

PAINTING
DOESN'T
COUNT

1972
JAMES QUIN

1441
ANDREW BRACEY

1897
M.B. O'TOOLE

1972 1441 1897 2021

1441 1897 1972

ANDREW BRACEY

M.B. O'TOOLE

JAMES QUIN

THE TEMPORAL CONDITIONS OF PAINTING

Painting Doesn't Count features the work of three artists at a similar point in their careers, having already submitted, or currently working towards the completion of a practice based PhD. Quin, Bracey and O'Toole's exhibition marks the first in a series of exhibitions, publications and proposed conferences that examine the relations between Art and Time.

The three artists are members of the Art and Time Research Group, founded by James Quin at LICA (Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts) at Lancaster University. The exhibition and catalogue were made possible through LICA research funding

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www.bridewellstudiosliverpool.org/news

PAINTING DOESN'T COUNT: MOBILITY IN TIME.

In *Time and Free Will* (1889), the French philosopher Henri Bergson introduced his theory of duration (*la durée*) in terms of affect, agency and embodiment.

¹Bergson's duration is a horizon of immediate experience, irreversible, qualitative, and a thinking of temporality that has no need for quantitative spatial logic. Bergson used the analogy of counting to clarify the distinction between time and space. When we count, we must hold in memory the units that are counted and juxtapose them with each subsequent unit. This juxtaposition, to follow Bergson, implies simultaneity and takes place, therefore, in space. We count in homogenous space and not in heterogeneous time. TIME DOES NOT COUNT...

This exhibition features three artists who produce artworks wherein time does count in ways, that foment a murmur in the normal and regular rhythms of counting, perform a 'doubling or bending of time'...'a strange kind of event whose relation in time is plural'.² Andrew Bracey, James Quin and M.B. O'Toole present work that responds to, and remediate extant works of art. Bracey re-paints aspects of Fra Angelico's 1441 Florentine fresco,

The Mocking of Christ. James Quin repeats images from the library scene in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 science fiction film *Solaris*, and M.B. O'Toole offers insights into the relations between the space of poetry and painting through a timely interrogation of Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 modernist work, *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hazard* (A throw of the Dice will never abolish Chance). All three artists acknowledge that in order for their chosen works from 1441, 1972, and 1897 to function as a carrier of meaning, they must have the potential to be mobile in time through various forms of repetition. This mobility in time can be described as a temporal condition of painting, a condition that overturns yet another term applied to painting by convention - the static image.

¹ Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will*. (London: Elibron Classics), 2005.

² Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, an extract from "The Plural Temporality of the Work of Art", *Anachronic Renaissance*, (New York: Zone Books) 2010, pp.17-19. In *Time: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press) 2013, pp. 38-42, 39.

To describe painting as a static image, one that does not move, is an over simplification that nevertheless provokes an admiration for painting's long history of overcoming the limitations of its inertia - its ability to refer to time, both on its surface and of the world beyond its edges. The temporal conditions ascribed to painting by convention, from Horace, James Harris, Anthony Ashley Cooper, to G.E Lessing, adhere to an understanding that painting as a static image cannot represent movement or the passage of time.³ In *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), Lessing argues that space is the purview of painting and not time. While Ernst Gombrich's essay *Moment and Movement in Art* demolishes the argument that the changeless cannot represent change... a temporal condition of painting, not held on its surface and bound by its edges - it's mobility in time - returns us to the question of painting as a static image, begging the following question.⁴ IN RELATION TO WHAT, IS PAINTING STATIC?

Quin places his paintings into what he calls an open labyrinth, a timber maze-like structure without walls that allow the paintings to be seen simultaneously and successively. As we walk around and through this labyrinth, we set the paintings into motion through an awareness of parallax motion.

⁵ The perception of parallax allows the whole space, including the paintings, to be set into motion at different rates relative to any individual audience member's position within the labyrinth. Paintings hung on the walls of the gallery space are perceived to move at a slower rate to those hung on the labyrinth's supports.

Bracey's relationship with Fra Angelico's *The Mocking of Christ* stretches back to 1995, when an encounter with the fresco fomented the dilation of time and the deceleration of the gaze. These qualities are ascribed to certain artworks by Mieke Bal under her term 'sticky Images', images that Bal sees as making 'time its business and its medium, yet is not deployed in the allegedly temporal media. It works with time on a level that simultaneously acknowledges and challenges the fixity of the visual image: the level of process in real time.⁶ Bracey's response to *The Mocking of Christ* limits itself to an exploration of line. I use the word limits here, perhaps unfairly. Bracey's use of line, in concert with Bal's *sticky images*, challenges the fixity of the image, the limits of perception, and memory. To move in close to examine Bracey's line from a distance is to encounter the qualities of these lines changing over time - from the apparently monochromatic line, to one bursting with prismatic colour - and back again.

3 See James Harris. *Works of James Harris Esq. with an Account of His Life and Character by his Son the Earl of Malmesbury.* (Oxford: J. Vincent for Thomas Tegg), 1841.

Lessing, Gotthold, Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, translated by Ellen Frothingham, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1873.

4 Ernst Gombrich "Moment and Movement in Art". *Journal of the Warburgh and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 27, 1964, 293-306.

5 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, parallax, from the Greek word *parallaxis* (alteration), is defined as 'the apparent difference in the position of an object when viewed from different positions.

6 Mieke Bal, "Sticky Images: the foreshortening of time in an art of duration", in *Time and the Image*, edited by Carolyn Bailey Gill (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 79-100.

In David Michael Levin's *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*, a distinction is made between two modes of vision; the assertoric and alethic gaze - where the former is narrow, fixed and inflexible, and the latter denotes pluralism, multiple standpoints and perspectives.⁷ It is the alethic gaze that acknowledges the interdisciplinarity, materiality and hapticity of O'Toole's contribution to *Painting Doesn't Count*. These coalesce in all of O'Toole's work but most effectively, perhaps, in O'Toole's cast bronze brush-strokes - objects that O'Toole refers to as 'gestures'.

In freezing, the fluid and sensual 'gesture' in time and by fixing it in bronze, O'Toole allows 'vision to reveal what touch already knew'.⁸ Like all of the surfaces created by O'Toole, whether they be the meticulously crafted surfaces of her paintings, polished and patinated bronze, or the porcelain like surfaces of her plaster gestures, they remind us that all matter endures the continuum of time, while focusing our attention on the relation between the time invested in their making and their power to hold an alethic gaze, in and over time.

A work of art is what Andre Malraux described as 'an object, but it is also an encounter with time'.⁹ What connects the objects presented by Bracey, Quin and O'Toole for this exhibition are the ways in which simultaneity and succession are in play, combined with a sense that the past is being reconfigured in the present. Their starting points from 1441, 1972, and

1897 also signal unfinished business. This unfinished business, however, is not approached with rehabilitation in mind - a revisionist historicism, but to protect it from historical specificity and to undermine art history thought of as an unbroken chain. In this sense their collective endeavors are open to past, present and future.

When discussing the temporal conditions of painting in relation to those of time-based arts - is the best we can say about what constitutes time-based art a matter of its motion in and over time. The work of Bracey, Quin and O'Toole can be described, on the surface, as static images. In answer to the question of what is painting static in relation to, their works move in relation to each other, move in relation to an embodied observer and continues to move in relation to an open future and an open past. Their work can be described as painting-based time, no longer static, and no longer counting in time.

7 David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York: Routledge) 1988. P440.

8 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons), 2012. P 46.

9 Derk Allen, *Art and the Human Adventure* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi,) 2009, p. 73.

JAMES QUIN

1972

“It is almost as though Quin’s interest mirrors that of the appositely named Quinn in Paul Auster’s City of Glass”

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REPETITION, PAINTING AND SOLARIS.

In Act 2, Scene 1 of *Julius Caesar*, Brutus tells Cassius to “count the clock”, to which Cassius replies it “hath stricken three”.

The ticking of a mechanical clock, however, will not be heard in Rome for another thirteen hundred years after Caesar's death, and in one of the earliest examples of anachronism in painting, the 15th century painter Robert Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* (1425-28), we see the Angel Gabriel informing Mary that she will soon give birth to the son of God amidst decidedly Flemish Architecture of the day. These anachronisms, from the Greek word *anakhronismos*, from *ana-* (backwards) and *khronos* (time) signal a temporal confusion that bothers the regular rhythms of counting, often begging an explanation, revision or correction – why the appearance of clock in Shakespeare's *Rome*? Should it be removed as an offence to temporal good manners? The work of art, according to Nagel and Wood, is ‘a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting’, an event where time thought of as being linear is consigned to a past that never was.¹⁰ Anachronism, then, is not simply a condition of our own contemporaneity.

A cinematic example of anachronism, one that prompted me to produce the series of paintings for *Painting Doesn't Count* is Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 science fiction film, *Solaris*, and in particular its famous library scene.¹¹ The scene takes place on the space station *Prometheus* in a wood-paneled library, packed to the chandeliers with stuff more befitting a nineteenth century reading room or seventeenth century *wunderkammer*. The most prominent images in the library are a set of Bruegel paintings, among which is perhaps his most famous painting – *Hunters in the Snow* (1565). We are not sure if these are reproductions of Bruegel's paintings or are intended by the director to be read as being the originals. This question of where meaning might lie between original and copy seems to be central to Tarkovsky's handling of Stanislev Lem's 1961 novel, as it is to my own practice.

Solaris's protagonist, Kris Kelvin, played by Lithuanian actor Donatas Banionis, is haunted by the repeated reappearance

¹⁰ Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, an extract from “The Plural Temporality of the Work of Art”, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone Books, (2013), pp.17-19. In *Time: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 38-42, 39.

¹¹ Tarkovsky's *Solaris* is based on the 1961 novel of the same name by Polish author, Stanislaw Lem.

of his dead wife, Harey, played by Russian actress Natalya Bondarchuk. These uncanny repetitions of Kelvin's dead wife, sent by the planet Solaris as a means of communication, not only traumatise Kelvin, but torment Harey as she struggles to make meaning of her existence(s). Each repetition of Harey brings her closer to an understanding, not of whom, or what she is, but what she is not. In this sense, understanding is approached through repetition in negative terms. My own painting practice has followed a similar pattern; in that I never knew what kind of painter I was becoming but had very clear ideas about what kind of painter I did not want to be. This becoming, however, became most apparent to me when I put together a number of images for an upcoming lecture for Paint Club East¹².

Having decided to review the documentation of recent painting and drawing for the lecture, it became clear that my practice had been one long, though intermittent engagement with repetitive strategies. Paintings had been made in series, were reproduced using printmaking techniques such as etching and dry-point, presented overlapping moments of time on the same surface, and had appropriated images from the history of painting. This awareness collapsed recollections of two important

moments pertinent to the question of where meaning lies between original and copy in my painting - the first being an essay written by Professor Christopher Jones for a catalogue to accompany the exhibition, *Evidence*, at the Globe Gallery.¹³ In writing about my painting, Jones observes:

It is almost as though Quinn's interest mirrors that of the appositely named Quinn in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*: "Quinn knew nothing about crime. Whatever he knew about these things, he had learned from books, films and newspapers. He did not, however, consider this to be a handicap. What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories."¹⁴

The second moment that mirrors Professor Jones' observations returns us to the library scene in *Solaris*, where Dr. Snaut, a cyberneticist aboard the Prometheus, in attempting to make meaning of both Kelvin and Harey's situation in relation to Solaris's attempts to communicate, utters the following:¹⁵

12 Paint Club East was founded in 2012; it is an Arts Council supported organisation for the professional development of painters in the Eastern region. Its aim is to develop dialogue across the East Anglian region around issues in contemporary painting. They have hosted talks by Rosie Snell, Marcus Harvey, Peter Ashton-Jones and Daniel Sturgis in two supporting venues - Firstsite and The Minorities Galleries in Colchester.

13 The Globe Gallery is in North Shields and Newcastle upon Tyne. Christopher Jones is currently Professor of Fine Art Practices at Newcastle University.

14 Paul Auster. "City of Glass" in *The New York Trilogy*. (London: Faber and Faber), 2011. P.7.

15 In the 1970 English translation of *Solaris*, Kilmartin and Cox substitute Snaut with Snow and by way of an anagram, replace Harey with Rhyeya. Lem, a fluent reader in English, repeatedly voiced his dissatisfaction with this translation.

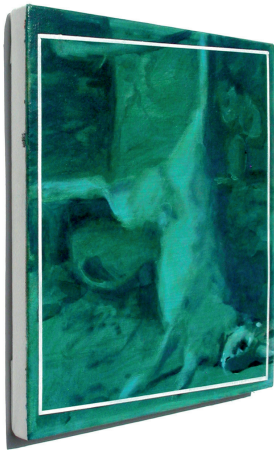


We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don't know what to do with other worlds.¹⁶

These quotes from Auster's *City of Glass*, and Lem's *Solaris* clearly articulate my position in relation to painting. I am interested in the ways in which my paintings enter into dialogue with other paintings, other images - not as an attempt to create the new, but as a mirror held up to reveal something of an image's mobility in time...its unfinished business.

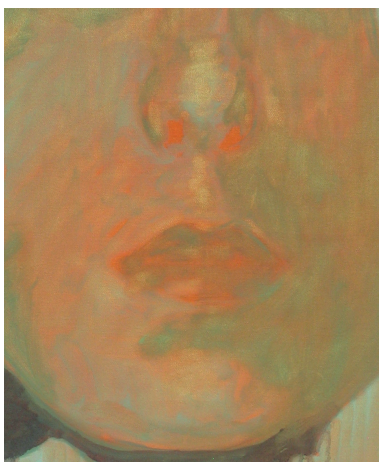
Once is Not Enough #2.
Newcastle University.
42 oil paintings on linen.
28m x 26cm. 2018.

¹⁶ Stanislaw Lem. *Solaris*. (Faber and Faber: London). 2003. P.75.



Still Life (Orthogonal
Object-Rectilinear Plane).
Oil on linen.
28cm x 26cm. 2019.

Repetition of Reproduction
(after Bruegel).
Oil on linen.
28cm x 26cm. 2018.



Harey # 1.
Oil on board. 12cm x 10cm, 2020.

Harey # 2.
Oil on linen. 50cm x 45cm. 2020.

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza #1.
Oil on linen. 28cm x 26cm. 2019.

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza # 2.
Oil on board, 28cm x 26cm. 2019.



Hunters in the Snow #1.
Oil on board. 28cm x 26cm. 2019.



Hunters in the Snow #3.
Oil on board. 28cm x 26cm. 2019.



Hunters in the Snow #2.
Oil on board. 16cm x 14cm. 2019.



Repetition from Reproduction
(after Picasso).
Oil on linen. 28cm x 26cm. 2019.

ANDREW BRACEY

1441

“I transcribe elements of the original painting in the form of coloured lines directly onto the gallery wall.”

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Qui Viveⁱ
Focusⁱⁱ
Time spentⁱⁱⁱ
Retention and erasure^{iv}
Anecdote^v
Dialogue^{vi}
Oscillation^{vii}
Love^{viii}
Primary awareness^{ix}
Attentiveness^x
Echoes^{xi}
Meditative kinship in isolation^{xii}

TWELVE FOOTNOTES ON QUI VIVE

ⁱ Qui Vive is a term for heightened watchfulness, vigilance or preparation for action; a state of being especially watchful and alert. *Qui Vive* is also a series of paintings made after a sustained period of looking attentively at Fra Angelico's *The Mocking of Christ* (1441). I transcribe elements of the original painting in the form of coloured lines directly onto the gallery wall.

ⁱⁱ Vija Celmins speaks of how: "The paintings I like to see have a compacted time that opens your eyes. When you pack a lot of time into a work, something happens that slows the image down, makes it more physical, makes you stay with it."¹⁷ Celmins implicitly understands strange relationships with time that are connected in the encounter with a painting, precisely because she is a painter. Celmins' notion of compacted time is pertinent to what an artist may notice in an artwork that others might not notice, or feel is significant - what I pick out in *The Mocking of Christ* for each *Qui Vive* for example. Celmins also talks of the millions of decisions that go into making a piece of work, to give a "personal identity that develops over painting it, many times and it gives it a certain kind of presence."¹⁸ Choices in the time of making can be understood to be compressed into the viewing of a work.

ⁱⁱⁱ After spending time close looking at a reproduction, elements of *The Mocking of Christ* are partially transcribed in the form of lines in the same position as the original composition. The line shifts and changes as you get closer to the painting, from afar the line can appear to be monochrome, as you get closer the lines pulse with multiple colours, akin to the splitting of light by the prism. Missing elements of the original concurrently allow space for the imagination or memory to be (re) ignited. Each *Qui Vive* is made in the here and now; I try not to consider previous versions, whilst simultaneously recognising that each of these will inevitably impact on the decisions of each new painting. Time mutates beyond the rigidity of clock-time, becoming nebulous. I wonder what it means to stare, instead of to see or look at a work of art? A stare can be perceived as rude, unsettling, off-putting. To stare is neither quick nor slight, but allows focus

¹⁷ Vija Celmins and Jeanne Silverthorne, 'Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne', *Parkett*, no. 44 (1995), p42.

¹⁸ Tate, 'Explore the Art of Vija Celmins - Look Closer', Tate, accessed 23 August 2021, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/vija-celmins-2731/vija-celmins-artist-rooms>.

and intensity; it can also be to zone out, to allow the subconscious in. Susan Sontag writes that: "Traditional art invites a look. Art that's silent engenders a stare. In silent art, there is (at least in principle) no release from attention, because there has never, in principle, been any soliciting of it."¹⁹ The stare, like the silent art Sontag speaks of, is something active and present, but also something elusive - felt in the gut, heart and eyes as much as the brain. I aspire for *Qui Vive* to allow someone to just be in the moment with it.

^{iv} The intention of *Qui Vive* is twofold. The making process creates a dialogue across time with Fra Angelico's fresco. I engage a sort of muscle-memory by repeatedly imprinting the image and memory of the painting; this also connects to my aphantasia - the inability to remember or think visually²⁰. The viewing process encourages close looking of painting, my own and Fra Angelico's. *Qui Vive* departs from the traditions of the transcription through a balancing act of retaining and erasing the original painting; *Qui Vive* fails if one aspect is too dominant. The activity and direction of how the knowledge is gathered and articulated relies on felt and tacit knowledge, in this case, garnered through the habitus of the artist.

^v The only time I have seen Fra Angelico's frescoes was during an A-level trip to Florence in 1995. On the penultimate day we were driven by coach to yet another old building, the San Marco convent.

My friends raced around and left to go shopping. Meanwhile I had a sliding doors experience. I stopped transfixed at the top of the stone stairs, enthralled by Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (1438-45) that faced me. Time slowed down, I could have stayed there all day, a lifetime. Any shred of teenage cool disappeared, replaced by love at first sight. The awe of this experience only intensified as I moved from along the corridors, from monk cell to cell to encounter masterpiece upon masterpiece. I was guided by my history teacher Mr Derrick, who was clearly surprised and delighted by my enthusiasm. *The Mocking of Christ* was the single piece that captured me most then, and now. I did not know that art could do make me feel this way. I hunger for repeats of this experience.

^{vi} *Qui Vive* is made with an intent for two-way dialogue between painting and painter, allowing mutualist influence to occur. Fra Angelico's work influences me in the present and I seek to give influence back to it; *The Mocking of Christ* can change, because of *Qui Vive*, this is a fundamental position of the 'parasitical painter'²¹. I give agency back to *The Mocking of Christ*, rather than taking from it, allowing a rich vocabulary of action to occur. Art historian Michael Baxandall writes that when we respond to an existing painting, we "draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, pick up, take on, engage with, react

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p16.

²⁰ ⁴ Andrew Bracey, 'Painting Aphantasia: Making The Non-Visible, Visible', in *PhotographyDigitalPainting*, ed. Carl Robinson, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 99-122.

²¹ ⁵ Andrew Bracey, 'Parasitical Paintings', *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 4, no. 2 (1 October 2018): 325-44, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcp.4.2.325_1.

to, quote, differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to, assimilate, align oneself with, copy..."²² These sentiments cannot be reversed, Fra Angelico cannot influence me in these ways.

^{vii} The process of looking at a work of art oscillates between past and present, and in this case between *The Mocking of Christ* and *Qui Vive*. The curious part of this is that all art is contemporary, after all the art happens in the encounter in the present. An oscillation of distinct times starts to eat itself in the present.

^{viii} Philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti writes: "When you are looking at something with complete attention there is no space for a conception, a formula or a memory. This is important to understand because we are going into something which requires very careful investigation. It is only a mind that looks at a tree or the stars or the sparkling waters of a river with complete self-abandonment that knows what beauty is, and when we are actually seeing we are in a state of love."²³ *Qui Vive* is made in a state of complete attention and love towards Fra Angelico's fresco.

^{ix} Meanwhile, philosopher Byung-Chul Han has talked of how our contemporary culture desires new stimuli and is increasingly steeped in attention deficit disorder-like tendencies. Han speaks of a loss in the human capacity to linger and a tendency to overlook the value in

the past. He sees this as being linked to a move away from ritual and religious practices that encourage deep attention. Han speaks of how within repetition in rituals, "past and present are brought together into a living present. As a form of completion, repetition founds duration and intensity. It ensures that time lingers."²⁴ In *Qui Vive* the repeatedly painted lines of the details of *The Mocking of Christ* evoke a ritual-like mediative state of awareness in the present. Artist Agnes Martin writes: "The artist uses only the primary awareness because the intellect draws on knowledge from the past which leads us in a circle. The response in primary awareness is in feeling. The response to art is feeling not intellectual (knowledge) or emotional love, anger, etc, but pure feelings such as you would have at the beach--freedom, joy, gratitude, innocence, harmony, content, the sublime, all positive feeling."²⁵ I value linked notions of curiosity, tacit knowledge and imagination, over rationality, definite answers and certainty. Connectively philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker talks of the activity of slow and careful reading can be "an intellectual curiosity rather than a deferential account; as a questioning rather than an explanation; as an incomplete reading rather than a final one; as a partial account rather than an exhaustive one; as a suspended judgement rather than a verdict...."²⁶ In

²² Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p59.

²³ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Freedom from the Known* (London: Rider, 2010), p92.

²⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Daniel Steuer, (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), p8.

²⁵ Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, 1st edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), p210.

²⁶ Michelle Boulous Walker, *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p33.

making, and asking others to view, Qui Vive I encourage a switch from desiring answers, towards noticing what is felt through primary awareness in the encounter with an artwork.

^x The historical, theoretical, and semiotic context of the work are not side-lined, but are supplemented (overshadowed perhaps) by readings of the work that are driven by notions of the periphery, materiality, textures, colour, line, etc. The attentiveness of the artist drives Qui Vive.

^{xi} There is focus away from the overall composition towards highlights and details, the eye is encouraged to wander. The methodology of the work allows echoes of the original paintings to be retained, whilst creating the room for

other possibilities and readings.

^{xii} Qui Vive began in Spring 2020 during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. I felt a kinship between my temporal state of isolation at home and painting as a form of devotion. Fra Angelico was said to believe that he was merely a vessel for God and that his paintings were actually made by God. Nothing was ever changed in his paintings once a mark was put down, as to do so would be to doubt God. Similarly, once I decide on the details to be picked out in the watercolour lines, there can be no change to it, no going back. To do so would be to doubt what is felt in the moment.



Qui Vive. The Mocking of Christ (detail).
Watercolour on plaster. Installation at
General Practice Lincoln. 2021.



Qui Vive. The Mocking of Christ (detail).
Watercolour on plaster.
Installation at General Practice Lincoln.
2021



Qui Vive. The Mocking of Christ.
Watercolour on plaster.
Installation at General Practice
Lincoln. 2021



Qui Vive. The Mocking of Christ.
Watercolour on plaster.
Installation at Gloam, Sheffield. 2021



Qui Vive. The Mocking of Christ (detail).
Watercolour on plaster.
Installation at Gloam, Sheffield. 2021

M.B. O'TOOLE

1897

“I consider my relation to art production in the present by examining modes of temporal operation in modernity and post-modernity.”

1972 1441 1897 2021

ON SOME DEATH THROE

What does it mean to engage with Stéphane Mallarmé now?²⁷ Why place Mallarmé's poem, *Un coup de Dés, jamais n'abolira le Hazard* (A throw of the Dice will never abolish Chance) at the heart of my research?²⁸

To address this question, I consider my relation to art production in the present by examining modes of temporal operation in modernity and post-modernity, leading me to question what it means to be contemporary?

In his essay 'Comrades of Time', Boris Groys equates contemporary with 'doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision - by the need for a prolonged reflection, for a delay'.²⁹ Groys regards the condition of uncertainty as a condition of the time, which he links to the loss of a historical perspective, prompting a reconsideration of the modernist project. For Groys, this state of limbo typifies a present that has lost faith in a future, justifying a

reconsideration of the spectator's relation to the art object and its production leading to a distinction between 'time-based art' and 'art-based time'.³⁰ The former includes traditional art works such as painting and sculpture, conceived with the understanding that they will be exhibited in a gallery space and seen over time, and the latter 'documents time that is in danger of being lost as a result of its unproductive character', leading to a change in arts relation to time, and an investment in work that documents a continuous present.³¹

Groy's definition of contemporary, expressed as doubt and embodied as hesitation, suggests a loss in the transition from past to present to future. This contrasts with 'classical modernity's belief in the ability of the future to realise the promises of the past and the present - even after the death of God, even after the loss of faith in the immortality of the soul'.³²

In his essay, 'Crisis of Verse', Mallarmé describes the contemporary era as a 'kind of interregnum'.³³ Mallarmé is referring,

27 The radical nineteenth-century French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé was born in Paris in 1842.

28 The only version of *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hazard*, to be published before Mallarmé's death in 1898 was printed in the English version of *Cosmopolis* in 1897, in single page format, and not when the poet had intended.

29 Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', e-flux journal, no 11 (December 2009) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/>

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', Stéphane Mallarmé: *Divagations*, translated by Barbara Johnson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 201–11, 202, (*Divagations*, Paris: Bibliothecque-Charpentier, 1897). Interregnum from Latin, from inter-between reigns or during suspension of normal government: from Latin, 'inter-between' + regnum 'reign' (OED)

firstly, to a state of uncertainty brought on by the death of Victor Hugo in 1866, secondly, to experimental practices in French poetry leading to a suspension of traditional metre and a new form of 'free verse'. In other words, the French reader, accustomed to counting; to the familiar rhythms of the language, was forced to navigate a new and unfamiliar space, which Mallarmé likened to a second French revolution.³⁴ The 'exquisite and fundamental crisis' Mallarmé refers to is linked to the classical French verse form of the 'alexandrine--a line of twelve syllables divided into two halves, or *hemistichs* by a pause called a *caesura*'.³⁵ As the uncompromising rules governing the alexandrine were loosened at the turn of the nineteenth-century, Mallarmé experimented with a new spatialised form, in which, 'the ear freed from a gratuitous inner counter, feels the pleasure in discerning all the possible combinations and permutations of twelve beats.'³⁶

In the interregnum Mallarmé exploits the themes and dramas of the past, re-writing the metaphor of the shipwreck favoured by the Romantic poets. Jacques Rancière writes, 'Mallarmé did what poets usually do - at least those who know what to do with old moons of inspiration: he reworked the poems of his elders in his own way.'³⁷ In *Un coup de Dés (A throw of the Dice)*, Mallarmé presents a constellation of seven hundred and seven words across twelve double pages, revealing a new spatialised form; a

new genre, one that unifies the traditional form of the alexandrine with free verse.

Mallarmé, like Groys, equates the contemporary era with doubt: in *Un coup de Dés* the master of Mallarmé's shipwreck, hesitates on the brink of the abyss. In his clenched fist he holds two dice, and, like Hamlet, his hesitation marks the space between being and not being. Unlike Groys's 'eternal present', Mallarmé's act of suspension reflects an era in transition, and the dilemma of the master/author in navigating a new space for poetry. As such, *Un coup de Dés* defies a traditional historical trajectory, instead performing a multiplicity of times reflected in the form and content of the poem, and its potential to generate new forms with each new encounter.

My reading and re-reading of *Un Coup de Dés* is testament to 'the pleasure I feel in discerning all the possible combinations and permutations of twelve beats.'³⁸ A pleasure that repeats in my encounters with Mallarmé, which are staged and re-staged in an ongoing series of imagined dialogues between Mallarmé, 'Me', and selected poets, painters, and philosophers who have responded to Mallarmé's generative poem. Among these are, Édouard Manet, Marcel Broodthaers, Michalis Pichler, Jacques Derrida, Quentin Meillassoux, Rosalind Krauss, and Agnes Martin. These dialogues are fashioned in the process of reading, memorising, reciting, writing, listening,

34 Ibid., p. 201.

35 Op. cit., Barbara Johnson, 'Translator's Note', Stéphane Mallarmé: Divagations, pp. 299-302, 299.

36 Op. cit., Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', p. 203.

37 Jacques Rancière, Mallarmé, *The Politics of the Siren*, translated by Steven Corcoran, London, New York: Continuum, 1996, p. 3[Mallarmé: *Lapolitique de la Sirène*, Hachette Littératures, 1996].

38 Op. cit., Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', p. 203.

speaking, looking, walking, counting, making, painting, and musing; in the act of constructing and deconstructing *Un coup de Dés*.

In the encounters I re-imagine of the space of painting through the space of poetry; through the network of reciprocal relations manifest in Mallarmé's poem. In *Un coup de Dés* narrative and fragmented forms merge, spatial and temporal divisions dissolve, as do traditional genres. In *Un coup de Dés* the measured metre of the alexandrine is at play in the fragmented form of the poem. In the exhibition I present all the possible permutations of the master's [author's] symbolic throw in the form of a mathematical model. This takes the form of a grid which like the rhetorical or literary figure of the *chiasmus* repeats in reverse order. As such the structure can be seen to simultaneously construct and deconstruct itself.

In the exhibition I suggest a new critical space for painting in which the tropes of poetry and painting come under scrutiny as the tension that exists between gesture *in* painting and *of* writing are made visible. I consider the grammar of painting through a playful engagement with the space of writing - the white page. Letters, numbers, words, and brushstrokes articulate their difference in the page and across the conceptual horizon dividing the page. The placement of brushstrokes in relation to letters, numbers, words and 'blancs', is intended to reflect the reciprocal nature of language. Like Mallarmé's constellation this work establishes the limits of meaning in a space where meaning is differentiated with each new encounter, where words constantly efface themselves in the silence.

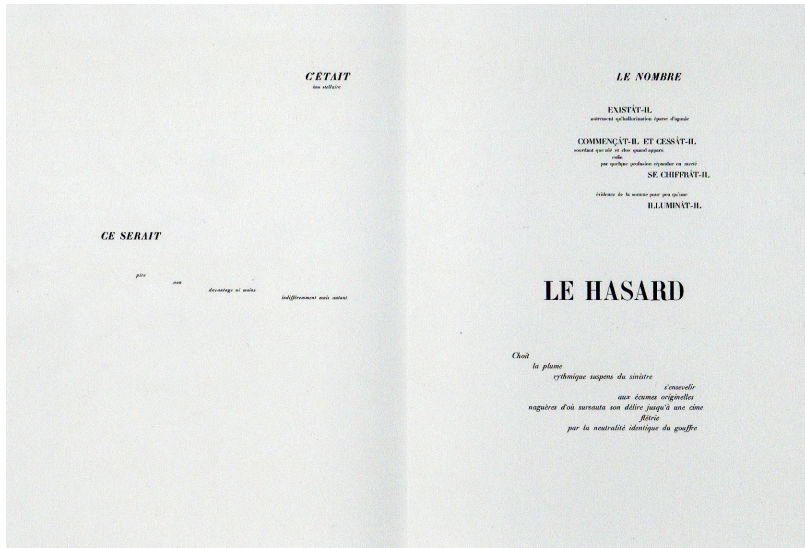


Fig. 1: Stéphane Mallarmé, Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard, Excerpt from Michael Pierson Edition published by Ptyx, 2004.

Fig.2: M.B. O'Toole, Untitled, Digital print, 56 x 38cm, 2015.

1 1

1 2 2 1

1 2 3 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 6 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 6 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 3 2 1

1 2 2 1

1 1

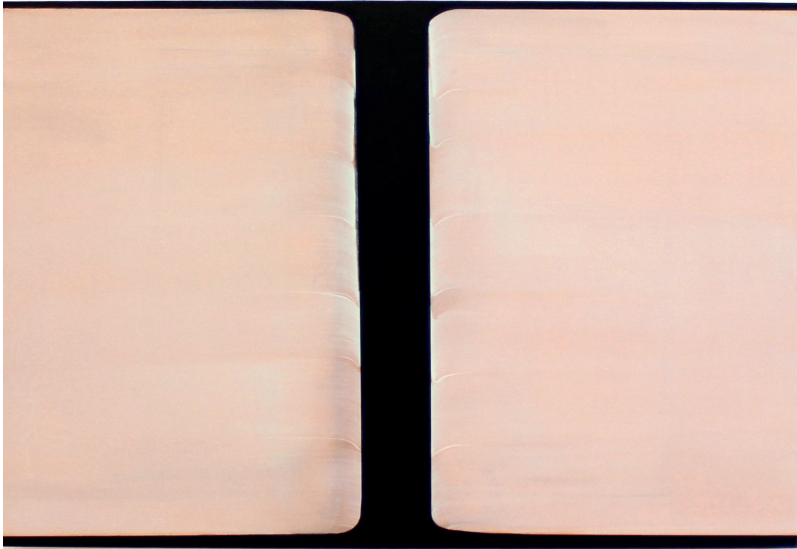


Fig.5: M.B. O'Toole, Variant Sail # 1,
(Series 1, Oil on board, 56cm x 38cm, 2016-2018.

Fig.7: M.B. O'Toole, Gesture (Series 4), Bronze,
18 x 3 x 0.5cm, 2016.



PAINTING DOESN'T COUNT

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