MOIRE

A kind of graphic unconscious[1]

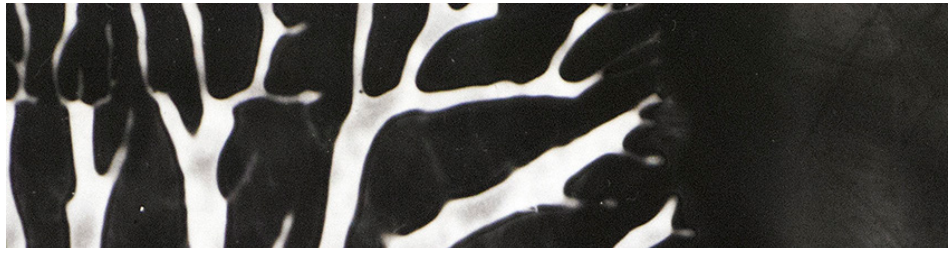
Liz Deschenes
Eileen Quinlan
Erin Shirreff
Erika Vogt

A kind of graphic unconscious[1]

Colin Miner

Moiré offers no knowing. Rather, as an effect, it questions vision. In scanning the history of moiré, alongside methods to work around and unfurl it, a pattern comprised of avoidance is illuminated. When viewed in duration, what comes into focus is an overlapping of materiality and immateriality. A shifting quality of relations is present, presenting itself that is. Emerging, a paradox takes shape in which not looking is less confusing than beholding; to realize the effect it becomes requisite to see at angle, awry to the subject light seeks to re-present.[2] Representing, moiré can be conceived through a visualization process in which the physicality of material is transfigured into the immateriality of the imagistic. This enhanced visibility is accrued in the crossing of singular paths to make patterns, and then again in the crossing of each pattern that composes the effect so tightly it becomes impermeable to the eye.[3] Slipping, skewing, and swaying, the friction between patterns adjusts (slightly and/or radically) to reveal a process of re-composing | de-composing.

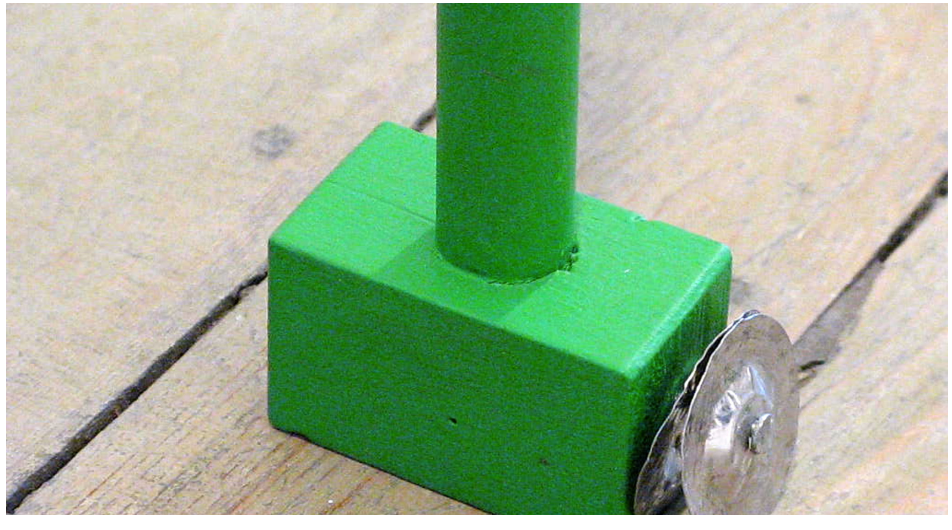
[1] "...words put the matter in a new light: the moiré effect was ultimately a kind of graphic unconscious: a basic condition of blur out of which temporary effects of sharpness were occasionally won." Lytle Shaw, *The Moiré Effect* [2] "Light can in fact only give way to an image when its path is impeded, when it is turned away from its course." Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photograph of History* [3] "I decompose, enlarge, and, so to speak, I retard, in order to have time to know at last." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*



What does the composition know?[1] Like a compressed fragmented crystalline form, the spaces between surfaces are difficult to grasp. Not for lack of contrast, but the inverse, a collapse of contrast. Whereas patterns behind offer ground and patterns in front figure, moiré is composed within an interstitial space between surfaces of contact. When viewing

this middle terrain we can start to conceive a veiled occultism.[2] However, the opacity of these layers and their subsequent depth of obscurity are not complete. If they were, there would be nothing to see. Frustratingly, moiré is fascinating in its complexity in its dance that threatens reason and in its existence outside of the presently predictable.[3] The abstract space of dull blurry shade and sharp points of light oscillating within the effect wait for the curious. With eyes captivated, awareness seeks out qualities of relation that offer form to the space-time between the layered depth of grounds and figures.

[1] "What is to be understood by composition? Two things, which compose together. First, separated by an insuperable limit, the two concepts exchange compromises; they compose together, the one with the other... This concept of the photograph photographs all conceptual oppositions, it traces a relationship of haunting which perhaps is constitutive of all logics." Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" [2] "When the world-in-itself becomes occulted, or 'hidden,' a strange and paradoxical movement takes place whereby the world-in-itself presents itself to us, but without ever becoming fully accessible or completely knowable." Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*[3] "We might pin down a buckyball's location by observing it, but in between our observations, it takes all paths. ... no matter how thorough our observation of the present, the (unobserved) past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities." Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*



https://vimeo.com/149519625

Liz Deschenes with Barbara Kasten

LD: Abstraction is something that both of our work is discussed in and around. If you could position your work in that conversation how would you position it?

BK: I wouldn't position it as an abstraction in photography. I think people are too short-sighted about what the work is about. The basics that people hang on to are what people can identify, and that first thing is that it doesn't "look like it should." But that's one of the reasons why I make the work that I do, so that there is no subject and so that there is no representational value. I am not photographing reflections from this bottle for example. I really want the shadow, and I don't want it to look anything like the bottle. I want it to be it's own identity, it's own being. It's like going down to the core of who we are in an almost spiritual way. I mean we are photographing light. It's almost as ephemeral as that. We can't put our hands on it. There is a mystery to it. It's out of our control.

LD: It's really nice to hear you talk about the intangible, because I think it goes back to not wanting a name. I think we share wanting to make an experience that's in all of the spaces that we work in. In this case you are working in the studio, but then you are going to present it in the exhibition space, and it will be a completely different set of criteria. Through your process you are going to be discovering things as well, and I think that's what you were talking about, the discovery through doing.

BK: Right. And you want other people to look at things in a new format too and it's almost this illusiveness, this ambiguousness. You know you go for it and it's a not there /but is there kind of thing.

LD: It's slippery.

BK: Exactly. It's slippery. It's out of reach. You can't deny it, but it's there. There is a very interesting quality about light–it is the object, but is not the object. It's almost what the object produces. It's almost as if there is an aura. We are after this experiential thing around the thing

LD: And that goes back to the naming of the experience. That makes a lot of sense. I mean I have been reticent to think about the work in terms of abstraction and much more inclined to think about the phenomena that you are describing, which is not the expectation of photography.

BK: That's the thing about photography: there is so much room for everything. Unfortunately, because the phenomena that we work with happens to be closely connected to a photographic process, we end up getting lumped into that, but we shouldn't be. There are other people doing similar things in other mediums.

Excerpt from the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania's exhibition catalogue *Barbara Kasten: Stages,* Ed. Alex Klein, co-published by ICA and JRP Ringier, 2015.

Eileen Quinlan

What relevance does abstraction, representation, or the space between these concepts have within your practice?

I have long struggled with the word abstraction, particularly as it relates to photography. “Abstract photography” has become a catch-all, largely serving the market’s hunger for brands, or lazy criticism’s need for prefab arguments, rather than any meaningful shift in the medium itself. I’m more interested in transformation, degradation, and a kind of alchemical conjuring, than I am in interrogating abstraction or the nature of the real. I do labor over composing pictures, constructing, lighting, seducing with texture, hopefully communicating through the worldly associations of selected materials and objects, while considering performance, duration, and touch in the traces of myself that I leave behind. After all of this control and careful communication, I try to introduce chance, illegibility, agressivity, an opportunity for the photographic materials to express and even image themselves. Sometimes their obliterated abstraction comes to resemble representation. The ghosts of other images, hanging nearby - bodies, trees, stars, things we recognize - creep back into clouds of chemical dust. Nothing becomes something. Just as something, as it slips into genre and cliché, becomes nothing. The straight photograph, so mind-numbingly predictable, gives way to abstract form, as the queer photograph, a novel conundrum, is forced to depict something by the collaborating eye of the viewer who completes it through an act of willful, illustrative, projection.

A significant motivator for our project is to open up the space of dialogue for (and between) artists. Is there a question that you would appreciate being asked, or want to offer?

How can we, as artists and thinkers, create more opportunities for women in art? The galleries and museums still overwhelming prefer to give exhibitions to men. Those of us who teach know that the art schools are disproportionately peopled by talented women, as are many curatorial programs. What happens to these women as they enter the real world? Why are there so few great women artists (that we know of)?

Their most volatile and delicate substances

Trevor Mahovsky

Entering the exhibition *A kind of graphic unconscious* at Susan Hobbs Gallery, one encounters an arrangement of silvery slabs, each curved along one profile, some stacked together and others set at right angles, and placed upon a steel-framed table with a top made from the same material as the slabs. It is initially suggestive of a stylized landscape of rolling hills, but it is hard to say if one should situate oneself as if hovering over a miniature world, or as if looking at a distant horizon greyed by atmospheric perspective. This work is Erin Shirreff's *Catalogue, 8 Parts,* and the artist has made a series of these pieces; research reveals the slabs to be graphite-infused plaster casts, taken from unique molds that Shirreff derives from curves she creates through freehand drawing, so the casts can be understood to be traces of movements, thickened and displayed as things.

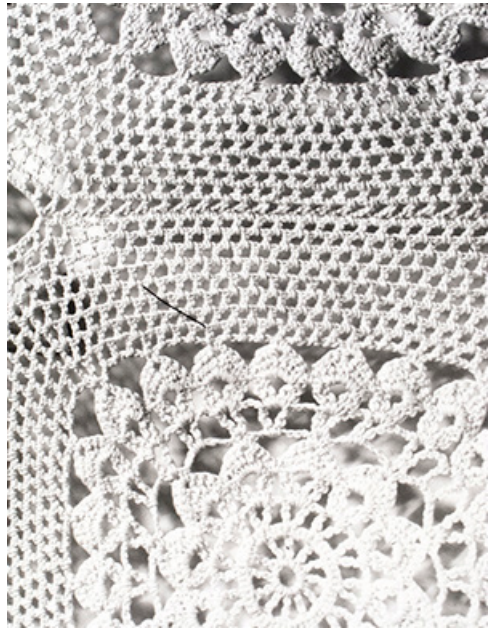
These pieces are arranged in a formal manner, reminiscent of the monochrome grouping of abstract plaster and wood shapes used in the teaching of introductory tonal drawing. In that sense, the casts simply are what they are, and here they sit at the scale of life. But even then, since the tabletop is made of the same material as the slabs, and the table itself sits upon a plinth, uncertainty returns. Is the framing device of the table full-sized or is it a model: do we take it literally, or do we see it as a representation?

Walking around the table, the relationship between the profiles changes with one's vantage point, and the composition expands and collapses, a pictorial effect associated with Anthony Caro's sculpture. But this misses the way the planes flesh out, attaining a sense of fullness reinforced by the soft grey shadows they cast upon one another, and by the fact that they articulate a more cohesive volume than Caro's extended drawings

in air, making the work ultimately more reminiscent of the stereometric sculptures of Naum Gabo in terms of their virtual body.

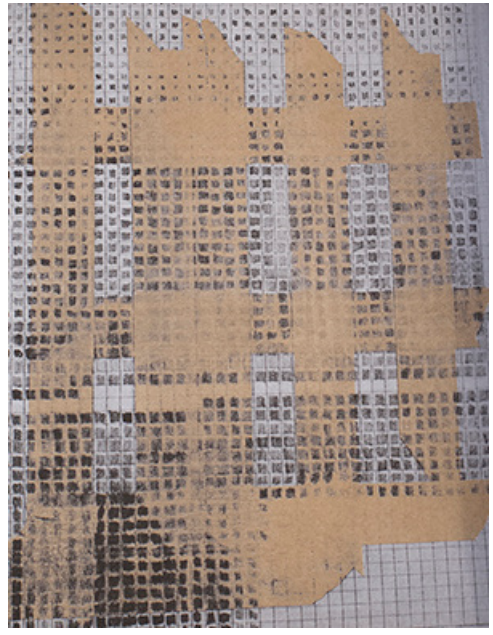
This final observation identifies why the tabletop has the same sucked-out atmosphere that Jonathan Crary ascribes to the virtual depth of stereo photography. On the wall a few steps to the left of the table hangs Liz Deschenes' *Moiré*, like a window onto this interior, though it admits no air. To create the moiré pattern, Deschenes photographed a window that she had covered with a screen of perforated dots. She created two identical negatives from this setup, laid them one atop the other, slightly out of registration, and produced a print from that. Its surface seems to swell towards us, volume without air; the undulations of the picture plane are palpable, but we can experience that peculiar space only with our eyes.

That experience offered by *Moiré*—of inhabiting a space produced by the confluence of the physiognomic limitations of our sight and an optical trigger—shares something with the fantasy of walking into the space of a film. An oblique view opens onto a haptic experience just as solid material takes on a virtual quality. This feeling of being unsettled proves characteristic of the experience of all the works in exhibition; one accesses a plane of correspondences by virtue of the most straightforward methods and means.



The works of *A kind of graphic unconscious* share some combination of being formally minimal, materially reductive and/or temporally repetitive but they are not inert: beyond the works of Shirreff and Deschenes, consider the black voids at the centre of Eileen Quinlan's prints, and the Ur-forms suspended by rope within the mise en scène of Erika Vogt's video *Darker Imposter,* along with the pulsing, repetitive structure of its editing. As that description of *Darker Imposter*'s montage suggests, there is a sense of volatility, heightened by the way each artist frames the recording and presentation of the trace.

The works variably incorporate processes of casting, photography, gestural mark-making and, in the case of the arm that appears in Vogt's video, acts of showing as a variation of pointing. If this is a list of indexes of things from a world somewhere out or back there, external or antecedent to the viewer's experience of the artwork, that notion is complicated by an uncertainty regarding the relationship between object, process and resulting translation. What sort of spatial or temporal frames are the works asking us to attend to? How are we to situate ourselves, and where are we to focus? What exactly do we see in the slightly blemished, but otherwise mirror-like surface of Liz Deschenes' untitled photogram?



The same could be asked if we follow a lead suggested by the exhibition title, and think of the drawn elements variably incorporated within the pieces—the sketchbook curves transposed by Shirreff into casts, the scribings etched by Quinlan into the emulsion layer of her negatives, the digitally animated

gestural marks in Vogt's video—as forms of handwriting, and therefore subject to analysis following the methods of graphology. As Walter Benjamin notes in *On the Mimetic Faculty,* "graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it."[1] This is not to suggest a search for an explication of the work in terms of the inner life of the artist. Rather, it introduces the idea of the importance of the materiality of the sign—in this case the index—as a means to access a plane of correspondences. Benjamin's ideas are of use here as one formulation of the idea of an optical unconscious, something made complex by way he sees language operating as a storehouse of an ancient—even occult—knowledge of the world. In this account, powers of augury and clairvoyance have yielded, without residue, to writing and language, which nevertheless provides a means for us to inhabit, in some indirect way, that earlier mystical relationship to the world, even if we now lack the perceptive powers to understand it. As Hito Steyerl notes, this mystical reading of the world would have entailed the admittedly bizarre notion of a fluency in the language of things.[2]

In Vogt's *Darker Imposter* it is as if this process is being staged in reverse. The organizing structure of language is replaced by a field of encounter, a cosmic debris in which we float. The swaying sensation caused by the camera panning across Vogt's darkened studio is intercut with a montage of what appear to be images taken from sketch and notebook pages, as well as digitally-generated elements, including gestural drawings that morph and a grid that spins at a dizzying rate. The ground falls away, its power to anchor replaced by the attractive force of objects, which are themselves suspended on ropes in the studio, and lit in chiaroscuro by a light on a stand that partially comes into view when the camera moves fully to the left. These thickened forms are almost recognizable—one appears to be anchor-like—and they occupy an intermediate state between tactile object and graphic icon.

There are parallels here with the way Werner Herzog films the Paleolithic cave paintings in his 2010 documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams.* At one point in the film, as a member of the team working on the cave hypothesizes that the flickering light of torches would have once animated the paintings, Herzog's camera pans across the walls of the cave, his makeshift lighting rig likewise producing moving patterns of light and shadow over the undulating rock surfaces. The volumes of the rock and the movement of the light make the paintings seem palpable. Indeed, some of the paintings are noted to possess a kinetic quality in their own right—there is a stuttered drawing of a rhino, and another drawing of a bison with eight legs—and they are described by Herzog as aspiring towards cinema.

If memory serves, at one point in the film there is a mention that, relative to our contemporary position of looking at the paintings of Paleolithic people, 'we are locked in history, they were not'. It is ridiculous to compare looking at relatively recently made artworks with looking at 30,000 year-old cave paintings, and perhaps that's why it is irresistible. Such a comparison is out of scale, a distortion of what it is trying to visualize. Yet is it not apropos, given the problem of perspective that the commentator in the film is alluding to, a problem that results in episodes of a sort of temporal vertigo in both the scientists and the film crew? In his narration, Herzog refers to the way the sense of distance collapses, and it is as if they have stumbled into a living environment, interrupting the Paleolithic painters at work. This fosters a sense in the crew that they are being watched.

There is an echo here with the photographer Carl Dauthendey's observation, mentioned in Walter Benjamin's *Short History of Photography*, that the Daguerreotype's incredible and unfamiliar clarity was at first so unsettling to viewers that it seemed to them that the faces in the images were staring back.[3] This uneasy reaction to the mimetic capacity of

photography perhaps helps to understand the violence Eileen Quinlan has done to the two negatives from which she printed the photographs *Bonanza* and *Acting Out.* At first glance, both appear to be images of a delicately crocheted tablecloth which has been torn to reveal gaping black voids: in the case of *Acting Out*, the image is almost entirely taken up by a black hole, surrounded by a few tattered remnants of the cloth. Further inspection of both photographs reveals that it is not a tablecloth that has been destroyed in each case, but an image of one. Quinlan commonly runs her negatives through a cycle of abuse, exposing them to extremes of temperature, leaving them sitting in expired chemicals for protracted periods, tearing the emulsion from the outdated black and white polaroid stock she uses, and otherwise mechanically distressing them. A living face stares back from the prints, though it is only that of the viewer reflected in the frame's glass, which is even more like a mirror sitting in front the blackened voids that result from the near obliteration of the emulsion in parts of the negative.

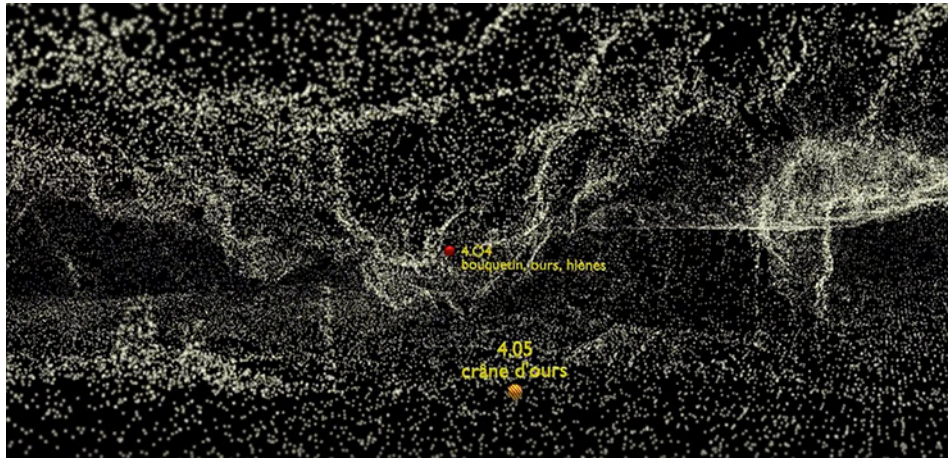
These two prints bring to mind Gordon Matta-Clark's 1969 work *Photo-Fry,* for which he fried polaroids of Christmas trees in oil and then applied gold leaf to them before they cooled, though without the mythical overtones. Quinlan's process is less an alchemical one than a prosaic working through, in this case right through the emulsion, wherein focus on medium is intensified to the point of its physical destruction. It can be hard to distinguish between the traces of the manipulation of the negative and

the visual depiction of the tablecloth: white rivulets, possibly caused by the residue of chemicals, and feathery wisps of light, possibly the result of the peeling emulsion, appear to be the frayed edges of the crocheted threads. The laboriously crocheted tablecloth is equated with the plane of the image, a kind of shroud of appearance, and thus the work of rending that plane is the undoing of the equal work invested in its assembly. What remains is still an image, made uncanny by virtue of the way traces of a drawn-out studio process blend with the instantaneously captured trace of the tablecloth, itself made stitch by laborious stitch: it is hard to say if the original image is more or less phantasmal than the void that is opened within it.

Liz Deschenes' untitled photogram presents a similar view onto a void, in this case a thick haze. Its surface is heavily silvered and, as in the work of Quinlan, faint traces can be seen of what could be the result of handling, chemicals or possibly even some sort of modulation of light captured in the original exposure. But unlike Quinlan's work, it is difficult to call it an image. Standing at an angle to the piece, so that the rectangle of light from a gallery window is reflected in its surface, perhaps opens up—if we are receptive to it—a time before the invention of photography, when the technology for the capture of images existed, but there was not yet a means to fix them. This evokes not only the fog from which Benjamin has photography emerge, but also Geoffrey Batchen's related concept that photography existed for a long time as a sort

of collective dream, well before the technological breakthrough of fixing photographic images arrived. In that dreamspace, to paraphrase Batchen's account of William Henry Fox Talbot's vision of photography, transience and fixity are somehow magically brought together.[4]

But the point is not to erase difference—between moments in time, states of being, categories of experience—but to come to an intuitive understanding of the nature of that difference, an understanding that is rooted in the materiality of things and the materiality of our bodies, and is therefore always in motion. One can feel that mysterious space to be vast, or infinitely small: as nothing in the most literal sense. A universe opens and collapses. This is a way to open an at least shifting perspective on the present, as works such as Deschenes' *Moiré* speak to a condition of visual noise that is more pertinent to the digital image, wherein algorithms replace the indexical processes of analogue photography. In the case of Vogt's *Darker Imposter,* the use of video establishes a self-conscious relation to that now long-lost ability Benjamin ascribes to the ancients, "To read what was never written."[5] Openly giving ourselves over to a state of uncertainty and confusion—actually a form of play—is the closest we can come, but even then there is a sense of displacement, a product of the way the past time of the studio shoot is reconstituted



within the time we spend in front of the monitor.

In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* the scientists are working on representing the cave via digital plotting, a series of points that correspond not only to the shape of the cave but to the location of drawings, bones, and other artifacts found within it. For all its objectivity, this plotting retains a sense of mystery, since the spaces between its dots are the conflation of a rationally plotted, constricted space with an unfathomably vast sense of time. In the end, its impossible to say what the space between those dots is, other than an array of possibility, in the same sense as we might describe the future. In Quinlan's *Acting Out,* we stand at the mouth of the cave, yet its depths are on the surface. It is an encapsulation of an expanse of time within a constricted space; returning to the example of Chauvet, it is impossible to tell if the footprints left by a human child near those of a cave bear mean the bear preyed upon the child, or that they missed each other by thousands of years. The tablecloth in *Bonanza* is both a thread extending through time and a spatialized mesh, a layer made even more complex by its situation relative to layers of process and presentation: emulsion, celluloid, paper and the glass of the frame.

The work of the artists in *A kind of graphic unconscious* encourage us to hazard a measure of such gaps by inhabiting them in an intuitive, bodily sense. The question turns to how this notion of perception and consciousness rooted in the body can relate to such digital visualizations as the plotting of Chauvet Cave. To answer that we can only start by looking to the structure of the exhibition and the correspondences it posits, and to the way they can open up, also like an array of possibility, on to new experiences and things.

A connection is drawn between material and immaterial states: think of the bodily experience a viewer might have of the virtual space in Deschenes' *Moiré* and Shirreff's *Catalogue, 8 Parts.* One can physically

walk from piece to piece, from table to window in an airless room, or teleport vast distances by virtue of some echo or other correspondence, as with the back-and-forth way this essay has been put together. These two ways of moving through the exhibit exist in a dynamic and indeterminate relation to one another. At times they fold together in a complimentary way, at other times it is as if one is jarred between different planes of existence. Walking the floor from one work to another suddenly feels like crossing a void. What ultimately connects these works, other than a temporarily shared space and an exhibition title? To Benjamin, collecting things based on similarity was a primordial form of reading the language of things, an idea that resonates not only with the logic of curation but also with the way this text adds Chauvet to the context. Sometimes we feel a similarity between things that is explained only by some unconscious compulsion, an effect Benjamin notes when he speaks of the way that, "To children, words are still like caverns, with the strangest corridors connecting them."[6]

Notes

1. Benjamin, Walter. "On the Mimetic Faculty" in Reflections, New York: Schocken Books, 1986, p 335
2. Steyerl, Hito. "The language of things", in transversal - eipcp multilingual webjournal, www.eicp.et/transversal/0606/steyerl/en, 2006
3. Benjamin, Walter. "Short History of Photography", in Screen Oxford Journals, Vol 13 No 1, 1972, p 8
4. Batchen, Geoffrey. Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History, Boston: MIT 2000, p 11
5. Benjamin, Walter. "On the Mimetic Faculty", p 336
6. Benjamin, Walter. "Thought Figures" in Selected Writings v2, part 2, 1931-1934, Cambridge: Belknap Press 2005, p 726.

The title of this essay is taken from Walter Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar" (1933) in New German Critique, No 17 Spring 1979 p 68

Liz Deschenes

Moire, 2007
uv laminated chromogenic print
101.5 x 76 cm

untitled, 2015
photogram
25.5 x 20.5 cm

Erin Shirreff

Catalogue 8 Parts, 2013
hydrostone, pigment, graphite, steel
78.5 x 76 x 51 cm

Pages (no. 20), 2014
book pages, pins
38 x 38 cm

Pages (no. 23), 2014
book pages, pins
30.5 x 30.5 cm

Erika Vogt

Engraved Plane (metal guide), 2012
bronze
251.5 x 14 x 4 cm

Darker Imposter, 2013
1/3 digital video with sound

Engraved Plane (green wooden instrument), 2012
wood latex paint, celastic, tambourine jingles, and nail
32.5 x 9 x 4.5 cm

Engraved Plane (green curve), 2012
wood and latex paint
75 x 38 x 2 cm

Eileen Quinlan

Bonanza, 2013
1/2 silver gelatin print
71 x 58.5 cm

Acting Out, 2014
1/3 silver gelatin print
101.5 x 78.5 cm

Acknowledgments.

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Photo credits:

Erika Vogt, *Darker Imposter,* 2013 (film still) courtesy of the Artist, Overduin and Co, Los Angeles, and Simone Subal, New York. Co-commissioned by the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Frieze Foundation for Channel 4. Pages 10-11.

Toni Hafkenscheid, Courtesy of Susan Hobbs Gallery. Pages 14-15, 18-19.

Moire 3 corresponds to the exhibition *A kind of graphic unconscious* at Susan Hobbs Gallery, 4 July to 15 August 2015.

Moire 3 / December 2015
Colin Miner, Ella Dawn McGeough and Liza Eurich

Contact: info@moire.ca