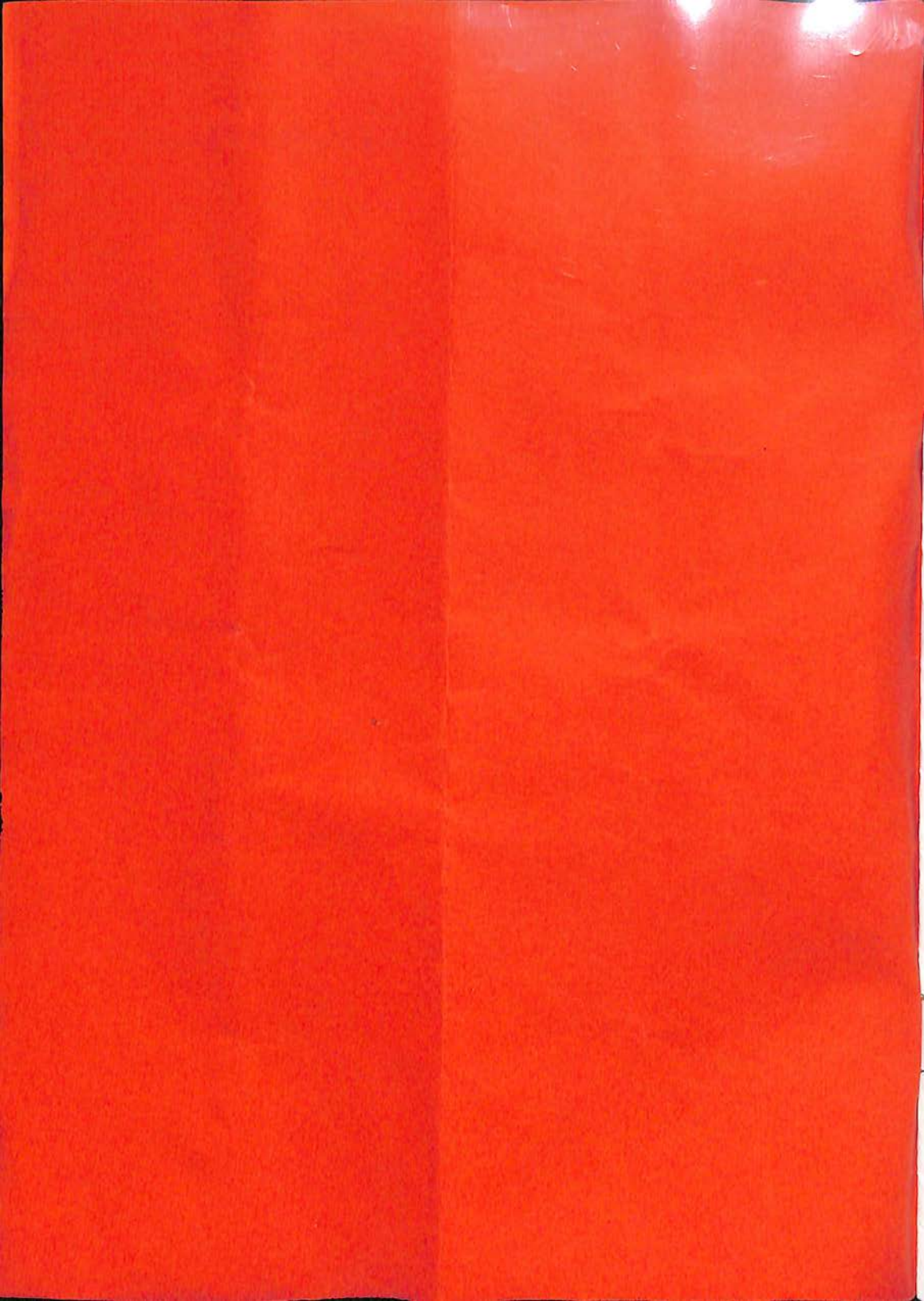


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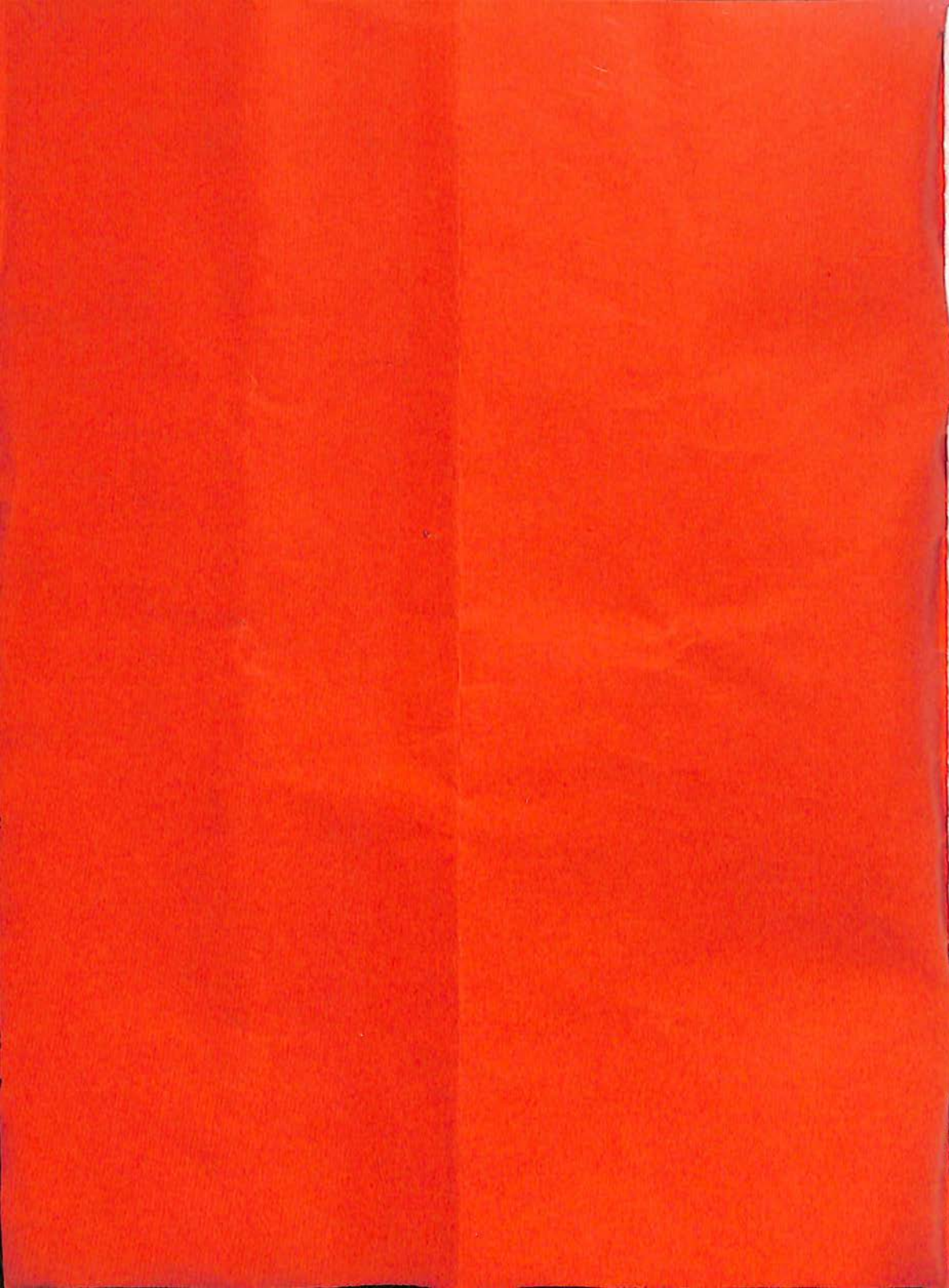


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mariusz JASTKOWIAK
angelina LUCKETT
lee MILLER
miria NAMONYE
effie VOURIE
phil WILLIAMS
monique WITSEN**

**curator nicholas TSOUTAS
text adam GECZY**

11 - 21 December 2002

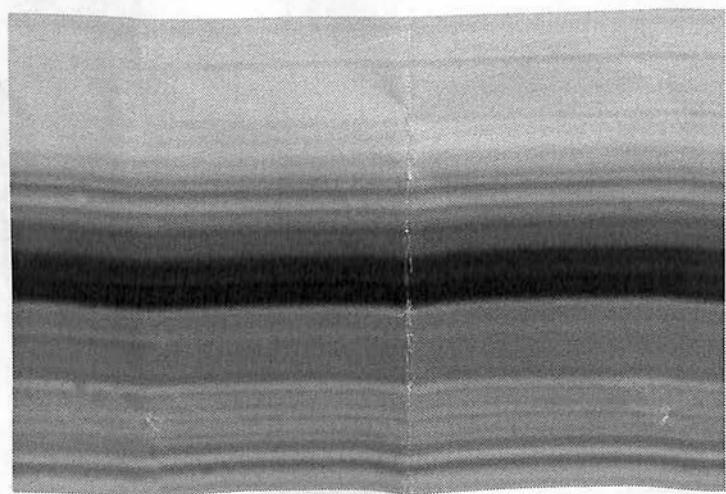
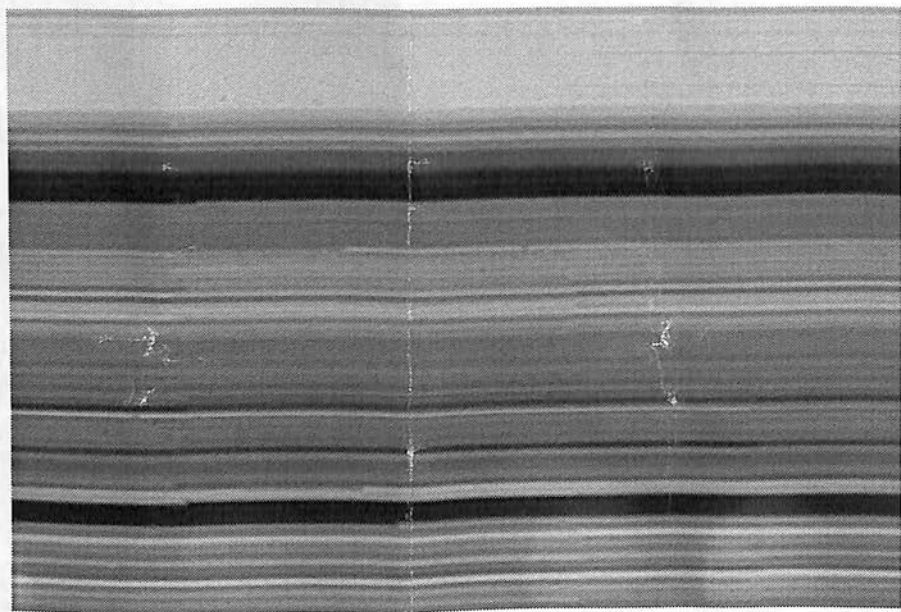


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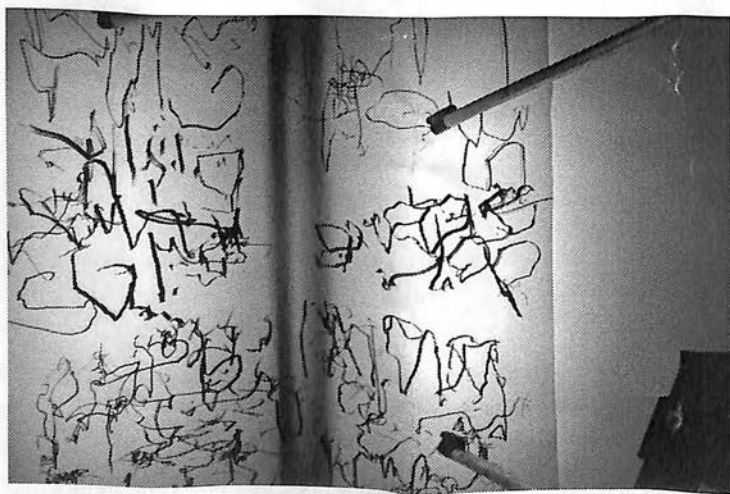
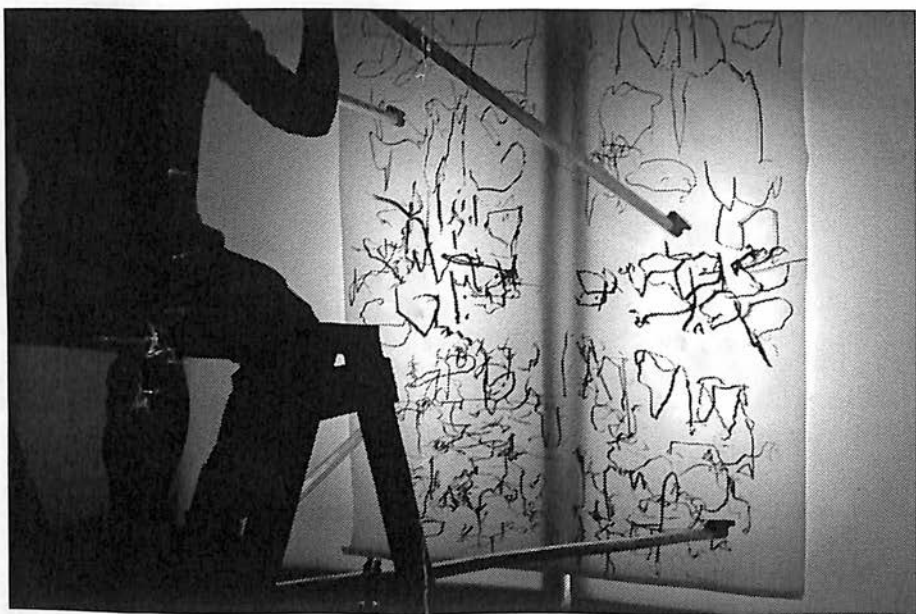
Jason Coltan, *everything anything*

Looking on, looking back and occasionally, effaced

Adam Geczy

Until relatively recently, an artist would learn a major discipline. That discipline was, and still is, tied to a medium, deriving from the Latin for middle, and related to *modus*, denoting a means or a way. So, conventionally speaking, an artist's education consists in learning about the tools of the trade, which are the physical and technical means of the clearest and most poignant expression. As it evolved from the Renaissance, specialising in a particular medium was guided by economic expedients and imperatives before pure artistic ones. As a painter, one was expected to paint on an appropriate subject on an agreed scale, often guided by the architecture. Specialisation and artistic professionalism logically resulted by the 1700s in philosophical reflection on the effectiveness of a mode or medium over another: sculpture was better for bodily forms, painting for spatial illusion (printmaking was largely seen as a degraded form of painting), while music was best for visceral and mental evocation. They were seen as different forms of phenomena that work on the senses in different ways.

Through force of belief and power, with such divisions in place, learning and making art can be a much easier affair than when they are not, since one might conveniently just move within the confines of the frame. It must be noted that the reading of Modernism as a process of experimental refinement to eventuate some formal purity is a selective one. For Modernism is synonymous with the avant-garde, who's very purpose was to challenge boundaries of form, technique, philosophy and indeed to search for alternative ways of living. Take a formal division, then topple it. It is difficult to say exactly when the avant-garde begins to dwindle, but it occurs at roughly the same point when artists' working methods



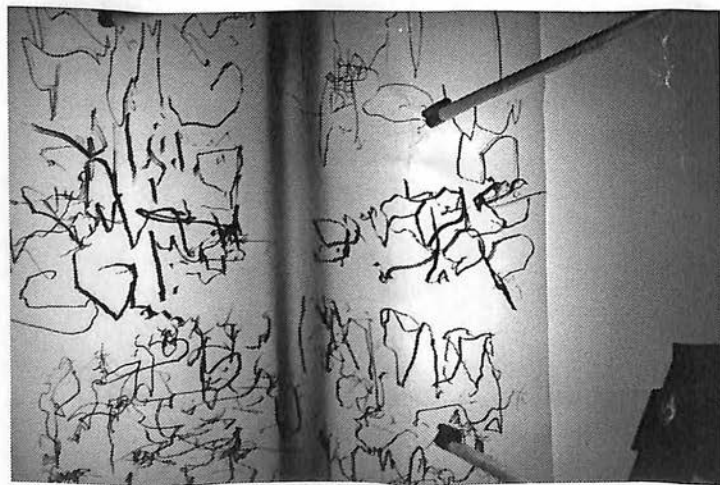
Benjiman Denham, *rewrite nine; space between*

are highly selective and heterogeneous, and where a medium and technique is increasingly sought to advance a particular project. This is very different from apprenticing yourself to a medium for the whole of your life (even Gerhard Richter maintains an agonistic relation to the mechanical and photographic). Generally speaking, from the 70s onward there has been a growing tendency for artists to multi-skill, to avail themselves of specialist assistance for a particular project, and to explore the most advanced technology available to them. The combination, or concatenation, of a number of elements belonging to several forms and disciplines is no longer unusual.

Before I look at nine very different artists who have grown up in an environment where disciplinary divisions exist more for the sake of convenience than to conform to a strict rule, it is worth reflecting briefly on how one might teach in the absence of strict delimitations. In the convoluted web of cross-disciplinarity it is essential, I think, not to forget that to teach the notion of openness is very much a dialectical process: students are given a rule, then offered the countless exceptions to this rule. All of these rules, be they in play or anachronisms, are inevitably historical and have a series of justifications and philosophies in their train. It is fair to say that today the rejection of formal boundaries has grown into a rule of its own, and that technical specialisation is done on a more private or on-to-one rather than institutional basis. While disciplinary openness has its advantages, it also means that, in the process of learning, students miss out on the discipline inherent in exploring a discipline. And the consequence of an intense relationship with a medium can be salutary perhaps even spreading to a refined perception of work and society. At worst, it leads to a precious hermeticism. Where this is happening today is in the technological arts, where artists and schools appear to be hypnotised by software knowledge and less interested in the discourses about where this could lead. I predict that the unfortunate consequence of this in the next five to ten years will be an untold amount of techno-driven fodder. How many tech-heads would bother knowing about Joseph Marie Jacquard, a major forerunner of the computer, born in 1752? How many are interested in the history of painting? Or poetics? Art is one of those strange creatures that, although it grows cantankerous and dull if it dwells too much on the past, it becomes shrill, puerile and lacking insight when it looks exclusively to the future.

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These nine artists are good examples of a balanced art-making, renegotiating past practices with new or reinvigorated approaches, sliding across the scale from the imperturbably palpable to the intangible, from facts to illusion. Subjective agency is another factor binding them all, especially in the body as either a mechanistic cipher, mediated by machines, or, at the other extreme, resisting the intervention of machines altogether.



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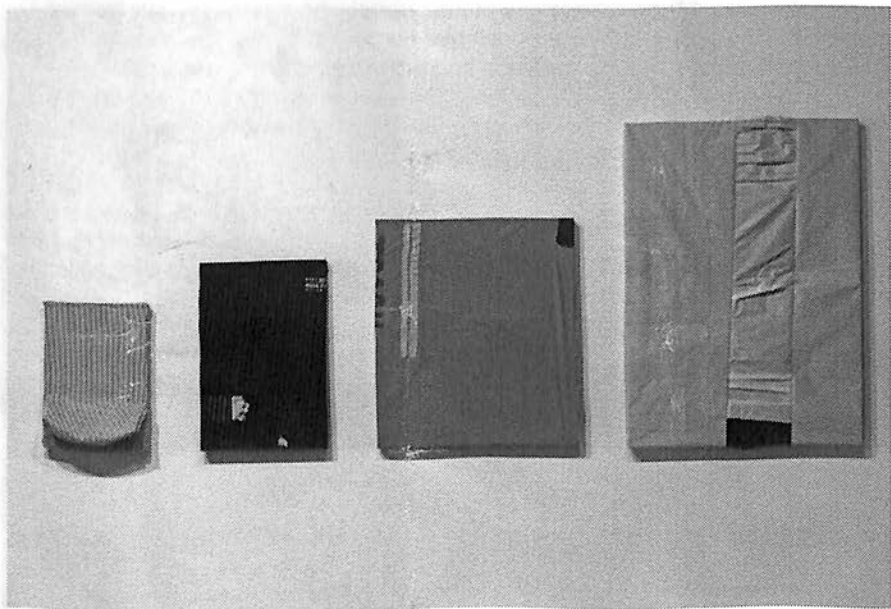
Mariusz Jastkowiak

The perennial and logical discovery of the subject who resists any intervention by machines is that the body itself becomes conscious of the mechanistic roles it assumes as in its habits and routine appetites. Any manner of resistance leads to a certain obsessiveness which can be accompanied by an air of piety that usually seeps out of the rigours of stylised repetition. This paradox of the mechanistically resistant body turning into a machine, despite itself was evidenced in Effie Vourie's performance, where she stands high on a pedestal like some parody of a high-diver with a small inflated pool of water below. Poised naked except for a belt-strap, instead of pretending to jump, she sucks out the contents of the eggs from one bucket, transferring the liquid to another, then throws the emptied shells into the pool. When I first saw this performance, I was immediately reminded of Beckett and the famous ritual Molloy's stone-sucking, the stones going from one pocket to another via the mouth, the body simplified, atomised to a banal routine process. As the performance wears on, the contents of the egg that were expelled began to take on the connotation of bile or viscera. After all, eggs are embryos, and you get the sinister sense that Vourie engages in some forgotten rite of sacrificial purification, the shells below looking less and less innocent as they gain in number.

As opposed to the ancient use of deliquescent matter as metaphor for bodily fluids as well as more lofty notions of transubstantiation, the performances of Benjiman Denham bring the body and machine into a state of abrupt impasse. Less shamanistic in nature, his prosthetic drawing implements bring to mind the automatic writing of the Surrealists and the dysfunctional contraptions of Jean Tinguely. Ever since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century signalled the unremitting presence of machines in our lives, humans have been intent on showing each other what machines cannot do, a reflex that has certainly not let up in the wake of computerisation. The now clichéd conclusion of such humanising contestation is that machines are incapable of spontaneous hypothesis or self-reflection. The vitalist (Rousseauian) objection to the machine is that whereas the machine forces uniformity, humans are capable of constant variation.

With his long drawing instruments affixed to his hands and feet, Denham effectively makes the machine spontaneous while the body attempts to remain consistent and austere. For what end up as quite intriguing drawings are in fact all botches—failures, but pleasing all the same. At closer inspection you might make out a letter or two, but largely all you see is scribbles and jabs. These are the salutary results of trying to write text. As the body remains focused, intent, the machine accomplishes something that suggests the opposite, namely freedom, randomness, everything supposedly foreign to machines.

In art, probably the most pervasive reaction against the desubjectivising of machines lay in performance and gesture. Every gesture belongs to the person who makes it and, legible or not, is therefore like a signature, particular and personal. Machines don't have signatures. But what if you mechanise performance? Beckett did this, and the simplification of theatre and performance to a set series



Angelina Lockett, *the'orem n. proposition which can be demonstrated*



Lee Miller, *the electric body project*

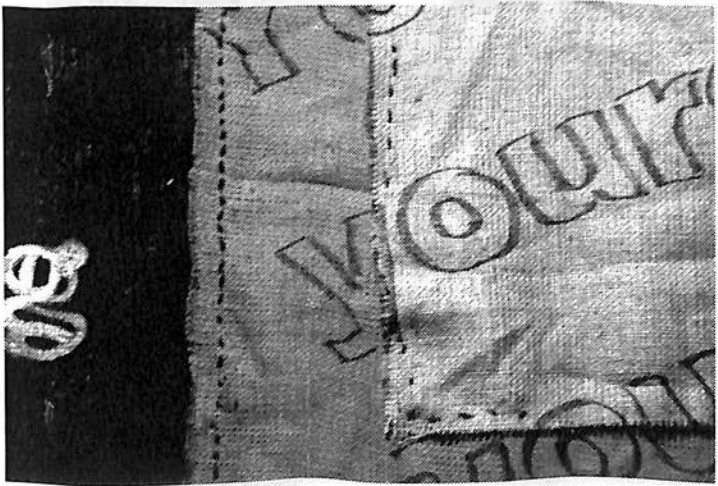
of words and movements is a strong hallmarking of performance of the twentieth century, linked to the subject alienated by god and polis. But the incorporation of computers brings this tradition into a different realm. Or does it? In the early 1800s the German writer Heinrich von Kleist produced the seminal short text *On Puppet Theatre* which puts forward the unexpected yet prescient notion "that we shall find grace at its purest in a body which is entirely devoid of consciousness or which possesses it in an infinite degree; that is, in the marionette or in the god."

As if taking up this dialogue afresh, Lee Miller staged an entire performance at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre on 8 November 2002 that had been choreographed through a computer; the movements of the performers were those generated by the computer. The cumulative effect of such Miller's experiment is profound, as it stresses the arbitrariness of subjective input and the relative nature of audience response. Miller's innovation has already earned him resistance within the field of dance, but to them he could also point out that one of the reasons that Degas's main attraction to drawing and painting ballet dancers was that they struck poses that were unlike those that had been drummed into him through his years of academic training; he sought to capture bodily states that did not fit conventionally into the bodily repertoire of movement and gesture. The human body and its representations have always sought to overstep common day limits. To resist computers in such endeavours is nothing but defensive nostalgia for mythic authenticity.

In Phil Williams' video one has the feeling that the machine has more or less taken over. If computers could have dreams, this would be it; an endless procession of light fragments, expanding then dying, to the sound of high-pitched static. The title *There is No Tree of Awakening* derives from a Zen dictum that forces one to notice that there are no essentially sacred sites, for every place is potentially a place of discovery, no matter how trivial or inauspicious it may appear. Abstraction in time-based work is very difficult to pull off especially since the nature of the medium has the viewer in a state of expectation. But very soon here anticipation gave way to a timeless lull. And behind the calming reprieve of the patterns appearing then dissolving into the darkness could be discerned the faint nattering of voices, like the voice of consciousness that now and again looms up from out of the calm nullity of meditation. But you are never sure if this video conjures the human mind or is the impossible representation of cybernetic thought, a computer left to its own devices, an artificial intelligence turned in on itself.

The video by Jason Coltan, *Matter* is similar to the degree that, on occasion, the image fell into a digital abstraction, and at certain areas the pixillation was enlarged to create its own mosaic that interrupted parts of the image. Equally as meditative as that of Williams, the video and sound installation sucks the viewer up into an endless channel, a neon-lit tunnel cum oesophagus. The sound gently cracks, hums and splutters, soft and sharp, fusing the sound of machines with those of humans. Succumbing to the sucking motion of the image interspersed with flashes and digital interference is to become hypnotised and cast into realm where time has no relevance.

Want fuller
lips? Let me
smæek you on
the lips

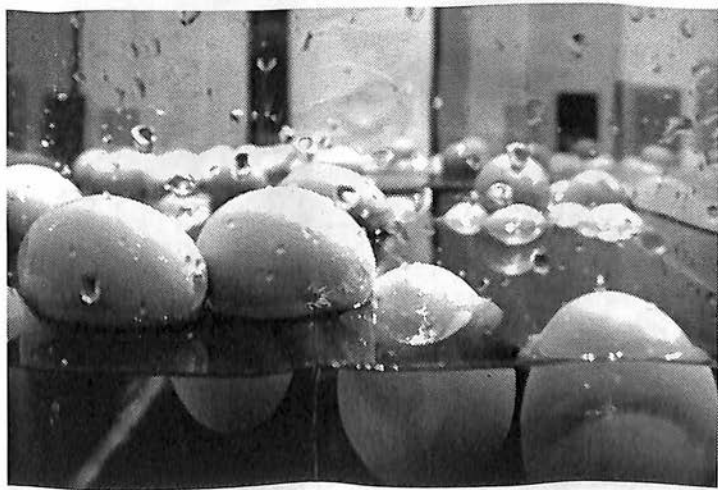
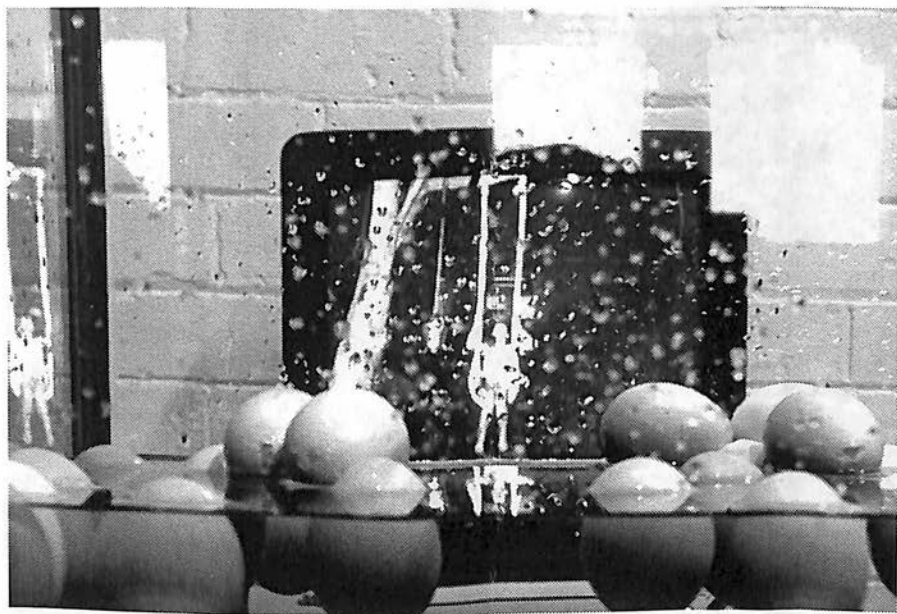


Miria Namonye

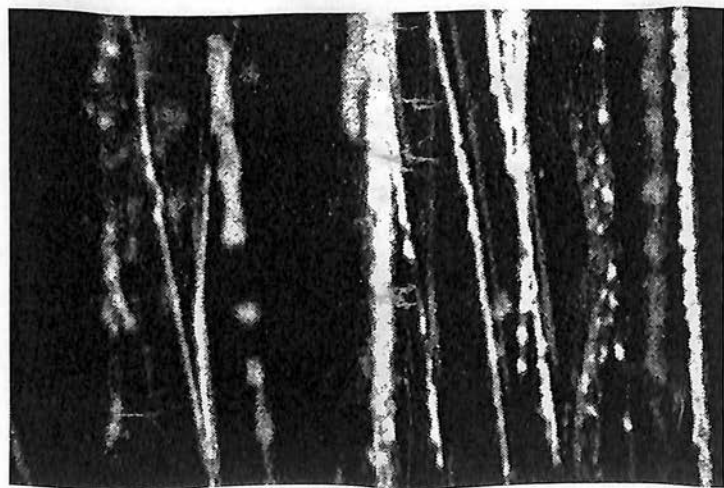
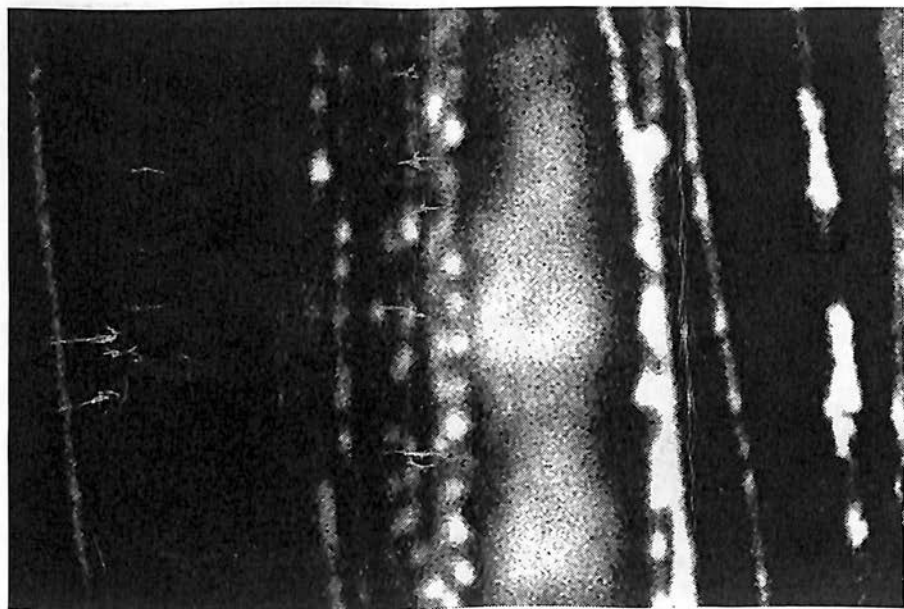
As a kind of nexus between the ephemeral and tactile works were Monique Witsen's cool glass sheets inserted onto the wall. The layered sheets with their abstract white nebulae are shallow chambers that shimmer gently as your eyes moved across the surface, the colours of the outside fusing into the soft flow of opaque and translucent white forms. These variously sized panels are evocations of modernist abstraction, yet their connection to stain glass relieves them of the rigid stolidness that frequently encumbers such work.

The dialogue with painting is also evident in the work of Mariusz Jastkowiak, Angelina Lockett and Miria Namonye. Jastkowiak's images are interrogations of basic codes of domesticity such as interior home snap-shots and the surfaces associated with suburban interiors, typified by the kitsch of laminate and vinyl. Meanwhile Lockett's intercessions on the painterly surface are more to question the ubiquity of the taught virgin white canvas. In its place Lockett make the wooden canvas frame a site for more than one kind of coloured fabric and in differing stages of flaccidity. And Namonye dispenses with the frame altogether, and the cloth is a patched and voluminous running surface shouting lines which read as if taken from advertisements for women's products, "smaller pores? Is there such a thing?" or the artist's reactions to them, "Buy a lipstick because it looks good on someone else". It is a raw surface of dry declamations and passionate reactions.

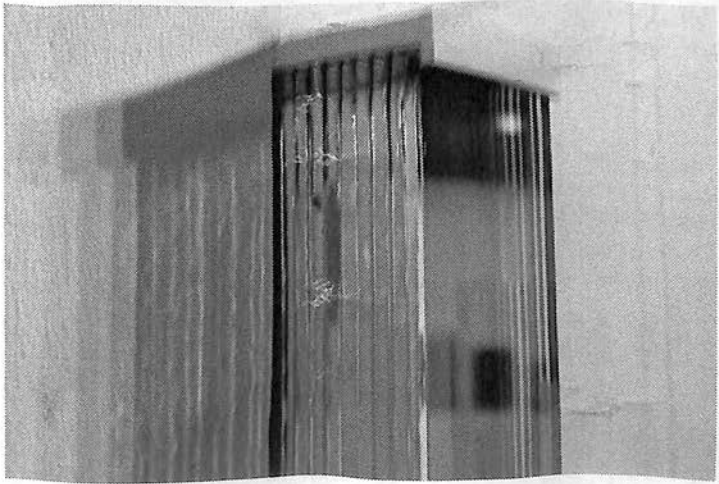
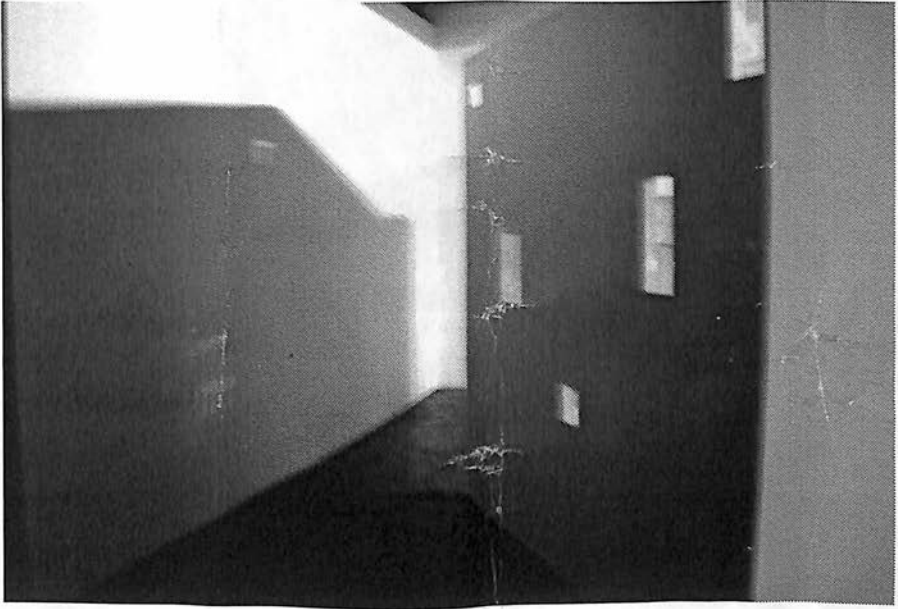
In all the works of this exhibition, the contemporary subject is polymorphous, as is the mode of its expression. Quite often the artist assumes a sceptical, ironic relation to the medium, conscious of its capacity to define or devour the subject, leaving him or her behind. Where there might once have been a time when the artist inhabited the work, we see here artists within the work, looking on, looking back and occasionally, effaced.



Effie Vourie, *In-Dangered...ed II*



Phil Williams, *there is no tree of awakening*



Monique Witsen

artspace



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