art and Conceptual Art in the USA challenged the beliefs of originality, genius and taste by introducing different working methods based not on technical skills but on material processes, chance operations, repetition, seriality, concepts and systems (Kelly 1981, 48).

In the wake of Conceptual art, new art categories emerged, such as photography, video and installation art, artist books, architectural drawings, maps, charts, documents and musical scores. They all became part of an expanded contemporary art practice. Although Conceptual art did not actualize its promise of abandoning the art object as a commodity, its emphasis on ideas, concepts and information continues to play a significant role in contemporary art. After all, the information, the concept and the meaning of an artwork is its essence, whether communicated by language, images or through material transformation.

The ground has shifted for painting. In the 1920s and 1930s, non-objective painting inaugurated a fundamentally new way of conceptualizing the world and translating those perceptions into radically new works of art. In time, this initial vitality and promise faded, and non-objective painting became just another movement followed by a new wave of innovation. Liberation from the imperative of realism and focus on the underlying essential structures were repudiated as being formalist and rejected as lifeless, art-for-art's sake. The critique of formalism precipitated greater push-back into examination of the material elements of painting in the 1960s. With the rise of postmodernism, the emphasis shifted from non-representational modernism and painting towards a more conceptual, political and socially engaged art practice. However, over the years all these innovations have been quietly integrated and taken hold in art, architecture and design, and have become part of our general perception of life.

The successive movements of innovation that dominated Modernism do not seem to occur in the postmodern period. Artistic operations have been atomised into many disparate practices, technologies and conceptual investigations, and many contemporary artists reference specific modernist movements as their point of departure. For these artists, all modernist developments are available on an equal footing, which allows artists to choose the appropriate background for their investigations. Today, we rarely meet contemporary artists who say that they are 'painters.' The rise of Conceptual art in the 1960s and the subsequent questioning of the relevance of painting in an ever-more-developing technological society caused Rosalind Krauss (1999) to coin the term 'post medium condition.' In this

condition, paint is one medium amongst many others. The context of painting is not specifically painting anymore, but the larger, more general context of contemporary art. However, Verwoert (2005, 7) argues that:

The medium specific approach to painting is still possible in artistic practice and in critique. All it has lost is its status as self-evident. Since painting is realised today within the horizon of conceptual practice, it must be grounded in a context that is no longer its own. That means.. that an appeal to the specifics of the medium as its sole justification is no longer possible. Painting can no longer just be painting.

As such, painting has to stand its ground in relation to conceptual practices in other media. While painting may have exhausted its connection to the various contexts with which it has been associated, it has not lost its ability to correspond to new sets of relations. That is, I believe, the possibility for the future of painting: to discover and relate to specific contexts and explore those relationships with painterly means as well as conceptual rigour. Painting provides unfettered access to the means of production without needing technological translations and it directly communicates our shared humanity.

Painting however, is a highly specialised practice that needs to keep in touch with the world at large while investigating its own particular context. Without an interactive relationship to the everyday, it becomes an esoteric and self-absorbed pursuit unable to achieve wider recognition and communicate its concerns. In the following chapter, I focus on the concepts of the everyday and its changing conditions throughout history. I argue that the everyday has continued significance within contemporary art practice by examining the work of a number of contemporary artists that have integrated the ideas of the everyday into their practice.

Having outlined some arguments about the importance of the everyday to contemporary visual art in the previous chapter, this chapter will discuss different theories of the everyday. The main part of this chapter investigates the work of artists that have integrated everyday materials in their non-objective art practice. As discussed in the previous chapter, a chasm opened up between artistic investigation of the painting-object and cultural engagement of ordinary people throughout the twentieth century. People were less and less able to recognize their humanity as the depiction of realistic or symbolic imagery was purged from art. The advance of abstraction and the subsequent exploration of non-objective painting became a domain for specialists and lost touch with everyday life and ordinary people. For artists, the liberation from the need to depict representations of life turned them away from issues outside the frame. For the first time, they could concentrate on the essence of painting, for instance, the purity of colours and shapes, without referencing external realities. Krauss (1999, 11) suggests that these artists wanted their works to be autonomous and independent from depicting life.

Lefebvre and Levich (1987, 7) argue that repetition, routine and monotony are characteristics of the contemporary everyday. As Lefebvre pointed out in his essay "The Everyday and Everydayness," the everyday is marked by two different modes of repetition. On the one hand, repetition takes the form of the natural cycles such

as day and night, the seasonal occurrences of sowing and harvesting, periods of activity and recuperation, hunger and satisfaction, desire and its fulfilment, and ultimately life and death. On the other hand, there are the rational processes, such as the repetitive activities of work and consumption. Lefebvre and Levich (1987, 10) argue that for most people, the experience of the everyday is characterized by monotony paired with passivity since they are not included in the macro decision-making process and therefore have little control over their lives.

In *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre (2008, 31) argues that the concept of everyday life is adjunct to Marx's concept of alienation. For Marx, with the rise of industrialization, everyday life became fragmented into differing spheres of activity such as family life, leisure time and work activity. He argued that the commodification of labour undermined the workers self-worth, as well as their relationships to the workplace. Alienated from nature, their own identities and other human relations, their private lives, such as family life and leisure-time, were affected.

Marx argued that leisure provides a break from the monotony of the everyday, at least on the surface. Leisure distracts; it should provide liberation as well as pleasure and relaxation. Certain leisure activities have a global reach, such as television and movies, whose images can appear to be as far as possible removed from everyday life (Lefebvre 2008, 33). Marx argued that the leisure possibilities are infinite, with some tending to impoverish through passivity while others have a more enriching effect. Contemporary corporations exploit the passive attitudes commercially by turning the real needs of relaxation into desire for consumption. For Lefebvre, capitalist consumerism reproduces itself in the everyday . However, without revolutionizing the everyday, capitalism will continue to inhibit and stifle the self-expression of ordinary people.

Like Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau (1988) acknowledges that the experience of the everyday is repetitive and for the most part unconscious, yet he does not attempt to create methods to resist the regimes of power. He distinguishes between the concepts of strategies and tactics. Strategies are linked to producers, corporations and power structures, whereas tactics are used by individuals and consumers to navigate the environments created by the strategies of the institutions of power. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1988, xiv) explores how whole sections of society find a multitude of creative tactics in the everyday to evade the "networks of discipline" that have been constructed around them. He asserts that marginality today is no longer limited to minority groups; it is now all-pervasive and constitutes the silent majority. Everyday practices such as dwelling, walking, reading, talking, shopping, and cooking (and I include art practice here as well) are tactical in character. The invention of tactics by the weak to resist the disciplinary strategies of the powerful adds a political dimension to everyday practices (de Certeau 1988, xix). It allows obscure fringe activities and creative life on the margins to exert an influence on the structures of power.

Art practice is usually a tactical activity conducted on the periphery of a society. This vantage point allows for observations that are more truthful and revealing of the human condition. It also better enables one to pay attention to the unspectacular, the ordinary and the insignificant. The overlooked and unexamined are treasure troves to be explored. When we perform ordinary activities countless times throughout our everyday lives, they become invisible and insignificant. However, when used in an art practice, they are devoid of any function. Consequently, participants have the opportunity to become aware of their own bodies and minds, as well as their surroundings, and the passage of time. Activities that are ordinarily

performed to achieve an outcome are emptied of purpose and are performed only to become conscious of body and mind. These everyday activities become tools for experiential self-awareness.

The German artist F.E. Walther turned his back on the manufacturing of objects and pictures to concentrate his efforts on developing such participatory processes with everyday activities. He was a professor in fine art at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, where I was one of his students. For him sculptures were not merely inactive objects; instead they were meant to activate the relationship between viewers and artworks. The art object was not complete until the viewer had used it. In *First Work Set (1. Werksatz, 1963-1969)*, he developed very specific instructions to apply to each of the works. These works were made from heavy

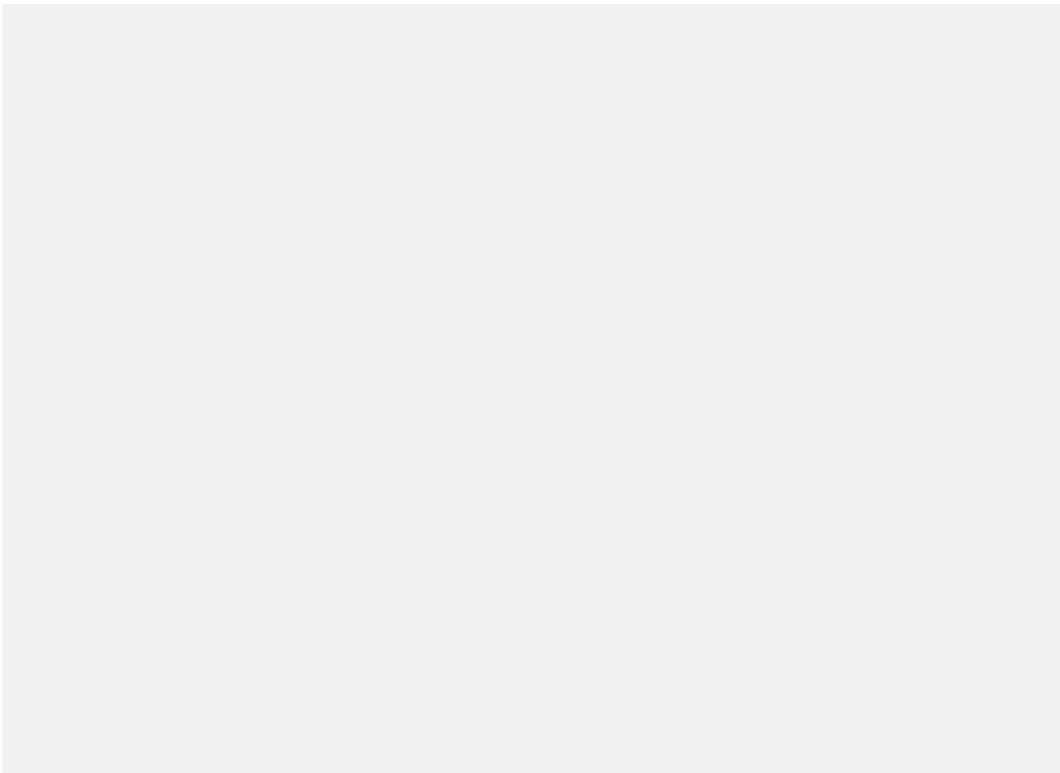


Figure 6. F. E. Walther, Sehkanal, 1968, Element #46 of the *First Workset*. Green fabric, 30 x 740 x 20 cm. Photo: Tim Rautert.

cotton fabric, that, when activated, created an experience for the participants which was the essence of the work. These works needed the participation of the viewer/user to be meaningful as sculptures.

Walther's artworks were not merely products to be viewed but needed to be experienced with all senses. The role of the viewer was extended from passive recipient to effective co-author. The viewer became a contributing participant in a process that activated not only the whole body, but also processes of thought and reflection. All elements of the fabric works were based on measurements related to the human body, such as height, volume, arm-length, stride, foot-length and hand-width (Walther 1990, 121). The viewers provided measure and proportion, and consequently took responsibility for the outcome of their experiences. I will never forget my experience of the work *Sehkanal* [*Sight channel*]. Two people slipped the long piece of fabric over their heads in order to establish a "viewing channel," as can be seen in *Figure 6*. The length of the fabric added to its weight and we had to use all our strength to strain and lean backward to straighten the fabric. As a result, we could see each other's faces. As soon as we relaxed slightly, the material slackened and the other person's face vanished into darkness. It took physical effort to establish and maintain a visual connection.

The material of the sculptures therefore included the bodies of the participants, as well as the time and space of the experiences (Walther 1990, 113-118). Walther's fabric works referenced everyday human activities such as standing; lying down, walking as participants engaged in these simple activities when they participated in these sculptural experiences (*Figure 7*). Time became material and place became significant (Walther 1990, 127).

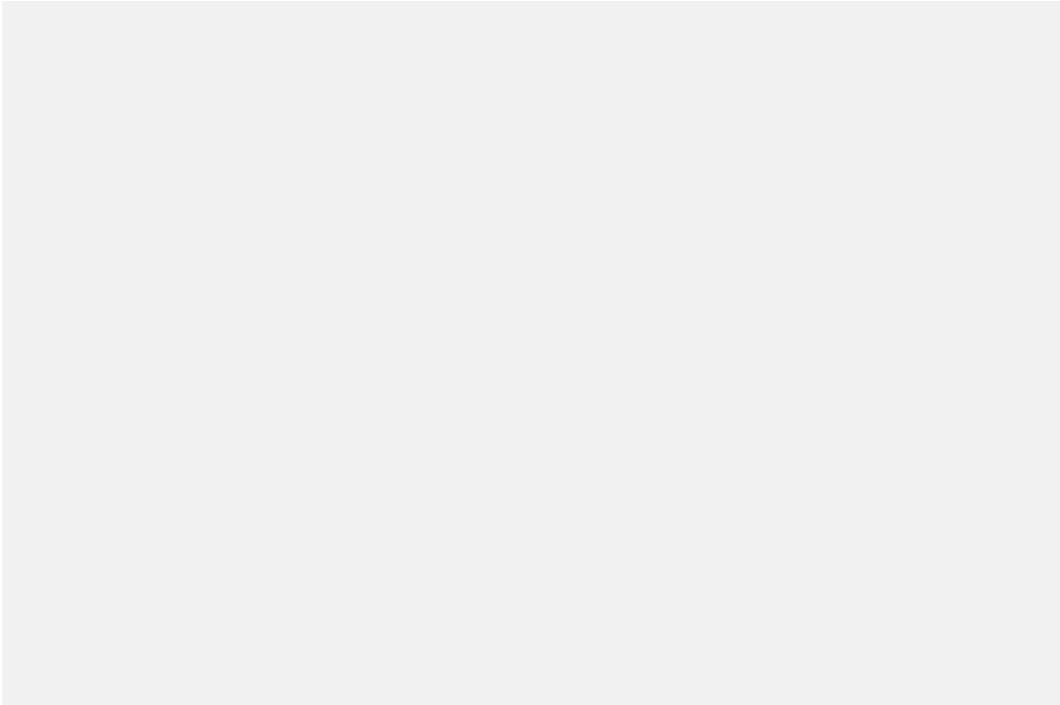


Figure 7. F. E. Walther, *First Work Set*, 1968. Fabric, dimensions variable.  
Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1971. Photo: Tim Rautert.

Walther's use of unassuming materials to evoke new experiences in the participants was unique; however, he drew on artistic precedents that had incorporated everyday materials. At the beginning of the twentieth century, around the emergence of non-objective art practice, everyday materials found their way into artists' works. Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso were the forerunners of this innovation, inserting newspaper clippings into their paintings. They invented the technique of *collage*. The German artist Kurt Schwitters was inspired by this invention and developed their ideas further. He jettisoned the use of paint and brushes altogether and fashioned works that were made only from fragments of found objects from the world around him (*Figure 8*). He combined all conceivable materials into a total artwork to create new relationships between all things in the world. He became a pioneer for contemporary practices such as installation, assemblages and collages (Restorff 2013, 11).

Walther was not the first artist to use everyday materials. Everyday materials became particularly important in the post-war period of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In Italy, the artists from the Arte Povera movement experimented with unassuming and poor materials such as cement and newspaper as well as materials from the natural world such as trees, branches and rocks, instead of using traditional sculptural materials like marble and bronze. These artists were concerned with the primal energies of life, such as the basic physical forces of gravity and electricity and fundamental human forces, such as vitality, memory and emotion (Christov-Bakargiev 1999, 17).

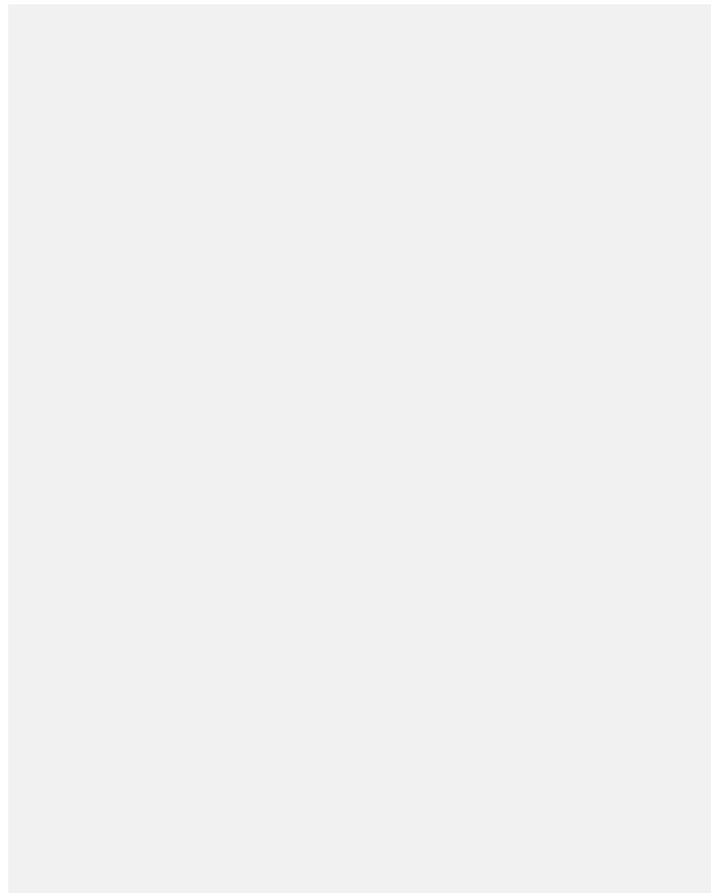


Figure 8. Kurt Schwitters, *Blauer Vogel*, 1922. Collage 20.3 x 17.8 cm. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Murray A. Gribin, Beverley Hills, CA

Contrary to the artists of the European movements at the time, North American Pop artists had fewer political ambitions. Their appearance has been attributed to the increasing industrialisation and subsequent burgeoning consumer culture of post-war America. (Honnef 2004, 15). Finding Abstract Expressionism to be insulated from the concerns of their present day, the artists of the Pop Art movement wanted to relate to the actual environment that they found themselves in: the everyday reality of shopping centres, consumer goods, mass media, fashion, and design (Honnef 2004, 22). Pop Art simultaneously destabilized distinctions such as design, advertising, consumerism, mass media, high art and popular culture. Robert Rauschenberg especially integrated everyday materials and objects into his paintings (*Figure 9*). He used newspaper articles, press photos, street signs, wire, wood and grass; even stuffed chickens and a goat populated his works. By treating all the materials equally, he created a tension between the representational and the real—stretching the definitions of art and questioning the boundaries between art and life (Honnef 2004, 22). As these works did not fit the traditional categories of either painting or sculpture, he called them “combines”, a combination of those two disciplines.

Walther's work began in the 1960s, a time when the Fluxus movement was also highly influential. Fluxus artists were interested in the diminishing gap between art and life. They wanted to break down the barriers between the disciplines. They worked across media and were not interested in medium specific practices such as painting. The anti-commercial attitudes and participatory events of Fluxus artists blurred art-life boundaries and created possibilities for integrating objects from everyday life into the conversation of visual art.

The following contemporary artists were influenced by these artistic attitudes. This creates the background for later discussion of my own work in this project...

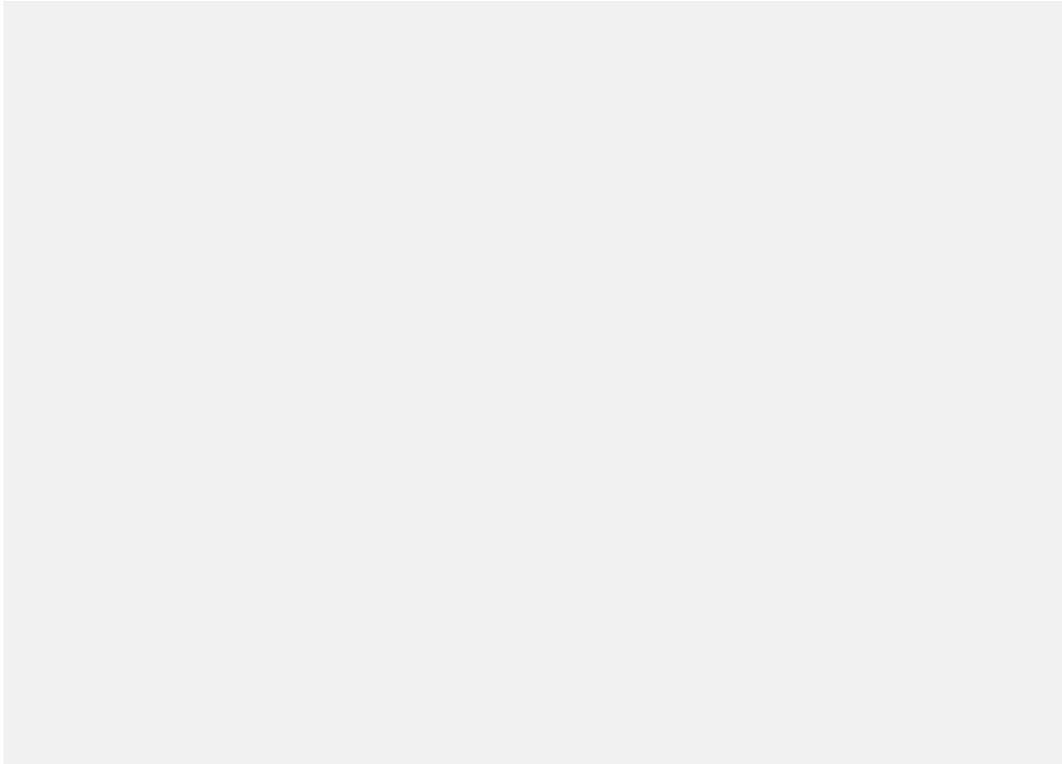


Figure 9. Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, 1955-1959, Combine, Mixed media with taxidermy goat, rubber tire and tennis ball, 106.7 x 160.7 x 163.8 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

The Swiss contemporary artist, John Armleder, brings painting into the everyday by juxtaposing 'artworks' with objects from everyday life in a relevant way for my practice... He has benefited from the ideas and activities of the Fluxus pioneers. His choice of materials is unrestrained and eclectic. He uses constructivist imagery, designs seemingly borrowed from Op Art, paintings that directly reference Abstract Expressionism, as well as industrial materials (like the minimalists did). By combining these different attitudes and approaches in a playful way, he plunders the cache of art history and presents these achievements side-by-side. This is an attempt to engage the contemporary context. He collapses the boundaries between artistic practices and daily life. He resists being categorised and has a strong scepticism towards the artist as genius. He has created installations, paintings, sculptures and especially what he calls furniture-sculptures (*Figure 10*). These furniture-sculptures

include combinations of monochrome or abstract paintings with items of furniture used as painting grounds. His surprising juxtapositions arise through chance proceedings with a nod to John Cage, who was a major influence on the Fluxus artists (Brehm 1999, 31/34).

While Armleder integrates everyday furniture into his painting practice, the North American artist Jessica Stockholder brings the whole gamut of consumer culture, with its garish colours and artificial materials, into play—signalling an aesthetic intersection of a critique of consumer culture, everyday materials and a non-objective painterly sensibility. Her practice predominantly consists of built installations that take the specificity of the architectural site as a starting point and

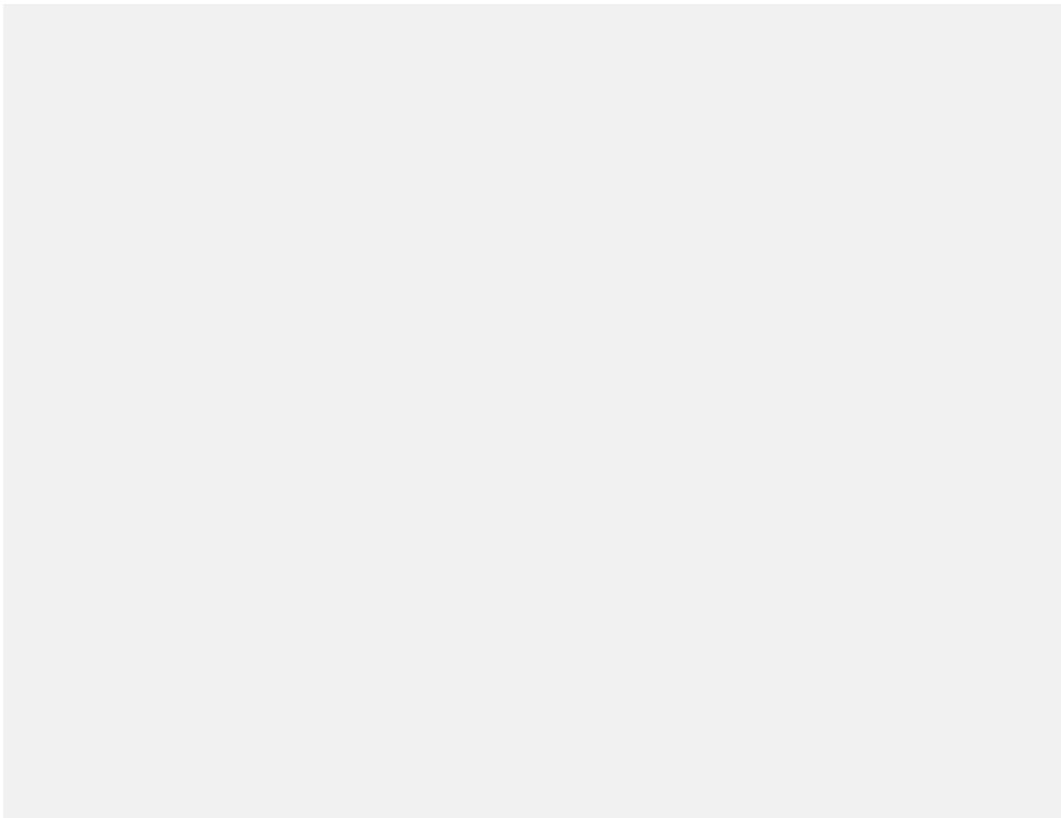


Figure 10. John Armleder, *Untitled (FS 169) Furniture Sculptures*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, leather and wood

amass a great variety of items sourced from everyday life (*Figure 11*). She arranges these objects in ways that appear at once ordered and improvisational, but also emphasize the mostly overlooked aesthetic qualities of these items. She brings the ordinary world of the city into the gallery, and combines these everyday materials with lavish amounts of colourful paint. Her integration of cheap and lurid elements critiques capitalist throwaway society and consumer culture and simultaneously references numerous artistic traditions, including Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, colour field painting and Minimalism. Her installations are sprawling assemblages that feature every degree of scale from the vast to the miniscule. They not only blur the boundaries between painting, sculpture and installation, but also obscure the distinctions between the artwork and the exhibition space (Schwabsky 1995, 63-76).

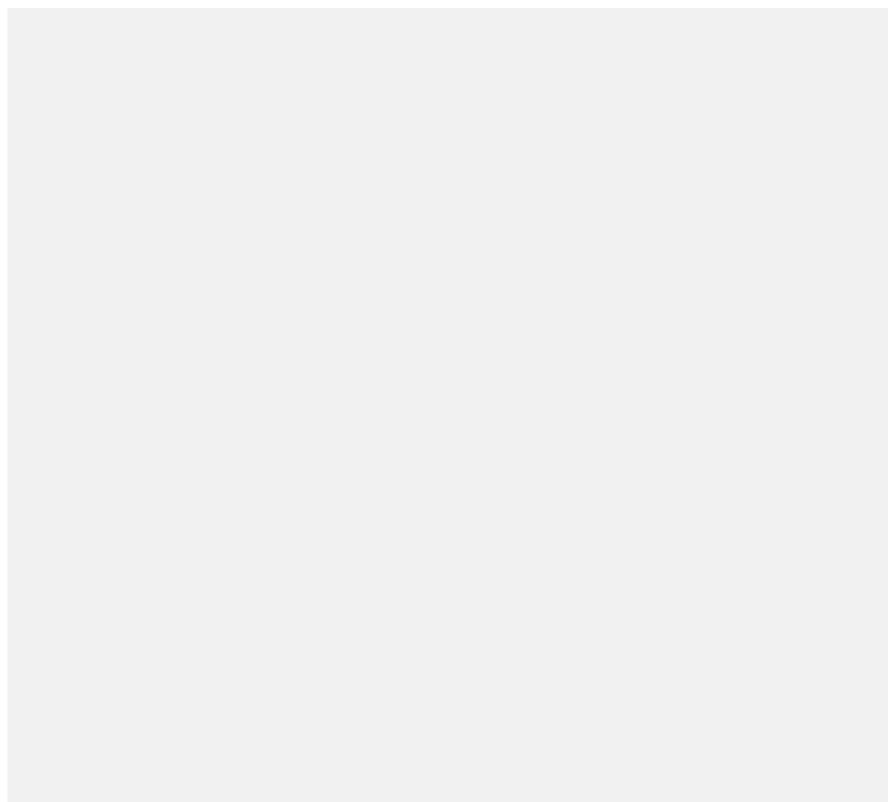


Figure 11. Jessica Stockholder, *Lay of the land*, 2014. Orange plastic shopping baskets, drive-way mirrors, oriental carpet, 15 wooden stools, acrylic paint, pendent lights and bulbs, hardware.

Stockholder's exuberant and colourful installations are constructed from objects taken from various contexts of everyday life. These objects are rendered dysfunctional in her arrangements, as they are not used according to their original purpose. They are employed only for their aesthetics, such as their colour, shape or form. These displaced objects lose their context, function and meaning, which has the effect of seeing them for what they are, rather than for what they have been made. This re-contextualisation also raises our awareness of other objects that surround us in our everyday lives.

The Swiss artist, Beat Zoderer, trained as an architect and as an artist. He uses everyday materials and space as his main media. His practice strongly references constructivist and concrete art and his work deconstructs and re-examines these styles by "undercutting [their] severity, rationality and perfectionism" (Strauss 2008, 4). While he often works with ordinary household items, office components and raw materials from the hardware shop, he rarely uses paint to alter the substances. Instead, he cuts, pastes and re-arranges these raw materials into methodical structures and geometric systems. His works convey his interest in perception and how the recognition and significance of everyday items is altered when placed in another context (Strauss 2008, 4).

Like Stockholder, Zoderer dislocates everyday objects and integrates them into the context of art. In *Transparent Order* (Figure 12), the different colours of transparent office folders are designed to distinguish different categories. By inserting the transparent folders into each other, the three colours overlap and become six colours. The simplicity of this act renders the folders dysfunctional and establishes a new order, a *Transparent Order*. As non-objective art, they comment on the history of colour theory and its application. Exploring the relationships of colours was an important aspect of non-objective art, practiced by Josef Albers, Johannes

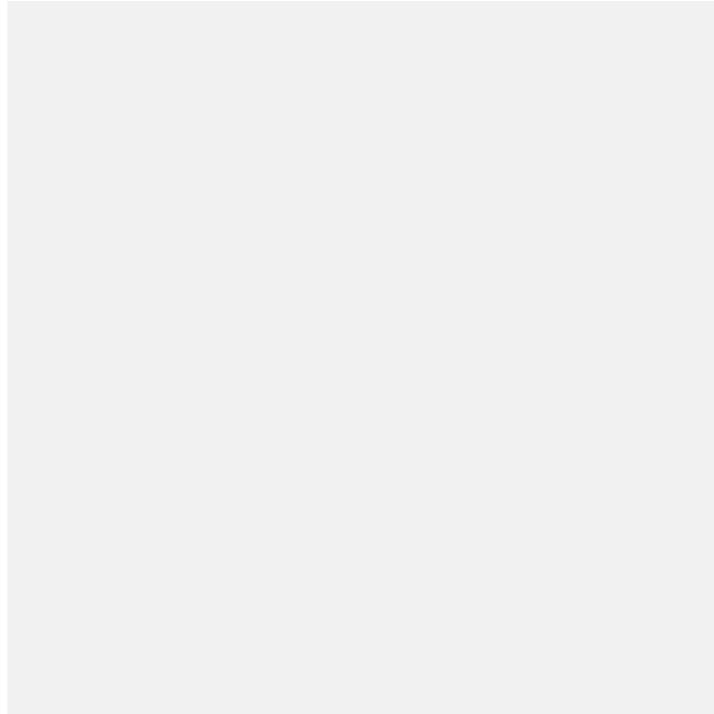


Figure 12. Beat Zoderer, *Transparent Order*, 1991. 3 plastic sleeves, stuck into each other

Itten and many other artists, often with great effort. Zoderer's work makes light of these efforts, while still engaged in the examination. Like all the works discussed here, *Transparent Order* alters the way we look at our environment and provides a perspective on the everyday that is beyond the purely functional.

Of course, there are many different ways of integrating the everyday into an artistic practice. Bernard Frize, a French artist, who works exclusively with paint, uses predetermined structures, rules and chance proceedings to produce works that question the specialist skills and the elevated position of the artist (*Figure 13*). By first conceiving of a system that determines the formal composition and then executing it, often with the help of a group of collaborators, who are actively and equally involved in the process, his work takes on a mechanical and detached quality.

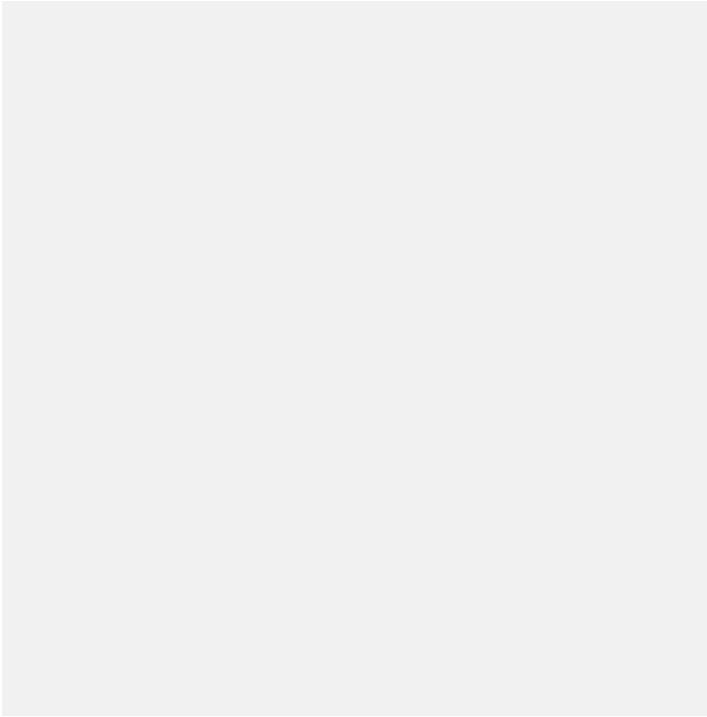


Figure 13. B. Frize. *Wigul*, 2015. Acrylic and resin on canvas, 100 x 100 x 2,5cm.

Frize's works are not the result of personal expression or attempt to communicate a political message. He wants the paint to speak for itself, to strip painting back to its bare essentials (Kantor 2005, 85/87). While Fluxus inspired performative character of the durational painting process may occur in the privacy of the studio, the results are instilled in the works and can be released by the act of viewing. When confronted with Frize's works, viewers become engaged in disentangling the painting's history and retracing the process of its construction. The transparency and simplicity of the paintings encourages viewers to reconstitute the original process. The artist involves viewers in a dialogue that resembles the painting's construction method (Falguieres 1997, 83).

The North American artist, John Baldessari, is not a non-objective painter, he is not even a painter. However, his work is profoundly influenced by the ideas of the everyday. Baldessari began his career by burning all the paintings he had done and then embarking on a conceptual practice. He mainly works with pre-existing images, photography and collage and investigates the codes of visual communication, often through erasure (*Figure 14*). Baldessari employs everything he needs without concern from where it comes. Using multiple sources, he combines the sacred and the profane, the ordinary and the extraordinary to pull together the world of art and the everyday. Tucker (1981, 65) argues that:

His work clearly expresses the idea that neither a life perfected as art nor an art perfected as life seems possible for us; both lead to death. Life as art allows neither change nor growth; art as life conveys no meaning. Our world lies between the two extremes. In effect we shift back and forth along the metaphoric bridge; our life is modeled upon our art, and our art is modeled upon our life. In this way we maintain ourselves in a state of doubt; we seek knowledge by means of experience, we discover new truths.

I appreciate the freedom with which Baldessari uses already existing images and by obscuring some parts and revealing others, generates new ways of interpretation. His work has been influential for my ReCover project that I will talk about in chapter 6.

In chapter 1, I sketched a selected history of non-objective painting and how this particular strand has been interlaced with considerations of the everyday. In this chapter, I described a variety of contemporary artistic positions that combine an interest in the everyday with the process of painting. Some of these artists have integrated various objects from their everyday environments into their art practice. John Armleder juxtaposes furniture with painting, establishing a

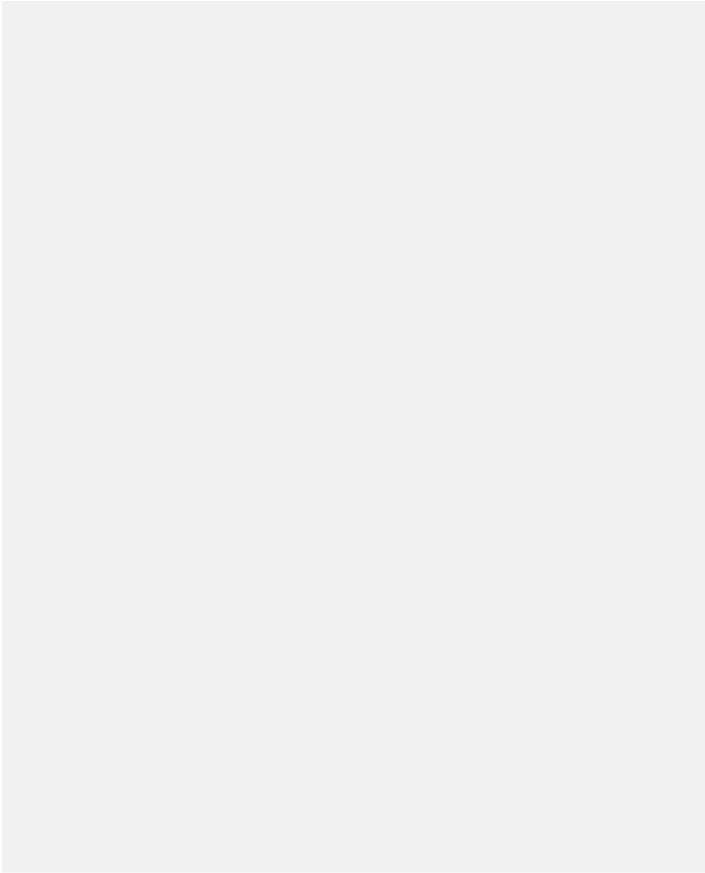


Figure 14. John Baldessari, *Three Government Personnel Considering and/or Deciding*, 2008. Screenprint, 113 x 86.4 cm. Guild Hall, East Hampton.

significant relationship between these objects which inherently does not exist. Jessica Stockholder transforms the architecture of the exhibition space by inserting colourful consumer items. In this new context, these items lose their function, blurring boundaries between art space and external life. Similarly, Beat Zoderer re-arranges office folders and inserts them into the context of non-objective painting, commenting on the pre-occupation of order and colour coordination by non-objective artists. Bernard Frize does not integrate everyday objects into his practice, adhering to the oil-on-canvas tradition of painting. However, these works could have not been achieved without collaboration with other people. His works emphasizes

the importance of the painting process and the cooperation between people, undermining the myth of the genius artist and making the artwork a collaborative effort by makers and viewers. Finally, John Baldessari mainly works with pre-existing images. By collaging, cropping or obscuring them, he questions the codes of visual communication. All these artists share an interest in revitalising painting and/or visual communication by connecting their practice to the familiarity of the everyday.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter outlined the changing historical circumstances of the everyday in artistic practice of the twentieth century. I drew on the writings of Lefebvre to describe the alienation and commodification of labour. Further, the writings of de Certeau recognizes the tactics that ordinary people can use to evade the strategies of the powerful. In outlining the tactics contemporary artists have used to explore the everyday, I began with the work of my teacher Prof. F. E. Walther. I then examined the practice of collage and its historical beginnings. I identified historical art movements such as Art Povera, Pop Art and Fluxus, and examine their relationship with everyday materials. Finally, I considered the working methods of a number of contemporary artists who have integrated the everyday in various forms into their practices. The tensions between art and the everyday make for a productive art practice.

In the next chapter, I investigate the aspect of time in relation to contemporary art practice. I explore the work of artists that have made time the focal point of their inquiries and concentrate on accentuating the differences of two specific painters, Roman Opalka and Julije Knifer.

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5 There are many more artists whose work is concerned with the topics of consumerism, the readymade, issues of originality in the context of painting, amongst them Oliver Mosset, Jason Rhodes, Sylvie Fleury and Jac Leirner. However, engaging with these artists' work in addition to the ones that I have focused on would have placed the emphasis on the research of other artists rather than my own practice. The artists included in my research represent a selection of historical and contemporary attitudes that had a significant influence on my viewpoints and my practice.



Unlike films, novels, sound and performance art, paintings have a physical presence seen all at once. However, even in painting, the passage of time is evident. All living beings share limited time on this planet. The awareness of our own mortality is connected to our aging bodies. Our hearts beat like a ticking clock and our bodies go through various cycles of growth and decay. The knowledge of the finality of life connects all of us powerfully. Our life experiences are linked to place and time. It takes 24 hours for the Earth to revolve, the moon takes approximately 28 days to revolve around the Earth and about 365 days for the Earth to make one complete revolution around the sun. In this chapter I ask, "how can a sense of time be brought to bear on painting?" This chapter evaluates the importance of time for painting processes and examines how artists have explored objective and subjective experiences of time. In particular, I consider the different approaches and attitudes to time by the two painters, Roman Opalka and Julije Knifer. I also describe a methodology premised on critical anachronism which I deploy throughout my own art projects.

To come into contact with a painting is a personal encounter, an experience of body and mind. The viewer determines what kind of experience this will be. Most important is the viewer's own sensitivity and attentiveness, as well as prior knowledge of the historical context and the artists' intentions. Painting does not come with a predetermined timeframe. Each viewer has the freedom to engage

with the work in his or her own time. It takes a while to absorb all the information of a painting and the time it takes to do so depends on the viewer. Time is part of the experience of painting; it is part of disseminating the meaning of an artwork. Often we discover aspects of the work that we previously overlooked or didn't pay attention to in the first place—as with my encounter with Friedrich recounted in Chapter 1. Repeated exposure may yield different realizations. A changed mind also perceives different realities.

Modernity is inextricably linked to a heightened sense of the passage of time. Modernism increasingly came to register a critical relationship to time. Socialism was oriented toward an imminent future and its propaganda forms used the image to usher in the new paradigm. Futurism demonstrated a desire to speed up to the point of becoming a molecule of infinite density. Time has been the grist to the mill of the visual artist. The clock in particular, has had a stranglehold on the mediation of contemporary culture.

In the twenty first century Western world, the proliferation of electronic devices has made it possible to be instantly connected to almost anybody, anywhere, at any time. While this connectedness makes the world appear smaller, it has also collapsed the distinct areas of working and private life. Being available at any time has diminished our private sphere, where we could slow down, be alone and contemplate life's events. Life has sped up and as a result, the quality of life/time is constantly eroded by the demands on the quantity of life/time. These two characteristics of time were recognised and distinguished by the Greeks: *Chronos*, the familiar concept of measured time and *Kairos*, which is linked to the qualitative aspect of time. *Chronos* is measurable and each segment is of the same duration, while *Kairos* is not quantifiable and changes constantly (Chan 2013, 53). Chan argues that:

Chronos is, in a sense, empty; without content or meaning beyond its own linear progressing. It is when nothing happens, and goes on not happening. Kairos, on the other hand, is a kind of time charged with promise and significance. It is time that saturates time.

In Western societies *Chronos* seems to be proliferating while *Kairos*, the qualitative aspect of time, seems to be diminishing. This tendency to place a higher value on quantity over quality has a long history, beginning with the invention of mechanical clocks.

Clocks with hour hands appeared on public buildings in Germany during the fourteenth century (Woodcock 1944). The invention of the pendulum in 1657 enabled enough accuracy so that a minute hand could be added to clocks. It wasn't until the eighteenth century that a second hand appeared. As George Woodcock points out in his essay "The tyranny of the clock," the clock was the first automatic machine. It led to the construction of more complicated machinery that dominated manufacturing during the industrial revolution. Clocks became a means of regimentation and enforced a regularity on the lives of people which had no resemblance to the rhythmic life of a natural being. Woodcock (1944) argues that:

The clock turns time from a process of nature into a commodity that can be measured and bought and sold like soap or sultanas. And because, without some means of exact time keeping, industrial capitalism could never have developed and could not continue to exploit the workers, the clock represents an element of mechanical tyranny in the lives of modern men more potent than any individual exploiter or any other machine.

The mass production of clocks and watches in the 1850's disseminated the consciousness of (*Chronos*) time far and wide (Woodcock 1944). Public buildings and workplaces, such as churches, schools, offices, workshops and factories, promoted punctuality as the greatest of human virtues. The emphasis became one of quantity not quality of time and the consequence was a loss of enjoyment and pride in one's work. The worker became a 'clock watcher,' who could not wait to get home and escape into forms of leisure and entertainment. The only way to avoid becoming a slave to the clock was either to be wealthy or to live by one's own wits without the security of a regular pay-packet.

In the visual arts, the aspect of time is usually considered to be eminent only in disciplines such as film, video, sound and performance art. It is rarely examined in painting, sculpture, drawing or printmaking. Time, however, is an integral part of all life, and consequently is relevant to all art disciplines. These disciplines all generate objects and, as such, they occupy a specific space and a specific time. Martin Heidegger distils existence in the two horizons of being and time. As James Elkins (2005, 2) writes:

An object, Heidegger says, is a thing that exists at a certain place and a certain time. If I take two apparently identical pine needles, I can tell them apart because they cannot be in the same place at the same time. Each one has a place and a time, even if it doesn't have a form that is different from other pine needles. Time is there at the basis of our way of thinking about objects.

There are many ways that time is integral to artworks. Firstly, motion is an effective indicator of the passing of time, and painters have been interested in depicting motion since the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Futurists used painting to

depict the speed of the "machine age" (Elkins 2005, 7-8). They painted blurs and successive moments similar to freeze-frame photographs to convey the rush of speed. Their fascination with technology led them to make works that appeared scientific and mechanical. Too often however, these paintings looked contrived and were unable to convincingly depict movement. Futuristic representations of realistic narratives, however, are only one way to depict motion with the painting

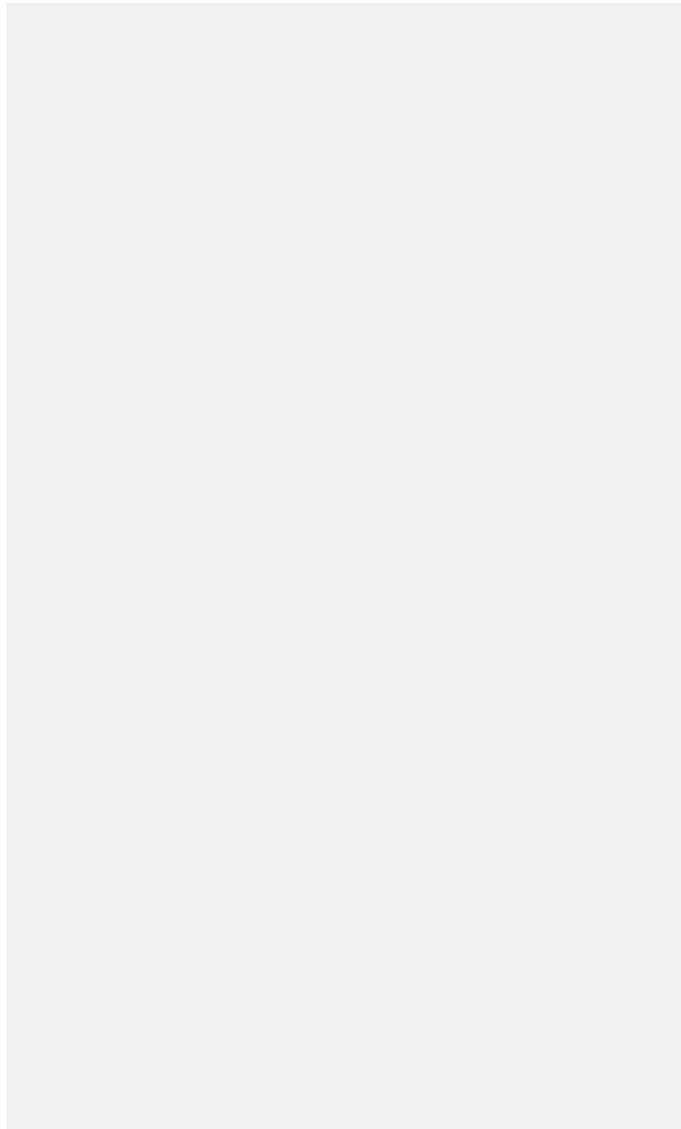


Figure 15. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude descending a staircase No. 2*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 147 x 89 cm. Philadelphia, Museum of Art.

medium. Jackson Pollock, for example, layered fluid paint with gestural marks on a horizontal canvas. Traces of his movements could still be observed in the finished painting. A sequence of works can also be perceived as a time-line of events. Claude Monet, for example, painted a series of haystacks in which he explored the variations of light during the day, the weather conditions and seasonal changes.

The invention of photography and the way photographs capture moments in time influenced artistic depictions of time. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Figure 15), for example, could not have been painted without Edweard Muybridge's detailed photographic investigation into the movements of animals and humans. In *Master Narratives and their Discontents*, James Elkins (2005) suggests that the main purpose of Duchamp's painting was to show the passing of time, rather than for scientific purposes. As Elkins (2005, 8) says, "we don't usually ask how fast Duchamp's nude is descending the staircase, or exactly how she moves her limbs or distributes her weight (those are the questions that would be asked by the scientists who made stop-action photographs), because what is interesting is the idea of time passing rather than any scientific record."

All artworks exist in time, in the time of their making and in the time of their viewing. The gestures of the artist, like those of Pollock, give us information about their state of mind at the time of making the work. The traces of their activities are imbedded in time and can be deciphered in the artwork. Elkins (2005, 9) argues that:

in general every mark that is made by an artist will also be a record of the time spent making it. No matter what a work is about, it is always also about time: when I see a mark made by a human hand, I cannot help but think, or feel, the time that went into making it. My muscles replay the mark unconsciously, as my eye retraces the line: all artworks are made by marks, and a mark is the trace of time.

How long does it take to make a work of art? How long does it take to view a work? How long does it take to think about a work? How long do we remember a work? A museum is a store of artistic gestures frozen in time. Works that were once part of an ongoing and lively conversation have become faded echoes. They have lost their original significance and have become reference points for the interested. Through the passage of time and the unpredictable course of ongoing artistic conversation they may regain importance, value and currency or they may be forgotten. In addition, every work has a specific life span depending on the materials used, although with proper treatment and care the longevity of an artwork can be extended.

Not only are artworks able to inspire us to think about time, they have the power to change our experience of time. They can transport us from *Chronos* to *Kairos* by capturing our attention. They can distort our sense of time when we become absorbed in the act of viewing and contemplating. For Elkins (2005, 10), "they have the ability to influence our sense of time, change the relationship we have to time, can interrupt our sense of time, and make us lose track of time. While the clock mechanically ticks along, subjectively we can be transported into a different experience of time." Adrian Heathfield in *Thought on Duration* (2009, 97), also expresses this shift in experiencing time when he says:

Duration nearly always involves the collapse of objective measure. Whether it is short or long in 'clock time', its passage will be marked by a sense of the warping of time, an opening of regularity to other phenomena or inchoate orders. Duration will often be accompanied by the spatial sense of expansion, suspension or collapse or by reverential, chaotic or cosmic phenomena, as notions of temporal distinctions are undone.

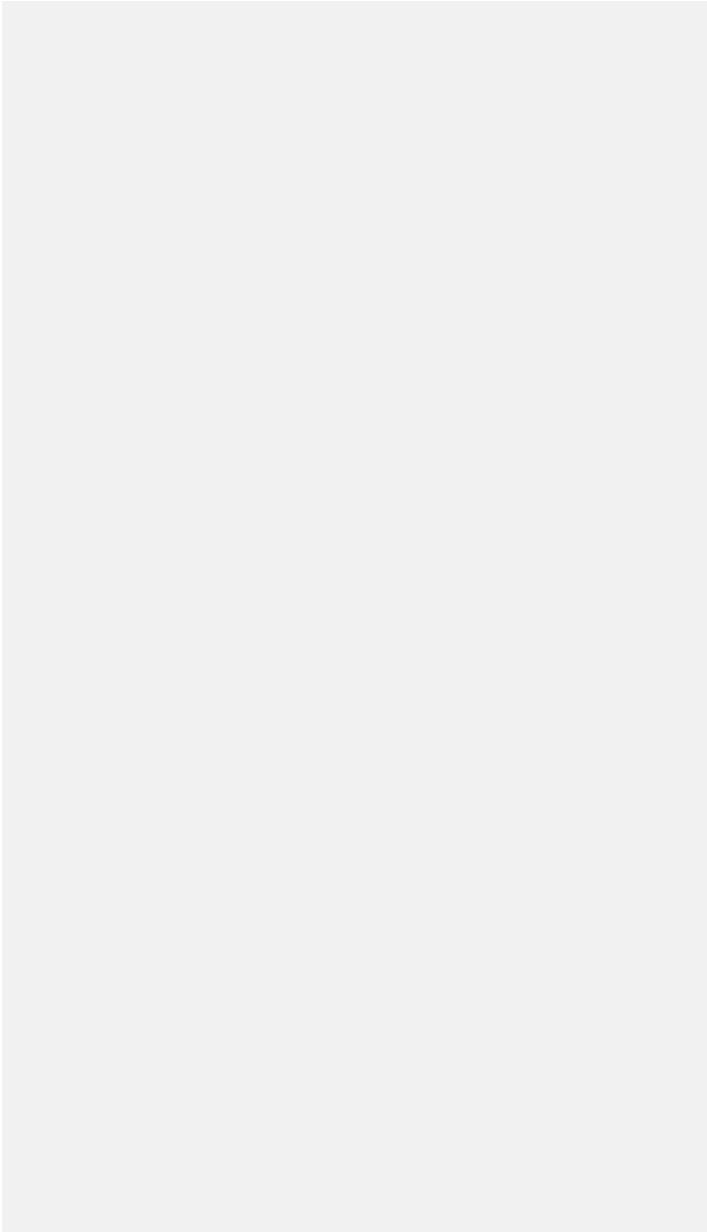


Figure 16. Roman Opalka, *1965/1 - ∞* and Detail of *1965/1 - ∞*  
Oil on canvas, 196 x 135 cm.

The Polish artist, Roman Opalka, used time as his main area of artistic investigation. His project *1965/1 to infinity* occupied him for most of his life. From 1965 on, he filled one canvas after another with numbers from 1 to infinity with white paint on an

initially grey canvas while reciting the numbers into a tape-recorder as he painted them (*Figure 16*). Additionally, he took two photographs of his face, one before and one after his daily painting practice. He added one percent of white paint to the grey background of each painting, so that infinity for him would mean painting white numbers on a white background. He described this practice of time thus, "My basic assertion, the program of my entire life, takes place in the work process that records progression, which is at the same time a document on time and its determination" (quoted in Besacier 2014, 294).

In contrast, Julije Knifer has maintained a practice of drawing and painting variations of *meander* patterns, on different grounds and sizes yet always in black and white, since 1959 (*Figure 17*). For Knifer, the meander signifies the "principle of non-development and he classifies his works as anti-paintings" (Besacier 2014, 291). Knifer describes his practice of time thus, "the chronology and the sequence of my paintings have no importance in my work. Maybe I have already made my last paintings, but I haven't made my first. My first paintings remind me of the future" (quoted in Besacier 2014, 294). Knifer's meander is a stylized sign of a flowing river; it has no beginning and no end and therefore eliminates questions about origins and destination. As a repeating pattern, it reaches beyond the edge of the canvas and denies progression and regression. In Knifer's work, there is no chronological development only indifference, rhythm and monotony. As Knifer says (quoted in Besacier 2014, 291):

First of all a certain rhythm and monotony; the monotony of rhythm. Absurdity, paradox...I consider monotony the simplest and the most expressive rhythm...Our main goal is to achieve rhythm with minimal means, rhythm most minimal in pictorial respect, whose result is entirely anti-pictorial.

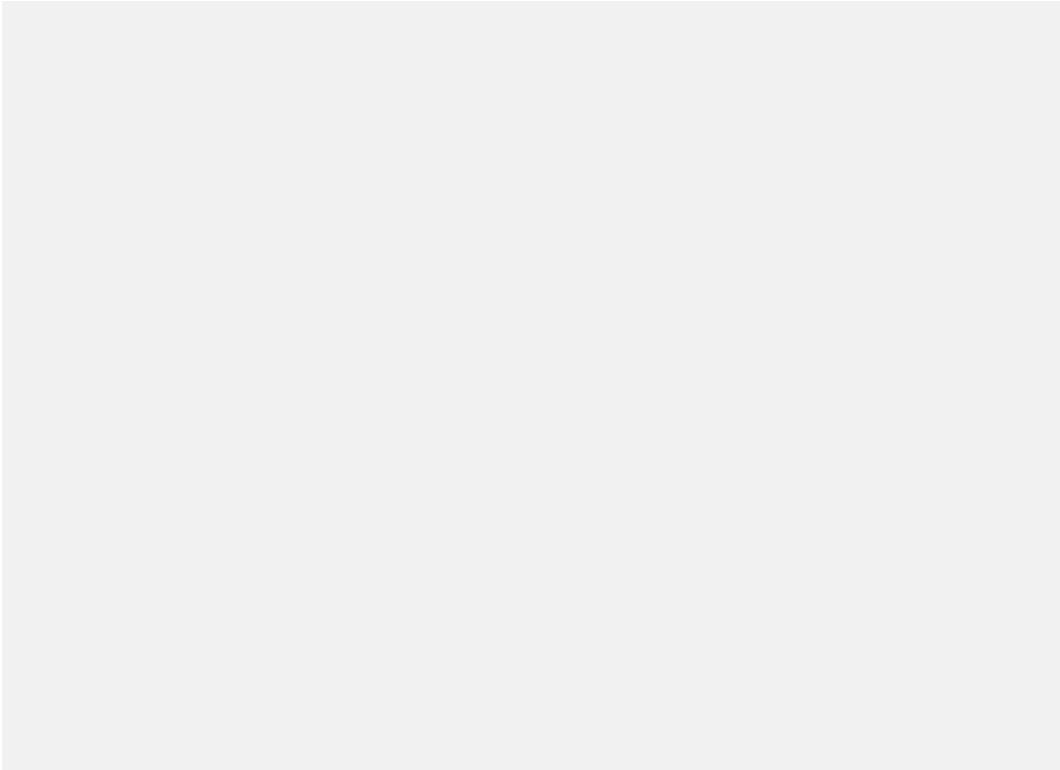


Figure 17. Julije Knifer, *Meander 2*, 1960. Oil on canvas 60 x 100,9 cm.  
Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Croatia.

Roman Opalka's project is directed towards infinity and ultimately his own demise. As he describes (quoted in Besacier 2014, 294), "after 1965 I have filled the space between this important year of my life and my disappearance. The being is determined by its missing death. My concept is simple and complex like life; it develops from birth to death." In his work, Opalka counts the time until his death, day after day. The activity of painting consecutive numbers functions as a meditation on numerical progressions. His works is concerned with understanding infinity through the continuity and monotony of *Chronos*. In contrast, the Croatian painter, Julije Knifer's work is life affirming and embraces all its absurdity, monotony and senselessness. He explores the non-linear aspect of time. He is interested in paradox, irrationality and the freedom of *Kairos*, where the passage of time as well as

life and death are meaningless. For him time has no beginning and no end, and only the present moment is of importance (Besacier 2014, 293). Knifer (quoted in Besacier 2014, 294) says, "the most important element in my work is complete awareness, but also ultimate spiritual freedom. For me absurdity is a very important component of my activity. Absurdity is a form of freedom." While Opalka's work is about the visualization of infinity, the continuity of chronology and the visual manifestation of time passing, Knifer's work frees him from the constraints of time, chronology and the rational grip of *Chronos*. As he (quoted in Besacier 2014, 293) argues:

Continuity lasts from painting to painting or a painting within a painting. Continuity exists, but the order is not important. If I can and if I dare say this, I have effectively discontinued the passage of time in my work. Of course, I have also tried to abolish chronology...Each new day and every new attempt means a new beginning.

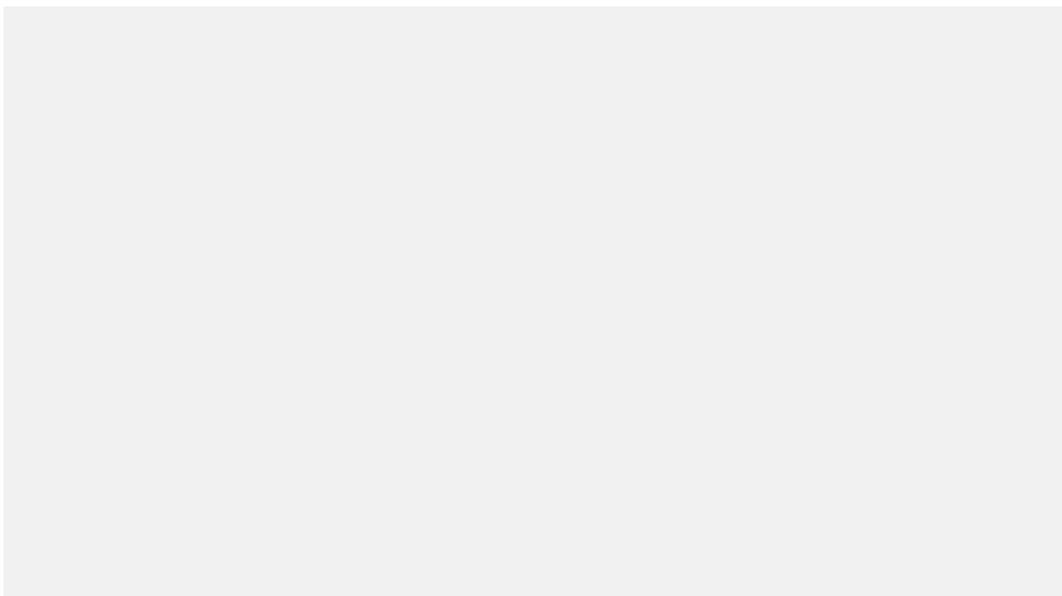


Figure 18. On Kawara, *Date Paintings*, Guggenheim Museum, 2015

On Kawara and Tehching Hsieh are two other artists who have examined temporality in their works. The Japanese artist On Kawara has been making *Date Paintings* since 1966. Each of these works simply states the date it was made, usually with white letters on a black ground (*Figure 18*). Often they are presented in boxes that contain the front pages of newspapers revealing the day and the place of production.

In 1996, Kawara presented *One Million Years* (David Zwirner 2009):

a monumental 20-volume collection, comprised of *One Million Years [Past]*, created in 1969 and containing the years 998,031 B.C. through 1969 A.D., and *One Million Years [Future]*, created in 1981 and containing the years 1996 A.D. to 1,001,995 A.D. Together these volumes make up 2,000,000 years.

The subtitle for *One Million Years [Past]* is "For all those who have lived and died." The subtitle for *One Million Years [Future]* is "For the last one."  
(David Zwirner, New York, 2009, Press Release)

With this work, On Kawara challenges our understanding of time, which we usually measure by our human life spans. This work goes way past our ability to grasp these temporal dimensions and confronts us with different magnitudes of time, such as archaeological time or astronomical time.

The most severe statement made about the passing of time must be Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh's 1980 *One Year Performance* in which he activated a time-punch-clock every hour, day and night for a whole year, while each time taking a photo of himself dressed in a worker's uniform. When looking at these documents, we can see his hair grow and the exhaustion in his controlled facial expression. This work

accentuates and exaggerates the oppressive constraints of our submissiveness to clock time. It demonstrates the overwhelming domination of *Chronos* over *Kairos* and the consequences of such an extreme attitude.

Opalka's counting of numbers, Knifer's monotonous meanders, Kawara's and Hsieh's temporal markings question not only the quantity of our time alive, but also the quality of that time; how we occupy our hours, days, weeks, months and years. Their works demonstrate the dual nature of time, as well as the relativity of time and the brief period that we are alive compared with the periods before our birth and after our deaths. They reveal how limited our understanding of time really is.

Time becomes more tangible when we look into the past and connect it to the present. The products of the past, saturated with memories, can be modified and transformed. This process makes it possible to access the past in different ways and consequently, questions our role in manufacturing it. By repeating processes over and over, they become routines ingrained in our lives and therefore begin to shape our character. To a large extent, they determine who we become. The everyday is full of these repetitions. We choose which routines to cultivate into habits and character traits. Similarly, painting can be a repeated activity and paint can be used as a medium to demonstrate how time is transformed into matter. By instigating painting processes that are repeated over many months, sometimes years, the invisible factor of time acquires a physical quality. The built-up traces of paint on various grounds reveal the cumulative nature of time. Paint then functions as a device to visualize the rhythms of time and life.

This chapter examines the history of timekeeping and how the introduction of clocks paved the way for industrialization and the exploitation of the working class. I describe the difference between quality (*Kairos*) and quantity (*Chronos*) of time and explore how several artists have integrated time into their practice. Specifically, I

examine the contrasting attitudes to time in the works of Roman Opalka and Julije Knifer. Having examined the different attitudes of artists with regard to the importance of time, chapter 4 focuses on my own artistic practice and how I have integrated the non-objective with painting processes of the everyday. In particular, I discuss the *Wrong Angles* exhibition presented at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art in 2011, which marks the beginning of the investigation that led to this exegesis.

In this chapter, I analyse the 2011 exhibition *Wrong Angles* to consider the tactic of transforming the everyday packaging materials to engage contemporary painting as a critique of consumerism. By re-configuring cardboard boxes and integrating them into painting processes, their economic function is subverted and alternative ways to engage with the culture of consumption and excess are explored.

*Wrong Angles* is an exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art which ran from 3 September to 30 October 2011 (*Figure 19*). This exhibition was the beginning of a concentrated exploration of everyday materials within my own non-objective painting practice. As discussed in Chapter 1, the modernist, non-objective tradition of painting has become removed from the everyday concerns of most people. In my own art practice, I re-position the more formalist considerations of this tradition with contemporary circumstances as they are experienced in today's late capitalist consumer society. My choice of materials is based on this historical moment. Materials such as cardboard, wire, newspaper, shopping trolleys and used record covers are not part of the tradition of non-objective painting, although they originated in the modernist period.



Figure 19. Alex Spremberg, *Wrong Angles*, Installation at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 3 Sept. - 30, Oct. 2011. Photographs of all works for *Wrong Angles*: Bewley Shaylor.

The reductive, essentialist, Cartesian and analytical geometries of modernism have influenced architectural designs, product designs and artistic practices to such an extent that almost no area of life has been untouched by them. These modernist influences extend to the present day. Even though many related ideas have proven to be detrimental to humans needs, they are still customarily implemented in architectural designs in most parts of the world (Briegleb 2015). Now they combine with digital developments that have spurred an exponential growth in ordering systems and administration, with the result that most people are caught in these networks of rationalized bureaucracies. Straight lines and orthogonal designs have overtaken both the physical forms and behavioural patterns of our lives, distracting us from the eventualities and unpredictable twists and turns of life. The ideals of modernism and the rise of consumerism are intrinsically connected, as Michael Fried (1998, 219) argues:

This means that while modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience – that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness.

My artwork attempts an intervention in this scenario—where the imbalance, stress and depression that is symptomatic of our incompatibility with a life dominated by rigid structures might be gradually outgrown and surpassed by consciousness.

For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated by precision, order and systems of organization, and their malfunction and failure. In my artwork, I have positioned closed rational and linear systems against open unpredictable tendencies of

organic processes and the behaviour of specific materials. I experiment with various materials with the intention to understand and replicate these processes. My purpose is to gain agency in something that is only ever partially controllable. The tension created by a collision of organized systems and the organic movements of paint, for example, can lead to results that are unique, unrepeatably and beyond the scope of my imagination. In short, they can surprise me in a way that has renewed relevance in a world dominated by seamlessly integrated bureaucratic procedures.

I live in a world dominated by external organizing principles and rationalized systems, and repeatedly my life conflicts with those inorganic devices. Most of the time, I have the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, however, as an organic entity governed by internal self-regulating systems, such as the nervous system, breathing and heartbeat rhythms, I am constantly trying to balance external and internal systems to insure my wellbeing and continuity. Technological advances at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the assembly line, led to an increase in the ability to produce goods. Consequently, mass production led to mass consumption. In 1955, economist Victor Lebow (3) wrote in the *Journal of Retailing* that:

our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate.

Lebow describes the trajectory of the consumerist society to this very day. If we keep following his tenet to "consume, burn up, wear out and discard" an increasing amount of consumer goods by an increasing world population, we have to face

consequences that could not have been imagined in those days. Lebow's conclusion exemplifies the optimism and short-sightedness of the mid-century. However, this way of thinking still dominates decision making on many levels and we have been slow to realize the dangerous results of such attitudes.

The constant focus on quantity (faster, bigger, more and cheaper) has created a society that regards superficial and sensational values higher than something that takes time, lasts longer and is characterized by a high standard of quality. A large part of the western world is dominated by this attitude and has become a fast food and throw-away-society that has led to a de-valuation and confusion of values. In the words of Guy Debord (1999, 30):

The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing beyond augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

The idea that endless consumption is able to satisfy our spiritual needs as well as our ego satisfaction seems utterly ill conceived. This conflation of spiritual needs and ego satisfaction reveals a materialistic conviction in conflict with what spiritual leaders propose will satisfy our spiritual needs. In fact for many, the requirements for spiritual satisfaction are closely linked to a diminishment of ego satisfaction; one is only possible without the other. The Dalai Lama, for instance, has said (1991, 14):

The two truths refer to the fundamental Buddhist philosophical view that there are two levels of reality. One level is the empirical, phenomenal and relative level that appears to us, where functions such as causes and conditions, names and labels, and so on can be validly understood. The other is a deeper level of existence beyond that, which Buddhist philosophers describe as the fundamental, or ultimate, nature of reality, and which is often technically referred to as 'emptiness'.

*Wrong Angles* was an attempt to creatively question the capitalistic juggernaut, which is built on commerce and trade (selling and buying), in such a way as to re-contextualise some of its inherent characteristics and produce new knowledge of its phenomena and our relationship to it.

Manufactured products must be packaged, stored and transported around the world. Most of these products are at some stage packaged in cardboard boxes. The cardboard box is ubiquitous in our consumer culture. It is the single most important material/object used to package and deliver consumer goods. There is hardly anything that is not moved in cardboard containers, from food and drink to records, computers and fridges. Their standardized, lightweight, rectangular shapes make them ideally suited for efficient storing and stacking. The cardboard box sets a standard that seems to homogenize everything within its system of production. Once its content is delivered and consumed, the container becomes useless. It may be recycled for another roundtrip. Occasionally, it is used as living quarters by the homeless and for joyrides down grassy slopes by children.

Primarily, cardboard boxes function as temporary enclosures for products, which are the actual objects of desire and which typically lose their function once the products have been delivered, unpacked and consumed—their aura removed.

A box made of cardboard is ideal packaging material. It is cheap, insubstantial, and quite durable. It can be flattened, is recyclable, and has little value in itself. Folded into the form of a standardized orthogonal box, it can be used to efficiently store goods of all shapes and sizes. Generic boxes have been developed into packages for specific items and the external planes of the boxes used for advertising the articles inside. They are purposefully designed and named, and often have idealized images of their content printed on them. On the supermarket shelf, these brightly coloured objects desperately compete for the attention of the customer. Andy Warhol expressed this desperation in the 1964 *Brillo Box* multiples. Consumers see the actual product only after purchase; they have to make their choice based on the re-presentations of the product on the surface of the packaging. There the qualities of the products are celebrated in words and images, but the actual objects is for the most part unattainable until they have been purchased, ushering in an age where the use value of an object is confused with its exchange value.

While the boxes have an important role to play in this cycle of production, transportation and consumption, the emphasis is never on the cardboard boxes. The boxes exist as enclosures for products. The works in *Wrong Angles* focused on the cardboard box to explore its potential to reveal this level of reality within consumer culture. The low status and ubiquitous presence of the box captured my interest. It functioned as an invisible standard and indicator for the relationship we have with the manufactured products that surround us. I was interested how new objects created from discarded cardboard boxes could reveal the arbitrary nature of how we assign value.

After coming home from shopping and separating the products from their cardboard enclosures, I carefully examined each box and noticed the effort and production value that went into their construction. These individual containers for

tea, toothpaste, cosmetics, biscuits, etc. are all manufactured by machines, yet have unique formal characteristics, whether they are art objects or consumer items. They are determined by size, volume, materiality, and texture, colour and of course, the underlying concept that organized these characteristics is evident. The boxes are hollow, their insides vacant. Without the products they are intended to protect and promote, they become empty and useless shells.

At first, I reversed their production process by opening them up along the fold lines and looked at them for what they are, rather than what they had been made for. The flattened shape revealed the bends and folds necessary to bring them into the intended three-dimensional form. By bending each fold the opposite way, and re-assembling them, the boxes become whole again, yet all the depictions and descriptions of the contents were now on the inside. The simple act of turning them inside out unified them and accentuated their formal qualities. It emphasized their similarities, rather than their differences. Their frantic attempts to stand out and compete were silenced. A strange and muted elegance emerged that implied variations on a theme of small minimalist objects with different volumes, textures and various shades of beige and grey (*Figure 20*).

This small intervention caused the original purpose of the boxes to be lost and their intention compromised. However, when exhibited and placed in a visual context they eloquently spoke of loss of identity and destination. The noisy advertisements on their exterior were rendered invisible and the boxes were devoid of purpose, fallen out of time. The race from manufacturer to consumer was over and they existed in a different order of time. Their quiet presence pointed to a denial of consumption, to a failure in the system and a loss of meaning. Instead they acquired a significance driven not by consumption, but by their materiality, their shape and shade of colour. Their use was no longer determined, but open to interpretation.



Figure 20. Alex Spremberg, *Empty and*, 2011 (69 reversed boxes on shelf 934 cm.)  
*Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.



Figure 21. Alex Spremberg, *Geometry of Groceries*, 2011 (22 reconstructed boxes on shelf, 550 cm.)  
*Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.

I retained the information on the exterior surface of the boxes in another series. Even though the outsides of the containers tend to be loud and colourful, they are also effective in catching attention. I made use of these attributes, featuring the product design while simultaneously subverting its purpose. After unfolding and inspecting the boxes, I realized that most of the containers have only horizontal and vertical folds. I divided the boxes into their separate elements and introduced the diagonal to extend the possibilities of shapes. When reassembled in this way, new and unusual configurations occurred, and the once standardized rectangular boxes became uniquely shaped objects (*Figure 21*). Familiar depictions and descriptions printed on the exterior surface of the boxes were still recognizable, albeit distorted and fractured. Boxes tailor-made to transport specific products were rendered dysfunctional. The re-configured boxes functioned as comments on the practice of standardization and economic rationalism. As Nicolas Bourriaud (2007, 16) argues:

All these artistic practices, although formally heterogeneous, have in common the recourse to already produced forms. They testify to a willingness to inscribe the work of art within a network of signs and significations, instead of considering it an autonomous or original form. It is no longer a matter of starting with a "blank slate" or creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production.

By not accepting the premise of the blank canvas, I engage with the everyday materials of the world around me, finding alternative surfaces and/or objects that can be used as the basis for a visual inquiry. "Things and thoughts," Gilles Deleuze (1995, 161) writes, "advance or grow out from the middle, and that's where you have to get to work, that's where everything unfolds." The modernist idea of originality presents only one possible course of action. However, our everyday world is full

of already existing forms, information, data and visual signals that can be re-interpreted, re-focused, transformed and re-presented (Bourriaud 2007, 16-17). Bourriaud (2007, 17) asserts that:

The artistic question is no longer: what can we make that is new?" but "how can we make do with what we have?" In other words, how can we produce singularity and meaning from this chaotic mass of objects, names, and references that constitutes our daily life?

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau asserts that the consumer is by no means just a passive receptacle for products. Using an object is in some ways a re-interpretation of the object. It is up to the consumer how a product is used, and in that way consumption can become a form of production (Bourriaud 2007, 24). As Bourriaud (2007, 24) describes:

we are tenants of culture: society is a text whose law is production, a law that so-called passive users divert from within, through the practices of postproduction. Each artwork, de Certeau suggests, is inhabitable in the manner of a rented apartment. By listening to music or reading a book, we produce new material, we become producers.

Instead of fabricating an object, de Certeau argues that the issue is to choose and to modify one intentionally. As Marcel Broodthaers (quoted in Bourriaud 2007, 25) asserts, "since Duchamp, the artist is the author of a definition' which is substituted for that of the objects he or she has chosen." Duchamp asserted that the act of choosing is as acceptable as the act of fabricating, sculpting or painting. He redefined the idea of creation by inserting an object into a new context and thereby considering it a character in a scenario (Bourriaud 2007, 25).

In *Wrong Angles*, I recognized the similarity between the orthogonal cardboard box and the shape of a painting. As discussed in Chapter 1, a painting is traditionally made either of a wooden frame covered by a wooden surface, or a wooden stretcher covered by a surface made of canvas or a similar textile material. Just like most paintings, cardboard boxes are rectangular in design. Obviously the three-dimensionality of a painting is less pronounced than a cardboard box, which functions as a container to transport goods after all, while a painting transports philosophies and attitudes.

The work *Orthogonal Dawn* was based on this observation and confounds the viewer by orienting cardboard boxes the way that paintings are oriented. A large number of boxes of varying sizes were used as grounds for painting. The differing sizes and heights of the boxes were unified through the painting process. First, they were all painted black, turned upside down, and then the bottoms were painted with a generous amount of white paint so that the overflowing paint streaked down the sides of the black boxes. They were then hung on the wall with the white bottom facing the viewers and the open flaps touching the wall (*Figure 22*).

The wall installation provides two distinct views of the work: the close up, and the full-frontal view when looking at the whole wall from some distance away. When viewed up close, the various sizes and shapes of the painted boxes cantilevered from the wall into the space becomes the main feature of the work (*Figure 23/24*). When facing the wall from some distance, the boxes flatten out and the white rectangular shapes appear to sit at the same level as the white surface of the wall. Like Donald Judd's artworks, *Orthogonal Dawn* occupies a territory between painting and sculpture and expands the definition of painting, in particular. While it

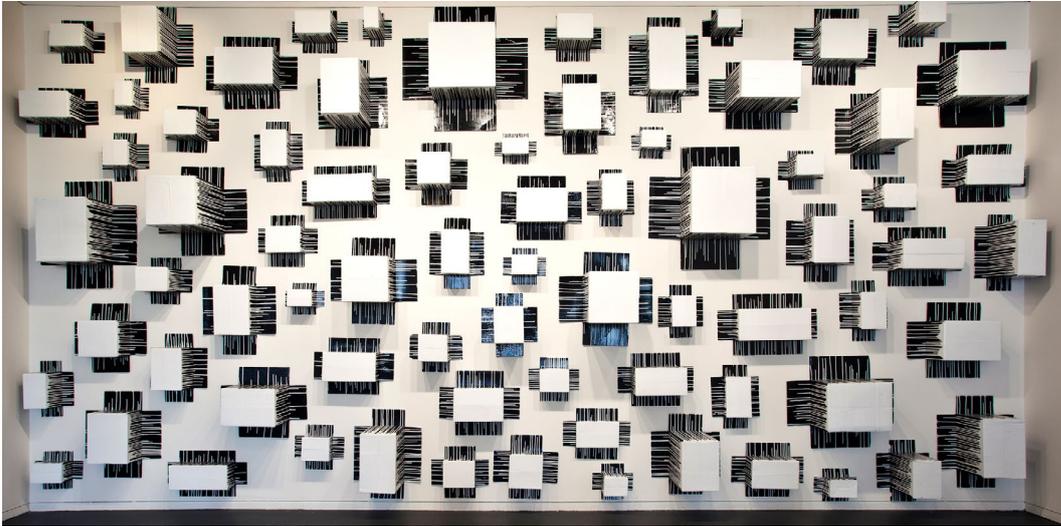


Figure 22. Alex Spremberg, *Orthogonal Dawn*, 2011 (76 Enamel on cardboard works 445 x 875 x 75 cm.)  
*Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.



Figure 23. & Figure 24. Alex Spremberg, *Orthogonal Dawn*, 2011 (Details)  
*Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.

emphasizes physical presence and the object character of painting, it also engages the viewers' faculties of perception and reveals how different viewpoints create different realities.

These non-objective works reject illusionism as well as a clear distinction between sculpture and painting. As discussed in Chapter 1, Clement Greenberg, the influential theoretician of the Abstract Expressionists, insisted that painting is two-dimensional. For Greenberg (1960, 3):

Three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture. To achieve autonomy, painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its effort to do this, and not so much—I repeat—to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract.

While that may have been gospel in the 1960s, Greenberg's assertion goes against all common sense, as every painting, representational or not, is already a three-dimensional object. To be precise, even a piece of paper, has height, width and depth.

Paintings are some of the most highly valued objects in the world, while cardboard boxes probably belong to a category of least valued objects. I am interested in this contrast and by conflating these two categories, I questioned how we value works of art and by extension, how we use our perceptual faculties to make sense of our lives. The way the white paint runs down the sides of the black boxes evokes associations of barcodes, another external organizing system used to identify, categorize and organize large amount of data and to track, and evaluate products and people. The barcode or UPC (Universal Product Code), which took almost half

a century of development to appear in its current form, seems perfectly suited to the digital age, while the cardboard box seems like a leftover from a different time altogether. However, both belong to the consumer culture and are essential for its functioning.

For the work *Oblique Objects*, I used larger boxes and reconfigured them into a variety of shapes, accentuating the diagonal and the triangle (*Figures 25 to 28*). The rectangular grid and the cube refer to static order, stability and rational practicability. In *Oblique Objects*, the orthogonal, established through horizontals and verticals, is used as a background against which the diagonal represents movement and abrupt change of direction. It is an indicator of aliveness, the irrational, the unexpected and the unforeseen. The objects that emerged from dismantling the boxes and cutting and joining one shape to another were not pre-conceived, but occurred in an impromptu manner. They were irregularly shaped and had no prescribed front, back, top or bottom. The non-determined nature of the objects contained multiple possibilities for display and interpretation. They were then used as grounds for painting, turned and moved during the painting process so that all surface areas were exposed to numerous layers of paint. The multiple coats of paint gave the objects added stability. When looking at the painted objects closely, the history of the painting process can be seen in the various layers of paint.

Traditionally, painting is referred to as a two-dimensional, mostly rectangular stretcher covered by canvas or wood that is used as a ground for painting. Stretchers emphasize the object character of a work. The *Oblique Objects* are unique shapes with multiple sides that occupy space, rather than being a flat canvas on a wall. They are hybrids that occupy a place between the traditional categories of painting and sculpture. Similarly, the standardized rectangular shapes of the cardboard boxes were transformed into unique multi-sided objects and covered in traces of paint,



Figure 25. & Figure 26. Alex Spremberg, *Oblique Objects No. 18*, 43 x 23 x 26cm, *No. 12*, 39 x 35 x 26cm. 2011. Enamel on cardboard. *Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.



Figure 26. & Figure 27. Alex Spremberg, *Oblique Object No. 6*, 39 x 35 x 26cm, *No. 4*, 40 x 39 x 25cm. 2011. Enamel on cardboard. *Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.

subverting the economic rationalism that drives consumerism in favour of an act of individual repurposing that blurs the distinction between detritus and valuable. The exclusivity of art objects is demystified by the introduction of everyday materials such as house-paint and cardboard into the context of art.

I am interested in how conscious decisions play out against life's unpredictable circumstances and interventions. Similarly, in my work I am curious to see how conceptual intentions clash or merge with the unpredictable behaviour of materials and processes. Chance proceedings have always played a large part in my work. They create outcomes that are surprising and force me to adjust my own preconceptions. John Cage, inventor, composer and artist, is famous for using chance operations in his work. "Chance," he has said, "by helping to avoid habitual modes of thinking, could in fact produce something fresher and more vital than that which the composer might have invented alone" (Cage 2017, 1). Cage described music as "purposeless play":

this play is however an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.  
(Godfrey 1998, 63)

Materials have characteristics and qualities that need to be acknowledged and integrated. The artist is but one element in the making of an artwork and in order to feature the voices of the components, he needs to get out of the way. Once conceived, an artwork is invested with energy that strives for realisation. Artists are mediators between materials and ideas. Cage was opposed to quality or value judgements, more than once angrily rebutting an interviewer, 'Why do you waste

your time and mine by trying to get a value judgements? Don't you see that when you get value judgement, that's all you have? They are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness.' (Godfrey 1998, 63)

My practice is experimental, which adds some unpredictability to the painting process, but also extend its possibilities. I instigate processes and mediate between materials and ideas rather than controlling all aspects of production. This attitude has led me to avoid the use of brushes, which control and manipulate the paint. Instead, I use discarded soup cans to pour the paint directly on to the painting grounds, which I move in order to give direction to the liquid paint. I repeat painting processes over long periods of time (2 to 3 years) and pay close attention to accidents and unintended occurrences in the studio to embrace "purposeless play."

The series *Thrills and Spills* is a case where unintentional activities turned out more interesting works than those I had focused my attention on (*Figures 29 and 30*). I cover my working table with newspapers if I expect large amounts of overflow paint. In making *Thrills and Spills*, I discovered that in some instances the paint had formed compelling relationships with the photographic prints in the papers. I photographed those specific areas, enlarged them and printed them in poster format.

The dissemination of images through newspapers (and similar media) provides visual information to a large number of people. Certain images have such a wide circulation that they become iconic and are recognized in most parts of the world. This distribution of images is part of the globalized network that delivers boxed products, and which unifies and equalizes unique and distinct cultures. In *Thrills and Spills*, the overflowing paint merges and interacts with the spread of newspaper images, invoking an unintentional commentary on the world events depicted.



Figure 29. Alex Spremberg, *March/Thrills and Spills*, 2011. 102 x 143 cm.  
Digital Print of photographs of paint spilled on Newspapers.  
*Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.



Figure 30. Alex Spremberg, *Toxic/Thrills and Spills*, 2011. 101 x 144 cm.  
Digital Print of photographs of paint spilled on Newspapers.  
*Wrong Angles*, Installation at PICA.

The transformation of packaging material and newsprint into works of art is a tactical subversion of consumer culture. I use these everyday items to question the trajectory of late capitalism. Is our happiness dependent on the consumption of ever more, ever faster and ever cheaper products? Are we like junkies looking for a new fix when we go shopping for the latest consumer products? These interventions call attention to the active exploitation of the populace by multinational corporations that continue to become more wealthy and powerful. By analysing, reshaping and painting these everyday products, I propose a tactic for engaging with this culture of want and waste.

With *Wrong Angles*, the ideas of non-objective painting were applied to everyday objects. This asserted the object character of painting while the integration of packaging material subverted the consumption that this society depends on. In a review of *Wrong Angles*, Thea Constantino (2011) commented that the repeated application of layers of paint "elevated the humble cardboard box to the status of art object." She concluded that "Spremborg reveals a preoccupation with the formal properties of objects and the overlooked aesthetic systems which construct our experience of consumer items: food, household goods and even information."

In this chapter, I emphasized the different methods employed in integrating cardboard boxes into my experimental painting practice. I established the importance of packaging material in consumer society and drew on the writings of Nicolas Bourriaud and Guy Debord to critically examine the underlying ideology. I identified a correlation between the non-objective and the orthogonal shape of the boxes and explored possibilities to reconfigure them without regard for their original function. Experimenting with different paint applications, I employed chance

operations to critically subvert the rational system of distributing consumer goods. Similarly, images from newsprint accidentally subject to paint spillages became a critique of global news consumption.

The following chapter examines the distinctions of my experimental painting practice and evaluates the results of repetitive painting processes on everyday objects, such as cages, shopping trolleys and the wire-clew. It focuses on the grid as a system of social control and appraises the theory of percolation that Michel Serres proposes as a different way of understanding time.



This chapter examines the conditions for an experimental painting practice that integrates the everyday with non-objective painting. I identify the assumptions about painting over the course of my artistic practice and describe seven conditions for such a practice; three are concerned with materials, three with ideas, and the fourth condition combines both aspects as context.

#### Conditions of painting

6. **Ground** – *what to paint on*
7. **Paint** – *what to paint with*
8. **Instruments and attitudes** – *how to paint*
9. **Process and time** – *activity and duration of painting*
10. **Research and information** – *understanding the issues*
11. **Concepts** – *what to paint*
12. **Context** – *what to paint for*

On the most basic level, painting is the covering of a surface, or more accurately, an object, with a pigmented substance. Traditionally, these objects were made of wood or a canvas stretched over a wooden support and the painting depicted an image that represented an illusion of reality. The focus was solely on the front surface where the picture was located. Paintings however, are not height and width alone; they are multi-dimensional objects with multiple surface areas. Even a piece of paper has at least four dimensions, even though we mostly consider only two of them. It took a long time before all the dimensions of a painting were acknowledged. The emergence of abstraction and consequently non-objective painting made it possible to consider the whole object as well as the image on the surface to be a painting. Today, paintings are not just seen as pictures, they are experienced as objects. The evolution of painting from a two-dimensional depiction of reality to the presence of an actual object added a physical dimension to painting, which was designed to engage the imagination only.

In addition to painting on canvas, MDF and plywood, I choose everyday objects as grounds for painting. They are extracted from the ordinary matrix of my life: low value materials such as matchboxes, cardboard boxes, papier- mâché, newspapers, covers of old vinyl records, wire-meshes and a shopping trolley. These grounds have no inherent relationship to painting. However, as discussed in previous chapters, the use of these materials in artwork can be found in non-objective art and in the modernist period more broadly. Everyday objects have their own characteristics and material properties that need to be acknowledged and can be transformed. Re-purposed in the service of a visual inquiry, they can disrupt the traditions of painting and at the same time, question the conventional function of these objects. In a painting, these grounds emphasize its multi-dimensional object character, rather than the flat surface of traditional paintings.

I discovered wire mesh in a hardware store, where it is sold as panels to assemble cages for rabbits and guinea pigs. The mesh is a physical manifestation of the orthogonal grid, a device that demonstrates "a visualization of modernity's faith in rational thought and industrial progress" (Higgins 2009, 6). Hannah Higgins (2009, 6) argues that the grid "reflects standardization, mass production, and the newly smooth mechanics of transportation." In her 1989 essay on the use of grids in the visual arts, Rosalind Krauss describes a trajectory where the grid becomes increasingly stringent throughout modernism. For her, the grid represents a rejection of narrative, literature, and discourse and embraces the silence and autonomy of the visual arts: "Flattened, geometricised, ordered, it is anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature" (Krauss 1989, 9). In *The Grid Book*, Higgins asserts that the grid has numerous origins, from the early mud-bricks used to build shelters and the nets that fisherman knot, to the weaving of fabrics and the way we organize systems of writing. It is much older and more varied than its use in modernism and has accompanied human development since its earliest days. However, not unlike our use of clocks, its precision has increased over time. It is now mostly associated with the repetitive aspects of modernist architecture and serial industrial production. For Higgins (2009, 275), the grid is a kind of authoritarian form, a device that flattens the world and controls and diminishes its natural variety:

A framework of spaced parallel bars – the grid seems the very picture of a jail cell! On the most superficial level, each grid described in this book could be said to conform to this association. By this account the grid of my modern metropolis is a material expression of social control that includes educational, artistic, and penal system alike.

With regard to painting, Krauss posits that the grid duplicates the structure of the canvas and superimposes a network of coordinates. It therefore becomes a representation of the surface. Rather than exposing the surface, it disguises it through repetition (Krauss 1989, 161).

The connotations of the grid are as numerous as artists that have used it in their practice. It has become a system that has helped us to understand, categorize and utilize the world and its varied appearances. To come across it in a hardware store being sold to cage animals is part of the contested territory in which I am interested. This relationship between visual signifier and everyday embodiment is precisely where my work is located. By using these metal mesh grids as grounds for painting, I re-introduce the grid back into the context of painting. In doing so, I emphasize the close relationship between the everyday and contemporary art and undermine the function of the grid as an ordering device of contemporary consumer culture.

For *Cages*, the metal mesh grids were hung vertically on the wall and gloss enamel paints are poured from the top. The paint runs down over the grids, leaving drips that grow through repeated pouring and compromise the precision of the original grid-formation (*Figures 31 and 32*). As the paint drips down the wire, it forms pathways that became thinner. In this process, most of the paint is lost through the holes in the grid, yet a thin layer remains on the horizontals and verticals. This layer becomes thicker through the daily repetition of the process. The enamel paint encases the objects, covering them in layers of paint, generating skins, building and transforming the metal grids, one layer at a time. Each pouring covers the previous layers to a large extent and adds to the history of the painting process. The layers are visible as the running paint finds new and old pathways and covers some areas and leaves others untouched.

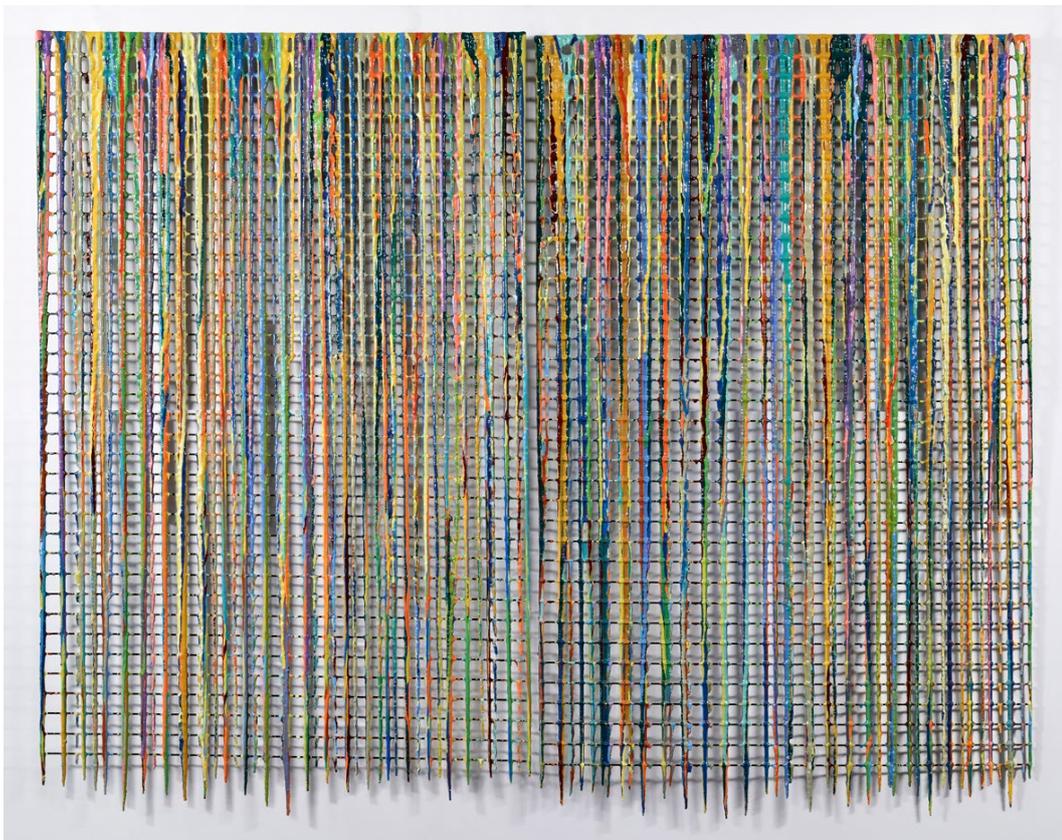


Figure 31. Alex Spremberg, *Untitled (Cages #3)*, 2016. Enamel on coated metal, 98 x 122 x 2 cm.  
Photograph: Tony Nathan.

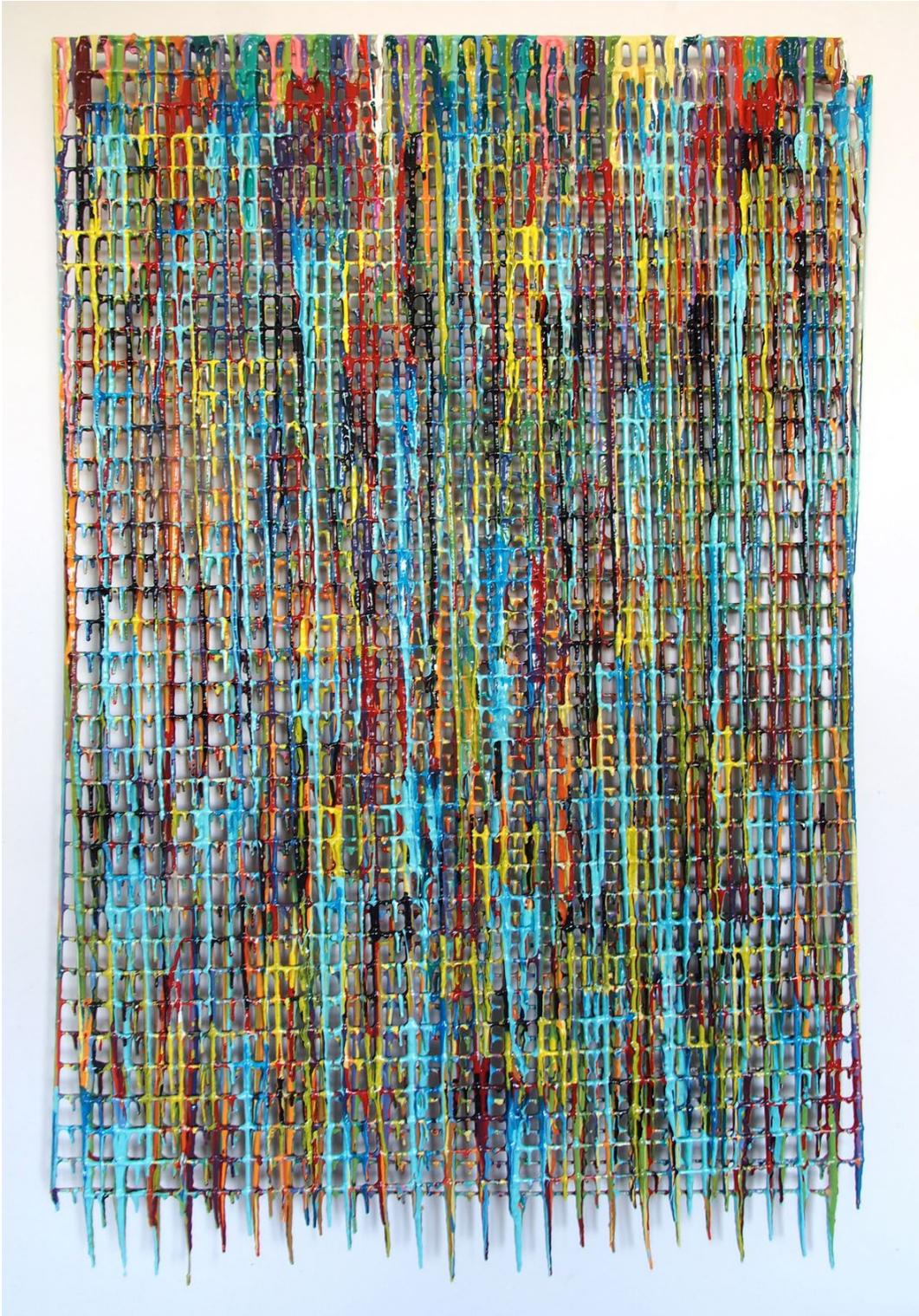


Figure 32. Alex Spremberg, *Untitled Cages #4 (double)*, 2016. Enamel on coated metal, 98 x 63 x 2 cm.  
Photograph: Tony Nathan.

Not unlike an infestation, the paint residue encases the metal elements and transforms an everyday industrially manufactured metal grid into a unique object that has lost its utilitarian purpose and rational authority and can only be considered in the context of painting. The repeated paint application results in an organic build-up, like a coral reef that grows over a shipwreck or plants that take over abandoned buildings and industrial sites. The paint flows over itself, connoting a sense of geological time, like the folds of rock that create mountain ranges—faceted by the flipping of the earth's magnetic poles and the movement of tectonic plates. While the grid is in many ways a useful device as the "material expression of social control," it is an inorganic, inflexible and inhuman system that is used to suppress people rather than liberate them. The continuous application and accumulation of paint in these artworks subverts this system and questions its purpose and authority.

*TRANSIT (Shopping Trolley)* expands on the grid as a structure for paint. The shopping trolley is an American invention closely connected with the consumer society, the use of which proliferated after the Second World War. (Whigham, 2016) Its purpose is to assist shoppers to transport goods from the supermarket to the car. At the time of its invention, many demographic shifts were occurring in the United States. New roads were built, the use of automobiles surged, industrialisation increased while transportation costs fell. People moved into cities, their disposable income rose and supermarkets started to dominate the retail landscape:

Refrigerators began to spread to both commercial and residential use, allowing consumers to visit stores less frequently and purchase more each time they went. Radio (and later television) increased the appeal of national brands by facilitating large-scale advertising campaigns. (Ellickson 2011, 6)

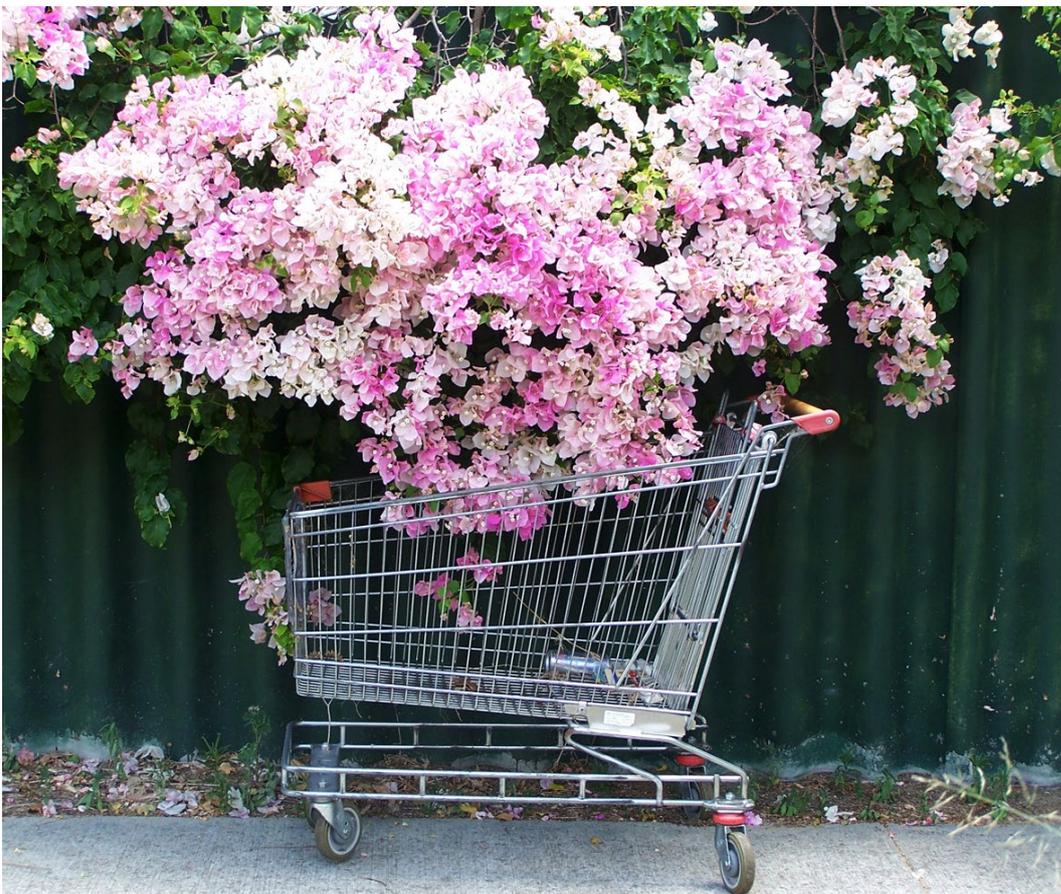


Figure 33. Alex Spremberg, *Misplaced shopping trolley #5*, 2013. Photograph: Alex Spremberg.

This was the beginning of consumer society as we know it today. The shopping trolley is an essential link in the movement of goods from the manufacturer to the retailer and to the consumer. Like the cardboard box, it has no value in itself and is solely a vessel to ease the transport of consumer products.

Sometimes these trolleys are taken further than the car park and are found outside their use context, where they appear lost and dislocated. *Misplaced shopping trolley* is a photographic series that documenting this dislocation (*Figure 33*). The shopping trolleys (and the wire grids) both frame and contain empty spaces, conveying the emptiness of consumer culture. The shopping trolley is made out of parallel metal bars that form a lattice enclosure, essentially a basket on wheels. It has no solid flat surfaces. This absence of solid surfaces and the transparency of the objects provide them with lightness.

Like the wire grids of *Cages*, I repeatedly poured paint over the side grids of the trolleys over a period of three years (*Figure 34*). The layers of paint grew closer together and less paint escaped. While applying paint to the trolley, a large amount of surplus paint fell through the bars and onto the plywood surface that the trolley was affixed to, forming a painting on two levels. The paint that accumulated on the plywood surface formed a colourful, solid mount beneath the trolley.

The English language distinguishes between colour and paint while in the German language this distinction does not exist; there is only one word, "Farbe", which can be used to refer to the substance or to colouration. This made me realise that colour has no specific relationship to painting, as pigmentation is everywhere and all around us. The substance of paint on the other hand is essential to painting and is the primary focus of my practice. For a long time, I avoided colours altogether and experimented with non-pigmented varnishes and black and white enamels. My emphasis was on the physicality of the work, rather than the pictorial aspect of



Figure 34. Alex Spremberg, *Untitled (Transit)*, 2013-2017. Enamel on shopping trolley, 105 x 120 x 75 cm. Photograph: Alex Spremberg.

painting, accentuating the painting as an object rather than a picture. For the same reason, I worked with industrial enamel paints, rather than more typical art paints, such as acrylics or oils.

Enamels are viscous liquids sold in cans. Their application encases objects with a skin that enhances its physical presence. Typically, enamel paints are used for painting domestic objects such as doors and windows, rather than paintings. They are usually referred to as house paints and are purchased in hardware stores, rather than artist supply shops. They belong to the everyday, not the artistic. Recently, I re-introduced colours into my vocabulary, but attempt to use them in a non-hierarchical manner, which means I treat every colour the same way and do not prefer one to another.

### **Instruments and attitudes**

Painting, and art in general, re-sensitizes our faculties in order for us to be more perceptive to the unfamiliar and exceptional. For me, painting is a very familiar activity even though I see as its purpose the transformation of the everyday so we can access a domain beyond appearances. Hence, I am interested in the transitional territory between art and life, where ordinary life is energized and artworks become means to focus our perceptual capabilities. The materials that I have assimilated into my artistic practice are unremarkable and mundane. In utilizing them, I attempt to convey the exceptional that hides within the commonplace.

Any activity that demands our complete attention – absorption in a task, looking hard at a painting or a piece of sculpture, losing ourselves in a book or play or film; doing anything, as we say, that 'takes us out of ourselves' – is restorative, in a particular way. (Malouf 2015)

With these words, David Malouf has captured the specific characteristics of the artistic experience and by forgetting our identifications for a moment, we are able to step out of the time/space continuum and become present to a reality beyond our usual limitations, when the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

My practice is not based on skills or the proficient application of a learned craft. It is rather a journey of experimentation with changing materials and processes that have their origin in a quest to examine painting and the ability to perceive them. The activity of applying paint continually over years as a daily routine is a mindless enterprise. No teachable skills could be employed in such an act. Anybody could do it ("Stupid as a painter" Davila, J.). The artist in this case is not the artist as genius, but perhaps as a machine. The American artist, Roxy Payne, developed a machine that

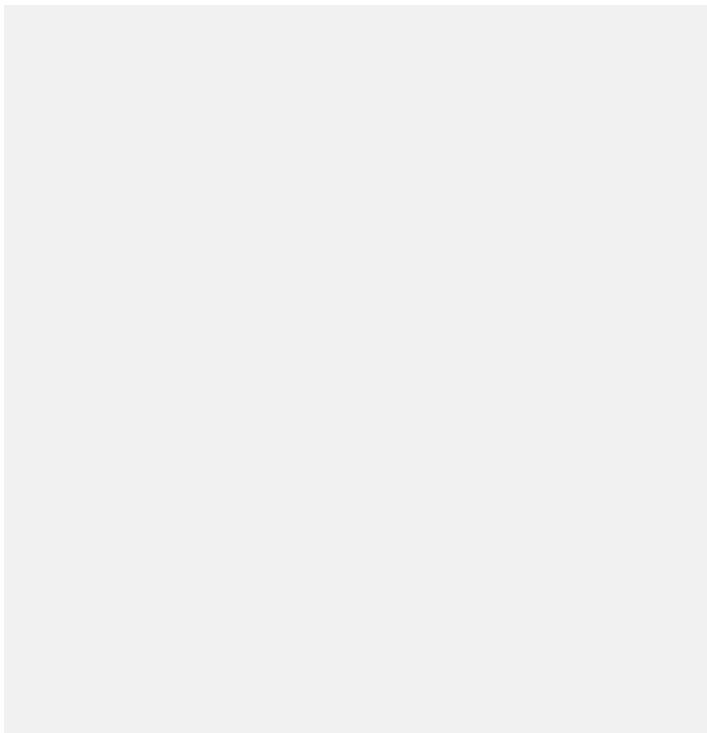


Figure 35. Roxy Payne, *Paint Dipper*, 1996. Steel, acrylic paint, computer, motors, interface, relays, chair, 124 x 99 x 24 inches.

submerges the painting ground repeatedly into a container of paint (*Figure 35*). He outsourced the process of applying paint to a computer controlled robot, avoiding boredom and the investment of time. However, when performed by a human being, the mindlessness of the repeated process of applying paint can actually lead to an experience of considerable mindfulness. This experience of mindfulness is transmitted through the work to the viewer. The accumulation of paint conveys the process of repetitive marks and accrued durations and induces an awareness of the passage of time. These works embody the absurdity and monotony described by Julije Knifer in Chapter 2.

By applying paint to an object repeatedly over a period of time, the accumulated matter comprises the information of time passing, like archaeological artefacts that show traces of past events. Layered deposits of paint are equivalent to layers of time, and the way they are stratified shows the nonlinear nature of time. They act as filters that percolate the flow of paint and time respectively. Serres in a conversation with Latour (1998, 58) describes the percolation of time thus:

Yes, it (time) passes, and also it doesn't pass. We must bring the word pass closer to *passoir* – 'sieve'. Time doesn't flow; it percolates. This means precisely that it passes and doesn't pass. I am very fond of the theory of percolation, which tells us things that are evident, concrete, decisive and new about space and time. In Latin the verb *colare*, the origin of the French verb *couler*, 'to flow', means precisely 'to filter'. In a filter one flux passes through, while another does not.

Serres compares time to the flow of a river with its counter-currents and turbulences where not every drop of water flows into the ocean but returns to the source (Serres and Latour 1998, 59):

The usual theory supposes time to be always and everywhere laminar, with geometrically rigid and measurable distances – at least constant. Someday it will be said that that is eternity! It is neither true nor possible. No, time flows in a turbulent and chaotic manner; it percolates. All of our difficulties with the theory of history come from the fact that we think of time in this inadequate and naïve way.

Serres distinguishes between classical time, which he relates to geometry that has nothing to do with space, but with metrics, and the way we actually experience time. For him, time is topological and can be folded and torn so that past events collide with the future, and closely related events can become very distant (*Figure 36*). He argues that we confuse time with its measurement and that the past, present and future can be experienced simultaneously. He asserts that:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. This science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry. (Serres and Latour 1998, 60)



Figure 36. Alex Spremberg, Crumpled fabric, Cotton, 2015.  
Photograph: Alex Spremberg.

The theory of topology is closely related to quantum field theory and Serres asserts that it resembles our experience of time, as well as historical time, more accurately. He proposes that it is a more comprehensive way to understand space-time. Although he acknowledges the usefulness of the traditional measurements of time, but he argues that we cannot extrapolate a general theory of time from it (Serres and Latour 1998, 60). To illustrate his point he tells a poignant story:

Have you heard how some brothers in their seventies, were grouped around their father for a funeral vigil, weeping for a dead man aged thirty or less? He had been a mountain guide and, following an accident, had disappeared into a crevasse in the high mountains. He reappeared more than half- century later, deposited in the valley by the glacier, perfectly conserved, youthful, from the depths of the cold. His children, having grown old, prepare to bury a body that is still young. That's the source of this alpine scene, which is precisely an anachronism, and is

admittedly rare here, but often observed – between a writer and his critics. Art, beauty, and profound thought preserve youth even better than a glacier! Admire how, on the problem of time, an unpretentious true story agrees with recent science, to produce good philosophy. (Serres and Latour 1998, 61)

Topological time rejects the linearity of the past, present and future trajectory. These divisions belong to our classical understanding of time. In Topology these categories are interchangeable as this story illustrates. The painting processes that I instigate compound these divisions into a material presence of time where they exist simultaneously. These processes are unpredictable, which is part of the reason why they are interesting. The outcomes may be anticipated yet ultimately they are uncertain. The linearity of time is dissolved into the physical presence of accumulated paint.

### **Clew**

The clew was made from a straight length of wire purchased from the hardware shop. Instead of it being organised into horizontals and verticals like in an orderly grid formation it has been twisted, bend and entangled to make a clew without beginning or end. It is another object that describes the idea of topological time with its turbulences and unpredictable dynamics. It shows the twists and turns that describe the infinite flow of time. This clew has been saturated with enamel paint on a daily basis over a period of two years. The accumulation of paint makes the passing of time visible; it presents the immateriality of time with a concrete form. It questions our conventional understanding of the linearity of time and shows the absurdity of progress.



Figure 37. Alex Spremberg, *Clew*, 2013-2015. Enamel on metal wire, 60 x 60 x 60 cm.  
Photograph: Tony Nathan.

Repeating the process of covering an object with enamel paint on a daily basis results in a visible accumulation of time. Although most of the paint runs off or passes through the metal bars, enough adheres to the metal structure. Over time, these deposits become clearly visible and alter the rigid structure they bond to. These works are strainers, filters or *colare* for paint and materialize the invisible percolation of time. The slow build-up of paint transforms the ordinary length of wire, the metal grid, and the trolley, one of many millions, into works that surpass their utilitarian purpose and allude to the accumulation not of consumer products, but of time, the more precious commodity.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the details of my experimental painting practice, as well as the painting experiments conducted with everyday objects. The objects, wire, mesh and shopping trolleys, play a minor role in consumer culture. They are auxiliary items that exist to ease the task of shopping and the taming of pets. I describe the conditions for my experimental painting practice, contextualised by Michel Serres' theory of topological time.

This chapter introduced ideas of how time, process, other artists' practices have become reference points in this research. In the final chapter, I outline the evolution of the *ReCover* project, which began in 2013 following the closure of the gallery that had presented my work for 23 years. This project is ongoing and has developed in unexpected ways. I explain how the introduction of obsolete record covers influenced my painting practice and how it evolved over the four-year period.

*ReCover*, the principal body of work developed during this research continued my interest in analysing and reinterpreting packaging material as a tactic to engage with consumer culture. Fabricated from cardboard, album covers are printed with glossy images designed to seduce and sell products. They seem so attractive when first released, so sexy, fresh and new. Predominantly photographic, they typically depict images of the recording artist or show representations that associate the product with desirable objects or activities. While records may have provided the soundtrack to our lives, album covers have the potential to establish an identity between the listeners, the music and the performers' attitude to life. They communicate the significance of the product, and the culture in which it is embedded (Jones and Sorger 1999, 98). Within my experimental painting practice, *ReCover* explores the possibility of using non-objective as well as representational painting as a means of interrupting our perceptual conditioning. It investigates our relationship with images and by appropriating and manipulating them destabilizes the construction of meaning—beyond the dominant established confines of contemporary painting practice. This chapter describes the history of vinyl record covers and the development of the *ReCover* project. I discuss its relationship with time and the importance of it in developing critical anachronism as a tactic to reinvigorate contemporary painting.

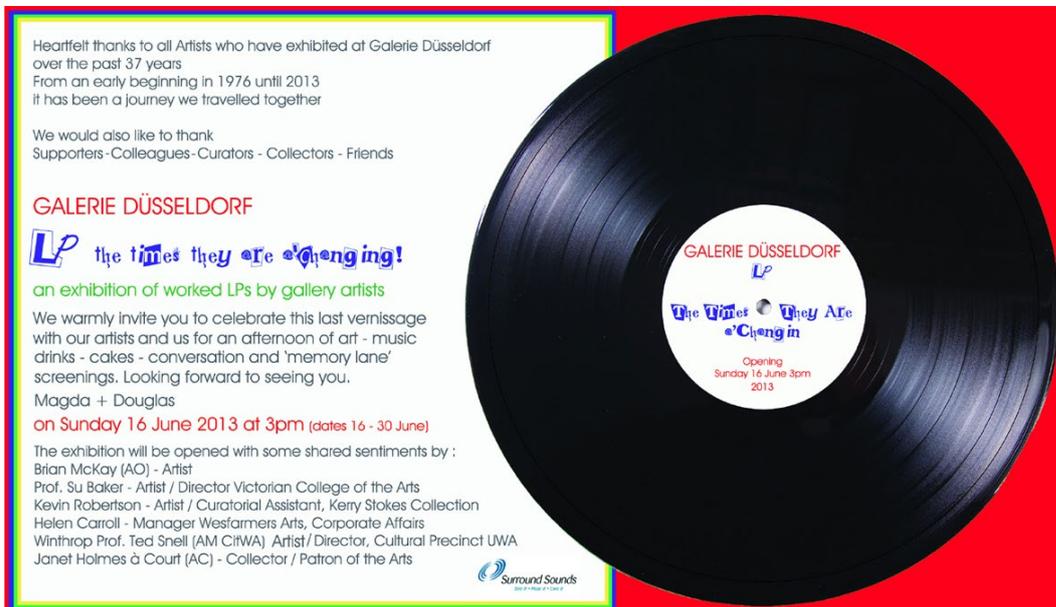


Figure 38. Invitation Galerie Düsseldorf: The times they are a changing!  
An exhibition of worked LP's by gallery artists, 2013

The *ReCover* project originated as a response to an invitation to participate in the final group exhibition of Galerie Düsseldorf in 2013. After 37 years of representing Australian artists, the title of the final exhibition was *The times they are a changing*, an exhibition of worked LP's by gallery artists. My response was *The Orchestra of the West*, a stack of 360 records (360°) presented on a low stool (Figure 39). It was a statement that equated material presence with content. From their inception in 1939 to their general overall demise in the mid-1980s, vinyl records were an integral part of our life experience. They carried music into our daily lives and as a result, they became objects of identification and subsequent veneration. Record collections were important markers of character and personality of the owner, not unlike well-stacked bookshelves. The assembled records were a symbolic account of all the exhibitions staged over the gallery's life.



Figure 39. Alex Spremberg, *The Orchestra of the West*, 2013, 180 records on stool, 96 x 32 x 32 cm.  
Photograph: Alex Spremberg.

The album covers used in this project have long lost their lustre. They were sourced from second-hand record shops, opportunity shops and tip site shops. In the age of digital downloads, they are an outdated technology that evokes sentimental and nostalgic associations. Their journey from the record shops to the discount bins and the op shop stacks is one of devaluation both in monetary as well as artistic terms. Now forgotten and devalued, these albums languish in the bargain basement bins and are close to being considered rubbish (1 LP cost \$1). They are the rejects of a bygone era and no longer arouse excitement. While we might have once been charmed by their imagery, after so many years they have lost their appeal. Our obsession with the new and the ephemeral nature of this fascination are embodied in these objects. Their remaining power lies in their ability to stimulate memories and associations. These discarded albums epitomize the hopes and aspirations of an era (1940s to 1960s), invested with the expectations, dreams and values of that time.

These albums operate as time portals connecting us to the values and memories of that previous era. Invariably these nostalgic longings involve a certain amount of distortion and self-deception, as the past does not resemble our idealised retrospections. The albums also represent the futility of those past ambitions and the impermanence and transitory nature of all aspirations. This feeling is expressed in the Japanese phrase, *mono no aware*, which means "the pathos of things." This phrase expresses the heightened awareness of the transience of things combined with a deep appreciation of the ephemeral nature of beauty (Burton 2014). It involves a gentle sadness, a melancholic yearning at the realisation that all things must pass.

There is an ambiguous relationship between the music, which is the predominant reason people purchase records, and the album cover, which has an illustrative function and provides a visual correlation to the music and/or the recording artist. While we may prefer one to the other, they are intrinsically connected. A caption that

appears together with an image influences how a picture is read and interpreted and likewise, the album cover effects how we listen to and understand the music of the album. However, this relationship is entirely artificial. The music exists in its own right, but once it is recorded, pressed into vinyl, and made into a product for sale, the cover illustration functions as a visual interpretation of the music. Album covers are not items of purchase. You cannot buy them in stores. They only exist as packaging material to protect and promote the musical information pressed into the vinyl discs they envelope. They are by-products of the music industry.

Records were not always delivered in illustrated covers. Guity-Novin, on the website *History of Record Covers*, (2013) argues that "the packaging and presentation of recorded music was transformed when Alex Steinweiss, an art director and graphic designer at Columbia Records, created the first album cover using graphic design in 1939." According to Guity-Novin, the visuals on this cover had an immediate impact on the sales of records and from then on record companies engaged designers and illustrators to create images that could boost sales. In 1940, Pat Dolan (quoted in Schmitz 1986, 88), the marketing strategist at CBS, recommended that:

Albums should be as bold and dashing as we can make them; they should stand out in dealers' windows screaming for attention, yet always reflecting the spirit of the music inside. Color should be violent and strong. Copy should be pared to a minimum, and each album should reflect the quality of the Columbia name.

This commercial imperative still exists. Ben Ponton, of the group Zoviet France and their distributor Charm, has said "that packaging is often used to 'provide a seduction to potential buyers by making the package as attractive (and often as inoffensive) as possible.'" (quoted in Jones and Sorger 1999, 84)

After the exhibition had finished and the gallery had closed, I was left with 360 records. I decided to integrate them into my experimental painting practice as grounds to investigate poured paint. Their worthlessness gave me the freedom to investigate a multitude of ways of pouring paint without fear of failure. Separating the covers from the vinyl discs liberates them from their intended function to promote and protect the recorded music. The covers become autonomous objects, seen for what they are: printed images on cardboard sleeves. They are a readymade format containing readymade information ripe for re-contextualization into the conversation of painting.

Initially mass produced and pristine, traces of human handling have produced unique wounds and scars, which result in the covers becoming individualised. They are in various stages of decay when I find them, bearing the patina of their histories. I mend and repair them for their re-appearance in a different context. In their journey from the discount bins to the walls of an art gallery, their status is reversed and the once abandoned rejects receive a new value. From mass-produced by-products, they become specific and unique artworks (*Figure 40*).

The juxtaposition of the existing cover design and painterly intervention alters the appearance and consequently the meaning of the covers. They become the scene of a confrontation between representations of reality and the physical reality of the paint. This scene comprises the spectrum from one extreme, where the existing image is totally blanketed with paint, to the other, where the cover is unaltered. In most cases, however, the paint distribution engages with the imagery of the album cover and only partially obscures it. Typically, I leave the record company's logo visible, as it is often the only identifier of the object as an album cover, apart from its characteristic size.



Figure 40. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on 232 record covers, 250 x 900 cm., Art Gallery of Western Australia. Photographs: Bo Wong.

This project is an involuntary collaboration between the designers of the original album covers and myself. By engaging with and altering their designs, I enter into a relationship with their work. My painterly interventions obscure the originals to varying degrees, distort the meaning of the designers' original intentions, and invent alternative narratives. When applying paint to the covers and eliminating or obscuring body-parts of the subjects, I am not interested in the individual identities that populate the covers. The altered figures become generic characters, stand-ins, and substitutes for all of humanity. This kind of painting is an act of defacement and erasure, a process of annihilation of personalities and the personal *per se*. Undeniably, these works ridicule, revealing insincerity, pretentious posturing and unbridled commercialism. However, they are primarily concerned with questioning our constant need for a narrative, our impulse to interpret, make meaning and assign value and significance.

When I began the *ReCover* project, I made no distinctions between the individual covers and treated them all equally. They were merely surfaces to experiment with pouring paint. At the time my focus was on exploring the characteristics of liquid paint and understanding the dynamics of flowing and intermingling paint. By entirely concentrating on the process of pouring paint, I treated the covers as empty and blank. However, like the newspaper works in *Wrong Angles*, the poured paint formed relationships with the text and the illustrations of the original backgrounds. The poured paint did not coat an empty white surface, but flowed over a person's face or a group of musicians, or flooded a landscape. The information of the original cover was compromised and the addition of paint created a new narrative.

Over the course of my investigations I changed my approach and began to analyze each cover design individually rather than treating them all the same. I categorized them, read the liner notes and the commentary on the back and tried to imagine

the context in which they were originally conceived. In treating each cover individually, I abandoned the chance proceedings of pouring paint and engaged with the covers in a more conceptual manner. Examining each cover for its own individual peculiarities, I devised methods to alter the existing illustrations by adding painted images. These images were appropriated from everyday sources such as newspapers, catalogues or the Internet. This collage-influenced technique resulted in a combination of the original designs with painted elements, which are intrinsically displaced visual quotations (*Figure 41*). These combinations inadvertently generate scenarios that are compelling and often comical or grotesque. They transform outdated album covers into commentaries on contemporary issues. They become icons of topological time, where the past interacts with the present (Serres and Latour 1998, 60).

The *ReCover* project questions the fundamental relationship between original and copy. While the album covers were commercially printed mass-produced copies with print-runs in the thousands, the individually painted interventions make each cover unique. Although the printed illustrations on these mass-produced objects are based on original photographs, the incorporated painted elements are appropriated from images widely available from print and digital media. This project turns copies into originals by adding painted elements appropriated from the Internet and other commonplace sources of the everyday.

The wide availability of images through the Internet has contributed to their devaluation. The loss of hierarchical structures which contextualized images led to the equalization in the treatment of images, as the following discussion of my project *ReCover* shows. Digitization has leveled them all. *The Mona Lisa* is only a mouse-click away from images of the latest porn star. Pixilation causes images to fall apart, to become atomized. As a result, pixels migrate and re-combine with other pixels.

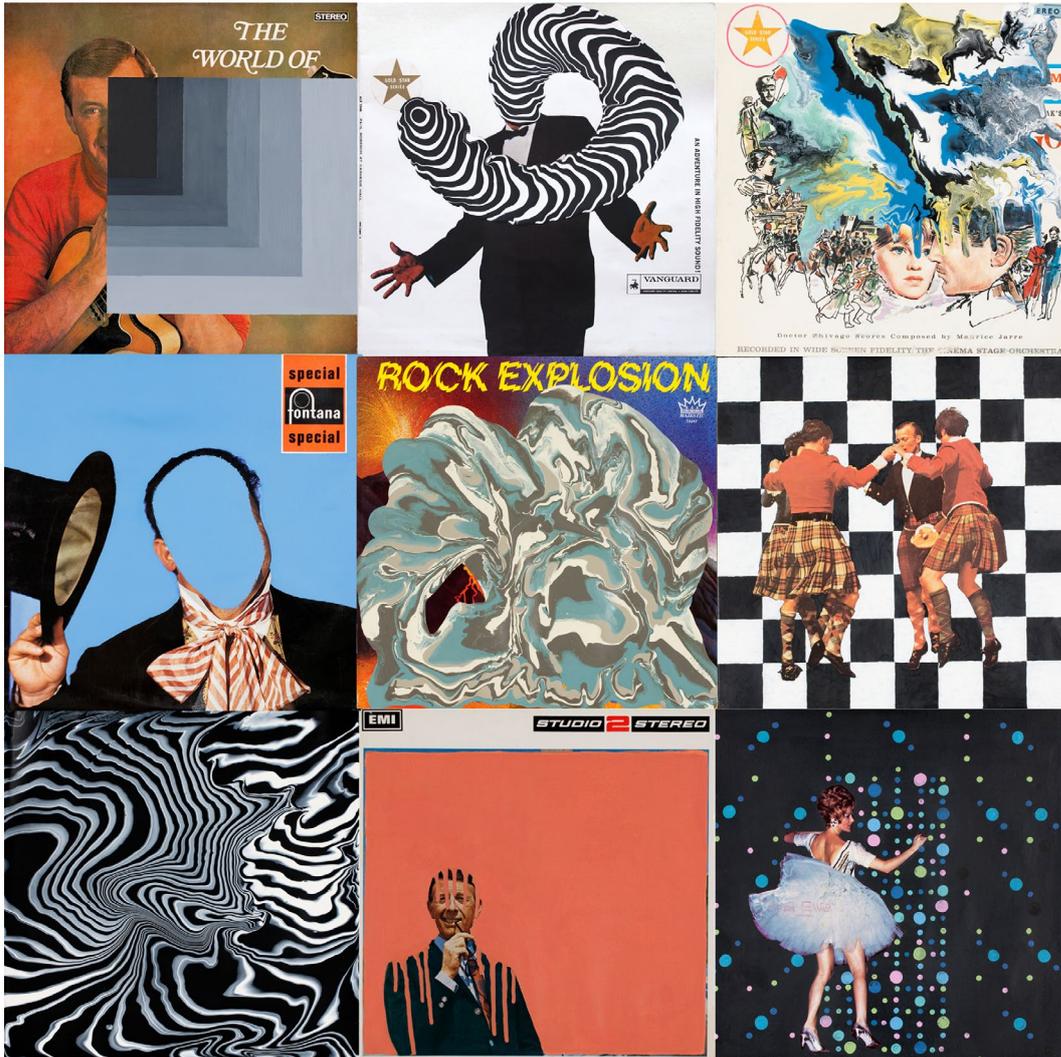


Figure 41. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2015. Enamel on 9 record covers, 92 x 92 cm.  
 Photographs: Bo Wong.

The integrity of images has been compromised and corrupted. They have 'lost their innocence' and now hide more than they reveal. As a consequence, contexts have lost their rigid boundaries and have become porous and elastic. The relationship between an image and its possible significance has been destabilised. Meaning has become fluid and has to be renegotiated with regard to the environment it occurs in and the intentionality of the proprietor of the image.

*ReCover* is concerned with the basic mechanisms of visual culture, how meaning is generated, altered and repositioned. As Bourriaud (2007, 16-17) argues:

Artists today program forms more than they compose them: rather than transfigure a raw element (blank canvas, clay, etc.), they remix available forms and make use of data. In a universe of products for sale, pre-existing forms, signals already emitted, buildings already constructed, paths marked out by their predecessors, artists no longer consider the artistic field (and here one could add television, cinema, or literature) a museum containing works that must be cited or 'surpassed,' as the modernist ideology of originality would have it, but so many storehouses filled with tools that should be used, stockpiles of data to manipulate and present.

The materiality of every object is infused with the time of its origin. The historical period an object was created in can be clearly seen or felt. The records I have used are imbued with the values and characteristics of the specific time and place of their production. The recovery and representation of artefacts and images from the past offers us an opportunity to look at us as we once were, as we have been. Re-interpreting these forgotten album covers makes it possible to see the past from the distant perspective of the present. Painterly interventions add an element of

confusion and surprise as memories are simultaneously awakened and disturbed. By engaging with the standards of the past, our values and attitudes of the present are also scrutinized. They reveal our obsession with the new, with the promise of a future that is better than the past. Soon we will look at today's products from the vantage point of the future and they will appear as quaint as these record covers appear to us today.

Traditionally, artists invent narratives. *ReCover* however, subverts an existing narrative. The painterly re-interpretation of the past adds layers of information. Details taken from a contemporary context are inserted into the original narrative and cause the two realities to blend into a new anachronism. The painting obliterates the meaning of the album covers and distorts and rearranges the original information in a way that can be related to actual experience. By recovering the past for the present, the past differs from our memory of it. The past is our youthful dreams and desires as well as our anxieties and failures. To be faced with the icons of the past awakens memories and confronts us with long forgotten personal experiences. The past has slipped from our consciousness and lives in the dark recesses of our minds. There we find memories we cherish and others that we subdue. Once they are recovered and made conscious, we are confronted with parts of our repressed selves. Continued denial and restraint has distorted them and alienated us from our past. The painterly interventions show these deformations and transformations to be absurd and perhaps help to recover and let go of these exhausted identifications. *Hits of the Blitz*, for example, is a cover, which originally depicted a female singer sitting on the ruins of destroyed English buildings, referencing the German attacks on Great Britain during World War II. I painted a woman dressed in a Burkha over the original female singer and burning palm trees and ruins from the current Syrian conflict in the background (*Figure 42*). The cover now makes a direct analogy between these two conflicts, 72 years apart.



Figure 42. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on record cover 30 x 30 cm.  
Photograph: Bo Wong.

Another transformation was achieved by replacing the corralling of horses that appear on the cover of the Boston Pops Orchestra under the direction of Arthur Fiedler (Figure 43) with an appropriation of Marcel Duchamp's major final work - *Étant donnés*. *Étant donnés* consisted of an installation that could only be viewed through holes in an old barn door that accentuated the viewer's position as a voyeur whose presence was necessary to complete the artwork.

Duchamp destroyed the illusion of paintings traditional Picture-plane and deconstructed the classical perspective by constructing a literal space behind the doors, and according to Pia Hoy paving the way for 'the return of the real' at the end of 20th Century (Hoy 2000). The complexity of Duchamp's work goes well beyond the scope of this paper but what is important to note in relation to my appropriation is that by painting an image of this installation onto the original record cover I was able to subvert the message and re-contextualise the meaning of the cover (Figure 44).

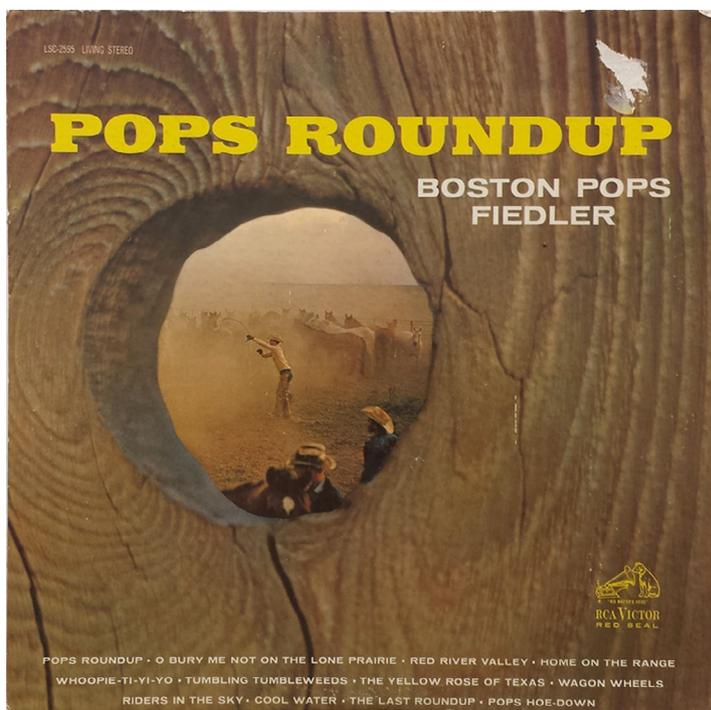


Figure 43. Original record cover, 30 x 30 cm.  
Photograph: Alex Spremberg.

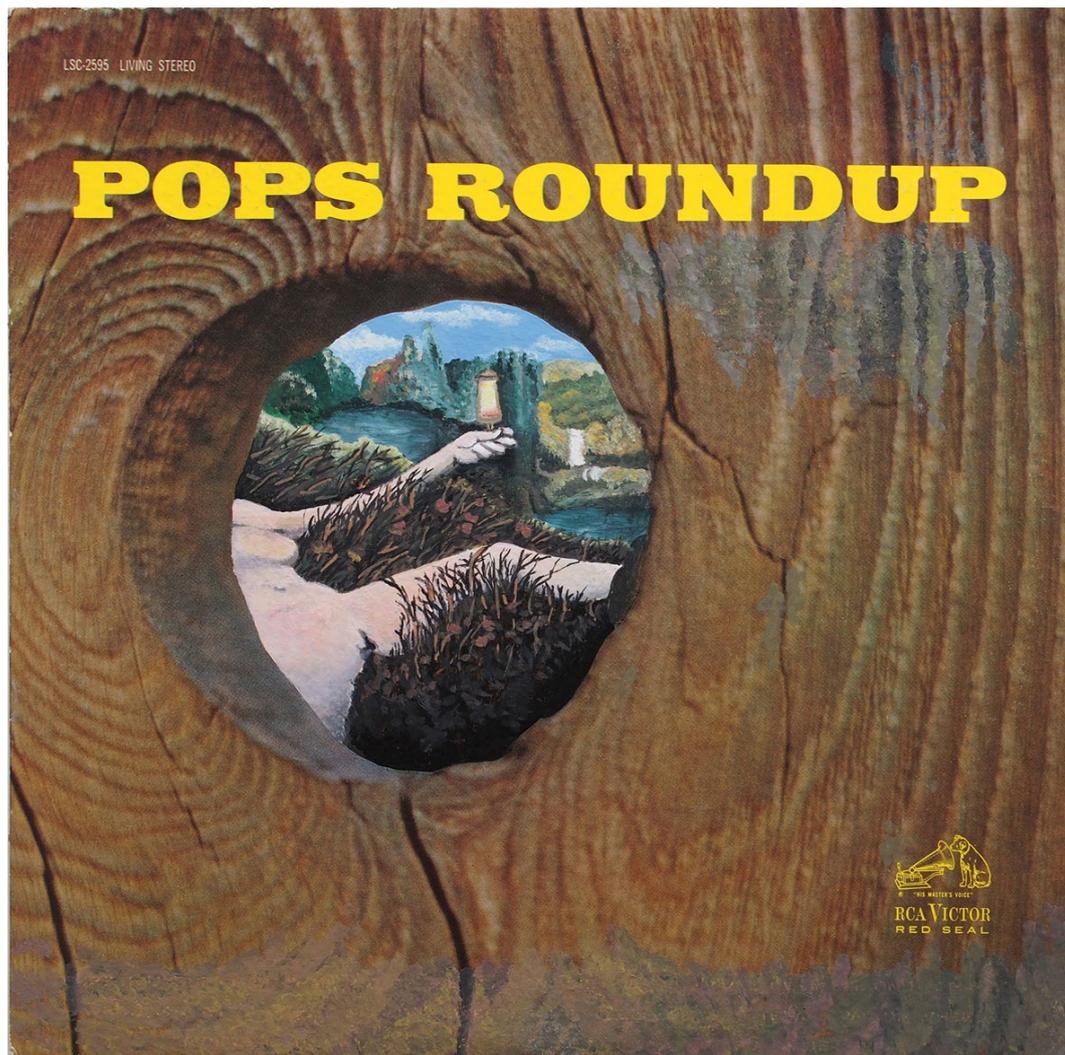


Figure 44. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on record cover, 30 x 30 cm.  
Photograph: Alex Spremberg.



Figure 45. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on 9 record covers, 92 x 92 cm.  
 Photographs: Alex Spremberg.

Whereas, Duchamp's installation was quaintly returned to the perspectival convention, together with the picture plane the romanticised version of the heroic West and masculine prowess was also flattened.

In "The last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," Walter Benjamin (1929), spoke of the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded," referring to artisanal relics, outdated fashions, and old images that resided on the fringes of bourgeois society like flea markets. Opportunity shops and tip sites are the Australian equivalents of the European flea markets of Benjamin's time. There we find the toys of our childhood and the infatuations of our youth, clothing and music with which we have identified in the past (Foster 1997, 159). These places are the repositories of our collective unconscious, where our repressed fears, rejected ambitions and failed dreams reside, connecting us to a past we thought we had left behind. Foster (1997, 161) argues that:

This is not to romanticize this old economic mode so much as it is to spark a connection between psychic and historical dimensions via a social object – a connection, however private, that might be both critical and curative in the present...In this way they confront the bourgeois order with tokens of its repressed past (the outmoded) as well as its exploited outside ('the primitive').

He claims that by recovering the items from the past, we connect with our former selves and the repressed and unwanted parts of our nature. As depicted in *Figure 45*, the objects of desire that were once cherished and idolized become twisted and

alienated when confronted with the present. Due to the violence of the restraint, Foster (1997, 164) argues, the repressed is damaged and on recovery, often has a distorted and demonic appearance:

The demonic aspect of this recovered past is then the sign of this repression, of this estrangement from the blessed state of unity – whether with a childhood toy or (ultimately) with the maternal body. In surrealism this demonic aspect is often inscribed on the thing (the toy, the body) in the form of distortions – the distortions that, again in the formulation of Adorno, 'attest to the violence that prohibition had done to the objects of desire'

History suggests that traumatic events that have not been transformed have to be repeated. History has a tendency to repeat itself until the lessons are learned, mistakes are rectified and tensions resolved. We are compelled to find new attitudes to these recurring issues from our past. Only when we can integrate them into our lives, are we finally able to move on to new experiences. According to Foster (1997, 167):

Marx paraphrases Hegel to the effect that all great events and characters are apt to occur twice – the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. But in an early manuscript of 1844 he intimated a third, comedic moment; and to the rhetorical question of what purpose is served by this ironic movement from tragedy through farce to comedy Marx replied: 'So that humanity can part from its past'.



Figure 46. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on 9 record covers, 92 x 92 cm.  
Photographs: Alex Spremberg.



Figure 47. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on 9 record covers, 92 x 92 cm.  
 Photographs: Alex Spremberg.

The remnants of an old technology provide the opportunity to work through those unexpressed emotions that inhabit the unconscious recesses of our minds. By engaging with them with humour, such as in *Figure 46*, we may be able to re-connect and bring them back into consciousness. This process of completion may be of vital importance in order to leave the emotional residue behind once and for all. As a result, we can embrace a future unencumbered by the traumas of the past and are able to face the challenges that new technologies and identifications bring (Foster 1997, 167).

The necessary transformation of the present can be delineated by our relationships with our surroundings (*Figure 47 and 48*). How does our past influence our interaction with animals, with refugees and other cultures or our relationship to our environment, to climate change, terrorism, war and revolution? Wolff (2004, 9) argues that:

We live by stories. It's the principle by which we organize our experience and thus derive our sense of who we are. We're in an unceasing flow of time and events and people, and to make sense of what goes past, we put a beginning and an end to a certain thing, and we leave things out and we heighten other things, and in that way we break the unbroken flow into stories, because that's the only way we can give it significance.

*ReCover* is a tactic for rewriting the dominant narrative. Re-interpreting a cultural artifact from the recent past provides insight into the way we construct scenarios and chronicle history. It discloses the process of establishing meaning and making sense. The convergence of two elements makes them both appear meaningful and significant. In this case, the painted marks interact with the original cover design and invent a new reality. They undermine the organisation of experience. A narrative is established that invades and hijacks our ordinary perception of reality. The record

covers trigger allusions and interpretations, becoming screens for psychological projections. Viewers interpret what they see through the contradictions they encounter. The work succeeds when viewers become aware of these mechanisms of interpretation and consequently question their belief in the idea of truth. At the heart of this project is the revelation that reality is not what we perceive with our senses, but is a construction that we form based on our interpretation of this information. As Foster (1997, 173) argues:

This mythology is intended not to mystify the modern (as Benjamin thought) but to expose the marvelous in 'the everyday existence'...For not only does such 'asynchronism' show capitalism to be never complete (or completely rational), but it also opens it up in such a way that moments repressed in its past can return to disrupt and perhaps transform its present.

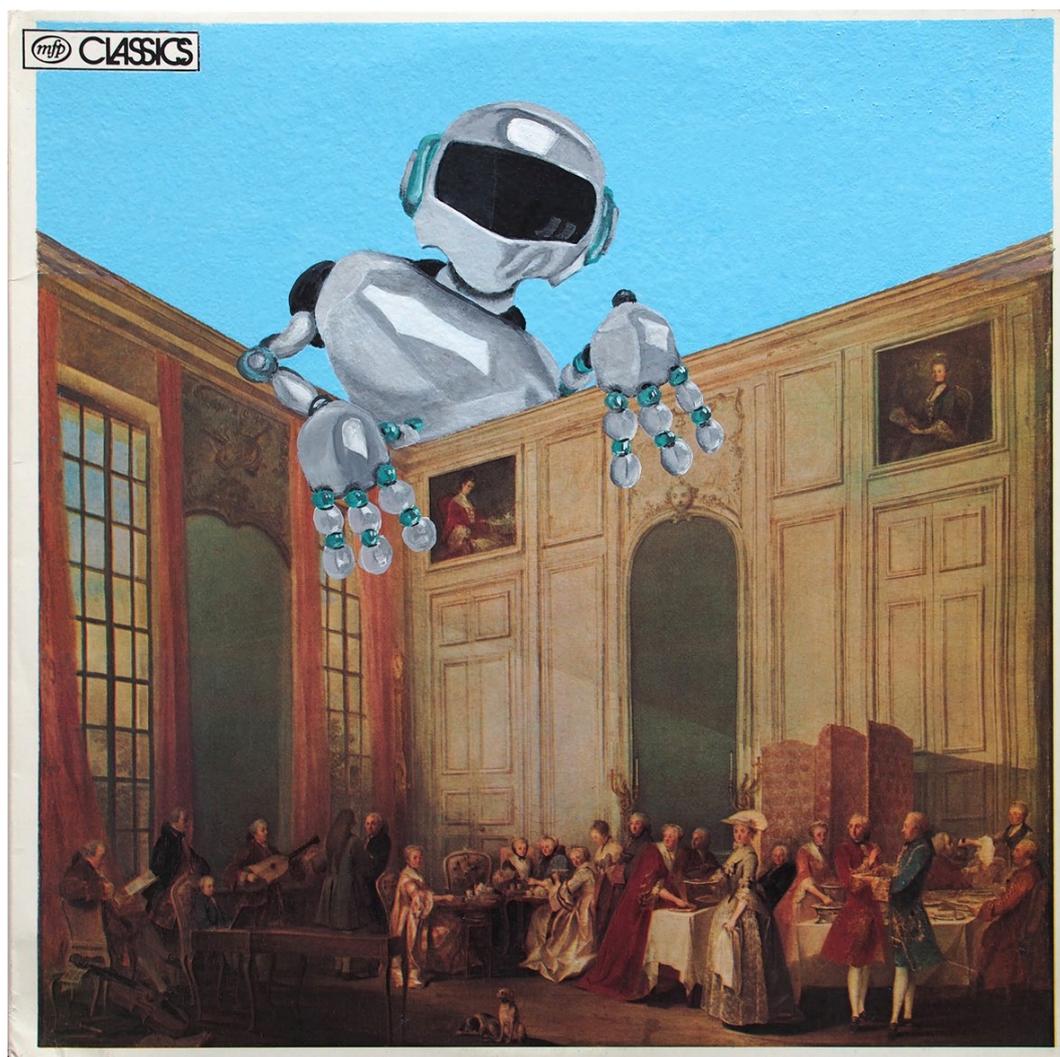


Figure 48. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2016. Enamel on record cover, 30 x 30 cm.  
Photograph: Alex Spremberg.



## Conclusion

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In the twenty-first century, the consumer culture of late capitalist societies is amplified by the development of social media, inundating us with images in uninterrupted 24/7 cycles. The power of images to communicate instantly is used to artificially generate desires and manipulate emotions, with the primary aim to sell goods and raise revenue. The materials and objects I have chosen to work with in my experimental painting practice are part of this consumer culture. They are not however, objects of desire. They are by-products, packaging materials and containers, with no intrinsic value in themselves. By transforming and reinterpreting them, I sensitise our perception towards the mechanisms of consumerism. Cultivating discernment helps viewers to reclaim agency over their visual experiences and find tactics to evade the "networks of discipline" erected by capitalist corporations and governments (De Certeau 1988, xiv).

Central to my work is the recognition that the everyday consists not only of our physical environment, but also an ideology to which we are constantly exposed. Moreover, we are engulfed by a growing ecological catastrophe fuelled by corporations that refuse to reduce their profit margins and governments that depend on these industries for their survival. The increasing devaluation of culture by governments slashing budgets for the arts and humanities contributes to the restriction of cultural development. Along with the inhumane treatment of refugees

in Australia that weighs on all compassionate minds, there is a growing awareness of exploitative mechanisms that are employed to maintain economic disparity. As a result, many artistic investigations into these situations are curtailed.

Over the course of this research, I set out to examine the relationships between a non-objective painting practice and its theories, materials and processes, and the discourse of the everyday, in order to develop a tactic for evading this curtailing. The readings and practical experiments have led me to recognise the importance of time in my art practice. Time is often invisible despite being part of everything and traversing all aspects of life. Consequently, it is often overlooked and under-examined. To make time more tangible and concrete, I devised a series of works where procedures were repeated daily over several years. The repeated accumulation of paint on various everyday objects serves as material evidence for the passage of time. In the finished works, the layers of daily deposits of paint are discernible and like an archaeological excavation, the strata of paint/time is apparent. Supported by the painting processes, the unstoppable, intangible and ephemeral substance of time has been solidified into matter, compressed into form and can be experienced all at once.

By integrating packaging material in the *Wrong Angles* project, I connected the work to everyday concerns and commented on consumer culture with its pervasive influence on most areas of life. The export of consumer goods across the globe is a new form of colonialism, which promotes the equation of material possessions with freedom and happiness. By deconstructing the cardboard boxes, I question the orthogonal matrix that underlies the efficiency of circulating goods around the world. The paint application is multi-layered and based on the organic flow of substances, an intervention using defiant and chaotic forces to disrupt the Cartesian rationality that dominates visual experience.

The grid is an ordering device that is applied to cardboard boxes, record covers and conventional painting grounds, as well as to prison cells, which incarcerate those who do not conform to the rational systematisation and uniformity of a society. The *Cages* series of painted wire mesh aesthetically subverts the grid as a structure that represents networks of discipline and control. Smothering these metal lattices repeatedly with paint over many months softens their rigidity and transforms these initially sparse and severe structures into intricate and colourful tapestries. They become indicators of processes that simultaneously mark the accumulation of paint and the passage of time. With molten and polychrome axes, these distorted grids parody the ideology of control and uniformity.

In the work *Transit*, a shopping trolley, essentially a basket on wheels, was used as a painting ground. A shopping trolley is the ultimate invention for consumer society and a perfect objectification of Lebow's (1955, 3) principle to "make consumption our way of life." Encasing this utilitarian object repeatedly with layers of paint over a period of three years is a completely useless activity and contradicts the purpose of the shopping trolley. Simultaneously, it functions as an analogy of the recurrent activities of shopping and is a visual and temporal manifestation of such repetitive pursuits. Each layer of paint constituted a day's work and the accumulation of paint indicated the passing of time. However, as the sides and base of the trolley are not solid, large amounts of paint fell through the gaps and were captured on the surface below, establishing an equivalency between the gravitational flow of paint and the flow of time.

*Chronos*, or quantitative time, as a linear and undeviating orientation describes only a limited aspect of the passage of time. My investigations into the characteristics of time and the practice of other artists and thinkers better reflect *Kairos*, or qualitative time, which has found its articulation in this body of work. Michel Serres (1998, 58)

believes that we confuse the measurement of time with topological time and that the actual experience of time is a percolating filter, where some parts flow through while others remain, rather than an even flow. My *Cage* and *Transit* paintings corroborate this definition of time and render it concrete.

Most of all, however, my project *ReCover* contributes to this critical re-assertion of time, disrupting the ideology to which the everyday is subject. Music is a shared experience and the soundtracks that accompany our lives link people's emotions with their everyday routines. Sounds attach themselves to lived experiences and as a result, reactivate memories of good as well as bad times. Music also connects us to our present and past relationships. It helps form our identities. Music responds to specific emotional expressions of the *Zeitgeist*. This inherent connection with the vagaries of time, however, has limitations. Music can quickly become outdated and obsolete.

Four years ago, when I bought my first second-hand records in op-shops and at the tip-site, they were objects of abjection, cast aside, dirty, cheap and, above all, in bad taste. Even in their prime, most of them were amongst society's least valued items, products of a capitalistic system intent on manipulating popular tastes and increasing profit. The evolution of the *ReCover* project that resulted from these first forays into second-hand shops traces my attitude towards the record covers and ultimately towards my entire artistic practice over the past four years (the period of this research). Op-shops are the repositories of our collective unconscious, where we find objects that have been discarded, rejected and abandoned. These items have fallen out of favour; however, they are still invested with the values and aspirations of that earlier time. By reinvigorating them, opportunities for awareness of these repressed identifications become possible.

*ReCover* is about the relationship between the unspectacular and the spectacular, between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between everyday routines and moments of high tension. It is a parallel universe mocking ours. It is a form of culture jamming where present day images collide with images from the past at a time when all historical images exist simultaneously on the worldwide web. The Internet has become the largest repository of images. It has usurped the hierarchy of pictures. All images are equally available. High art is just a click away from pornography. Digitisation has extinguished the special status of art. Although original paintings may still be precious commodities, as digitised images, their value is homogenised and conflated. History is compressed. Objects of the past are part of the continuous electronic present, as is information about the future.

The totality of digitised images exists in such close proximity that pixels are able to migrate, merge and become interchangeable. As a result, we see a distorted and destabilized world. Similarly, each album cover is a snapshot of another reality, a film still of an alternative narrative and a portal to a potentially parallel universe where all values have been overturned. *ReCover* questions the veracity of images by intermingling objects from the past with images from the electronic present by way of the traditional medium of painting. The pixelated reality of our electronic environment is fused with our physical reality. When pixels meet objects, two vastly different realities begin to dance together in a state of critical anachronism that questions the circumstances of our mediated existence.

Our culture has elevated the visual above all other senses. We construct our identities based on the way we comprehend the world. Anything that does not concur with the construction of our reality is disconcerting at first and undermines our confidence in that construction. *ReCover* interrupts our expectations when viewing pictures. It appropriates old photographs, illustrations, and designs, and amalgamates them



Figure 49. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2017. Enamel on record cover, 30 x 30 cm.  
Photograph: Alex Spremberg.

with images from the unlimited resource of the Internet and connects them to the discipline of painting (*Figure 49 and 50*). It mixes the world of music and its products with the world of contemporary art. This fusion of different realities has the potential to unsettle our assumptions and make us question our perceptions. How do we see, what do we see and what does it mean? It is an investigation into the way we perceive and construct significance. The works are triggers for perception to occur as a conscious process, invitations to look and trace the path of comprehension, to make sense of what is in front of us.

I began this project as a non-objective painter investigating the everyday and have become engaged in representations as a means to destabilize our faith in representations of reality. I have concluded that dividing painting into categories such as non-objective and representational is restrictive. I have followed a path inspired by curiosity rather than ideology. It is an ongoing journey of discovery that has transcended artificial boundaries and follows the unpredictable course of an inquiry into the multifaceted relationship of painting with the everyday.

We are drawn to the spectacular and the dazzling, and the sensational instinctively captures our attention. For the most part, we are not aware of the minutiae of day-to-day existence and everyone experiences the everyday differently. However, it is here in the daily accumulation of experiences that treasures wait to be exposed. My research has shown that many artistic innovations of the past have occurred by examining the commonplace. However, it is equally important to know *where* to look as it is to know *how* to look. By dispensing with the obvious and becoming more responsive to the ordinary, the unremarkable and the habitual, we get a genuine and more profound understanding of the human condition.



Figure 50. Alex Spremberg, *ReCover*, 2017. Enamel on record cover, 30 x 30 cm.  
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