

Little by little, the warp moved further in our direction, carried along by the slow rotation of the loom-roller, a wide transverse cylinder to which all the threads were attached. The weaving proceeded rapidly, and soon a rich cloth appeared before our eyes in a narrow, even band, its colour delicately blended. . . . There was no limit to the number of variations which could be obtained by the raising of certain groups of threads, coinciding with the lowering of others. Together with the host of multi-coloured shuttles, this multiplicity of successive patterns depending on the way the warp was divided, made practicable the production of fairy-like fabrics, resembling the pictures of the old masters.

— Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* (1967)¹

Painting has always occupied a space between the material and the ideal, the sensible and the immaterial, in a way that no other art form quite has. A painting is like a membrane, access-panel, hinge, skylight, fairy fabric, and dream screen. It's a type of trapdoor between the real and the posited, the real and the imaginary, here and elsewhere. The portable panel painting or canvas, and its variants, is a planar, geometric projection on the world as well as a prosthetic support for subjectivity. A fulcrum for acting on the world, for continuing life by means other than life. With its strangely petrified vitality, a painting is a type of body, a type of subject, while obviously being neither. As a surface more finely sensitised to the passage of thought and feeling than a computer screen, but as dormant as a back door mat, a painting assumes an equivocal disposition. The metaphysical status of the painting as a plane tilting both ways between here and not-here, not-this/not-that, is a beautifully concise equation. For all the phantasmic life an inert sculptural object may summon, and for all the visible difference between a film's projected illusion and the reality of the projection screen, neither sculpture nor film shuttle so perpetually, so surely, as does a painting between its concrete materiality and its imaginary space, between its physical limits and its apparitional potential.

Certainly, as discrete entities we also know how paintings retain their special alchemy as mobile units of value in local and global art economies. A painting is a most conveniently portable concentration of cultural capital. And, as thousands, millions of them pass through the books of dealers and auction houses worldwide, their

ubiquity and endless variation are taken by some as evidence of painting's rude health, of its survivor status in today's hyper-industrialised world.

Painting's proliferation and diversity both need to be considered in relation to the world of 'control societies' in which most of us now live. Whichever term we use to account for the realities of increasingly pervasive, open-ended societal control – neo-capitalism, neoliberalism, post-Fordism, the new spirit of capitalism, or market globalisation – we can all recognise degrees of increasing precariousness and insecurity as our social, cultural and personal lives begin to resemble mobile data on a backlit screen – promising easy access but permitting only a few very limited interactions. All our options seem pre-formatted. Extensive informational networks bring the world closer to a totalised system in temporal and spatial terms, a closed circuit of micro-managed data at a planetary level which fixes the whole of our reality with an unblinking, 24/7 Cyclopean stare. In a reticulated mesh of abstractions drawn between fluid financial capital, volatile conditions of employment, and commodified social media, the model citizen is expected to be flexible, mobile, compliant and connected.

One of the most crucial questions for any art form in the modern and contemporary eras has been where can a space of relative autonomy be found, and how might it be used to wedge open a view outside of capitalism that is not entirely administered to every last corner of public and private life? And always, this critical vantage point requires constant re-drawing. There are good reasons too why even attempting to find an outside of capitalism and its ruling abstractions has seemed implausibly utopian. As cultural theorist Gene Ray says, any relatively autonomous art still 'shares the social guilt and is always scarred by the dominant social logics it tries to refuse.'²

Part of painting's restless animation, however, stems from its dual life as both an item of exchange in an extensive market, and as a sign of something untranslatable inside the economy of the commodity. It is because a painting leads such an intriguing double life as an amalgam of contradictions that it is always more than itself, and beside itself; it is a self-dramatising monad as much as it is part of any wider circuit of information and exchange. In the current era of networks and global information exchange, this is particularly important

to grasp about the condition of painting, about painting's conditions of possibility.

In his analysis of the oppressive effects of techno-visual simultaneity in our post-industrial era, philosopher of technics Bernard Stiegler keeps returning to the way cultural industries homogenise and synchronise consciousnesses. For Stiegler, healthy human sociality emerges through a relational dynamic between the *I* and the *We*; the individual and the group. This dynamic is a constitutive one – meaning that the *I* always comes into being through relation to a group *We* in some form, and the *We* can only exist as a community of *I*s – so the *I* and the *We* differentiate and shape each other without eclipsing each other. And because these relations are dynamic the *I* and the *We* are not fixed entities. Such a constantly active field of relations and contradictions is exactly what Stiegler says is under threat when our current digital, techno-visual citizenship depends on the liquidation of differences. Differences in time, differences in experiencing the world. Through tuning in to the same channels at the same time, semi-permanently listening to the same data-bank of music, visiting the same websites in droves, consuming the same texts and images, categorising the incongruous profusion of our lives through the same social media metrics, increasingly co-ordinating our temporal and spatial, public and private, desiring lives – the *I* and the *We* collapse into each other. Consciousnesses are groomed through the placeless simultaneity of a distracted atemporality. Unsurprisingly Stiegler says such normative pseudo-togetherness engenders symbolic misery and psycho-social ill-health.

Ever since its emergence in the deep past, painting has had a complex and multivalent relationship with time. Soon after the invention of photography, a historical watershed for painting, this complex relationship fractured irrevocably and split into multiple, and incompatible time signatures, so that painting is now always crucially out of time, behind the times, refracted in time. But because painting lost a form of cultural priority alongside the photographic device, because painting lost its place, it can now be the site where the unexpected appears; it can turn up unexpectedly. Because it is now always untimely it can actualise a wealth of different temporal registers. Painting has an almost absurd potential to invent spaces and times differently.

What streams through *Necessary Distraction* is an accented diversity of abbreviated images, part-objects, stylistic traits, gestural codes, forms of pictorial rhetoric, transposed textures, and quoted motifs – all with their own historically inflected time signatures. There is an interest in the strange vivacity of anachronism. Just as installation artists often confound the one-way traffic of history through their employment of outmoded objects, so painters often tap the potential of obsolete forms through the revivification of styles and manners of earlier eras, even when an era may be defined as a finely titrated dose of quotable history rather than any deeply inimical otherness to the contemporary. Aspects of Saskia Leek's work, which sometimes approaches a Bloomsbury sensibility through Matisse, or Stella Corkery's conscription of passé graphic motifs turned chic once more enact inflections of the out of date and trace the grammars of visual memes as they eddy and delay their way through recent memory. Similarly Kirstin Carlin and Emma Fitts utilise lyrical ornamentation that suggests precursors such as Vita Sackville-West, Eileen Gray and Charlotte Perriand, as Carlin's ointment slippery paint becomes floral hallucination, subject to tailored arrangements, cutting to patterns, and life-style design.

Both Andrew Barber and Oliver Perkins, rely on expectations carried over from earlier forms of sober modernist abstraction to energise their oblique and extempore formalism. Simon Ingram dismantles the singularity of a painting by literalising the sequential nature of its production and, in his case, its productivity, by demonstrating its behaviour as a complex accrual, a relay of operations through time. Patrick Lundberg's pins and micro-planets of paint are all singularity – disconcertingly so. They operate like points of extreme gravitational density in relation to architectural surrounds or neighbouring art. As heavy 'marbles' or pellets of chromatic concentration, their vertigo-inducing pulling power is out of all proportion to their actual size.

In another room, another part of the exhibition, Julian Hooper performs a series of painterly-graphic tricks and stunts, making fast virtuoso play with a chatter of motifs and their drawing-board theatrics, while Nick Austin goes slow with folk narrations and ineptitudes exactly crafted through sensitive labour. Sometimes it is only with great skill and speed that one can keep just

ahead of the accumulating snowball of capital's commodity conversion momentum, which picks up everything in its path – every historical décor or forgotten byway of taste and style. Minor delays, deliberate retardations, and uncooperative behaviour within dominant style councils represent another way of gaining some time, if only a fragment, before the snowball arrives.

Rather than pursuing virtuosic swift adaptation to the rush of the current, some painters cultivate slowness through tarrying with the textural and embedded temporality; they reckon with a thickening of the visible and a muteness of thought. Dan Arp's unpaintings are casts of a mashed, crushed and pulped world, in which potato poop might fuse with soggy cardboard. Barbara Tuck, Milli Jannides, and Nicola Farquhar's landscapes are strongly internal. They suggest that reality is only ever apprehended through, or as, some distorting and wavering medium, which operates like a two-way mirror, or scrying pool into which the self-contained subject looks at their peril. Anoushka Akel and Kim Pieters each differently evade resolution through dilatory process as siftings, sievings, skiddings and abradings of paint prompt textural listening for psychic nuance. Paint matter is fluid or dessicated, rubbed or finely smeared. All care and attention but no definitive programme. For this group of artists the world is often a midden of compressed details, an underfoot wealth of material conditions, a mash-textured marshy place in which water and land mingle and merge, in which meshes and messes are mostly in close-up.

Artists like this follow the example of Ulysses who escaped the Cyclops and his ruined eye by clinging to the underbellies of his sheep, no longer frozen by the predatory glare of optical monomania, going animal, merging with the fleecy pelt of the world. In a 2012 interview Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai described a world in which there is no place beyond the reach of the market. He says that instead of 'empty spaces with possibilities', free of capitalist formatting, all we have is 'stupid spaces, spaces in which you can't do anything other than wait to return from this space'. In Krasznahorkai's fiction the slow-moving density of his un-paragraphed prose gathers up speech, imagery, characters, things, climate, physical peculiarities, psychology and political activities – like an endless line of barges carrying the matter of all things

and thought in tandem through time. Such a sustained, sluggish, movement of material is Krasznahorkai's way of countering the franchised textures and spaces of abstract capital. He turns the whole world into a form of best resistance against its own total abstraction. It is interesting to consider how painting too might practise ways of lagging behind, dragging its heels in the inertia of the world.

One of the biggest advantages painting has had over the last few decades is that it has been subject to such a critical drubbing and ontological demolition that more than any other visual art form it has been grounded in self-critique. It has been given the gift of inadequacy. Painting has had the burden of taking itself for granted removed – it can no longer presume its significance holds. Consciously or unconsciously painting is divided from within, predicated on doubt, no longer identical with itself. Perhaps painting now appears before us like Joseph's coat of many colours, torn and covered in blood, as it was presented to Joseph's father by his envious brothers. Perhaps beneath this ruined garment is the Harlequin's motley coat that Michel Serres also writes about, which contains still further layers beneath it. This coat is sewn in pieces with ripple-patterned skein chromatics soaking right through, covering a body which is also stained. Perhaps it will always be one of paintings' tasks to keep patching, unpicking and resewing this multipally pre-loved, permanently damaged, sumptuously threaded, partially unravelled remnant of cultural fabrication.

As fabrications of graphical syncopation, Ngataiharuru Taepa's traditionally patterned and digital code-carrying surfaces conjure the multiple information flow of woven tukutuku (ornamental panels) and painted kōwhaiwhai (rafter or ridgepole paintings) interiors of ancestral and current wharehau (meeting houses), as well as circuit board arrays, sneaker-laces and clarinet keys. They are cultural fusion charts and new maps to live by. Adrienne Vaughan's patterned abstractions with various checks, stitches, herringbones and loose threads evoke the textile life of painting, like old dreams woven on the looms which Van Gogh drew and painted as analogues of the painter's tireless labour. This is akin to the endless task of care and craft which the women marine scientists perform continuously on their research boat,

as they knit, and knit in Günter Grass's 1986 novel *The Rat*. Against a backdrop of apocalyptic environmental decay and political ineffectualness the researchers' collective knitting is a sign of something else:

On the water, they knit. They knit at half speed and lying at anchor. Their knitting has a superstructure. It can't be overlooked because, when they are knitting, more happens than can be counted in knitting and purling stitches, ... The process, the incessant, rigorous but seemingly gentle guiding of the yarn, the toneless counting of the stitches, served ... as a framework to the knitter's persistently repetitive argument; ... a many-coloured blanket, consisting of woollen leftovers, ... differently patterned patches with chain stitches, ... she sews together the motley squares with their spiral or ribbed patterns, marked by dropped stitches, or scaly like armour plate. ... I hear them clicking needles against the flow of time, against the menacing void, against the beginning of the end.³

The ceaseless productivity of Grass's tricoteuses, keeping tactile pace with the destitution of their world, could serve as an image of contemporary painting and its texturing of time; its accenting of history at the scale of busy fingers. The labour of Grass's knitting mariners stands in for painting's besetting anachronism, patiently figuring itself differently as so many material particularities and individual body-times disappear against the global green screen of digital abstraction. I think of painting's on-going actions and inventions as insistently negentropic elaborations of form; as high energy islands of configurational complexity countering the entropic loss of differentiation, variation, possibility. Painting as a generative activity which goes incrementally otherwise to dominant, abstracting regimes of informational technology.

Just as Grass's nautical knitting acquires over time a superstructure of its own, a slightly self-mocking grandiosity achieved through unspectacular means, so *Necessary Distraction* presents a crowd of painterly inventions as a rising plenitude. A plenteous assembly of imagistic, textural and gestural vibrancy. A reconstructed Potemkin village of painting typologies, a museological array of painting as plumage, a stage set for rehearsing painting in the world, an ebullience, a hubbub.

Perhaps the botanical profusion, the populous conviviality of the exhibition can also be taken as noisy diversity to counter the litanies of critical theory that, ex cathedra, have pontificated on the obsolescence of the language of painting. Perhaps peripheral awareness of such historical relegation and displacement provides the necessary destitution in *Necessary Distraction*. And, just as the repressed content of Ad Reinhardt's 'last paintings that anyone can make', like thickening bubbles under pressure, rose to the surface in his long lists of everything that painting could no longer include – so the copiousness of exhibitions like *Necessary Distraction* seem to rise in the vacuum formed by the vigilance of the anti-painting lobby's oppressing censure. Painting rises against its limits.

Painting rises to meet its limits. Among the artists in this exhibition different painting languages stand out as singular in their material particulars, in their fabricational idiosyncrasies – from the machine stitched femmage cloth motley of Emma Fitts' fabricated exuberance, for example, to the myopic monotony of Austin's country lyricism. From Ingram's machine-managed filigrees of battleship grey, to the burnished creaminess, warped tessellations, and skewed varnished parquets of Vaughan's slowly worked finishes. In Barber's raised registrations of game lines and abraded court markings, the moiré iridescence and gasps of atomised colour that drift across a James Cousins canvas, or the monochrome dazzle-pattern of Jeena Shin's precision-cut diagrams where distracted geometry loses itself in luminosity.

The picture on the cloth was slowly completed, and we saw a mountain appear, towards which the groups of human beings and every sort of animal were swimming ... The sky broadened out in the zenith, and great clouds suddenly took shape, from a combination of grey silks, ranging from the clearest tones to the murkiest shades ... At this moment Bedu stopped the machine [and] using a well-sharpened blade, cut all the loose threads around the edges of the material which was thus quickly freed from its frame; then, with a needle and silk, threaded in readiness, he lost no time in making gathers in the top, where there was a border of streaming rain clouds ... The cloth, wider than it was long, when made up in this way, was shaped like a simple, flowing cloak.

— Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* (1967)⁴

And how does distraction figure in this exhibition? Why is it 'necessary' in this overtly rhythmic show, which moves between dreamy intoxication and distraction in its sheer ravelled plenitude of slow pleasures and the shocks, blocks, and jolts of shape, edge, and spacing, which get purchase on painterly space through organisational drawing, and a feeling for seams in the infinite cloth of the material world?

Distraction's work is bidirectional. Its hypnotic optics and hypnagogic lethargies can put us to sleep or push our awareness to new levels. In the context of early 20th-century mass media consciousness, Siegfried Kracauer talked about a 'kind of distraction that exposes disintegration instead of masking it'.⁵ Kracauer's general point being that keeping visible the inconsistencies, and contradictions in our psycho-social experience keeps open the possibility of acting differently in an otherwise indifferent and oppressively static reality. By doing this we re-gain some of the material initiative which large scale, immaterial technologies of persuasion and control usually inhibit. Discussing Kracauer's and Walter Benjamin's dialectical understanding of distraction, Howard Eiland frames up its contrary pulls: 'The opposition now would seem to be between mere distraction and, shall we say, productive distraction, between distraction as a skewing of attention, or as abandonment to dispersion, and distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving.'⁶ The physical presentation of *Necessary Distraction* ensures we experience its content as housed in incompleteness, in a state of quasi-disintegration and stalled process. Its alternations between jib-stopped walls, exposed framing, and standard gallery wall surfacing sets the different works into a multiple space of constant interruption, which pulls away from the default homogeneity of white cubes and corridors. It gets further from equilibrium than is usually the case when the institutional framing is impermeable. The exhibition installs us right in the midst of an agitated ambivalence. The adjectival necessity of its title, sets us on the multiple edges of this condition, as if it is ours and painting's fate to be so contradictorily distracted.

Notes

- 1 Raymond Roussel (trans Lindy Foord and Rayner Heppenstall), *Impressions of Africa*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1967, pp 93–4.
- 2 Gene Ray, 'Culture Industry and the Administration of Terror', in Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray, Ulf Wuggenig (eds), *Critique of Creativity. Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the 'Creative Industries'*, Mayfly Books, London, 2011, p 175.
- 3 Günter Grass (trans Ralph Manheim), *The Rat*, Martin Secker & Warburg, London 1987, pp 23–5.
- 4 Raymond Roussel, as above, pp 95–6.
- 5 Siegfried Kracauer, quoted in Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', *Boundary*, no 2, Spring 2003, p 58.
- 6 Howard Eiland, as above, p 60.

References

- Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello (trans Gregory Elliott), *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2007.
- Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', *Boundary*, no 2, Spring 2003, pp 51–66.
- Günter Grass (trans Ralph Manheim), *The Rat*, Martin Secker & Warburg, London 1987.
- László Krasznahorkai (trans George Szirtes), *The Melancholy of Resistance*, New Directions, New York, 1998.
- Richard Lea, László Krasznahorkai interview: 'This Society is the Result of 10,000 Years?', www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/24/laszlo-krasznahorkai-interview, accessed 16 Nov 2015.
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- Michel Serres (trans Sheila Faria Glaser with William Paulson), *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor MI, 2000.
- Bernard Stiegler (trans Barnaby Norman), *Symbolic Misery*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2014.
- Bernard Stiegler (trans David Barison, Daniel Ross and Patrick Crogan), *Acting Out*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City, CA, 2009.