

Art/Other

Mark Prince argues that, while moving between disciplines offers visual artists a way out of the insularity of the art world, caution is required if such crossovers are not to result in the dissipation of art's power to communicate on its own terms.

After the River, 2016 – a 20-minute, three-channel video installation by the Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige – was in some ways characteristic of this year's Berlin Biennial, in others something of an outlier. Strung together by meditative shots of the river that runs through Beirut, it combined a personal journey of discovery through the artist's home city with a more objectively toned analysis of how the environment which surrounds the river has changed, culturally and economically, since the civil war. The use of subtitled interviews to contextualise footage of dilapidated, or recently regenerated riverside architecture, set among hooting, revving streets, conformed to the exhibition's context by framing a documentary study – which could have equally fitted into a National Geographic-style format and have nothing ostensibly to do with art – with a multi-screen presentation: a generic form of art-video installation, even a sign for it.

The film failed to conform to its context in conveying, if implicitly, a more layered sense of the artist's subjective investment in her narrative, while also accommodating 'psychogeographical' traits more familiar from a literary fictional context (eg the novels of Iain Sinclair, WG Sebald or Esther Kinsky). Two kinds of film, or two media – the documentary and the auto-fictional – were conflated, a complexity which seemed exceptional in that the Biennial (Reviews *AM458*) – curated this year by the artist Kader Attia – consisted predominantly of art that had assimilated material associated with alternative disciplines (eg that of the writer, the scientist, the philosopher, the sociologist, the documentarian, the architect, the musician, the designer etc) as a pretext for giving its presentation a specious veneer of 'objectivity'. The ready-formed impetus of imported narratives reduces the fitting response to simplistic moral binaries – are you inside or not? This has a relaying effect on formal aspects, which are similarly reduced to broad distinctions of functionality: does an installation appear 'professional' enough to carry a theme effectively? The subtleties of irony and doubt, along with all the potential for fictional address – rhetoric, theatre, others forms of posturing, which distinguish art from documentary – are lost on this powerfully normative magnetic field, a sacrifice not only justified but actively encouraged by various unarguably 'correct' political stances. Joreige's film stood out in not being amenable to these clear-cut dualisms.



Lamia Joreige, *After the River*, 2016, three-channel video

This is hardly a phenomenon specific to this iteration of the Biennial: look across town and the same objections could be levelled at the group exhibition, 'YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal', which opened in September at the Martin Gropius Bau. These manifestations of art as a testing ground for overlapping disciplines are faultlessly topical (typically leaning towards ecological, post-colonial or gender-identity themes). However, it is remarkable how neatly the disjunctions they imply between the home ground of art, and the material it adopts, corresponds to the old, post-romantic/modernist clash between so-called purer, transcendental art and its concrete forms, which are duly demoted – painting, sculpture and other media – to the mere 'technics' of craft, to 'the arts' as distinct from 'art'.

Spend any time plumbing the roots of these distinctions and you hit the bedrock of the Duchampian readymade. It seems odd that Theodor Adorno, writing in 1950, more than three decades after the bicycle wheel was raised on its stool, does not mention the readymade when he ponders the difference between 'art' and 'the arts', but it is probably an indication of how laggardly the uptake of Marcel Duchamp's breakthrough was. Adorno proposed that Kurt Schwitters's collage techniques, with their introduction of alien matter into the body politic of art, were 'an erosion of arts' through the 'attempt ... to reach out towards an extra-aesthetic reality': 'the more an art allows material that is not contained in its own continuum to enter it, the more it participates in alien, thing-like matter, instead of imitating it.'

The binary sketched here is between art based, as if by definition, on various forms of representation, which evacuate subject matter to a pretextual remove, leaving its essentially aesthetic qualities intact, and art as admissible to material to which those aesthetic qualities seem inapplicable. That phrase, 'alien, thing-like matter', now seems to refer ineluctably to the readymade, with its negative – in Adorno's dialectic – pitched, by Duchamp, as a positive value. With hindsight, Adorno seem to be succumbing to the 'dilettantism' he imputes to art that 'remains satisfied with a generalised aesthetic', although admittedly he is contrasting that value with the 'philistine handicraft' with which we are left if a pan-medium 'aesthetic' (the 'poetry' or 'spirit' of art) is 'expunged'. In fact, this only highlights how much of its time – the pinnacle of late modernism – his essay is.

Duchamp is now lauded as the founding father of Conceptual Art, which, in its guise as Modernism's great dematerialiser, would subsequently assume the role the earlier 20th century had imputed to 'pure spirit', as against the lumpen embodiedness of material forms. What could be more lumpenly embodied than the urinal? The readymade, as a 'given' object, would be exempt from the kind of aesthetic distinctions that apply to 'made' art, thereby circumventing 'taste'. Georg Hegel's proposition that 'the specific

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characterisation of the senses and of their corresponding material ... must provide the grounds for the division of the individual arts' was contradicted by conceptualism's insistence that art was a singular quality, transcending both media and the individual senses specific to them, along with 'their corresponding material', as concepts transcend senses and philosophical rationalism is exempt from niggling contingencies encountered by empirical enquiry. This was the thrust of Duchamp's anti-retinal argument against painting, a medium he had only recently abandoned as the vehicle for his artistic ambition (or, put in positive terms, as Thierry de Duve has argued that it should be, the effect of his abandoning the medium was to reconceive painting as a multi-medium discipline, a post-conceptual medium that transcended media.)

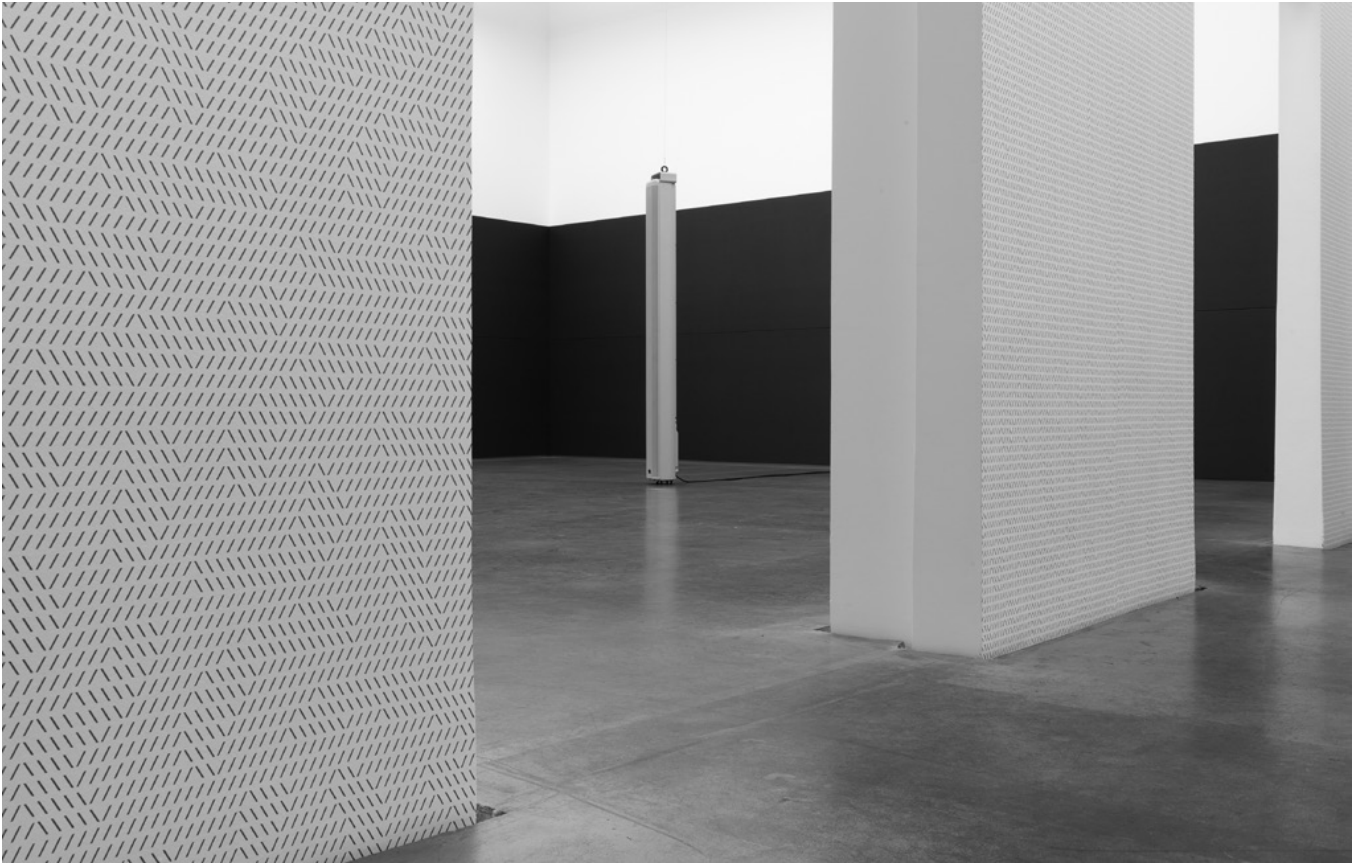
The elision of disciplines has a tendency to arrange itself into a functional dynamic, even when both of the domains being elided are artistic (ie art and literature, or art and music). A trade-off is established between work and play, idea and technique, aesthetics and function, the body and abstract notions that transcend its physical labour. Conceptualism's bifurcation of an *a priori* idea and the contingent forms of its realisation always belied a streak of moralistic puritanism lurking in that dichotomy: a fear of the body. We see these binaries reasserting themselves in art produced under

the assumed guises of the amateur documentarian, artist-activist or cod historian, placing a viewer, in turn, in a role similar to that of the social media trawler, whose contribution is limited to a choice of 'like' or ignore. To abstain, or even to disagree, is unlikely, given the indubitable rectitude of most of the premises. We do not like torture, we do not like suppressing people, we do not want to wipe out the rainforests, do we? I missed this summer's Documenta, but the controversy over some of the work it presented – subsequently removed from the exhibition, following allegations that it channelled anti-Semitic content – seemed notable, from afar, as an example of how one-dimensionally polarised are the responses usually appropriate to contemporary, 'politically motivated' art: an obvious positive or obvious negative.

But there are advantages and freedoms to operating outside of a discipline or medium, as there are to approaching it from the unfamiliar tangent offered by an alternative domain. For one thing, it may offer a release from the endemic self-referentiality of contemporary art, its inclination to use the media it provisionally adopts to comment on themselves, as a means of evading both the perceived trap of formalistic insularity, and conversely the kitsch illusionism to which, it is assumed, the use of traditional forms will tend when tasked to look outside of their own processes.



Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #34 (yellow)*, 2010, lenticular photograph



Florian Hecker, 'TEMPLEXTURES', installation view, Galerie Neu, Berlin

To assume the mantle of a foreign discipline, even to the extent of practising it, can be a release from the bind of art about art about art etc *ad infinitum*.

This is the thrust of Craig Dworkin's caveat, regarding the phenomenon of artists/writers producing literary works aimed at establishing the self-reflexivity of their forms. This strategy, he suggests, fails to correspond to Conceptual Art's recourse to language to gain an objective, rational distance on the immediacy of the visual: 'The mere idea of the poem made of words does not intervene in the discipline in the same way as conceptual art's linguistic turn does.' Even if the difference between referencer and referent is as other as criticism to the object of its focus, if both adopt the same medium, and circulate within the same discourse, things can get convoluted, incestuous, inbred. The poet-critic Geoffrey Hill was lamenting this hermeticism when he noted that 'language, the element in which a poet works, is also the medium through which judgments upon his work are made'.

At an exhibition by the sound artist Florian Hecker in Berlin this summer, I asked the gallery assistant about the unusual speaker, which stood as its centre-piece: a tall, grey column, placed in the role of an isolated figural surrogate in the otherwise almost empty gallery. I was told it was designed for high-level sound performance, that it was expensive and hard to get hold of, and the gallery had managed to purchase this one second hand from the Hamburg Philharmonie, which had acquired it for their own performances, only to reject it on the basis of its colour. When I later contacted the gallery for more information about the show, I was informed that the speaker's provenance was 'not relevant to the artist' and he would rather I didn't divulge it. Although I am disregarding Hecker's request, I respect his scruple, which I interpret as a wariness of the risk that, in straddling two domains

- or *appearing* to do so - his work will be seen as erroneously conflating them, with the consequence that he is seen to be dabbling in both of them.

Aside from the story about the speaker, the assistant also provided me with some helpful information about the sound piece the speaker was playing, which I would have had no means of gathering from the work itself, and would otherwise have taken for a piece of atonal electronic music, the gallery setting of its cyclical replay being redundant except as a frame that arbitrarily referenced generic attributes of minimalist sculpture as decor for a work as much out of its natural waters as Joreige's film could have appeared if the Biennial were not full of documentary material presented as art. According to this analogy, Joreige's three-channel presentation would correspond, in its function, to Hecker's wall-mounted, forest-green hessian acoustic panel system, and the single loud-speaker's totemic sculpturality.

The speaker was playing a 55-minute sound piece, *TEMPLEXTURES D*, 2022, which had been developed at Ircam, an institute in Paris where contemporary composers - such as Pierre Boulez, who founded it - access state-of-the-art technology with which to create electronic musical compositions, or add an electronic component to pieces written for ensembles of traditional instruments. Hecker had produced a series of miniature sound files (between milliseconds and five seconds in duration), which were fed into Ircam's computers and 'resynthesised', a process that, as far as I understand, involves synthetically reinventing the data seeds into what must mostly be far greater resolution, given that the resulting piece is nearly an hour long.

What I initially assumed was a musical language turned out to be the result of a process which is more familiar in a visual art context, particularly in work

in which the indexicality of photographic images is taken as a ground to be supplemented by artificially generated information. For instance, Hecker's resynthesising of seeds of data 'from features contained in the respective source material' recalls the process of image reconstruction undertaken by Mike Kelley in his 'Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction', series of the early 2000s. These are installations, sculptures and filmed performative works that reproduce theatrical scenarios documented in photographs Kelley sourced from vintage high-school yearbooks and local newspapers. The reconstructions were radical elaborations, given that the original images were amateur black-and-white snapshots, their quality further degraded through translation for printing purposes into low-resolution dot screens. In order to generate three-dimensional stage sets for scripted productions, Kelley had to drastically overcompensate for a lack of information provided by the source images. At all levels - narrative, spatial, chromatic - the results extended beyond the limitations implied by the mimetic process that produced them. The relation between a 'given' source image and the 'made' reconstruction prompted a process of compare and contrast, which revealed the failure of the reconstruction to capture the documentary aura of the original, as well as all that had to be artificially added to the original, or assumed from it, in order to produce the larger, more detailed version.

Similar to the relation between Hecker's 'resynthesised' sound piece and the bits of sound data it expanded upon, Kelley's reconstructions offer various analogies for the difference between memory and image. Photographs may represent memories, even ultimately come to replace them, but they are of a different order. Memories are conditional on assumptions and biases specific to a particular subjectivity; photographs, however, are causally objective, their evidential claim compensating for the camera's lack of interpretation. Photography's two-dimensional singularity asserts its factual basis over memory's more tentative, three-dimensional properties. Kelley's reconstructions offer the potential of an unlimited range of subjective decisions as to how the original image is to be interpreted, how gaps in its threadbare record are to be padded out. In a tautological loop, metastasising information, the source suggests an arrangement of props, which produce a new reality, a new base of detail, from which the reconstruction's image is empirically created, replacing the source from which it derived. Compared with the grainy originals, the reconstructions have the literalness of reality, a status which their artifice subverts, casting the originals as the only indexical link to a source. Paradoxically, the results are as much metaphors for the scene the original image recorded as signifiers of their own contemporary distance from its record; as much reifications of a lost reality as failures to become it, in that they can only over-interpret it.

Music also operates on an axis between memory and representation, through the repetition, variation and transformation of its themes, how those structures correspond to the auditory experience of the listener, and how a composition relates to a musical tradition, which new music - like any other artistic medium in relation to its own history - draws on, adapts and challenges. In assigning the 'composition' of his sound piece to Ircam's software, Hecker has no truck - or only the superficial one of similitude, which I picked up on when I entered the gallery uninformed - with the tradition associated with the institute. If the sound component of his installation superficially resembles music produced by that tradition, it cannot be evaluated according to the same criteria. To the extent that it is isolated from the context its production implies, it is impoverished. To compensate, it gains access to an alternative, materially self-reflexive tradition, deriving from Conceptual Art and Minimalism, hence the installation's emphasis on materially and technically specific geometric objects, which polarise themselves into a phenomenologically specific relation to an ambient viewer, at the same time as activating a dichotomy between a functional vehicle (the post-minimalist-style installation) and the sound which transcends it (in the sense that sound is a dematerialised medium, investing space) even as it is contingent upon it (in that the sound is also produced by concrete data). The installation gains an implicit advantage over work which belongs outright to a single domain in the outsider status its production process confers, releasing it from the insular self-referentiality of the art tradition it primarily claims as its context. The equivalent of the function, for Kelley, of the folk-art realm of the theatrical yearbook images ('I limited myself', Kelley noted, 'to specific iconographic motifs taken from the following files: Religious Performances, Thugs, Dance, Hick and Hillbilly, Halloween and Goth, Satanic, Mimes, and Equestrian Events') is, for Hecker, the esoteric world of the classical musical tradition. If it is the common theme of theatrical artifice which connects the yearbook source images to the art photographs they prompt, it is music, or at least a semblance of its structures, which *TEMPLEXTURES D* shares with the work of the composers who mostly utilise Ircam's resources. The individual medium, music, as corresponding to the individual sense, hearing, is effectively transcended by the pan-medium form of conceptual art practice, while remaining materially contingent upon it, through the specifics of production.

An onus on the cumulative logic of identity-building, which characterises social-media profiling and forms the lingua franca of the contemporary career market, dictates that to be a sound artist-composer, or for that matter an artist-activist, artist-writer or artist-documentarian, is double the juice and should be capitalised on. But the practitioners themselves turn out to be wary of being seen, from the viewpoint of either of the double, or more, domains they operate

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within, as also working within the other. The caution is a reflection of what is taking place at the micro-level of a practice. When someone who is working in one field finds themselves straying into another, a powerful argument will tend, over time, to arise, suggesting that in order for them, as much as their audience, to accurately perceive the value of their contribution to either, it will need to be seen on its own terms, without the exoticism of outsider status arguing for it, even justifying its existence.

At a recent reading, the American writer/visual artist Andrea Scrima confessed her difficulty in maintaining visual art and literary practices, and that it was probably inevitable that she had come to feel the need to see for herself how her writing would fare in a literary context, without the appeal of the crossover to support it. Behind a tone of weary resignation in the face of this quandary, one could only imagine the impossible accommodations that had been required to balance her attempts to do justice to either medium with the exotic appeal of a novel hybrid of the two, which could perhaps better reflect the range of her particular talents, although doing justice to neither on their own ground. When Julian Barnes exemplifies 'the link between writers and artists in 19th-century France' with the characterisations that 'Balzac described himself as a "literary painter"', Émile Zola was seen as a 'writer-painter', Marcel Proust as 'occasionally a kind of cubist', it seems unlikely there would have been any serious doubts in the minds of any of these grand literary figures as to which context they were operating in, despite the dandyish wish they may have had to commingle their talents with those of their 'artistic' (in the broadest sense) *confrères* within the rich cultural cauldron of the Parisian Belle Époque. (This was, incidentally, a time when for art to be both political statement and aesthetic act might have been something to disavow rather than capitalise on. I wonder if there was as much political expediency, in Édouard Manet's claim, in defence of his lithograph of *The Execution of Maximilian* - banned, in 1869, on political grounds - that this was '*une oeuvre absolument artistique*'.)

Artists bring to what they do a complex of histories, which their work may or may not reflect. The Romanian artist Iulia Nistor is about to complete

a PhD in philosophy, and, although she is wary of making connections between the two domains - artistic, academic - in which she operates, her paintings have as much emerged out of her work as a philosopher as vice versa. She describes their subject matter as the contingent 'properties' of objects, which may or may not coincide with their appearance. Painting is a tool with which to redescribe what may, at the outset of the process, take a traditionally representational form, but then frequently involves editing out the features and contours of that view to arrive at an equivalence, in the form of a painting, which isolates the specific quality she is striving to capture.

That this process should coincide with a removal of pictorial signs associated with functional pictorial likeness, makes, for a viewer, an awareness of the empirical nature of the process all the more essential. Perhaps, at the crux of these distinctions is the difference between 'abstract painting' - a term that has come to signify formalist art's distance from the imperative to represent reality - and 'abstraction', in the more literal sense of a generalisation from a specific reality. A fine point of terminology turns out to be a largely overlooked methodological abyss; indeed, much contemporary philosophical research - especially on the 'analytical' side of the discipline - comes down to distinctions between definitions of terminology. That said, Nistor is as cautious of placing her art in conjunction with her philosophical work as Hecker is of the potential distraction from his concerns, which I assume he perceived in the Hamburg Philharmonie connection. She is aware that presenting a philosophical text in conjunction with a painting exhibition could lead her art to be seen as merely illustrating abstract ideas, despite such a dismissal being a symptom of the prejudices that arose within the formalist branch of modernist art, which Nistor is redefining through thinking honed in the context of another discipline. Her work speaks for itself, in that her paintings are finished when she judges the 'property' she wanted to represent to have been objectively rendered and capable of being shared in the act of viewing, but its abstraction makes it all the more beneficial for a viewer to appreciate its empirical intent.

The structure of her oeuvre provides clues. For several years she has been working on a series of



Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #23 (Joseph Supplicates)*, 2005



Iulia Nistor, *Space (Continuation and end)*, 2019, installation view, Scena 9, Bucharest

what she calls 'Evidence Paintings'; that they are all the same size (50 x 40cm), vertical in format, titled after geographical coordinates, and tellingly different in means and method, suggests that something specific, although unnameable, is demanding, in each individual work, a new approach, a reset to accommodate an alternative phenomenon. Similarly, the paintings themselves mediate between a vocabulary of painterly facture, associated with the contingencies of reality – organic drawing, sanded-down surfaces, the unpredictable interface between a mono-printed surface and the support to which it is applied – and a more geometric language, which harnesses and coalesces such forms as much as clashing with them, like an *a priori* 'solution' applied to the fruits of an empirical search.

This dichotomy also reflects how Nistor's 'interventions' engage with the spaces in which she exhibits. These are minimal, even clandestine, alterations of the architecture or decor, so reticent that they ironically comprehend the artifice – pronounced by comparison – of the convention of displaying paintings in an easel format on the walls of an art gallery. As explicitly 'abstract' features of her paintings are given the role of pictorial representatives of experience, which evades the nameability of aspects of our perceptual field (corresponding to the amenability of those aspects of reality to traditional codes of representation), her 'interventions' are designed to become part of a viewer's experience of an exhibition without their necessarily being conscious of it (they are untitled, and not featured in the list of works).

In Brussels, in 2018, sections of two adjacent gallery walls were repainted to match the colour of the shadow cast over parts of both by a staircase, leaving only the segments across which the shadow fell as they were. The intention was to conceal the shadow by assimilating its shade as colour – an impossibility, because it would involve eliding the illusion of light, created by paint's colour, and the hue of real light. In encountering that impossibility, and seeking to

find a material analogue for it, Nistor exposed the slipperiness of the correlation between a 'given' form and its 'made' equivalent, and how it is an equivalent to that between reality and representation. That the 'intervention' could have been taken for a geometric-formalist wall painting might suggest how much what philosophers call a 'coherence' theory of reality (that ideas generate ideas among themselves, in the enclosures of our minds, without necessary reference to what lies outside them) may resemble its converse, a 'correspondence' theory of the same (which suggests that ideas must correspond to something 'out there', which we experience).

Distinctions between *seeing-as*, *seeing-in* and *seeing-with* images are integral to contemporary image theory, a subset of the field of analytical philosophy to which Nistor has been contributing in her academic research. But if her art is philosophical, it is so not in the sense of applying a pseudo-intellectual burnish to a form – call it 'abstract art' – which post-conceptualism has reduced to the status of the quasi-decorative, but in ontological distinctions that determine forms, which have arisen in the process of practising art in conjunction with philosophy, and developing a painterly language to distinguish and discern distinctions which a philosophical inquiry raises. The results extend the medium of 'abstract painting' out of its self-reflexive insularity to accommodate a more refined sense of the ambiguities that emerge from our attempts to apprehend the world. This consciousness is then reinvested in the nitty-gritty of painting's materiality. In that return to matter specific to the medium, out of perceptions that are contingent, for their definition, upon thinking under the constraints of another domain, the indiscriminate dualisms which arise from discipline-crossing – between function and form, idea and material, rational order and contingency – may be reconciled.

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