

*Image, object, action:  
building paintings with digital logic*

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Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis

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## Abstract

*Object, Image, Action – building paintings with digital logic* is a practice-based project focused on the collection, categorisation, storage and combination of objects, images and actions. These assembled parts comprise a digital and non-digital database which uses structured and unstructured ways to generate layered paintings. The form, aesthetics, and poetics of the database manifest in my project and are explored for their art-making potential. Sited within the context of post-analogue painting, this project considers the effects of our increasingly digital world on both the paintings I make, and the way they are received. Using digital methods more than digital tools, I work between and across digital and non-digital workspaces, considering the interaction, constraints, and similarities that exist between them. Influenced by my digital workflow, I use modular layers, holes and transparency to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct paintings, creating the conditions for movement and unpredictability in image-making. I investigate how, through repetition over time, my actions turn into images and objects, subsequently driving new conceptual and formal interests. Strategies of imitation and replication amass and converge to form new outputs, the research motivated by what occurs when the expected makes way for the unexpected.



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### **Attestation of authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Potenger', written in a cursive style.

Amy Potenger

3 August 2022



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Jeena Shin and Lucy Meyle (aka Team Jucy). It has been a privilege to work with you both.

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Lucy, your playful and intellectually rigorous way of being an artist is very inspiring. Thank you for being so attentive and generous, especially at the writing stage of this project. Your aptitude for language and your insightful questions have been invaluable for clarifying my thoughts with regards to both the writing and making.

Sam, I am so grateful for your encouragement and belief in me, not only during this project but always. Thank you for helping me with my writing, for bringing me bubble tea and for telling me how databases work.

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To the AUT visual arts community, especially the fellow postgraduate students, for fostering such a warm, supportive and curious intellectual space.

Mum and dad, thank you for the unwavering base of love and support that you have always provided, and for helping to make sure I had what I needed when undertaking this project.





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All images appearing in this exegesis are mine unless otherwise stated.

Works from other artists are recorded in detail below in order of appearance.

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© Association Marcel Duchamp, by SIAE 2020. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)

<https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/box-in-a-valise/>

8. Marcel Duchamp, *The Green Box*, 1934, handmade box containing 94 pochoir reproductions on various papers, 33 x 28 x 2.5 cm.

Gift of Barbara and Aaron Levine, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Photo: Cathy Craver, Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society, New York 2019.

<https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/550276/marcel-duchamps-dueling-exhibits/>

9. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–23, oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, 278 x 178 x 9 cm

<https://www.sartle.com/artwork/the-bride-stripped-bare-by-her-bachelors-even-marcel-duchamp>

10 & 11. John Nixon, pages from *Thesis*, 1994. Published by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, February 1994. Courtesy the artist and ACCA.

<https://content.acca.melbourne/uploads/2016/11/John-Nixon-Thesis-screen.pdf>

12. John Nixon, *EP+OW* (installation view), 1997, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi

<https://citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/john-nixon-epow/>

13. John Nixon's Melbourne studio in 1984. Published in *Thesis* by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, February 1994. Courtesy the artist and ACCA.

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<http://www.morganblair.com/>



22. Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2016, oil, flashe, screen printing ink on linen, 274 x 213 cm. Courtesy the artist.

<https://www.owenslaura.com/piece/lo-574/?e=1276>

26. Sebastian Black, installation view of *Completed Paintings*, Croy Nielsen, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Croy Nielson.

<https://croynielsen.com/exhibitions/sebastian-black-completed-paintings/>

27. Sebastian Black, *My childhood pal always had it good. His newest bike had the newest wheels (eyes). His newest pellet guns had the newest pellets (pupils). His newest feet the newest socks (ears) and so on. He was nice to people but cruel to animals. He'd shoot at pigeons, take the limbs off bugs he caught, one by one, like hangman in reverse (nose, mouth). High level bad boy stuff. I admit it impressed me. Once he showed me a joint coated in white dust (whiskers) in an altoids tin (muzzle). "It's not from the altoids," he smirked. After we smoked he drew orange circles in the air with the roach ember (head). Things hung suspended like that for a couple years and then we lost touch. He was on a different path I guess.*, 2016, oil on linen, 152.5 x 114.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and Croy Nielson.

<https://croynielsen.com/exhibitions/sebastian-black-completed-paintings/>

30. David Kennedy Cutler, *Double Exposure*, 2019, inkjet transfer, Permalac, and acrylic on canvas, 114 x 81 x 11 cm. Courtesy the artist.

<https://www.davidkennedycutler.com/muscle-memory>

31. Marcel Duchamp, *Malic Molds and shattered glass* (detail), *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*), 1915-23, oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, dust, two glass panels, 278 x 178 x 9 cm © Succession Marcel Duchamp (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/dada-and-surrealism/dada2/a/duchamp-the-bride-stripped-bare-by-her-bachelors-even>

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<https://www.greenenaftaligallery.com/artists/jacqueline-humphries>

35. Dieter Roth, *Poetry Machine*, 1961, black paper with holes

© Dieter Roth

<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/black-page-with-holes/>

50. Jacqueline Humphries, *sysysy/:|*, 2018, oil on linen with Poly-Optic Resin objects, 290 x 323 cm. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/jacqueline-humphries-felix-bernstein-2019/>

51. Jacqueline Humphries, *sysysy/:|* (detail), 2018. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

<https://modernart.net/artists/jacqueline-humphries#s-19>



## Introduction

*Image, object, action: building paintings with digital logic* is a project driven by the idea of “practise” as a verb. *Practising* is about discovering actions: finding out what I can do with (and to) collected images and materials; amassing and sequencing these actions; and layering and gathering them together with objects and images to build artworks incrementally. Through repetition, these actions have developed into a personal logic. With action at the fore of my practice, conceptual concerns are born from critical reflection on the methods and processes my work incorporates.

This project develops from a practice combining painting, drawing, collage, print, object, sculpture and photography, flipping back and forth between 2D and 3D, image and object. Although I have made digital images during this research project, it has culminated exclusively in A1-sized paintings, each comprised of three to five modular layers. The shift to a painting-based project comes from adopting digital working methods during lockdowns.

Towards the beginning of the project, the pandemic forced those of us in Tāmaki Makaurau to stay home for over 100 days. Though the momentum and methods I had built up in the studio were interrupted, I was able to scan many of my collected images and objects and use them to make digital drawings. Digital image-making enabled me to approach working in a new way once back in the studio. Though now making physical, tactile objects, I transferred digital methods and logic into my non-digital studio practice. By making paintings on multiple, modular layers that could be arranged into new combinations, these new working methods created the opportunities for chance and change that I had previously found incompatible with my own painting.

I was diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) at the beginning of 2022. The two modes of attention characteristic of ADHD minds map closely onto my modes of making. A flitty, distractable brain, naturally suited to divergent thinking, helps me to discover the nascent links between objects. Holding many possibilities in my mental workspace at once, I rapidly shift through potentialities and perspectives. The opposite of this state is a deep and obsessive hyperfocus on process and detail. This allows me to fully enter one aspect of my work for many hours at a time, imbuing an object with all my attention and love. Understanding these distinct



modes of creating (organised vs disorganised, intuitive vs systematised, spontaneous vs pre-determined), I now intentionally weave them into a new flow of movement through the studio. In creating works that invite people close and then push them backwards, there is perhaps an opportunity for viewers to experience the expanding and contracting perceptual shifts of divergence and hyperfocus.

This exegesis takes the reader on a journey through my ways of making, thinking, and situating, drawing on a continually expanding personal database of ideas, writers, thinkers, and artists. Throughout the document, I use terms related to computing, the database and the digital.

The first chapter primarily deals with *database* as methodology. Although the database is not usually thought of in relation to creativity and aesthetics, its ubiquitous yet often invisible role in our world is reflected in art-making. I argue that the database's inherent qualities make it fertile for creative thinking and production, and discuss how I use structured and unstructured methods to sort and process the collected materials that function as data in my database, bringing forth new connections and relationships.

The second chapter is focused on the effects of "the digital" on my painting. In this project, I focus more on the logic of digital methods than the digital tools to create the work. I position my work as *post-analogue painting* and ground it in a larger discussion of how digital technology has revealed new ways for paintings to be made. I discuss how I develop actions that can be transferred between the digital and non-digital studios, with the aim to transcend these 'binaries' into a new, blended future.

The third chapter deals with how the concepts of imitation and replication act within the project. I examine how the actions I use in the studio turn into images and objects, and subsequently drive new conceptual interests. My repetition of "art acts"<sup>1</sup> over time cements them as components of my logic, driving new possibilities.

1 Robert Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making," *Artforum*, 1970, <https://www.artforum.com/print/197004/some-notes-on-the-phenomenology-of-making-34191>.



## CHAPTER ONE – THE DATABASE

### *Parts as data in the database*

The whole world, everything which surrounds me here, is to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible, diverse sea of garbage... A dump not only devours everything, preserving it forever, but one might say it continually generates something: this is where some kinds of shoots come for new projects, ideas, a certain enthusiasm arises, hopes for the rebirth of something, though it is well-known that all of this will be covered with new layers of garbage.<sup>2</sup>

Ilya Kabakov

I collect images, objects, and art supplies, all of which I consider to be materials. The objects and images I collect come both from my everyday interactions with the world, and through searching for particular things. Art supplies such as paint, tape, and canvas are mediators with which to process, copy, and join these collected objects and images.<sup>3</sup> In this way, art supplies help to carry, or transfer, information contained within the objects and images. I call these collected materials (including art supplies) *parts*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a part as “one of the often indefinite or unequal subdivisions into which something is or is regarded as divided and which together constitute the whole.”<sup>4</sup> The term *parts* speaks to the fact that they need to be combined to create a whole, as parts by themselves are not artworks. A whole artwork is composed of images and objects on which I have performed actions using art supplies. The word *parts* is also useful when considering the studio as a generative machine or system, adaptable and open to new inputs.

By collecting and storing, I ensure that I will always have enough materials from which to create works. Often, these parts hang around for years, stored in clear file pockets before their use is apparent. I trust that there is value in what I have collected, that I have held onto certain parts for a reason. Isolating, sorting out and classifying these parts helps me to make sense, to understand why I collect them – is it because of colour (neon), material property (squishiness), shape (wiggly), image (marbled) or concept (relationship to other



Figure 1. Wood, things pretending to be wood, and paintings of wood in my studio, May 2022

2 Ilya Kabakov, “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away,” 1977, in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether (London, Cambridge MA: Whitechapel, MIT Press, 2006), 35.

3 Sometimes art supplies and their packaging become parts as well.

4 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Part,” accessed 26 June, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/part>.



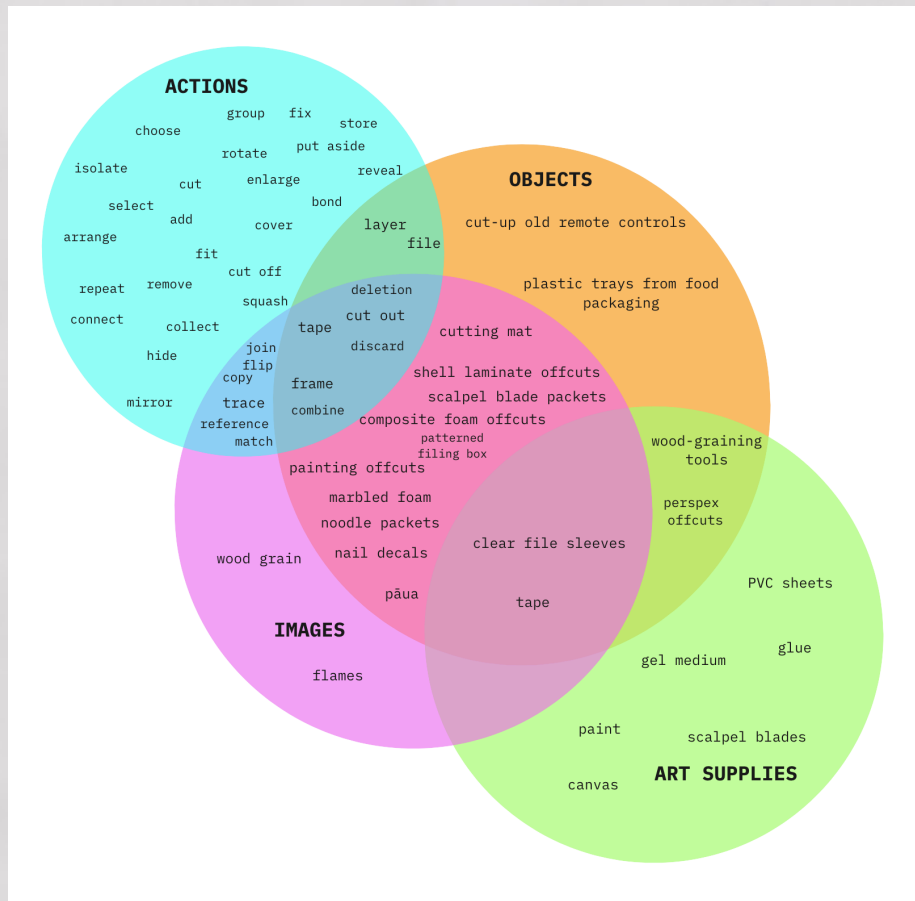


Figure 2. Venn diagram of *parts*



Figure 3. *Moonroof*, 2022, digital drawing





Figure 4. Wood graining tools

paintings)?<sup>5</sup> Many of these parts fit into multiple categories of object, image, and art supply. This slipperiness implies that a part can be treated in multiple ways, its use not always static or clear at any one point. A wood graining tool can be scanned and used as an image (fig. 3), or it can be used for its intended purpose, dragging paint to create the image of wood grain. It could also be used as an object, a curious, confusing, and absurd one.<sup>6</sup> Actions such as cutting out, removing, repeating, and enlarging have also become parts.<sup>7</sup>

Once I acquire and store them, these collected parts are the data in what I call my *database*.

### Database form and aesthetics

The artist is a producer not of consumer goods but of ideas, methods, strategies, information, organisation, research and demonstration.<sup>8</sup>

John Nixon

A database is a collection and arrangement of data, either with or without a pre-defined structure, that can be queried by a user. Databases vary in complexity, from linear, static ledgers such as phone books printed once per year, to modern graphical databases which are based on storing, surfacing<sup>9</sup> and visualising inter-relationships between data. Older databases are inflexible; the data is stored in one way only (phone numbers stored against last names, for example), while new databases store data in large unstructured “pools” or “lakes,” with no prior definition of relationship, enabling unanticipated queries and thus new possibilities.<sup>10</sup> In new databases, understanding is based on

5 For example, the way in which plastic trays used to package dried mushrooms or chocolate look like transparent modernist grid paintings. I'm sure I'll figure out what to do with them at some point.

6 Because mass-produced, synthetic objects being sold in order for people to recreate natural materials is absurd to me.

7 This development has conceptual implications that I discuss in chapter three.

8 John Nixon, *Thesis: Selected Works from 1968-1993* (Melbourne: Printed Books, 1994), <https://content.acca.melbourne/uploads/2016/11/John-Nixon-Thesis-screen.pdf>, 62

9 In computing, surfacing means to bring a relationship to the fore, to make visible. When creating a surface in art, we are also visualising relationships between elements, but usually creating new ones rather than bringing attention to existing ones.

10 Jos de Mul, “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination,” in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology* ed. Marianne van den Boomen et al., (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 95–106, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mxjv.9>.



connections between things, which are often more important than the things themselves. This reflects how meaning arises from connection, as well as reflecting the interconnected and complex nature of our world.

In this hyperconnected world, there is a vast array of information online and offline, available for consumption. It has become almost requisite for regular citizens to spend much of their time using processes of filtering, organising, storing, retrieving, and navigating information regularly. Intentionally or unintentionally, we create database-like structures, schemata of information in our minds,<sup>11</sup> which we use to make decisions about what information to keep, what to forget, and what to update. Digital media artist and professor Victoria Vesna observes that when engaging with the vast amounts of material in both digital and non-digital worlds, artists “are acutely aware of information overflow and that the design of navigation through these spaces has become a demand of aesthetic experience.”<sup>12</sup> Artists produce knowledge and seek to make sense of the world through making, often selecting existing ideas, images, and objects as materials from both external formal databases and internal databases of prior knowledge. The ubiquity of the database in both our everyday experience and its central place in the creative process allows us to see everything as potential material for “recombination and manipulation.”<sup>13</sup> In an overwhelmingly data-saturated, endlessly scrollable world, it makes sense that artists are compelled to use the form of the database to give structure to their work, or to interact with and critique existing systems of organisation.<sup>14</sup>

I use the terms *database form* to describe art shaped by how we interact with and structure large amounts of information, and *database aesthetics* to describe how visual elements of storage, organisation, navigation, and retrieval manifest in art. Database aesthetics, for example, could include many images presented at once in non-hierarchical or interactive ways, or the incorporation of objects related to storage such as filing cabinets. Database *form* and *aesthetics* can be challenging to tease apart and often exist together. I see database form as the back end of the database, while database aesthetics are like the front end or interface of the database.

11 *Schemata* is the plural of *schema*. Britannica defines schema as “mental structures that an individual uses to organize knowledge and guide cognitive processes and behaviour. People use schemata (the plural of schema) to categorize objects and events based on common elements and characteristics and thus interpret and predict the world.”

Michalak, Katja. “Schema, Cognitive.” Britannica, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/science/schema-cognitive>.

12 Victoria Vesna, “Introduction,” in *Database Aesthetics*, ed. Victoria Vesna (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xii.

13 de Mul, “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination,” 101.

14 Some artists who use databases must also consider their responsibilities as knowledge creators to engage with databases and audiences in ethical ways. I don’t feel that my practice warrants a discussion of *database ethics*.



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Figure 5. Marcel Duchamp, *Box in a Valise* (*Boîte-en-Valise*), 1941, leather valise containing miniature replicas and colour reproductions of works by Duchamp, and one photograph with graphite, watercolour, and ink additions, 41 x 37 x 10 cm



Figure 6. Parts on my table, August 2022

Marcel Duchamp's *Box-in-a-Valise* can be understood as an early example of an artist engaging with both the form and aesthetics of the database. Expandable and contractable, the suitcase structure reflects the storage, display, deactivation, and reactivation of both his works in the real world and similar tactics used by museums and institutions.<sup>15</sup> Although comprised of small-scale replicas of his past works, Marcel Duchamp's *Box-in-a-Valise* represents circulation rather than individual objects, emphasising the interrelatedness of objects and images.<sup>16</sup> The significance of each seemingly disparate item depended on its place within a collection or set of items. Database form and aesthetics were so new at this time that *Box-in-a-Valise* was not regarded as art at all, the art world seeing it as proof that Duchamp had stopped being an artist.<sup>17</sup>

I find the freedom to use almost anything in the world as material, overwhelming. This led me to set up systems and structures to choose, organise and process parts. Writer and Professor of Philosophical Anthropology, Jos de Mul claims that much contemporary art shares the core operations of the database: Insert, Select, Update and Delete.<sup>18</sup> Using these commands, the artist combines, de-combines and re-combines the elements that they have stored. These commands are actions I employ in my studio. I insert parts into my database, search for and select parts to be combined, update parts by editing their physical form, and throw them away if they lose interest or relevance.

The parts I use to generate work are related in many ways (formal, material, conceptual, or sourced at the same time/place). Relationships between parts are slowly revealed, or surfaced, through their spread across the floor, walls, and table (fig. 6) in a collagic, ever-changing mess. My method has developed to use structured and unstructured ways of storing and sorting parts. For example, clear files of similar parts provide a pre-defined schema of structure, and scanned parts are stored in structured folders on my computer as the clear files' processed, digital counterpart – tagged so that I can surface all patterns, or all offcuts, or all flame-shapes. These structured elements must be at play with unstructured elements for unpredictable connections to be

15 David Joselit, "Beyond Repetition: Marcel Duchamp's Readymades" (lecture, The Miami Art Museum, Miami, March 3, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zh-rSG5rpU>.

16 Joselit points out that the reproductions are not to scale, which occurs when things circulate in media. The sizes of my parts also increase and decrease, bound by the limits of the A4 scanner and the university's large-format photocopier/printer. Ibid.

17 Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2021).

18 de Mul, "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination," 100.



made. The transparency of the clear files allows unstructured, chance relationships to emerge between parts when they are messily piled up and pushed around my table. Chance relationships also emerge when parts are pinned unsystematically to the walls of my studio. Just like keeping tabs of essays open in my browser so I don't forget they exist, and endlessly renewing library books that I hope one day to read, if something gets filed away, out of sight, it becomes out of mind. For my database to function in a fertile, generative way, most of its parts need to be visible and accessible simultaneously. Thinking of my practice as a database rather than an archive<sup>19</sup> acknowledges its presentness, interconnectedness, state of flux and ability to be queried.

## Database poetics

How, then, do we create systems that allow each of us to be an unreliable archivist? To allow each of us to create the preposterous, the enigmatic? No matter how intelligent archiving agents are in the future, they will be poor substitutes if they cannot represent an individual, idiosyncratic, and imaginative point of view.<sup>20</sup>

Steve Dietz

“Database poetics”<sup>21</sup> refers to the imaginative, idiosyncratic, and enigmatic potential contained within the database. I borrow this term, the “poetics of the database”<sup>22</sup> from digital culture theorist Lev Manovich’s essay “Database as Symbolic Form,” which posits that the database as a cultural form stands in opposition to classic narrative structures in cinema and literature. Manovich theorises that the computer age has created a condition in which much contemporary media presents collections of items in which no single thing is more important than another. Though Manovich doesn’t explicitly state what he means by the “poetics” of the database, I understand a connection to the way in which writer and curator Steve Dietz defines the “unreliable archivist.” An archivist, human or non-human, can be good at finding specific known things in databases, but has difficulty making connections between things or finding things a user doesn’t know



Figure 7. Parts pinned and taped to my studio wall, 2021

19 While archives are accessible and searchable, the term archive has a *putting-away*-ness, an evocation of history, that doesn't adequately describe the state of my messy studio. When I archive an email, I don't see it anymore, unless I search for it.

20 Steve Dietz, "The Database Imaginary: Memory\_Archive\_Database v 4.0," *Daniel G. Andujar Archive*, 2007, [https://danielandujar.org/2007/10/04/the-database-imaginary-memory\\_archive\\_database-v-40/](https://danielandujar.org/2007/10/04/the-database-imaginary-memory_archive_database-v-40/).

21 Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," in *Database Aesthetics* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 40.

22 Ibid.



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reasons

Figure 8. Marcel Duchamp, *The Green Box*, 1934, handmade box containing 94 pochoir reproductions on various papers, 33 x 28 x 2.5 cm. The handmade, laboured copies make up the 20 deluxe editions of the work and can therefore be seen as "originals" while the 300 other editions are copies of copies.

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Figure 9. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23, oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, 278 x 178 x 9 cm

about.<sup>23</sup> Dietz posits that in the digital era, artists have been the ones to free "data (content) from its metadata (classification schema)."<sup>24</sup> Because databases hold large amounts of material in one place, connections can be made between things that can't be revealed in other formats, such as linear narrative. In this way, database form is not only used to produce art objects, but to create meaning. Through the reconfiguration of information, databases contain infinite potential for new creation, new thought, new insight, and new connections – in other words, they contain the conditions for the poetic, and artists are the ones who surface these original insights.

Duchamp's engagement with the database continued throughout his life and culminated in two significant works; the painting *Tum'*, which he said was "a kind of inventory of all my preceding works, rather than a painting in itself,"<sup>25</sup> and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, also known as the *Large Glass*. The object of the *Large Glass* (fig. 9) acts as a diagrammatic database of Duchamp's oeuvre, mapping the subject matter of his previous works in "a matrix of information."<sup>26</sup> Its literary companion, *The Green Box*, is a database (or a replica of a database) of the planning and preparation for the construction of the *Large Glass* itself. Randomly organised, detailed and hard-to-read, the notes reflect the "complex development of an idea whose logic, reference, and notation are hermetic rather than self-evident."<sup>27</sup> Because the notes are jumbled together in the box, like data in an unstructured data pool, there is no obvious or predefined way of understanding them. The viewer can pick and choose, making their own connections from the infinite potential of the box's content. Duchamp originally wanted the box to function more like a commercial catalogue, propelling the work from the traditional world of artistic production and museums into the "fantasmatic" world of consumption.<sup>28</sup>

23 Dietz wrote this in 2007, and in my understanding, newer graphical databases are much better at surfacing previously unknown relationships.

Dietz, "The Database Imaginary"

24 Ibid.

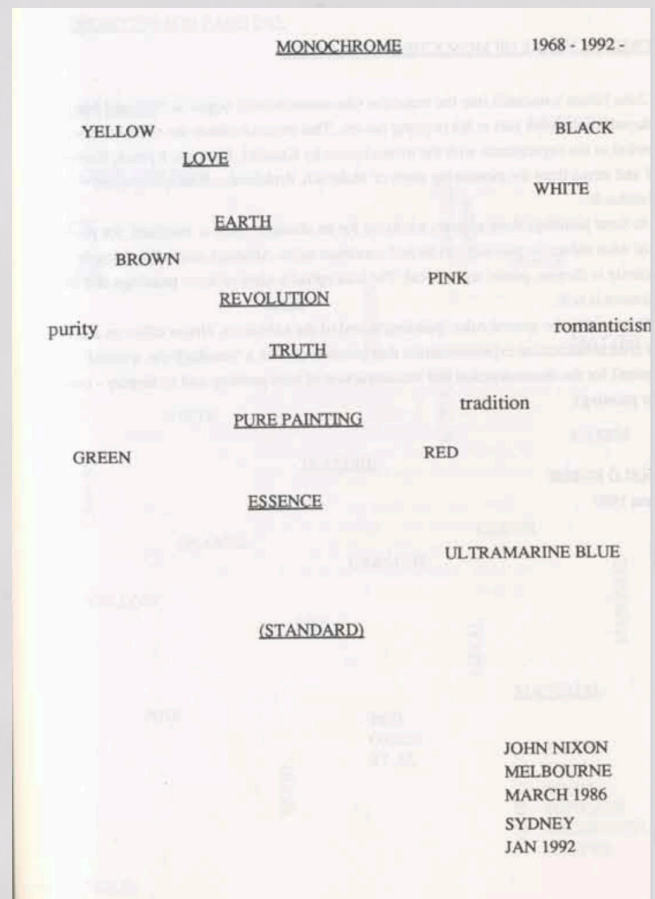
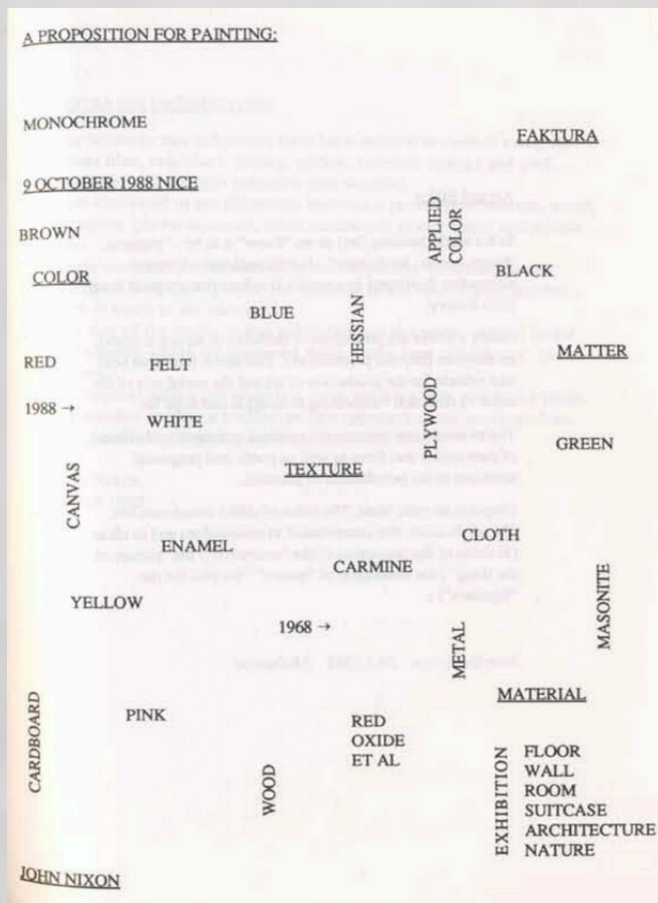
25 Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 461.

26 Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 85.

27 Susi Bloch, "Marcel Duchamp's Green Box," *Art Journal* 34, no. 1 (1974): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/775863>.

28 David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), 140.





Figures 10 & 11. John Nixon, pages from *Thesis*, 1994



John Nixon's ongoing projects *EPW* (*Experimental Painting Workshop*) and *EP+OW* (*Experimental Painting + Object Workshop*) took the form of multiple exhibitions accompanied by discussions and publications throughout the 1990s. Less like a physical workshop and more like a laboratory for formal and intellectual research, *EPW* posited "a position of critical action – a manifesto for practice."<sup>29</sup> Nixon's work was playful and open while remaining intellectually rigorous in his engagement with art's history and ideas. Nixon primarily collected readymade objects, made monochrome paintings and used the form of the database to process and make sense of his collection. Often using the materials on hand from whichever city he was exhibiting in, Nixon was interested in how objects, colours, materials, methods, and ideas could be organised into different combinations and contexts to create meaning. As his painting practice "springs from acts of nomination and not from the cultivation of painting as craft or skill,"<sup>30</sup> his lists and categories of constituent parts (figs. 10 & 11) draw attention to distinct elements and caused me to categorise my own parts to understand them better.

Photographs of Nixon's studios, which he often used as informational additions to his exhibitions, show relational, experimental groupings and arrangements in the form of stacks, piles, leanings, and hangings (fig. 13). These arrangements were then edited down and transferred into the gallery space (fig. 12), resulting in more minimal installations that reflected the "formal syntax of registration, displacement, isolation, dispersal and repetition"<sup>31</sup> he practised in his studio or workshop. Nixon engaged with the poetic potential of his database by embracing "an informal relational inclusiveness and an ad hoc acceptance of the given."<sup>32</sup> By being open to new "stock"<sup>33</sup> (a term with similar connotations to my parts) as additions to his database and accepting the objects' inherent qualities and their fluid relationships to one another, Nixon created the conditions for chance and ambiguity in the making of meaning within his work.

Like Nixon, I engage with the poetics of my database by being open to new parts and their subsequent connections. Sensitive to the formal properties of things, I will revel in the colours, shapes and textures of an everyday object, a pile of recycling or a boarded-up window. Conceptual and formal connections the new materials, objects, and images have to other parts in my database or to other things in the world are always visible in my mind.



Figure 12. John Nixon, *EP+OW* (installation view), 1997, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi



Figure 13. John Nixon's Melbourne studio in 1984

29 John Nixon, *Thesis*.

30 Allan Smith, "EP+OW Experimental Painting + Object Workshop" (City Gallery Wellington, 1997), <https://citygallery.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PJN-1.pdf>.

31 Allan Smith, "John Nixon: Standard Type Paintings," in *Milan Mrkusich/John Nixon: Eight Paintings 1968-1998* (Wellington: Hamish McKay Gallery, 1999).

32 Smith, "EP+OW"

33 Ibid.





Figure 14. Collected, leaning, and stacked parts in my studio, organised by formal properties, December 2021

This openness to new parts as possible material to join my database carries through into the open way that I regard parts once they are in my database. Running queries in an analogue way, I look through the piles and clear files of parts for something with an all-over pattern, or a collection of shapes I can turn into a stencil, or a colour to paint the base layer of a substrate. While searching for a specific thing, I will get distracted by something else and use that in combination with the specific part I was looking for. A user of a digital database might run a query such as “find all customers who buy this product” while the query I run could be “find an image that can be turned into a repeating pattern but also be open to another interesting part that I can fold into what I’m working on.” This openness to parts that are not the part I am searching for is another way I engage with the poetic nature of my database.

Cultivating an environment constantly on the verge of tipping from organisation into chaos fosters new possibilities. Spread across the studio, the parts relate and unite in my field of vision. I increase the chance of connections sparking when I cover every surface, grouping similar parts together in both structured (purposeful) and unstructured (chance-based) ways. Nixon’s strategy of grouping and arranging parts into stacks and piles is one I use, creating categories that allow me to make sense of why they’re important (fig. 14). A pile of sparkly foam offcuts placed next to a clear file of pill packets reveals their similar formal property of shininess. A part is cut away from one surface and falls onto something else, producing a new pairing. My database need not be overly organised or tidy, otherwise these sparks may be stifled. If I am feeling stuck, not knowing what my next move is, I organise (or defrag) the studio just enough to uncover what is often a single significant part that reveals the way forward. My cycles of tidiness and messiness are predictable in terms of order but not in terms of duration. As I navigate these networks within the studio to create new knowledge, I next consider how these networks reach out from within my studio and into the world.



## Connectivity within the database and out into the world

The internet has provided contemporary artists with new possibilities, not only for how art can spread but also for forms it can take.<sup>34</sup>

In the book *After Art*, art historian and writer David Joselit posits that images' significance in the contemporary world comes from their replication and dissemination, and from how much contact they have with an audience. The more points of contact an image has, the greater the potential for people to connect to it, and the greater its capacity to spread. It has become natural and acceptable for both artists and viewers to create relationships between things that could have once seemed improbable because highly specific points of connection have become increasingly likely when we can access and link niche areas of knowledge.

I consider networks as the connections first contained within the studio. Parts themselves exist in fluid relation to one another. I select and combine them in different ways to recognise, reveal and develop new relationships and new parts. Each part's significance is increased both by internal connections to other parts in my studio, and external connections to the real world. A flame shape cut from cardboard packaging (fig. 17) has both image and material connotations, as it is both image and material. The flame motif calls to mind cultures of tattoo and hot-rod enthusiasts while also bringing to mind recent images of forest fires sweeping across the Amazon rainforest (and other parts of the globe), which is on the brink of destruction.<sup>35</sup> It evokes the "this is fine" meme (fig. 15) of the cartoon dog sitting in a house on fire, tapping into how younger generations feel going about their lives under global economic collapse and impending, irreversible climate change. The ubiquity and familiarity of cardboard as a material recalls a time when we were all stuck inside ordering goods online and the increasing failure of global supply chains. I use images and objects that are recognisable to the viewer in combination with more unrecognisable forms, which are often offcuts from my studio process.

As processes, images and materials cycle through my art works, ideas find objects to sit within. While some of my images are found, many are created within the studio as the result of actions such as cutting out, repetition, and replication. Once they have cycled through my studio, combined parts enter wider networks as finished artworks. Thus, my



Figure 15. "This is fine" meme taken from an issue of the webcomic series *Gunshow* illustrated by K.C. Green and published in early January 2013.



Figure 16. Scanned nail decals (stickers)

<sup>34</sup> Very broadly, systems art of the late 1960s turned art's focus from "object-based aesthetics" to "network aesthetics." Conceptual artists began using strategies and patterns of image saturation (capturing, reframing, documenting and representing content) to make works that utilised production and distribution networks such as institutions and publications, in contrast to inventing single, stand-alone works. In the 1990s the internet renewed interest in distribution-based practice and systems art.

<sup>35</sup> The wrong Amazon is on fire.





Figure 17. *Conversion*, 2022, digital drawing





Figure 18. Pāua painted layer, 2022, acrylic on canvas with Perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

works are comprised of networked objects rather than being either object-based or network-based. The layer of painted pāua with Te Waipounamu and Te-Ika-a-Māui-shaped cut-outs can be seen as independent of anything else, and its formal qualities such as colour, surface and mark-making can be appreciated as those of a stand-alone object. Experienced as a networked object, the pāua provokes conflicting thoughts of natural splendour, the reality of nature as a commodity under capitalism, and the cheesy, mass-produced knick-knacks of Aotearoa's tourist industry. Much contemporary art operates simultaneously as object-based and networked, as objects are not created in a vacuum, and art inherently interacts with and references a broad range of human experience.

Art's connectivity to and embeddedness in the wider world is a natural result of our hyperconnected reality. Database form is one aspect of how computing permeates our wider culture. Given this increasingly digital reality in which we no longer experience information in linear, hierarchical ways, the poetic nature of the database is important. It allows me to navigate my existing internal databases and those I produce while art-making by understanding how I can use unstructured and structured methods to bring forth the enigmatic and idiosyncratic. More broadly, it allows us as both consumers and producers of knowledge and meaning to consciously navigate through digital and non-digital informational spaces.



Figure 19. 310, 2022, acrylic and vinyl on canvas and PVC with Perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)



## CHAPTER TWO: TO PAINT IN A DIGITAL WORLD

### From digital to non-digital and back again

... it is clear technology acts as a delivery system which facilitates the translation of the painted gesture, acting not just as a tool but as an influence.<sup>36</sup>

James Frew

In 2015, New York gallery The Hole curated an exhibition called *Post-Analog Painting*. The press release defined post-analogue as a suggestion “that the paintings in this show were not even conceivable before digital imaging changed the structure of our images.”<sup>37</sup> *Post-Analog Painting* and its 2017 successor *Post-Analog Painting II* featured “digitally-minded”<sup>38</sup> paintings by artists such as Josh Reames, Trudy Benson, Michael Staniak, Morgan Blair (fig. 21) and Anne Vieux (fig. 20), and cemented the term post-analogue in the lexicon of painting. Given that we exist day-to-day interfacing between analogue and digital spaces, it follows that this now-permanent condition manifests in how painters think about and construct paintings, and how viewers process them.

In painting, the post-analogue condition is often embodied in work that first appears to be digital, but then reveals itself to be either non-digital in terms of materials and application, or a hybrid of analogue and digital. The digital has shaped how these contemporary painters approach not just content, but formal qualities such as colour, composition, depth, and light “even when away from their laptops.”<sup>39</sup> The glowing colours of Michael Staniak’s painted surfaces, for example, would be unimaginable before the digital age and at first appear to be digital. Digital gradients of colour are mimicked in the physical studio with airbrushes, such as in the paintings of Morgan Blair.<sup>40</sup> The digital

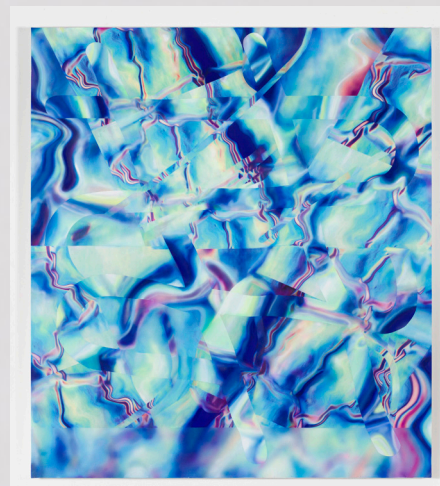


Figure 20. Anne Vieux, {###}, 2021, acrylic and pigment ink on canvas, 244 x 188 cm



Figure 21. Morgan Blair, *You, With Your Stolen Acoustic Guitar and Well-Worn Patchwork Corduroy Vest; Me With My Balenciaga Unicycle and Lofty Ambitions; My Ethically Non-Monogamous Partner Visiting From Phoenix With His Linen Pants and Heirloom Tambourine; Your Unethically Monogamous Partner With Her Dead Eyes and Cambodian Flute; Her Cousin and His Dewey Skin, Astrological Hand Tattoos and Palpable Maladjustment Issues. There We Were*, 2019, acrylic and glass bead gel on canvas over panel, 51 x 61 cm

36 James Frew, “Digital Fracture: Painting After New Media Art,” in *PhotographyDigitalPainting: Expanding Medium Interconnectivity in Contemporary Visual Art Practices* (United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), 71.

37 Krysta Eder, “Post-Analog Painting,” The Hole NYC, 2015, <http://theholenyc.com/2015/04/11/post-analog-painting/>.

38 Ibid.

39 Raymond Bulman, “The Hole NYC: Post Analog Painting II,” The Hole NYC, 2017, <http://theholenyc.com/2017/03/17/post-analog-painting-ii/>.

40 Blair’s titles are also very “web-aggregated,” with their overload of information and references to culture and subcultures.

Morgan Blair, “Morgan Blair ‘Survival Tactics,’” interview by Kristen Farr, *Juxtapoz Magazine*, 2017, <https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/magazine/features/morgan-blair-survival-tactics/>.



Figure 22. Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2016, oil, flashe, screen printing ink on linen, 274 x 213 cm



Figure 23. *Outside the Outside*, 2022, digital drawing

has created a new “pictorial vocabulary” of mark-making.<sup>41</sup> The erased areas of Anne Vieux and Laura Owens’ paintings are not, for example, the marks of real erasers but digital ones (figs. 20 & 22), and Ken Okiishi’s painted marks mimic the swipes our fingers leave on touchscreens. This pictorial vocabulary suggests that non-digital creative expression has been changed permanently by our digital existence.

Since 2018, I have made digital collages when unable to access my studio, or after periods of creative inactivity. To me, this is a drawing process, a low-stakes way to quickly generate lots of ideas and images without using precious art supplies. An image is selected from my digital database of scanned physical parts, inserted into a layer, rotated, mirrored, and repeated to form a grid. Multiple transparent layers are combined in this way, moved in front of and behind one another, building from the front and back simultaneously. Layers are toggled on and off and borrowed from previous digital collages. My digital works are often constructed by duplicating an existing digital or non-digital work, reordering layers, changing colours and adding new elements. If I get stuck on one work, I open a new tab, start something else, and then go back. Scanned parts are subjected to digital processes such as bevelling and drop shadows making them look more 3D, more “physical” (fig. 23). The non-digital world – its spaces (e.g., desktops), its appearances (drop shadows), and its actions (bevelling, airbrushing, cut and paste) – have been replicated in the digital world. This skeuomorphic<sup>42</sup> approach to design within the digital world suggests that humans are more likely to uptake new technologies if we can ground them in our pre-existing schemata; that is, we are more likely to accept the new digital worlds we are introduced to if they appear and function like our non-digital spaces. If a tool (such as a button or an airbrush) looks like a non-digital thing, we know how to use it. This extends to naming new digital phenomena: “scrolling content” on our phones, for example, references using scrolls, an early form of paper.

41 Alex Bacon, “Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age,” *Rhizome*, 2016, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/may/24/surface-image-reception-painting-in-a-digital-age/>.

42 “Skeuomorphism is the design concept of making items represented resemble their real-world counterparts. Skeuomorphism is commonly used in many design fields, including user interface (UI) and Web design, architecture, ceramics and interior design. Skeuomorphism contrasts with flat design, a simpler graphic style.”  
Ivy Wigmore, “What Is Skeuomorphism?,” *WhatIs.com*, 2013, <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/skeuomorphism>.





Figure 24. *Hertz*, 2022, acrylic on PVC, canvas and Perspex, 84 x 54 cm (A1)

My digital painting methods have been subconsciously transferred into my non-digital studio. By painting on multiple layers that are then combined, and carrying out actions such as cut and paste, enlarge, mirror and duplicate, the logic of Photoshop (which is itself influenced by the non-digital) flips back into the non-digital realm. One of the layers in my painting *Hertz* (figs. 24 & 25) is comprised of four overlapping images of a part that has been scanned, enlarged to fit A1, printed, traced, painted, rotated, and repeated onto a PVC substrate.<sup>43</sup> The painted areas overlap and form a grid, coming close to being an all-over pattern. The rest of the clear substrate is cut away so that other layers show through, the painted layer becoming as close to a transparent photoshop layer as possible. Painter Philip Gerald observes that “we can mimic the machine just as well as they can mimic us.”<sup>44</sup> My oscillation between non-digital and digital spaces blurs these boundaries so much that I use these actions in both realms seamlessly and subconsciously. Digital actions and their non-digital counterparts contain the opportunity to morph and develop into new actions that work in both spaces, and reach towards some sort of new, third space.<sup>45</sup> I aim to transcend the limitations of both Photoshop and the non-digital studio by developing my own, individual set of art-making actions.



Figure 25. *Hertz* (detail), 2022, acrylic on PVC, canvas and Perspex, 84 x 54 cm (A1)

Currently, I am primarily using the digital to facilitate my painting process. I use the digital processes of scanning, enlarging, and printing parts at A1 to make stencils that are then translated onto A1 substrates. Thus, while making digital work has altered how I think about and make non-digital work, digital technology's role in my current project has limits both as a tool and aesthetic influence. Images such as flames, for example, are influenced by digital culture such as memes. The aesthetic effect of digital culture on my work is obvious and arguably inescapable (seeing as digital culture is now culture and digital aesthetics are now aesthetics), but I am not motivated to make work that has a purposefully “digital” look.

43 I use the word *ground* to refer to the pictorial ground (background), and substrate to refer to the physical support, such as PVC or canvas.

44 Philip Gerald, quoted in Jas Keimig, “Seeing the Hand in Post-Analog Art: *Ultra Light Beams* at Mount Analogue,” *The Stranger*, 2019, <https://www.thestranger.com/visual-art/2019/02/18/39057126/seeing-the-hand-in-post-analog-art-ultra-light-beams-at-mount-analogue>.

45 A 2022 show at G Gallery in New York titled “Phygital Reality” included work by Anne Vieux, Eric Shaw and Jo Jae, artists who fuse “what is digital with what is physical, smoothly melding the two worlds through their art.” The word “Phygital” is a marketing term coined in 2013 by Australian agency Momentum, referring to a “both physical and digital universe that promises to strike the right balance between a virtual world and a physical world” in order to make sales. I am considering this term in relation to how I perceive this new reality. “Phygital Reality, G Gallery,” Anne Vieux, 2022, <https://www.annevieux.com/phygital>. Marine Le Borgne, “In a Phygital World...,” *Awabot* (blog), 2018, <https://awabot.com/en/in-a-phygital-world/>.





Figure 26. Sebastian Black, installation view of *Completed Paintings*, Croy Nielsen, Berlin, 2016

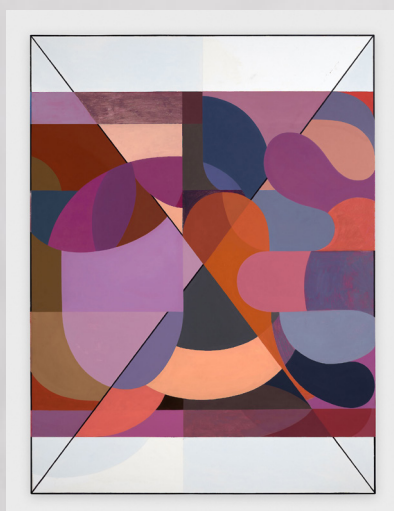


Figure 27. Sebastian Black, *My childhood pal always had it good. His newest bike had the newest wheels (eyes). His newest pellet guns had the newest pellets (pupils). His newest feet the newest socks (ears) and so on. He was nice to people but cruel to animals. He'd shoot at pigeons, take the limbs off bugs he caught, one by one, like hangman in reverse (nose, mouth). High level bad boy stuff. I admit it impressed me. Once he showed me a joint coated in white dust (whiskers) in an altoids tin (muzzle). "It's not from the altoids," he smirked. After we smoked he drew orange circles in the air with the roach ember (head). Things hung suspended like that for a couple years and then we lost touch. He was on a different path I guess.*, 2016, oil on linen, 152.5 x 114.3 cm

The skeuomorphism of layered computer windows and digital apps has influenced both painters' and viewers' understanding of perspective, surface, and depth. Sebastian Black is an artist whose painting is influenced by the design and experience of digital spaces. His show *Completed Paintings*<sup>46</sup> (fig. 26) is a clear example of how the logic of the digital workspace is carried out in the non-digital studio and follows a similar process to my work *Hertz*. In Black's paintings, the same abstracted image of a puppy's face in various colours is rotated at ninety-degree angles and painted with oil onto linen substrates (fig. 27). Just like in a digital workspace, the grounds do not rotate with the images, meaning some cropping occurs on the portrait-oriented grounds when the image is landscape-oriented. An X in each composition refers to InDesign bounding boxes and "any of the myriad graphic schema which organize opaque surfaces into illusionistic transparencies."<sup>47</sup> The four paintings are displayed facing towards the gallery window, reflecting the "flat" experience of interacting with digital windows and screens, and the hard, shiny surface which mediates our experience of it.

Black's work is pictorially flat, not attempting the kind of digitally-inspired illusionism that occurs in other post-analogue painting. Illusionistic drop shadows<sup>48</sup> and marks that have a "digital look" are fun, but have a trendy feeling that may quickly become dated. This pictorial flatness occurs in my work too. However, while I do not create depth on a single layer, by interrupting, cutting into and stacking them, I generate physical depth. People have mentioned to me that the shadows in my work look digital, but they are real shadows cast by holes in the surfaces of my substrates (fig. 28). This could be a result of the viewer spending a lot of time in digital spaces, so that simulated shadows have become their main reference point. It may be that our constant interfacing between digital and non-digital has created a new kind of illusionism, in which we are not sure about the nature of what we are looking at.

46 Sebastian Black's paintings also employ the same style of rambling, internet-inspired narrative titles that post-analogue painters Morgan Blair and Philip Gerald use. Black calls them *Puppy Tales*.

Sebastian Black, "Sebastian Black with John Ganz," interview with John Ganz, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2015, <https://brooklynrail.org/2015/12/art/sebastian-black-with-john-ganz>.

47 Croy Nielsen, "Sebastian Black: Completed Paintings," Croy Nielsen, 2016, <https://croynielsen.com/exhibitions/sebastian-black-completed-paintings/>.

48 Interestingly, illusionistic drop shadows look digitally inspired but were pioneered by artists of the Abstract Illusionism movement of the 1970s and 1980s, such as James Harvard.

Phillip Barcio, "On Abstract Illusionism - Taking Reality Out of Illusion," *IdeelArt*, 2020, <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/abstract-illusionism>.



Figure 28. *Picture This*, 2022, acrylic on canvas and PVC, Perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)



## Building from back to front and from front to back

### Layers

When putting down layers of paint onto a substrate, one can't go back and slip a layer out from under another. Painting on only one substrate feels static to me, with an element of permanence that I don't experience in the digital studio. While scanning some found nail decals and pieces of shell laminate (fig. 28), their transparency and holes made me realise I could stack them to create new, complex images, in the way that I was about to do in Photoshop with the scans. Realising that my digital inclinations could be replicated in the non-digital world, I became excited about the compositional potentials of holes and transparency. I was so drawn to these little stacks, that I wanted to create larger, painted versions (fig. 29). Deciding on A1 size for the paintings of my current project, I chose PVC as transparent substrates.<sup>49</sup> Akin to digital layers, transparent PVC layers can be added to and removed from a painting, creating a way of working that made me feel less precious about making decisions that can't be undone with a command+z. Like my digital images, my paintings are built simultaneously from the front and back. The accumulated, separate layers, themselves made from separate then combined parts, come together to form a whole. The changeable and forgiving nature of the digital studio translated smoothly into my non-digital studio via this material and approach.

I also use transparent substrates to trace images directly with paint, producing quickly and eliminating the need to outline in pencil or trace using carbon paper. The PVC layers can have different images painted on each side (or the same image but in different colours), doubling options for possible combinations of stacked layers that make up a complete composition. When one flips something in the digital space, it is the front, reversed. When flipping something in the non-digital space, it is the back of the front. Thus, flipping a layer in the non-digital space is like having an extra image, rather than the same one, mirrored. The back of something is the front of something else, a phenomenon that cannot occur in the digital space. This demonstrates that some aspects of the digital and non-digital have inherently different functions, and that not all non-digital phenomena can be replicated in the digital realm.

The solution to holding these layers together is drawn from another form within my database. Clear files started off as purely functional objects in which to store parts. The white strip with holes in it from the side of the clear files then became the structure I attach to the top of my painting



Figure 28. Stacked parts, 2022, shell laminate and nail decals, each stack approximately 12cm x 12cm



Figure 29. *Melting Hazard*, 2022, acrylic, pencil and vinyl on canvas and PVC, Perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

<sup>49</sup> I selected A1 because I work with document sizes, enlarging and printing using scanners and photocopiers. A1's relationship to my body feels comfortable; A1 substrates are large but small enough to move around easily.

layers, a system which allows me to stack layers together and reflects its original, intended use, to gather pages together in a ring binder. This structural element is now part of the overall image itself.

David Kennedy Cutler is an artist who is interested in how the “insane layering” of our increasingly digital experience is changing our brains,<sup>50</sup> but his output is decidedly non-digital. Working back and forth between 2D and 3D, image and object, his methods reflect how we transition between the flat experience of the digital screen and physical objects, between images of objects and the objects themselves. He treats flat images as materials, physically wrestling them into new forms. Cutler uses a handheld scanner to collect and record a myriad of objects in his world, including his own body. He prints the images onto aluminium using a rigged, large-scale Epson printer<sup>51</sup> or transfers them onto canvas. He then cuts, peels, bends, warps and wraps them back into three dimensions, resulting in sculpture, paintings that are also objects, ephemera and performance.



Figure 30. David Kennedy Cutler, *Double Exposure*, 2019, inkjet transfer, Permalac, and acrylic on canvas, 114 x 81 x 11 cm

*Double Exposure* is comprised of three surfaces on two planes. The outer layer of canvas is printed with the image of a screen-printed t-shirt on one side, and “bananas” on the other. The bananas are carefully cut out except for a small bit at the bottom, to keep them attached to the canvas, and peeled outwards to become part of the outer layer. The way the images of banana peels flop free of the canvas, sagging and drooping, mimic how real banana peels would behave. Another printed canvas is stretched to the back of the painting’s frame, so the viewer can see through the banana-shaped holes. The back canvas is printed with the same image as the top, but misaligned, “creating a jarring, stuttering effect.”<sup>52</sup> Cutler has added thick, banana-coloured acrylic paint, which unifies the layers and grounds the work as painting in addition to image, print and object.

Like with Cutler’s work, my accumulated layers mirror the way in which I experience life. Never stimulated enough to do one thing at a time, I layer activities on top of one another. I play online card games while watching YouTube cooking shows and looking at art on Instagram or reading the news. I make lots of paintings simultaneously, switching back and forth between techniques while listening to audiobooks, or music if I need more processing power

50 Scott Indrisek, “Uploading into the Real World,” *Modern Painters* 26, no. 9 (October 2014): 25–25, <https://ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=vth&AN=98610850&site=eds-live>.

51 This printer was being thrown out of Wade Guyton’s studio and was rescued by a friend of Cutler’s, a fact I am tickled by because the printer is like an offcut, or discard. Ibid.

52 Jeff Gibson, “David Kennedy Cutler,” *Artforum*, October 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201908/david-kennedy-cutler-80851>.



with which to make decisions. My brain's need for stimulation is satisfied both by making many layers at once, and the visual complexity of seeing them stacked together. Both the experience of making and viewing these paintings mimics the intense layering of stimuli and information we all experience daily. The slippage between image and object created by using cut layers is also a reflection of an oscillation between digital and non-digital workspaces.

## Transparency and holes

All that background on the canvas that had to be thought about, tactile space like wallpaper, all that garbage ... I wanted to sweep it away.<sup>53</sup>

Marcel Duchamp

I am after ... complete embeddedness, with a sense of the painting itself as a figure, coterminously layered on top of and under the ground. The ground is the figure, background is identical to figure.<sup>54</sup>

Jacqueline Humphries

The glass of Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* can be seen as a photographic glass negative, a window, and a mirror. Glass is "pictorially speaking, absence, its transparency purely negative."<sup>55</sup> Materially speaking, it is not absence, and when the *Bride* accidentally cracked in transit, it provided Duchamp with the work's finishing pictorial element (fig. 31). The transparency of the glass was a solution to having to choose backgrounds for paintings, which Duchamp said was "degrading for a painter"<sup>56</sup> and allowed him to focus entirely on the figure.<sup>57</sup> By painting on transparent layers, I can also concentrate on figure, so another layer can become the background (or foreground)

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Figure 31. Marcel Duchamp, Malic Molds and shattered glass (detail), *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23, oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, dust, two glass panels, 278 x 178 x 9 cm

53 Ades, Cox, and Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, 101.

54 David Joselit, "Painting Time: Jacqueline Humphries," in *Jacqueline Humphries* (London: Koenig Books, 2015), 19.

55 Ades, Cox, and Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, 100.

56 Marcel Duchamp, "I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics", interview by Francis Roberts, *ARTnews*, vol. 67, no. 8 (Dec. 1968), 62. Republished from the *ARTnews* Archives, January 18, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/archives-interview-marcel-duchamp-1968-11708/>.

57 "Rooted in early-20th-century German Gestalt psychology, *figure and ground* refers to a theory of the mind's organizing tendencies, in particular the way the human brain perceives physical form, distinguishing an object or form from its context or surroundings—a *figure* from its *background*." I use the word figure to mean the subject, or most important form on a ground.

Tess Thackara, "Decoding Artspeak: Figure and Ground," *Artsy*, 2014, <https://www.artsy.net/article/editorial-decoding-artspeak-figure-and-ground>.



Figure 32. 310, 2022, acrylic and vinyl on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)





Figure 33. 310 (detail), 2022, acrylic and vinyl on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)



Figure 34. Jacqueline Humphries, 41/14, 2014, oil on linen, 290 x 323 cm

at a later point.<sup>58</sup> The ability to try figures on different grounds is driven by my digital workflow. If a ground is transparent and other layers can be seen through it, chance combinations and movements can occur, allowing for a degree of unpredictability and change in image-making. This is the sort of process I build into my art-making system to give it resilience; the likelihood of unpredictable occurrences generates new possibilities.

While moving the PVC layers of my paintings about, I realised they got scratched (unlike their digital counterparts, which are essentially the absence of material), making layers underneath look dull. The scratches called attention to the PVC as a material, like the cracks in Duchamp's glass, but in a way that I felt was detrimental to the compositions. I cut into the layers with a scalpel, eliminating clear areas that weren't needed for compositional or structural reasons. The holes in the substrates took on similar attributes to the transparencies, allowing other layers to show through, but creating depth, casting shadows, and bringing attention to the spaces opened within and between the layers (fig. 33). Holes rendered the internal structure of the painting visible, inasmuch as my paintings have an internal structure at all, since the modularity of the layers means each can function differently. Each layer can potentially slip or flip over and take a slightly different role in the image composition, depending on its place in the stack.

Holes allow the viewer to enter a painting in a way they couldn't when there was a transparent barrier. Cutting into the picture plane lets the eye weave in and out of the undulating, accumulated surfaces. On artist Jacqueline Humphries' silver reflective paintings such as 41/14, David Joselit articulates this sensation as a "back-and-forth rhythm – whereby viewers are alternatively thrown out of a painting and drawn back in."<sup>59</sup> This physical push-pull quality is a phenomenon that can occur when a painter uses warm colours, which are conventionally understood to 'come forward', and cool colours, which 'recede'. Depending on conditions of light in the exhibition space, the push-pull quality of Humphries' silver paintings is "encoded in the silver paint itself,"<sup>60</sup> which reflects and repels, or pulls viewers in. Push-pull is also achieved by a large-scale work having small areas of detail that draw the viewer in for a closer look. In this way, paintings can have one operation, image, feeling or affect when looked at from a few metres back, and an entirely different one from only 30 centimetres away. I often find myself

58 A transparent work of art can be moved and whatever is seen through it becomes the background. This is something I consider, but the works I am currently making aren't transparent enough for the world to show through and become part of the art.

59 Joselit, "Painting Time," 16.

60 Ibid, 19.

moving backwards and forwards in front of a work in a gallery to experience these varying effects. When viewed from a few metres back, the colours on different layers in my current paintings merge, appearing as one mottled surface. Upon closer inspection, these colours separate out into layers, and individual elements such as text are revealed. I'm interested in how this push-pull effect is different when there are holes and interruptions in the layers, where the unexpected edges recalibrate a smooth rhythm of looking into a more disjointed one.

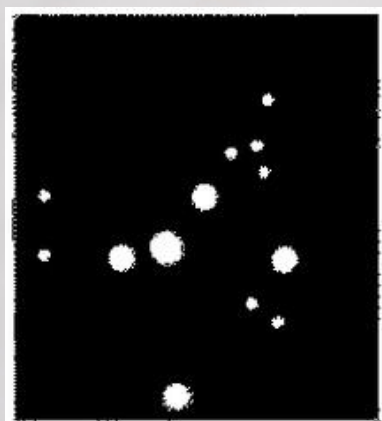


Figure 35. Dieter Roth, *Poetry Machine*, 1961, black paper with holes developed for a 1963 Fluxus publication called *An Anthology of Chance Operations*

A surface with holes in it both reveals and covers what lies underneath it. Fluxus artist Dieter Roth's work *Poetry Machine* (fig. 35) is a piece of black paper with holes, made to be placed over found text. The "machine" randomly reveals a combination of words that becomes a found poem. Roth's desire to remove "the tyranny of choice"<sup>61</sup> from the artistic process is relatable, as I often feel overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities of what I could potentially make. When I put a layer with holes over other painted layers, the holes become both windows to, and frames for, other layers. The choice about what to show, or frame, is taken away from me as the artist and is given to an object I have created without thinking about its ability to cover and reveal. This "controlled lack of control"<sup>62</sup> achieved by the artist working in collaboration with a system both reduces the need for the sort of arbitrary decision-making that can be overwhelming, and reveals new and unpredictable compositions.



Figure 36. *Reminder* (detail), 2022, acrylic, pencil, ink and vinyl on PVC and canvas, perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

In my work *Reminder* (figs. 36 & 37), holes draw the viewer in close to see what has been revealed by the frame of each opening. The layer on top, which is a painted copy of a large paper offcut, has some curious perceptual properties. Its muted colour reads as a background, so even though it sits on top of other layers, it has a receding effect. The bright colours of other layers act as figure, coming forward, even though they are physically at the back. When a transparent layer is placed on top of a stack of layers, the layer behind it becomes the ground. In contrast, when a layer containing holes is placed on top of a stack, the layer behind it can become the figure. The viewer's expectations of how surface and figure-ground operate are interrupted. Alongside holes, folds and floppings-forward also disrupt expectations of how these elements operate. The interruptions in their continuous painted surfaces bring attention to how my paintings are made from accreted layers of processed parts, emphasising their dual qualities as both object and image.

61 Cynthia Cruz, "Notes Toward a New Language: On Dieter Roth," *Poetry Foundation*, 2015, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2015/04/notes-toward-a-new-language-on-dieter-roth->

62 Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making".





Figure 37. *Reminder*, 2022, acrylic, pencil, ink and vinyl on PVC and canvas, perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)



Figure 38. *Attack Surface*, 2022, acrylic, pencil, and vinyl on PVC and canvas, perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)



## CHAPTER THREE: FROM ACTION TO IMAGE

### Imitation and replication

... a heterogeneous admixture filled with subtle self-mirroring and replication, a zone in which mediation and self-appropriation offer new compositional potentials. In this piece, telling apart real and fake, manufactured and spontaneous, is not only impossible but also thrillingly beside the point.<sup>63</sup>

Lloyd Wise

Replicating and imitating surfaces is my primary art-making strategy. Each colour, pattern, and surface I paint is copied from a part in my database, combined with the elements of other parts to create something new. No colour, pattern, surface or shape comes purely from my imagination. The Non-Sterile layer is a copy of the text from scalpel blade packets and the cut outs are in the shape of flame nail decals. The red is that of a shell laminate object, the silver (cut out, removed from the layer, and attached to a new one) is that of nail decals, and the mustard-green is replicated from the back of woodgrain vinyl. Replication and imitation in my process is focussed on reorganising and remixing existing materials into new forms, without using new, mass-produced material (although I buy new tubes of paint and other mediating art supplies). Though the terms replication and imitation are often associated with capitalistic, indiscriminate reproduction, my waste-oriented art practice works to respect limits of growth and production by re-using materials diligently.

Replication is also an act of attention. When replicating, I gain understanding as to why I have been drawn to the part in the first place. I am motivated by seeing what occurs when I reproduce parts that I am drawn to, adding my hand to their existing visual qualities. Given that they have been chosen for my database, the parts have inherently aesthetic merits. The mustard-green colour is already interesting; what happens when I add the thickness of paint, and the mark-making of my hand? Before they are painted, many of the surfaces I replicate appear to me as “readymade abstract painting.” Pāua, composite foam, and wood grain are swirling and mottled unintended images as well as materials. How do these image qualities change when they are intentionally re-presented as image? What happens when the image of wood grain is painted in the colours of marbled orange and grey foam (fig. 41)? In this way, parts are replicated but changed by using the formal qualities of other parts, my own decisions of method and material, and minor variations of chance. A composite foam offcut (fig. 42) is enlarged and reproduced as a painted



Figure 39. *Attack Surface* (detail), 2022, acrylic, pencil, and vinyl on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

63 Lloyd Wise, “Feelings aren’t Facts: Lloyd Wise on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries,” *Artforum*, Summer 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201906/lloyd-wise-on-the-art-of-jacqueline-humphries-79924>.



Figure 40. *Tinnitus*, 2022, acrylic on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)





Figure 41. *Clone*, 2022, acrylic, pencil, ink and vinyl on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

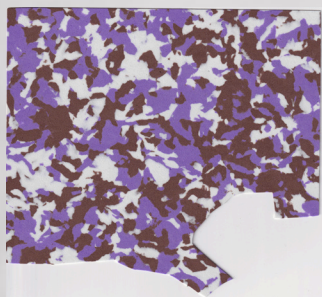


Figure 42. Found composite foam offcut

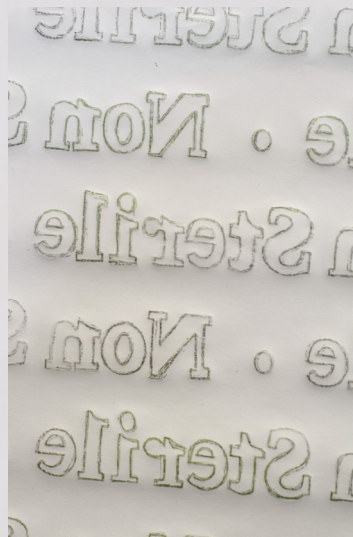
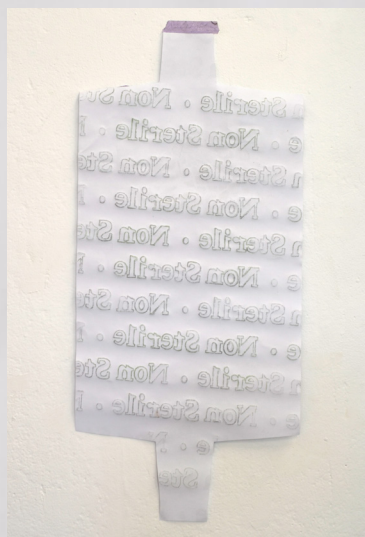


Figure 43. *Tinnitus* (detail), 2022, acrylic on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

layer on PVC before another shape is cut from it, producing more parts and extending the qualities of each (figs. 38, 39, 40 & 43). The perceptual effects of visual complexity may challenge the viewer to interpret what these elements are, or simply to pay attention to the actual process of looking. Either way, I hope to encourage curiosity and absorption. In this way the experience of the works may mimic, imitate and extend upon my own attentiveness and absorption during the collection of materials, the replication of parts and the arrangement of the whole.

When replicating a part, I usually copy it as closely as possible, but there are always decisions to make about what materials and processes to use. I aim to be an “unreliable archivist,” imbuing my copies with my hand and shaping them in my image. New dimensions and layers of meaning are added to the copy when creative liberties are taken, alternative paths explored, and choices are made that aren’t always the most logical or efficient.

Using an inefficient method is often not a conscious decision, but rather one made by not thinking through something fully, or by wanting to use the materials available in my studio rather than having to go elsewhere to a workshop, and then being too stubborn to give up on something I’ve already started. I spent dozens of hours tracing enlarged and photocopied text onto canvas using old carbon paper (an “offcut” from artist Harriet Stockman’s studio) when I could have screen printed or made a vinyl-cut stencil to transfer the image. This gives the text a hand drawn, cartoonish quality. Furthermore, instead of putting down a colour as the background, I painted the red text first and then went in with a tiny paintbrush to fill in the space around it (fig. 46). My right hand hurts when I look at this layer, which I could only work on for an hour at a time to avoid completely ruining my hand. It contains the memory of the two Zadie Smith novels I listened to while painting it, and memories of my peers walking past, grimacing at my slow progress. The pen-stressed photocopy (fig. 44) used to trace the text is a beautiful object that is a remnant of the whole process and is now a part that will undoubtedly be used for something else. The containment of stories and memories within a painting layer and the obvious presence of the artist’s hand infuse it with the idiosyncratic, making it much more curious than a more mechanically produced, efficiently made version.



Figures 44-47. The pen-stressed paper stencil (and detail) used to trace an enlarged scalpel blade packet onto canvas, a process photograph of the painting of this layer, and a detail of the finished layer in *Morphology*, 2022 (fig. 48).



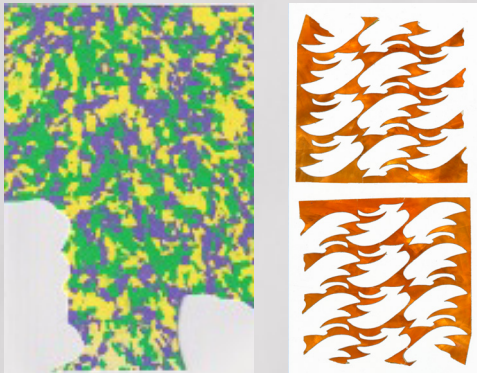


Figure 48. *Morphology*, 2022, acrylic and vinyl on PVC and canvas, perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)

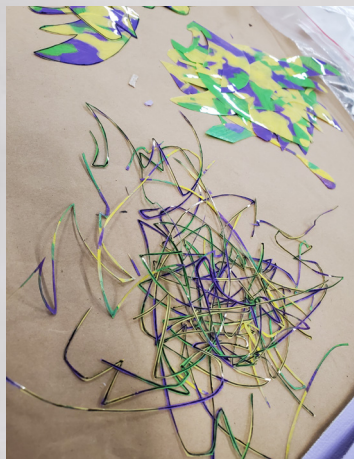
## Isolating gestures

I see my practice as an endless making of last paintings or of last paintings which just generate other last paintings, but the keyword is generate. I seek to find a way out of end game strategies and create a paradigm that is abundant and generative.<sup>64</sup>

Jacqueline Humphries



Figures 49 & 50. Foam offcut and shell laminate offcut, both sourced from Trade Me



Figures 46 & 47. Parts (figs. 49 & 50) being combined, offcuts being made, and more offcuts being made from the resulting offcuts

Extending from the replication and imitation of materials, my work also re-presents and replicates actions. In his 2010 lecture, “Why are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think it’s a Good Idea,” writer Jan Verwoert identifies that “the first act of production is to produce the very possibilities of that work.”<sup>65</sup> Building a database of parts to combine and process is my first step to produce these possibilities. Personally logical, generative processes emerge when I use these parts to make my moves: objects are photocopied and cut out to be used as stencils; packaging is scanned and enlarged to be copied onto canvas; offcuts are filed in plastic sleeves for future use. All elements of my studio process contain the possibility of reactivation.

Verwoert posits that conceptual art is about “isolating basic gestures.”<sup>66</sup> My action-parts, such as repeating, rotating and sorting are all basic gestures, uncomplicated actions that can be repeated over and over in a somewhat automatic way. Having a collection of actions that I can carry out without thinking too much means there is always something to busy my hands with, even when I don’t know what I am making. These actions I sometimes consider “mindless work,” allowing me periods of respite in which I only use my body and not my mind. Carrying out isolated gestures (doing actions) is mindless work, but isolating gestures to consider them deeply (thinking about actions) is the opposite, driving the conceptual aspects of my methodology. For example, producing, gathering, sorting and subsequently using offcuts in new ways creates a new formal and conceptual interest in offcuts, driving me to collect other people’s offcuts as source material (figs. 49 & 50). There is immense pleasure in “finding the possibility of the new in a thing that seems to be an end.”<sup>67</sup> Even the pieces of canvas I use

64 Jacqueline Humphries, “Artist Talk: Jacqueline Humphries” (lecture, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, July 25, 2019), <https://vimeo.com/356478373>.

65 Jan Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think it’s a Good Idea” (lecture, Glasgow, April 16, 2010), <https://vimeo.com/60549110>.

66 Ibid.

67 Fergus Feehily, “Tuesday Evenings at the Modern” (lecture, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, March 8, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAoTT3qgpdY>.



are offcuts from an art supply shop, and the Perspex clear file tops are offcuts from a factory, dragged from their bins. The pairing of “offcuts” and “cutting-off/into” has conceptual implications, where object turns into action, then turns back into object. I perform this action of cutting on my cutting mat, which has now turned into the ground image for a painting, action and object thereby turning into image (fig. 49).

Through repetition over time, these actions, such as cutting off and taping together, become parts, boundaries blurring between categories of image, object and action. This increased slipperiness may mean I approach each part with more expansive and inclusive options of what can be done to or with it.

The actions of cutting, removing and enlarging are deeply intuitive to my way of working. In his seminal 1970 essay “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making,” artist Robert Morris observes that artists want to carry out “the most discontinuous, irrational things in the most reasonable way.”<sup>68</sup> I consider my “irrational” actions to be logical, having developed into a personal logic through repetition over the last 15 years of art-making, both in digital and non-digital studios. Isolated gestures are repeated, often in sequence: for example, tracing a shape onto a substrate, cutting out shapes, collecting those offcuts into a clear file, then attaching them in a grid onto another ground. The linking of actions into recognisable sequences solidifies them as processes that become automatic. Although it hasn’t yet happened, this could mean that processes become predictable or boring. I trust that processes can be disrupted by injecting new parts at different points. Constantly updating my database turns it into a generative system, ensuring that there is always new potential contained within it.<sup>69</sup>

Jacqueline Humphries generates new work by processing and repeating her old works using mechanical and “hands-off” technologies and methods. Although interested in the existential idea of “making her last painting,” Humphries has created a paradigm in which her paintings always generate more paintings. Having felt that she has made enough works, she “cannibalises” her oeuvre in a generative, looping way in which there is “no beginning and no end,”<sup>70</sup> isolating, collecting, and making stencils out of marks and gestures



Figure 48. Studio, May 2022

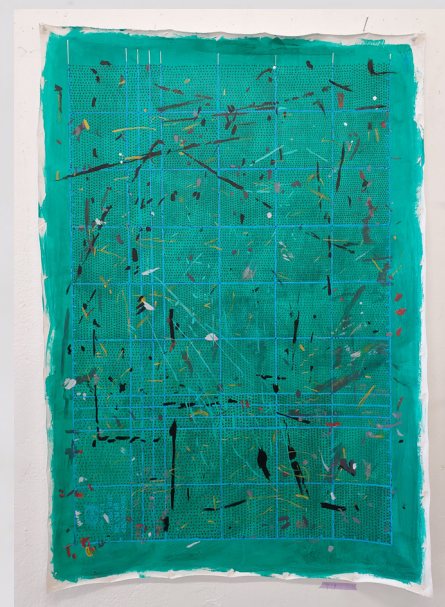


Figure 49. Unfinished “cutting mat” layer

68 Morris, “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making”.

69 “Generative systems are technologies with the overall capacity to produce unprompted change driven by input.”

“What Is Generative Systems,” IGI Global, accessed July 31, 2022, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/generative-systems/54012>.

70 Cecily Brown and Jacqueline Humphries, “Jacqueline Humphries,” *BOMB*, no. 107 (2009): 22–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40428080>.



Figure 50. Jacqueline Humphries, *sysysy/:|*, 2018, oil on linen with Poly-Optic Resin objects, 290 × 323 cm.



Figure 51. Jacqueline Humphries, *sysysy/:|* (detail), 2018.

from old paintings to use in new work. Fake, or stencilled, marks are mixed with real marks so that what appears to be a gesture is also a representation, or picture of itself.<sup>71</sup>

In 2018 Humphries fed images of her older paintings into ASCII, a 1960s image-encoding system. Controlling for characters, density, and size, she then stencilled these marks onto new canvases (fig. 50). This “controlled lack of control,” in which the image is determined both by the artist and a machine, is similar to that in Roth’s *Poetry Machine*. In the work *sysysy/😊*, Humphries also made some of this code and an emoticon into objects which sit on top of the canvas, breaking the bounds of the picture plane (fig. 51). From a distance, the work appears to be made via a series of expressive marks, but they are actually coded images of the same marks. Close-up, the marks break up into tiny forward slashes, semi-colons and apostrophes – expressions of text language and communication, hand on keyboard rather than hand on canvas. Humphries is not representing the old paintings but re-presenting them via replication and repetition. Building paintings in a physical way that feels to her more like sculpture than image-making,<sup>72</sup> she breaks them apart into separate elements with which to build her subsequent works. Past actions become images, encoded with new potential, that then become images once more.

While Humphries uses a past action (such as a painted gesture) as an image, I use current actions as images and materials, re-presenting them by using other action-parts. The information contained within “art acts” is “allowed into the work as part of the image.”<sup>73</sup> By cutting into my painting substrates, I inadvertently took away some of their structural integrity, making them sag, droop and become more three-dimensional. This new three-dimensionality of a layer made it difficult to put another on top of it. By using tape to connect one drooping bit to the area above it, the layer could be reverted to its more two-dimensional version (fig. 52). I made fake tape out of canvas (fig. 53) as a tool to add structure to any substrates that needed it, turning this temporary solution to a problem into something more deliberate, permanent, and stronger than its original counterpart. Tape/taping became a slightly deceptive and self-mirroring picture of itself, a new part that is simultaneously

71 In reference to Marcel Duchamp, Ecker Bonk observes that stencils are “a kind of two-dimensional ‘mould’.” A stencil allows for more images to be produced, but they are slightly different to the original from which the stencil was made, in the same way that each cast from a mould is different.

Quoted in Ades, Cox, and Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, 202.

72 Jacqueline Humphries, “Graduate Art Seminar: Jacqueline Humphries” (lecture, Los Angeles Times Media Centre, CA, April 18, 2017), <https://vimeo.com/216330883>.

73 Morris, “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making”.



image, action, and material. The fake tape is an image of a purple shape; the image of masking tape; the actions of taping, holding and fixing; and it is the material of canvas. It is also decidedly painters' tape, a low-tack adhesive material familiar to painters. Canvas "tape" as a part has generated new possibilities – in recent work I have cut canvas tape from offcuts of a painting that itself replicates "Non-Sterile" scalpel blade packets and used it to join areas on other layers (fig. 54).

Replication and imitation of images, objects and actions is a strategy that never fails to generate new possibilities. It allows me to add my own hand to existing materials, configuring them into new forms. By replicating, I understand the visual qualities of the things to which I've been drawn, and extend these qualities out onto other parts in my database. Replication creates formal and conceptual links between parts, strengthening my database as a whole system.



Figure 52. The moment that masking tape's structural use was discovered



Figure 53. Purple canvas "masking tape" being used to give structure to a layer



Figure 54. ~, 2022, acrylic and vinyl on PVC and canvas and perspex, 59 x 84 cm (A1)



## DOCUMENTATION OF FINAL SHOW AT ST PAUL STREET GALLERY 2

Images courtesy of Emily Parr





















































## Conclusion

*Object, Image, Action – building paintings with digital logic* is a studio-based painting project that reaches out into the world, and sits within a broader context concerning the impacts of technology on culture.

Database as methodology emphasises myriad, networked connections over linear, hierarchical ways of thinking. Its poetic potential enables me to balance the tension between the structure of systems with the joyous, idiosyncratic and enigmatic qualities of artistic production. The database has fostered my understanding of how I use images, objects, and actions as parts, constructing an external database that works alongside my internal database of knowledge and experience.

My increasingly digital reality shapes my methods of painting in surprising ways. By using the systems and structures of digital workflow, I balance the loose, intuitive and expressive qualities of painting with the logical and processual. Building paintings from front to back and back to front simultaneously sets up the conditions for chance and change, allowing me to approach painting in a way that suits my modes of attention. The elements of unpredictability and movement afforded to me by using layers are extended and complexified by using holes and transparency. Layers, holes and transparency open up space within my works, emphasising painting's dual position as both object and image. Temporarily held in stacked arrangements, the layers contain possibilities for other images; the work in this project is constantly in flux and drives me onward.

Actions are the driving force of this project. Sequenced together, they have developed into a personal logic that allows me to keep making, even with no fixed goal. By building a database of actions that function in digital and non-digital worlds, my practice can constantly develop with our changing reality. In this project, replication and imitation are essential strategies that add new conceptual and formal possibilities. Copying and combining parts allows me to constantly create links, facilitating the generation of new images, objects, actions and ideas.



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