



ROSS MANNING

DISSONANT RHYTHMS

DISSONANT RHYTHMS

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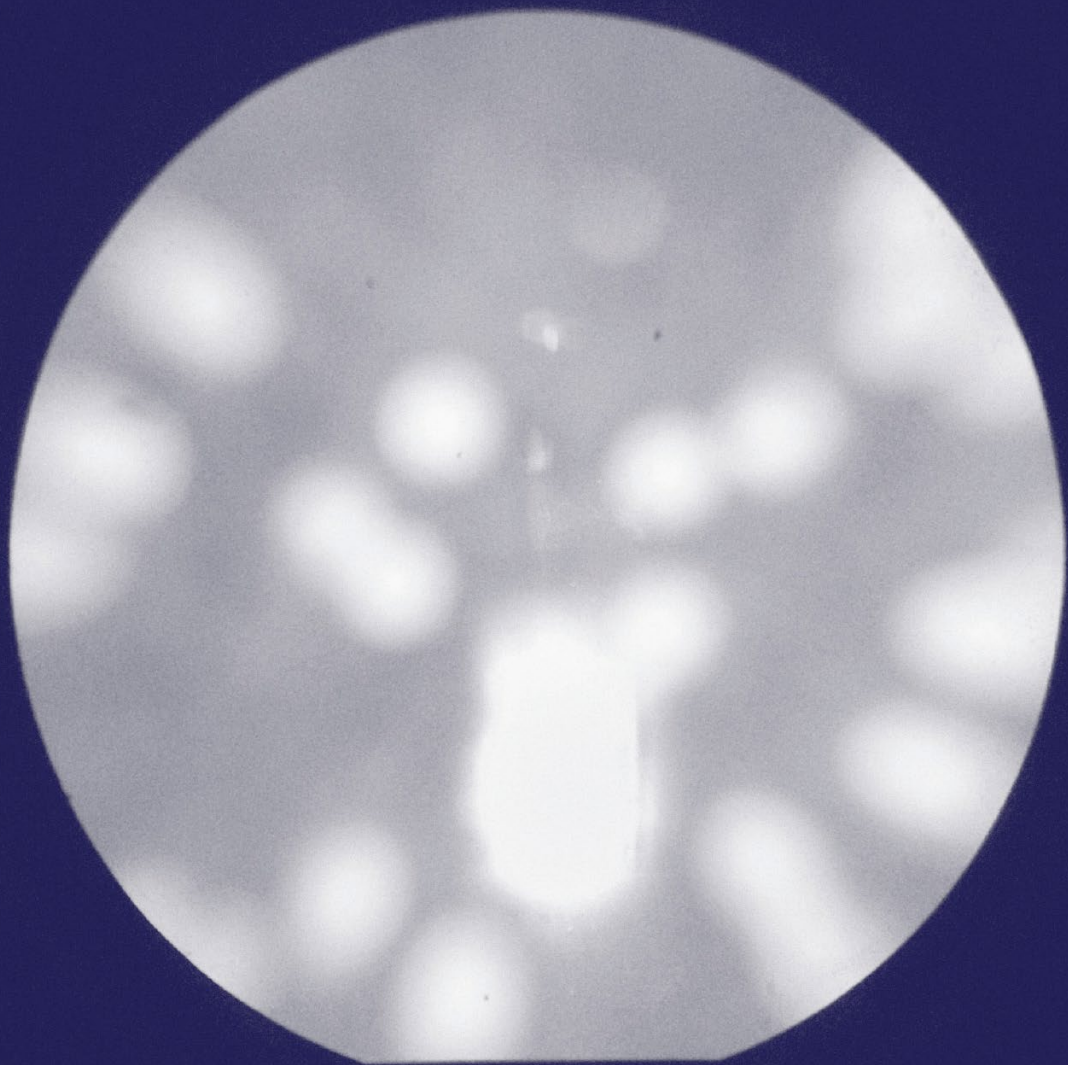
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Ross Manning



Madeleine King

INTRODUCTION: A DISSONANT UNIVERSE

Over the past decade, Brisbane-based artist and musician Ross Manning has developed what can only be described as his own world—or perhaps a universe—animated by light and sound. He is an obsessive creator of systems that are driven by their own logic, and of moving objects propelled by electricity and their own kinetic forces. This is a sculptural practice that has a totalising scope and vision: just as it appears to consume all manner of household and industrial objects, hardware, and technologies, so it harnesses visible and audible frequencies. It then uses those same energies of light, sound, and motion to colonise nearly every surface and wavelength in its vicinity.

Such is Manning's distinctive contribution to the field of sculpture—a field that, as Rosalind Krauss observed in 1979, has long expanded to include the kind of 'surprising' materials and immersive sculptural environments that Manning works with¹—that his work has been a natural inclusion in a diverse and impressive line-up of exhibitions, awards, and biennials in Australia and, increasingly, abroad. His most celebrated works are two serial projects: *Wave Opus* (2016–ongoing), a developing body of sound sculptures for both live performance and static display; and *Spectra* (2012–ongoing), a balanced mobile system comprising fluorescent tubes and fans. Both deservedly receive further attention throughout this book.

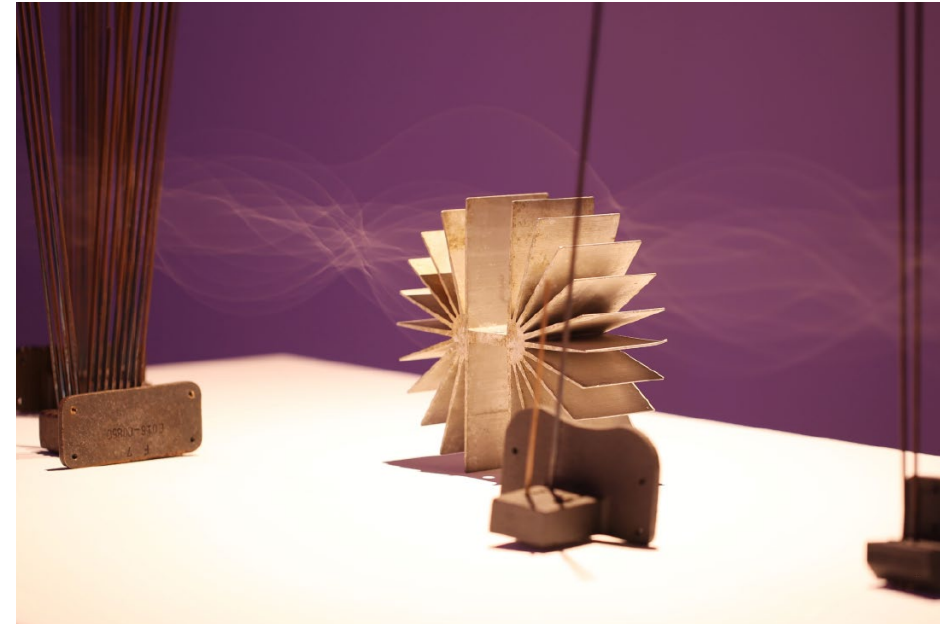
While one may draw parallels between Manning's work and that of twentieth-century American artist and pioneer of the mobile, Alexander Calder, Manning certainly owes more of a debt to twentieth-century Swiss artist Jean Tinguely, who

¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October* 8 (1979): 31–44.

really expanded and developed the use of kinetics in art.² Like Tinguely, Manning uses chance to lend his own machines some agency. While the parameters are set by the artist, there is a thrilling sense of unpredictability in how energy is seized and transferred by each component of his sculptures; how one motion may set off another. Part of Manning's continual return to forms and sequences is a drive to master this unpredictability. Like Tinguely, but also like renowned Korean American video artist Nam June Paik (whose creative misuse of television monitors, radios, and musical instruments in the 1960s has enabled contemporary artists such as Manning to look upon an expansive range of audio and visual media with equivalence), Manning manages to be analytical and systems-oriented as well as playful and lyrical in his assemblages. A domestic fan becomes a propeller for a swinging mobile of coloured light in one work, and animates a rotating spiral of string in another. Closer to home, the New Zealand pioneer of expanded cinema, Len Lye, is another key touchstone for the work, particularly in Manning's approach to the dynamics of moving light.

This book is published on the occasion of Manning's first survey exhibition, *Dissonant Rhythms*, co-curated by Aileen Burns, Johan Lundh, and I for the Institute of Modern Art (IMA), 5 August–28 October 2017, and shares its aim of charting the remarkable achievements of this artist over his past ten years of practice. It is accompanied by the artist's third LP *Reflex in Waves* (released by IMA and Room40), which both documents and transforms a new body of sculptural sound instruments composed of common hardware, such as steel, wire, and nails, and his trademark all-in-one percussion mallet and bow—a spinning rope. As the exhibition and this monograph reveal, Manning's instrument-building has developed into a far-reaching exploration of movement, rhythm, harmony, and, more importantly, its opposite: dissonance. The aesthetic, conceptual, and technical logic that the artist

² Tinguely is widely considered to have been a pioneer in this field, and produced kinetic works as early as 1954. For a discussion of Tinguely's use of machines and chance, see Justin Hoffman, "The Machine That Destroyed Itself", in *Under Destruction*, ed. Gianni Jetzer (Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2010), 131–138.



Wave Opus I, 2016, modified clock chimes, DC motors, hook-up wire, motion detector, contact microphones, and audio equipment. Photography: Sam Cranstoun. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

first harnessed in sound has translated into light and sculpture, with his signature attitude of equivalence.

Stemming from his musical background, and belying his totalising approach to the aural and visual, the body of work explored here uses *rhythm* to connect sound, light, colour, and movement. Rhythm is the time logic of music. But for Manning, rhythm is also what animates the frame rate of the moving image; what turns the cog in the machine; what powers the internal clock that drives the computer; what drives the flicker of light waves. Most importantly, rhythm is in the pulsation of energy. A *dissonant* rhythm isn't any less an order of time; it is simply one in which things appear *out of time*. Elements may not work together—they jar, grate, and

compete for attention—but they are bound by the same energy and intensity. Despite this sense of disorder, the ear and eye search for an underlying unity all the same.

Manning sees his sculptures as a series of “open-ended experimental situations or propositions” through which he facilitates the transference of energy between his own objects and between the environment and the viewer.³ Most works are electrically powered in some way (despite his reuse of discarded objects, there’s no obvious ecological impetus in the work), and the moving parts of works such as *Spectra* generate kinetic energy, but there is also the elastic energy stored by his tightly wound ropes and cables in that same work, as well as in *Spiral Sequence* (2013), *Spiral* (2015), and, of course, *Wave Opus*.

His is a truly idiosyncratic practice, whose hallmarks can be seen equally in his recorded sound practice as in his sculptures. First, there is an appreciation of the underlying science and mechanics of common media technology such as speakers, projectors, and television monitors—both those clunky analogue cathode ray tubes and their present-day LCD and plasma counterparts. Manning likes to strip down the outer hardware that contain and disguise these working parts, perhaps as a way to demystify, and make transparent, their function, or perhaps as a celebration of the quiet achievement of those hard-labouring objects we so often take for granted. Second, there’s an expert understanding of balance. This is balance in the aesthetic sense of proportions and compositional harmony, but also balance as it relates to physics and mechanical engineering: an understanding of gravity, movement, and dynamics. The tension that arises in Manning’s sound-and-light sculptures emerges from the manipulation of the science and balance of his objects. At their most complex, there are a number of moving and weighted elements that are co-dependent; they need each other, and they need to work together to survive. But

it’s almost in the moment that you are admiring how skilfully each component delicately—precariously—dangles from another that you suddenly realise how close the sculpture is to self-destruction. This is dissonance at play.

As may be expected from a survey exhibition, *Dissonant Rhythms* at the IMA demonstrates the development of a practice over time, and Manning’s continual return to ideas and forms. The numbering system used in many of the works’ titles underlines the extent to which these cycles and repeating motifs operate. *Spectra* is currently in double-digits—this exhibition presents *Spectra XIII*—and the artist is up to his third instalment of *Wave Opus*. The numbers don’t quite tell the full story, however, as the latter has in reality been a decade-long project, starting first in a live performance context, where the perfecting of sounds and forms has since taken on an obsessive quality. The most ‘primitive’ elements of music are here: melody and percussion, sounds that resemble thumb pianos, xylophones, and chimes. In previous iterations, the construction of a musical instrument has been brutally stripped back to basics (nails on a board). That reductive, analytical approach is again at work here. Manning proposes: What are the fewest, simplest acoustic elements needed to produce the desired sound? But this body of work is not purely about deconstructing the musical instrument. The third, and most ambitious (not to mention, biggest), version of this work—the newly commissioned *Wave Opus III* (2017)—demonstrates this. The very shape of this gallery-spanning sound sculpture is derived from a wave form—a speech pattern, to be precise—from two statements the artist has uttered and recorded, relating to notions of subjectivity and authorship: “There’s no accounting for personal taste”, and “With taste there is no dispute.”

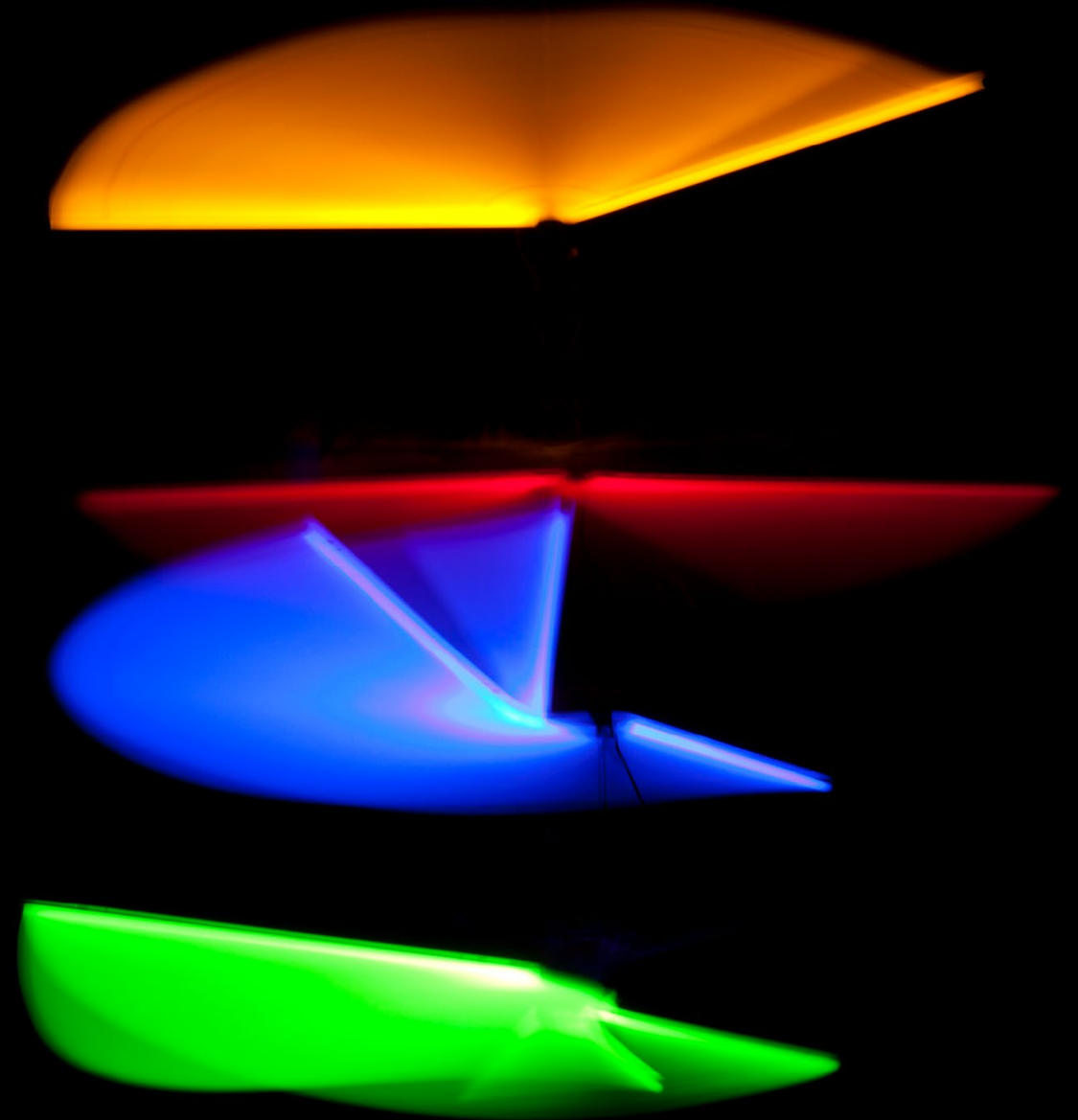
Ideas of taste are not immediately apparent in the work, but for an instrument builder, this takes on a different meaning in terms of its association with the bourgeoisie. For Manning, it’s more about how his intuitive aesthetic and material choices affect not just a singular sculptural object but something that might be played in a very different setting, or may even play autonomously, as it does in *Wave*

³ Ross Manning, in conversation with the author, July 2017.

Opus III. The work scales up processes such as amplification to expose the most basic mechanics of sound production. The space is the resonator that amplifies the striking of aluminium tubes. The cylindrical shape of the tube itself produces resonance. The length of each tube determines the note. These are the elementary components of sound and the basis of all musical instruments. But *Wave Opus III* is no more designed to school the viewer in acoustics than *Spectra* is intended to demonstrate the science of light colour mixing. These works are part of a much bigger project, and arguably a utopian one rooted in an avant-garde tradition, which is to draw our attention to the interdependence of energy in all artistic production—both in the sense of human labour (the maker and the viewer), and in the sense of natural forces (frequency, power, motion).

In this publication, three curators and scholars examine Manning's practice from both historical and contemporary vantage points. His choice of ubiquitous, industrial, and technological materials is a central point of inquiry for contributors Caleb Kelly and Ellie Buttrose, and something that has distinct parallels in art history. Buttrose draws a parallel between Manning's work and a 1986 exhibition held at the IMA, *Recession Art and Other Strategies*. The artist shares not only a reliance on cheaply available materials with this predecessor show but also an analytical approach. Kelly finds a material lineage in post-minimalism of the 1960s and 1970s. He makes a link between this historical context and twenty-first-century discourses around new materialism⁴ through the work of a key proponent of that

4 William E. Connolly's discussion of how current science bears upon new material seems particularly pertinent to a discussion of Manning's practice, but is beyond the scope of this introduction: "...as we come to terms with a cosmos composed of interacting force-fields invested with differing speeds and degrees of agency, we resist the thesis of what might be called 'the sufficiency of cultural internalism' that still carries too much weight in local, state, national, international and global studies of politics. Each of these zones of study needs to have both a microscopic and a planetary dimension folded into it, with the relevant features shifting, depending on the problem complex under scrutiny. Of course, you do not engage everything all the time; that would present the image of a holistic philosophy of totality resisted here. You adopt a problem orientation, pursuing the contours of an issue up and down these interacting scales, as the issue requires." Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013), 401.



philosophical tradition, Karen Barad. This is a complex way to understand the role of matter, sentience, and agency in Manning's practice. In her contribution, Danni Zuvela looks at contemporaneity as the uneasy context for a practice that relies on outmoded technologies such as overhead projectors and mechanical parts. Zuvela has written previously about Manning's work in relation to twentieth-century expanded cinema, and in particular the practice of Len Lye, who has evidently inspired the artist—Manning's work *Six Short Films* (2016) pays a direct tribute to the palette used in Lye's 1935 film *Colour Box*. But in this piece of writing, Zuvela asks how a practice that appears to be concerned with producing sensuous affect might not be anachronistic but in fact manage to harness some of the social and political undercurrents of both contemporary art and thought.

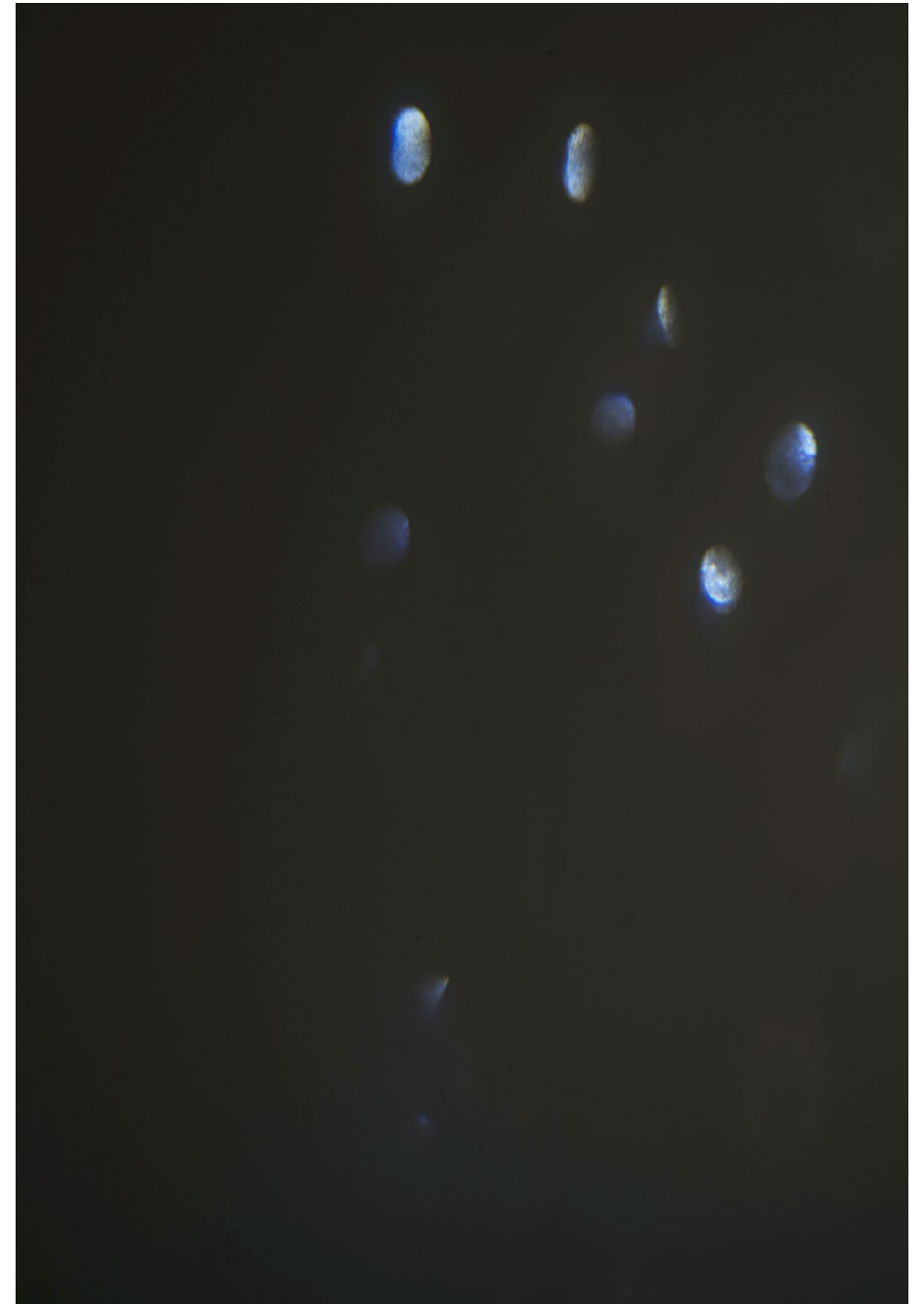
As we look back over the past ten years of this artist's practice, we also look forward to what will undoubtedly be a dynamic decade to come. The exhibition *Dissonant Rhythms* offers some clues as to what we may expect, particularly as Manning's latest commission represents an exciting new spatial direction to his work. It appears as though his sculpture has come to depend on the area around the work to complete it. In *Spectra*, the gallery is a camera obscura; in *Wave Opus III*, the gallery is a resonator. What is clear is that a universe is needed to contain the ideas, systems, and energy that Manning has to offer.

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Spectra I, 2012, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Photography: Andrew Curtis. Image courtesy Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

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Endless Sheet, 2011, overhead projectors, car window electric motor, brown paper, and timber. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.





Ross Manning

**DISSONANT
RHYTHMS**

Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
5 August–28 October, 2017



16–17, 19

Spectra XIII, 2017, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.





20-21
Bricks and Blocks, 2016, LCD TV, video camera,
 fluorescent lights, and mirror. Installation view,
Dissonant Rhythms, Institute of Modern Art, 2017
 Photography: Carl Warner.



22
Bricks and Blocks, 2016, LCD TV, video camera, fluorescent lights, and mirror. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017
 Photography: Louis Lim.

23
Six Short Films, 2016, overhead projectors, theatre gel, motors, interval timers, and rollers. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Louis Lim.





24–25, 27–29

Six Short Films, 2016, overhead projectors,
theatre gel, motors, interval timers, and rollers.
Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of
Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.





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Wave Opus III, 2017, powder-coated aluminium, timber, acrylic paint, rope, and motors. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.







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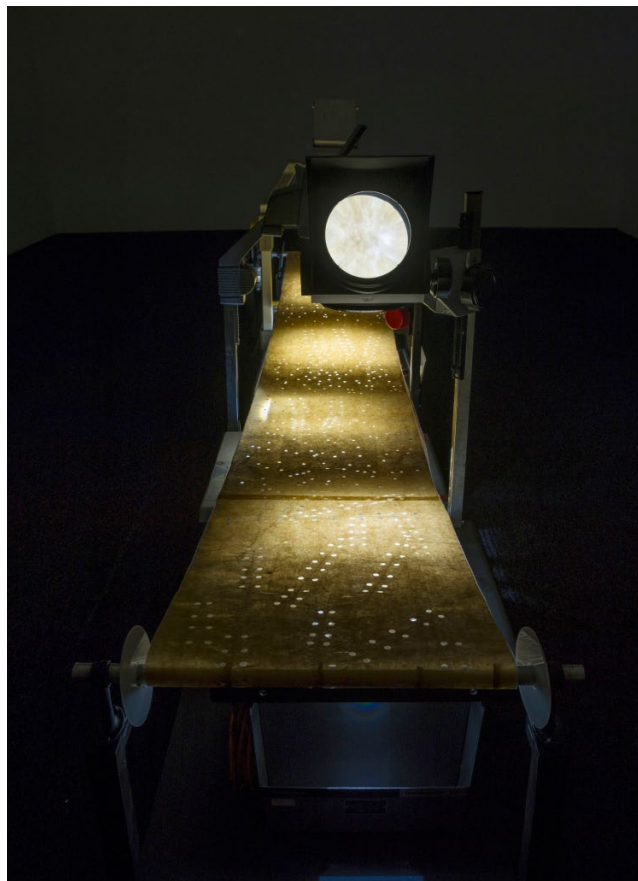
Wave Opus III, 2017, powder-coated aluminium, timber, acrylic paint, rope, and motors. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.

35–37

Wave Opus III, 2017, powder-coated aluminium, timber, acrylic paint, rope, and motors. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Louis Lim.



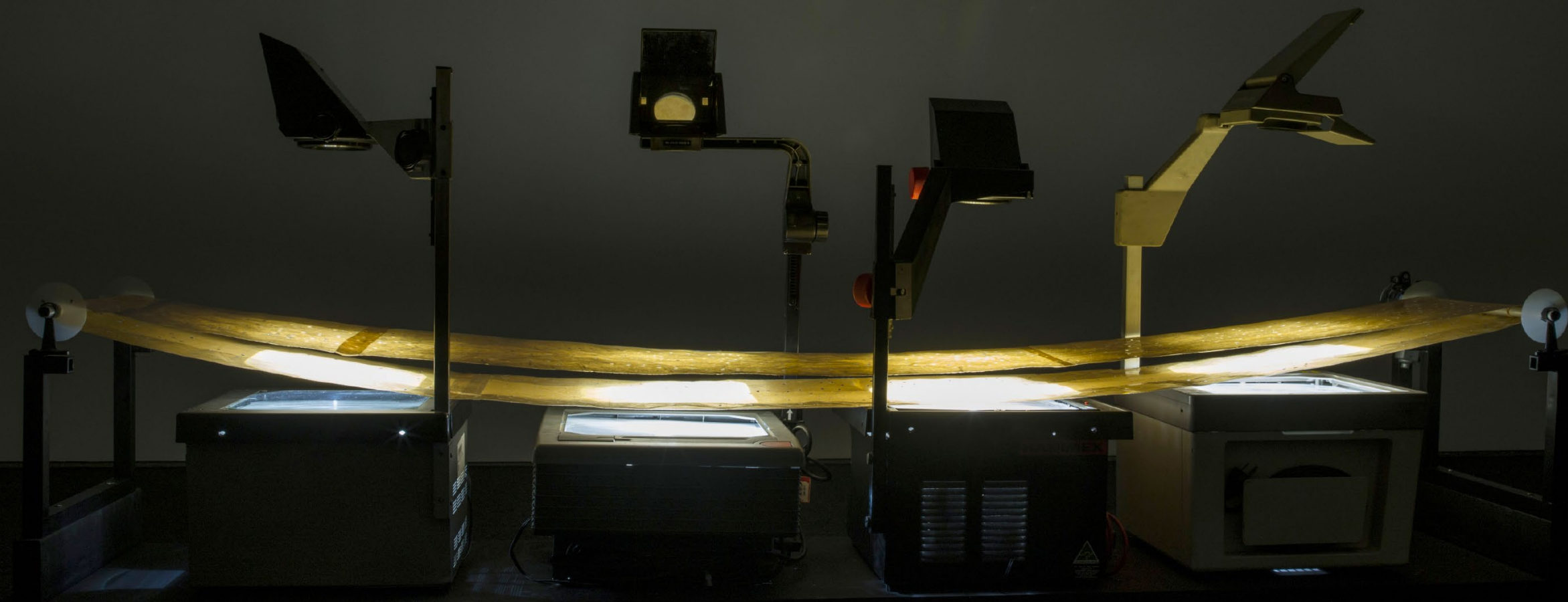




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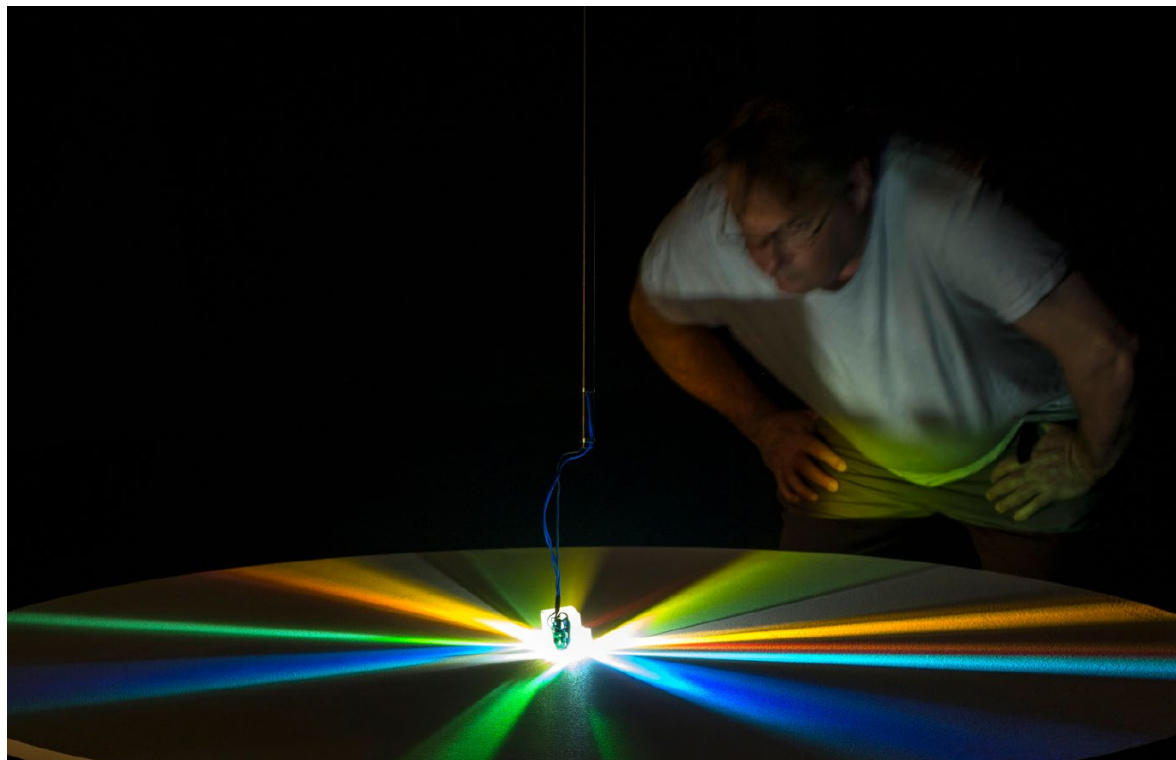
Endless Sheet, 2011, overhead projectors, car window electric motor, brown paper, and timber. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.



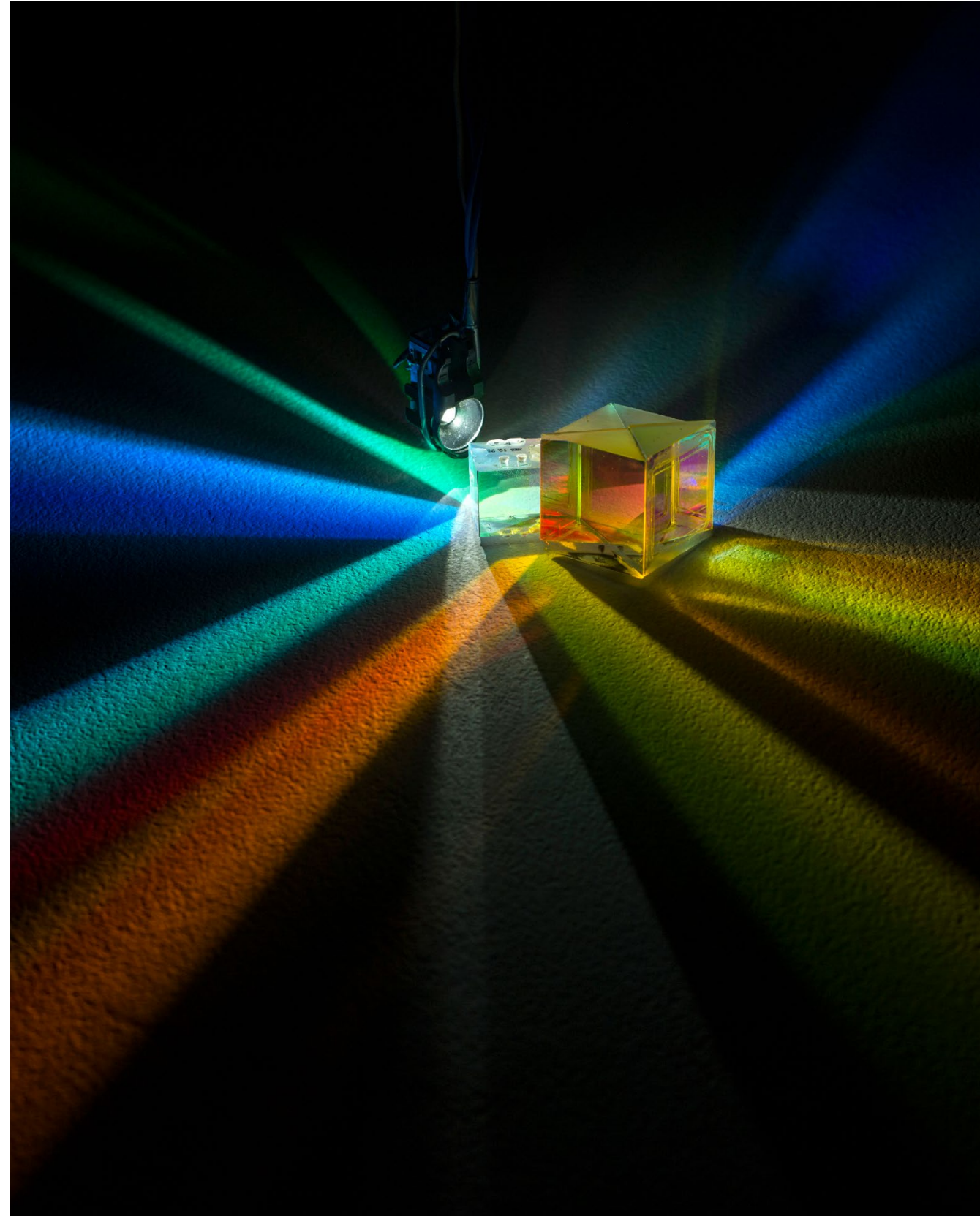


Endless Sheet, 2011, overhead projectors, car window electric motor, brown paper, and timber.
Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Louis Lim.





Sad Majick, 2009, glass prisms, LED light,
oscillating fan, and timber. Installation view,
Dissonant Rhythms, Institute of Modern Art, 2017.
Photography: Carl Warner.





Caleb Kelly

**EVERYDAY MATERIALS:
ROSS MANNING'S
DISSONANT MATERIALITY**

Petra Lange-Berndt begins her edited volume *Materiality* by stating: “Materiality is one of the most contested concepts in contemporary art.”¹ It is exactly the contested nature of materials that makes them a topic of the moment, not just in contemporary art but also in science, philosophy, and theory. Matter is at the centre of the largest of challenge of our time, since it forms the basis of our planet in crisis. We are reminded on a daily basis of our ecological crisis and that our desperate future is tied to ancient materials in the form of fossil fuel and the elemental practice of burning it. It is clear that in 2017, matter matters.

At the centre of Ross Manning’s practice, which encompasses sculpture, installation, sound, and music, is a prolonged engagement with materials. Manning assembles familiar items whose original purpose was never to be part of an art installation into works that are hung from the ceiling, collected on the floor, or perched on the white walls of the gallery. These works engage light and sound in ever-moving conglomerations. Through his use of high- and low-end consumer technology—fans, data projectors, flat-screen TVs, fluorescent and LED lights—the artist presents a persistent critique of media and question digital production. The same can be said of his self-built musical instruments and live performances, in which a post-digital sonic critique can be seen. In recent years, Manning has generated a significant output—to say he is busy is an understatement—and his ability to do so is partly due to his use of ubiquitous objects and media. At the heart of this endeavour is a close connection to historical experimental practices across art and music that formed in the mid-twentieth century, and Manning’s recycling

¹ Petra Lange-Berndt, “How to Be Complicit with Materials”, in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 12.



Spectra Cluster, 2013, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Photography: Tony Nathan. Image courtesy Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

of experimental approaches see an ongoing interest in not only repurposing materials but also concepts and processes—both from history and from within his own back catalogue.

The works that most embody Manning's core interests and ongoing artistic enquiry are his mobiles entitled *Spectra* (2012–ongoing), of which there have been thirteen iterations to date. In this series, Manning's foremost conceptual engagements are with light, 'the sonic', movement, and everyday objects. Firstly, the works are produced from fluorescent tubes that are attached to long beams, and counter-balanced by cheap plastic fans that in turn gently rotate the tubes.

Manning uses the plain white fans to keep the sculptures in constant fluid motion high above the heads of the audience. Coloured light shines from the different hues of each fluorescent tube to combine and mix on the gallery walls. The tubes mirror real-time environmental light mixing and electronic image colour mixing used by monitors and displays.

Secondly, *Spectra* is an example of Manning's ongoing engagement with the sonic. While the work itself creates low-level sound from the fans, it is the musical quality of the light mixes that Manning understands to be compositional. The sonic is here less literal than that usually found within the field of sound art; rather, it is engaged on the level of concept, a play between light waves and sound waves—the frequency spectrum of light imagined as sound.

Manning's long-term interest in the crossovers between light and sound draws into question the ongoing confusion between the so-called 'visual arts' and their relation to sound. This confusion is found in the misunderstanding of the term 'sound' in relation to 'visual' in that the two terms are not equivalent. That is, the

correct equivalences are to be found between sound and light, and hearing/listening and seeing. When the term 'light art' runs parallel to 'sound art', then we might be getting somewhere. In recent years, Douglas Kahn has pointed to the electromagnetic frequency table and talked about the spectrum that has historically been predominant—visible light—and then traced this out to the much later discovery of the wider spectrum of sound and various radio waves.



Melody Lines, 2016, overhead conveyor system, glass, colour filters, and fluorescent tubes. Installation view, Carriageworks. Commissioned by Carriageworks and Performance Space, 2016. Photography: Zan Wimberley.

Manning's focus on sound and light shifts between the two; for example, in *Spectra*, visible light stands in for sound frequencies, creating an imagined series of harmonic notes and indeterminate compositional outcomes.

Thirdly, movement almost always features within Manning's work, and the various iterations of *Spectra* sit firmly within his decade-long interest in kinetic sculpture. The mobiles link Manning's work directly to the original kinetic mobiles of Alexander Calder, whose inversion of the weight and form of the previously heavy structures of modernist sculpture saw these light, moveable forms reach beyond the art world and into the playrooms of children. While *Spectra* forms a substantial and ongoing series of mobile works, they are not the only ones that Manning has hung from the ceiling in this manner. Hanging light tubes in motion is an element of other works, such as the installation *Melody Lines* (2016) in which a multitude of lights and rectangular colour filters are regimentally advanced along a twisting conveyor belt. Other hanging works forego the fluorescent tubes but retain the balanced mobile system, replacing the lights with data projectors displaying test patterns, as seen in *Memory Matrix and Antiquity (for synchronised multichannel video)* (2015), or utilising a rope that is attached to the spinning fans, as seen in *Spiral Sequence* (2013).

The fourth theme, which is also embodied by *Spectra*, is Manning's continuous engagement with everyday objects. Many of his works are produced from objects or technologies that most people have a history with; in the case of *Spectra*, the lights and cheap plastic fans are an intrinsic part of our lives. We know these materials well, but their being assembled into the floating and spinning installations causes us to rethink our relationship to them. Likewise, our regular relationship to everyday objects is reconceptualised in other items that feature within Manning's installations: LCD televisions, clock chimes, overhead projectors, a pianola, LED candles, and plenty of rope.

These themes of light, sound, movement, and everyday materials within Manning's work open up a space in which to think about our relationship to matter in the theoretical sense and to a contemporary understanding of experimental practices via reuse, recycling, and repurposing. His approach can be considered through recent theories of materials and also his close relationship to historical experimentalism.

MATERIALS MATTER

Karen Barad comes to materials via quantum physics and feminist theory, giving an account of what she calls 'agential realism'. For her, "the knower does not stand in relation of absolute externality to the natural world—there is no such exterior observation point".² This means that the observer does not have a place outside of the system they observe; rather, they are part of any system with which they make contact. Even in the act of observation, we are part of the nature that we attempt to understand. Barad's discussion is based in quantum physics and the well-known problems of the effects of observation on the observed. She argues: "Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world."³ This type of thinking has implications for art making in that makers are never external observers nor purely speculative producers, but rather they are part of the system in which they create and are bound to. Thus, by using materials to demonstrate an observable phenomenon, artists can tell us something about the world we live in. This is not through some kind of didactic encounter but by producing work that employs energies and artefacts from the world and by making them tangible through our engagement with the work itself.

In her influential text *Vibrant Matter*, theorist Jane Bennett has lofty aspirations for her theory of vital matter, stating:

² Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 184.

³ Ibid., 185.

...my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption... The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption.⁴

Pointing to Barad, she exclaims “How reality is understood matters.”⁵ This points to our discomfort with the ‘real’—to the extent that we place the term in scare quotes. From my own point of view, we are in a time where the ‘real’ matters, a time of climate change and ecological catastrophe. Ecological critique could be said to underpin all critiques in the twenty-first century, and distancing ourselves from the real through philosophical naval gazing and logocentrism only gets in the way of creating a sustainable ecological condition.

THE OLD AND THE NEW

Manning’s work contains a certain nostalgia for mid-twentieth-century experimentalism, a sense that the analogue practices of that time are ripe for reuse and recycling in the twenty-first century. Experimentalism can be understood as a set of practices that come about through a radical attitude to making and, as Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn describe, involves “innovations in process and material.”⁶ In this regard, Manning can be understood to be collapsing history over time in the form of recycling historical ideas as well as recycling his own work over the span of his career; as he methodically pulls elements out of old assemblages to incorporate them into new works.



Li Fi, 2016, LED candles, record players, horn speakers, amplifiers, aluminium, steel, and timber. Photography: Cho Jungyoun. Image courtesy Alternative Space Loop, Seoul.

There are numerous contemporary artists who produce installations in a modular fashion, assembling constituent elements of previous exhibitions in a multitude of reused parts. In these practices, nothing is thrown away and everything is available for reuse; through this approach, the unique art object is no longer a factor. Instead, upon entering an installation, we might feel like we have an ongoing and continuous relationship with various parts of what we experience. As such, the various iterations of *Spectra* are familiar in that the form and materials are reused with minor adjustments to the overall presentation of the pieces. For many of the works within *Dissonant Rhythms* at the IMA, Manning has rebuilt previous sculptures and installations, adding to them in the process while retaining the overall sense of the original works.

⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xi.

⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 205.

⁶ Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn, *Mainframe Experimentalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 4.

Manning's primary creative space is a physical studio. While much of his output has clear connections to 'media art', Manning does not work within a virtual digital studio. Instead, his studio is a large open expanse filled with piles of electronic detritus. There is an element of the collector here, of the artist who keeps things in case there is a future need for them; as stated above, this approach serves his methodology of reuse as well as his constant return to materials.

Manning's fascination with mid-twentieth-century practices, especially as they pertain to experimental music and art of that time, comes from his direct and physical engagement with materials and his deeply analogue approach. His works are resolutely non-digital. As such, he reflects the current approach of many Australian contemporary and media artists, such as Peter Blamey, Joyce Hinterding, David Haines, Vicky Browne, Pia van Gelder, Emily Morindini and Nathan Thompson, who are foregoing the digital, in part I believe, due to digital fatigue and a longing to have a physical connection with the materials of their work. In the 2000s, the prevalence of digital production technologies, especially within the digital studio, led to a schism between the artist and their materials, one that has only been further severed with the development in complexity of digital processes. Few artists have a serious understanding of how the algorithms behind their post-production software and the hardware itself is locked within the physical casing of contemporary computing architecture. Thus, in a very real sense, makers have become estranged from the means of their own practices.

The analogue technologies Manning employs are physical, can be handled, and their processes are visible. His sculptures can be characterised as assemblages of everyday or commercially available objects, wherein an exposed system manages various inputs and outputs. In Manning's work, the mechanism that produces light, sound, or motion is laid bare; almost nothing is hidden from sight. For example, *Li-Fi* (2016) centres on a group of turntables that have LED 'candles' placed on the record platter and then spun. As the candles rotate, they pass by a solar cell, triggering a

signal that is subsequently amplified; the spinning modulates the audio signal, which is triggered by the light. The audio itself is played through horn speakers that were not designed for music playback but for audio penetration to deliver orders, instructions, alarms, and warnings. In part, the fascination of this installation lies in its clearly articulated form. Everything from the automation of the electronic devices to the audible relationship between the movement and the sound produced are discernible and openly displayed.

Historical precedents for Manning's sculptures, and the contemporary use of mass-produced materials more broadly, lie in the work of artists from the late 1960s, who were sometimes labelled 'post-Minimalist'. The role of materials within sculpture practice shifted from being permanent, fixed, and stable to being impermanent and unstable. *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (1969), curated by Marcia Tucker and James Monte for the Whitney Museum of American Art, stands as a key moment in the development of an art movement that not only expanded beyond modernism and its formalist extension in Minimalism, but also introduced an experimental approach to materials and process. The physical artworks were of little monetary value and, at the end of the exhibition, the works would most likely have been cleaned away and thrown in the garbage rather than carefully dismantled and packed into shipping crates.

The exhibition curators assembled artists often associated with post-Minimalism, such as William Bollinger, Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra, who employed a range of unlikely materials, such as "flour dust, hay and grease, steel, poured latex, neon and glass, lead, styrofoam blocks, ice and dry leaves, invested money, dog food, rocks, rubberized cheesecloth, and the human body"? For the art reviewer Emily Wasserman, the occasional non-visual and impermanent nature of the sculptures reflected the artists' new relationship to these materials:

7 Emily Wasserman, "Process, Whitney Museum", *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (1969): 57.



Ross Manning performing at *Colour Music*, Drill Hall Gallery, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2014.

The artists' refusal to objectify, to order and to construct permanently or solidly alters the conventional expectations for sculpture as something durable, discreetly formed or built, balanced from part to part, or substantially refined in numerous ways.⁸

These artists were part of a general movement towards dematerialisation—another historical precedent of Manning's sculptures—which emerged partly as a reaction to the industrialised, systematic processes of sculptural Minimalism that often resulted in highly polished machine-produced pieces, such as the work of Donald Judd. In the mid-to-late 1960s, influential writer, art critic and curator Lucy

R. Lippard had posited two types of conceptual approaches to what she delineated as 'dematerialisation'—art as idea and art as action.⁹ She identified a number of artists who were approaching materials not through a structured system but instead allowing them to determine the form of their work, as "reflected in the ubiquity of temporary 'piles' of materials around 1968".¹⁰ As these piles were ephemeral, they pointed to artworks that were not permanent, timeless, or even purchasable in the traditional sense. She tells us that this "premise was soon applied to such ephemeral materials as time itself, space, nonvisual systems, situations, unrecorded experience, unspoken ideas and so on", and subsequently applied to non-physical materials such as "perception, behaviour, and thought processes per se".¹¹ As it turns out, this dematerialised practice is not actually without physical substance, but rather indicative of the shift that was occurring from the mediums historically associated with art, and more specifically with sculpture—stone, wood, metal—towards an understanding of non-traditional materials. Part of this shift was towards an impermanence but alongside this was a logic of clusters of objects, where none of them has intrinsic value but rather their value lies in the coming together of multiple bits of stuff.

To some extent, Manning's sculptures and performances evoke this ephemeral or dematerialised sensibility. His works often have a chaotic feel to them, as found and handmade objects are hacked together with cheap electronic components. He activates his own instruments and sculptures in his performances; kneeling on the floor surrounded by electronics, Manning produces a series of semi-indeterminate sounds that are in some way automated. The instruments themselves have evolved out of Manning's history with custom electronics and acts such as the duo Faber Castell (2002–2005), in which the artist performed alongside Alan Nguyen. When I

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art", in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, ed. Lucy Lippard (New York: Dutton, 1971), 255.

¹⁰ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

saw the duo play at the What Is Music? festival in Brisbane in 2004, I was struck by the chaos and the ending of the piece, with Nguyen deliberately falling onto his table of electronics, the instruments becoming dematerialised. Similar to the materials in *Anti-Illusion*, the individual elements of the systems, including the electronic components, are not important here; what is important is process and the system as a whole.

Wave Opus (2016–ongoing) links this approach to systems as well as exploring other recurring themes within Manning's practice—specifically, automation, and the indeterminate and complex events that are created by setting assemblages in motion. *Wave Opus 1* (2016) develops this theme via the automation of a long nylon rope that is spun by two DC motors to produce a wave form. The work includes an array of modified clock chimes and percussion boards produced from strips of tuned metal. These discrepant objects are activated by the spinning rope creating a constant and resonant series of chiming effects. When in motion, the rope visually resembles a sound wave, and its shape creates a spontaneous composition as the energies within the spinning rope interact with the objects in its path. For *Dissonant Rhythms*, Manning has greatly expanded the work to include tuned lengths of aluminium piping, which are struck by multiple lengths of rope. This work should be thought of as a performative installation, since it is turned on every fifteen minutes at the IMA, playing to an audience who have converged on tiered theatre seating.

There is a long history of long wire works within composition, not least Alvin Lucier's *Music on a Long Thin Wire* (1977), which is an example of Lucier's continual interest in “exploring natural characteristics of sound waves”.¹² In this work, the wire is resonated by a magnet to produce a constant tone. Closer to home are Australian artist Alan Lamb's experiments with old forgotten telegraph wires in the

Australian desert. Lamb's extremely long wires resonate with the environment and are amplified with contact microphones, which pick up an array of natural sounds and strange otherworldly echoes. Perhaps the interest in long wires is due to both the strangeness of the sounds themselves and the link between the environment and the phenomena that produces the sound.

The strongest connection to historical experimentalism in *Wave Opus*, however, does not come via long wire works, but from the *Sonambient* sound sculptures of designer Harry Bertioia and son Val Bertioia. Harry Bertioia is best known for his furniture design, but closely related to his famous chairs are sculptures made from metal rods. While these pieces look like interior designer household sculptures, when a hand is run over them, they create resonant chimes.

We could also link *Wave Opus* to the sound sculptures of New Zealand artist Len Lye, in which metal objects are set in motion, with motors creating clanking metallic sound. In *Dissonant Rhythms*, the connection to Lye is made explicit by the inclusion of Manning's *Six Short Films* (2016), which was originally commissioned by the Len Lye Foundation. The work has six overhead projectors that are placed at various heights on two gallery walls, all facing the same corner of the space. Each projector is fed a series of coloured light gels that slowly wind through a loop, like film stock in a film projector. The convergence of the six projected light animations creates overlapping colour projections. This work of Manning's looks to two of Lye's core practices—experimental films and kinetic sculptures—to produce a constantly changing light installation.

The deconstruction of the projected image is key to Manning's recurring critique of the digital image. The critique is centred on the inherent technological constraints of the projected image set by the data projectors: its pre-set parameters, native colours, and the predetermined colour constraints. Manning approaches this critique, as he did with *Spectra*, by breaking down the technology; in the case

12 Alvin Lucier, interview with Jason Gross, *Perfect Sound Forever*, April 2000, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/ohm/lucier.html>.

of *Memory Matrix and Antiquity (for synchronised multichannel video)* (2015), this involves projecting nothing more than the test patterns of the data projectors. This work is a mobile piece that employs five data projectors balanced by long rods with fans on the end. As the units rotate, they project the test colours onto the floor of the art gallery and overlay and mix these colours between the five separate projections.

For the very literally deconstructed projector work entitled *Sad Majick* (2009), Manning shines LED lights through glass prisms (the same ones used in projectors), with the refracted light producing separated colours across the display surface. The light itself is attached to a rod hung from the ceiling and thus moves jerkily around, at times bumping into the prism. A slightly more complex take on this approach is *Dichroic Filter Piece (extended projection)* (2012) in which a projector is employed to shine white light into cut glass dichroic filters that are placed on the floor. In a data projector, these filters mix the white light from its RGB composites but the process is reversed in the installation as the white light is split and then sent ricocheting around the gallery.

A final element of Manning's media critique can be understood through inputs and outputs. Usually, we think of art being centred on outputs; even in heavily process-based works, we look to the outcomes before the process that created it. In Manning's ongoing use of photovoltaics (solar panels), input and output are combined, much like his employment of light as sound, discussed earlier.

Not only do many of Manning's installations produce light but they also capture light as a signal to then run or feed the system itself. Manning's use of photovoltaics employs light to generate signal as sound. In his paper "PV Aesthetics", Peter Blamey points to practices that include photovoltaics as never having "just one process,

characteristic or function taking place, but all of them occurring simultaneously".¹³ In this approach, output is input and input is output. Manning's light-generated signals are produced by plugging cheap garden-lighting solar panels directly into his mixer; the signals caused by light hitting the panels are then directly amplified as sound. Sound becomes the vehicle for understanding the energies that create the signals—here, the energy of light—making Manning's interest in sound/light crossovers explicit. As Blamey further elucidates:

By tracking the relationship between materials and processes, what is of interest is how this 'direct solar' approach has been used by artists to make available energy both the source for and the subject of their work—in other words, a simultaneous incorporation of an investigation into available energy phenomena.¹⁴

Therefore, by reusing his own concepts (turning his installations into an exercise in recycling both in the use of found items but also in the repurposing of components from previous installations) and the historical concepts of previous experimental process (reusing processes that were originally employed in the 1960s to expand and test the hazy edges of a crumbling modernism), Manning has produced an ongoing series of works that employ materials to critique our investment in them. His redeployment of custom-built electronics and everyday objects is part of a continuing post-digital critique of media art—one that achieves a rethinking of the digital through a hands-on studio approach that re-contextualises material practices within the gallery space. The ephemeral non-physical elements of light and sound provide a vivid play of immaterial frequencies all the while produced by very physical means. In the process of this ongoing investigation, Manning manages to continually create wondrous installations.

¹³ Peter Blamey, "PV Aesthetics", paper delivered at Energies in the Arts conference, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, August 2015.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Spectra II, 2012, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art for *NEW12*. Photography: Andrew Curtis.



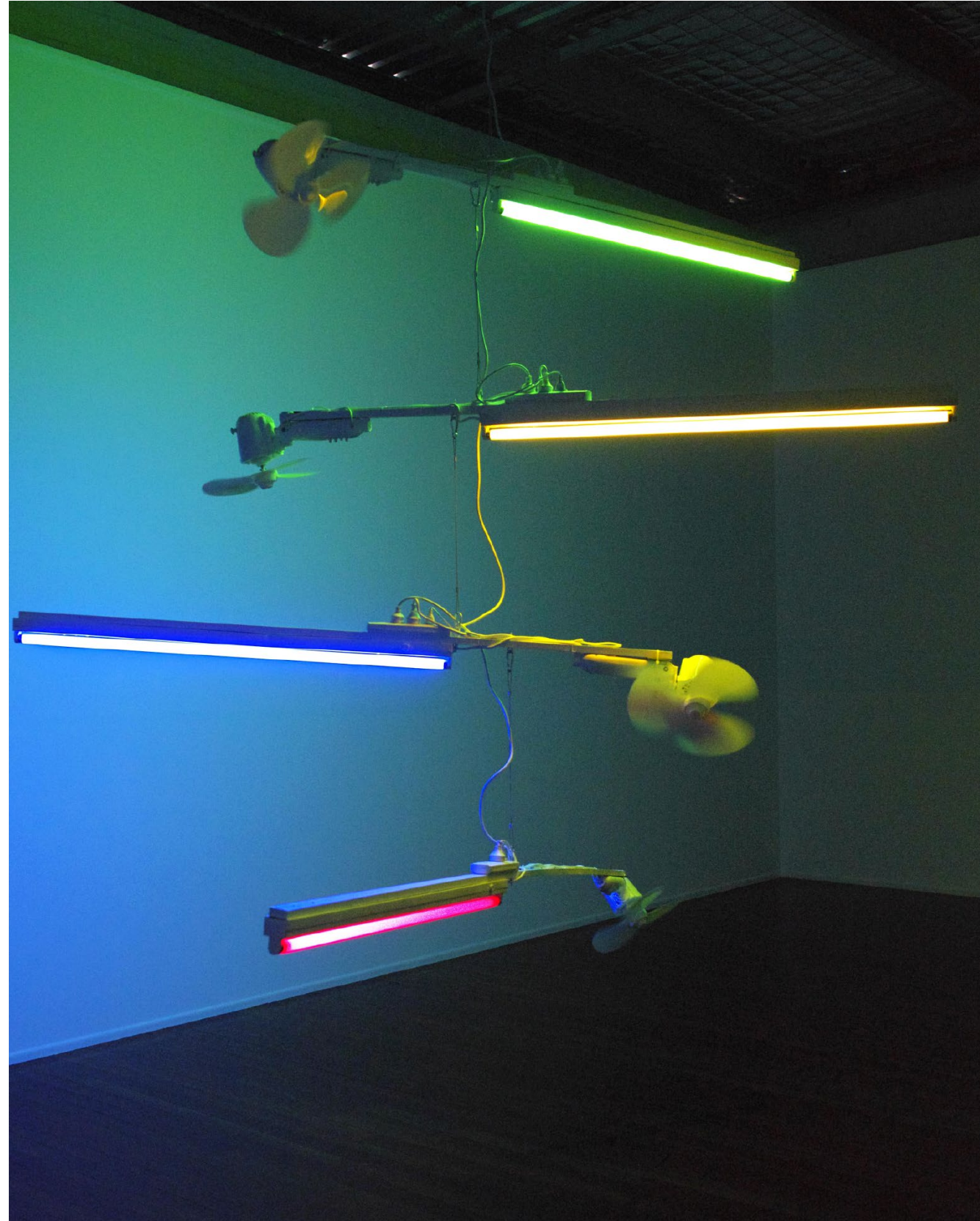


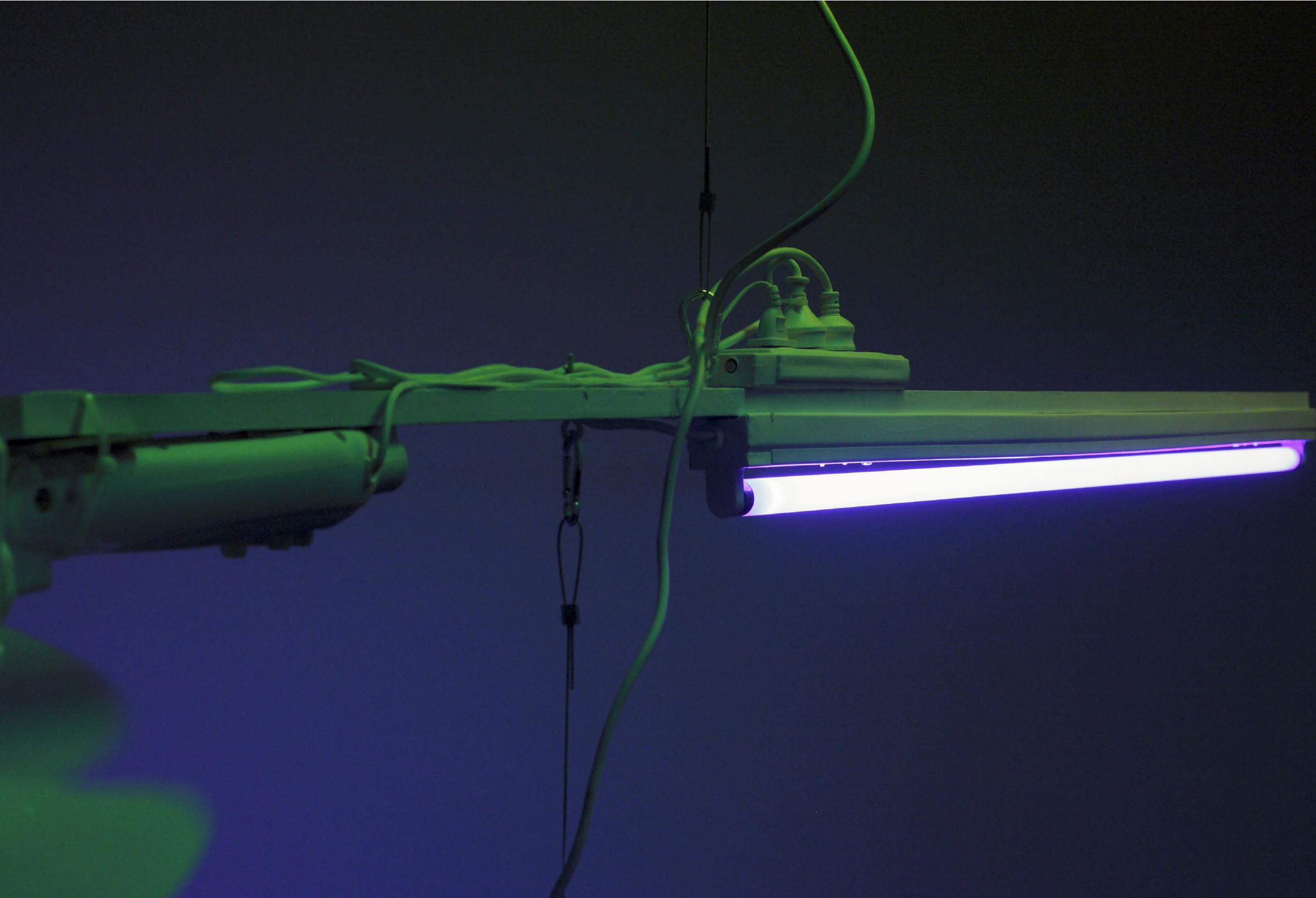
64–65

Spectra Cluster (detail), 2013, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Photography: Tony Nathan. Image courtesy Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

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Spectra I, 2012, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Photography: Carl Warner. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.





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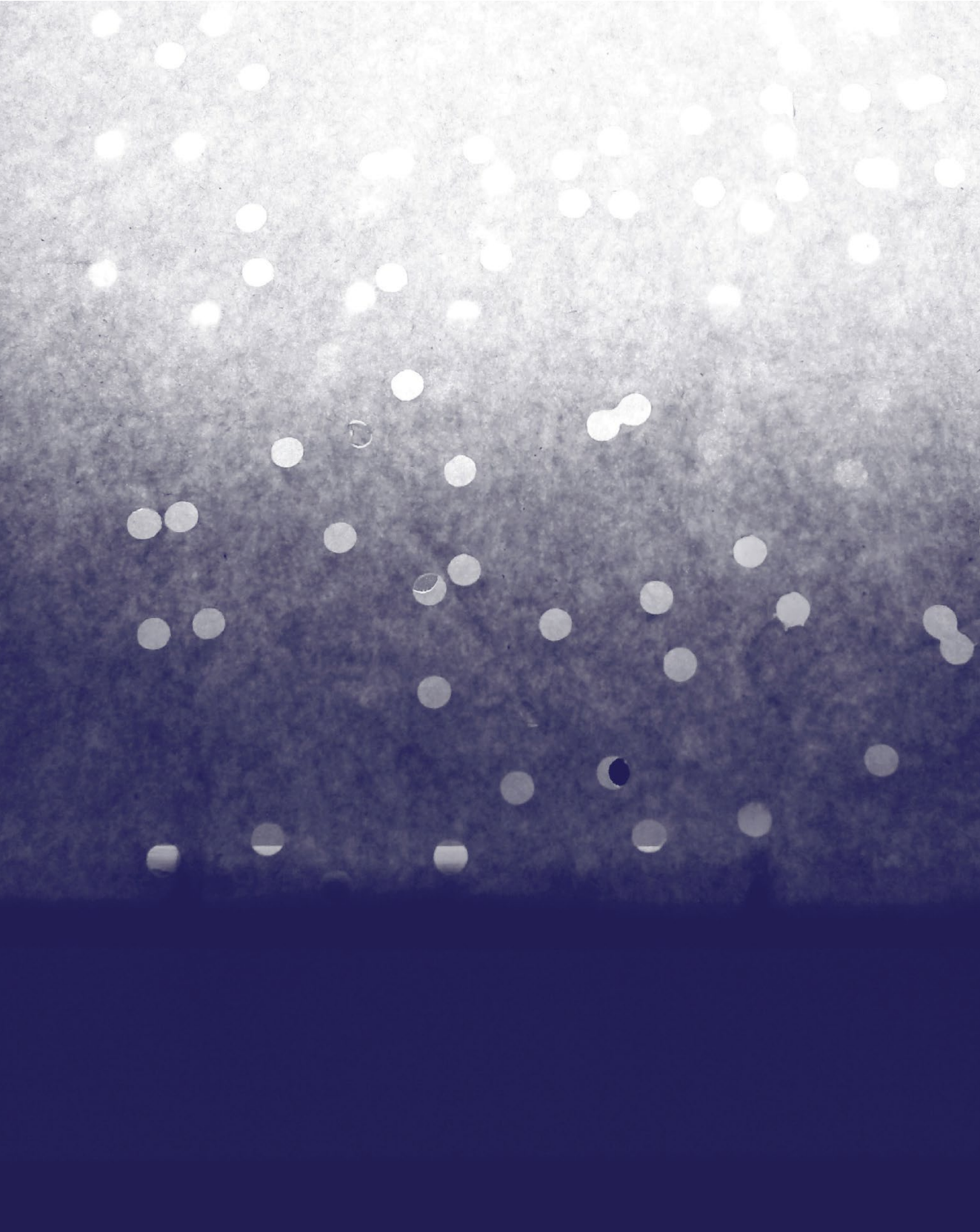
Spectra Cluster (detail), 2013, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. Photography: Tony Nathan.
Image courtesy Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

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Spectra I, 2012, and *Spectra II*, 2012, fluorescent lights, fans, timber, acrylic paint, and steel cable. *Spectra II* commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art for *NEW12*.
Photography: Andrew Curtis.





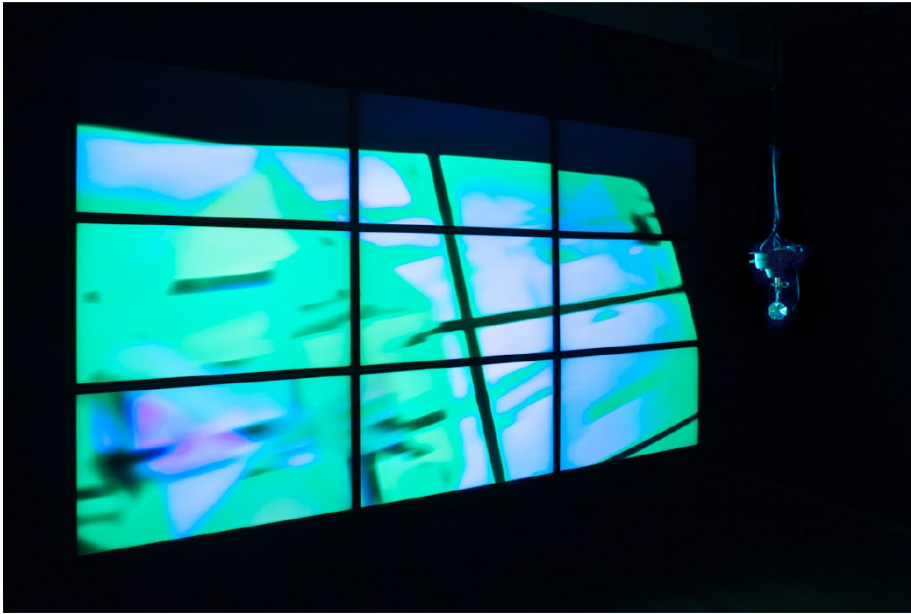


Ellie Buttrose

EXPLORING MATERIALS TO MAKE REVOLUTIONS

It is nearly a decade since artist-musician-instrument builder Ross Manning first exhibited at the IMA in a survey of Queensland emerging artists entitled *The New Fresh Cut* in 2008. Manning's contribution to the exhibition was a sprawling installation whose wires, bells, milk crates, toy pianos, kids balls, and solar panels ran across the edges of the gallery walls and ceiling. His practice can be characterised by his use of familiar and commercially available materials and objects, often upending their original purpose to create idiosyncratic sculptures and instruments. In the wake of the global financial crisis and in the context of the IMA, Manning's *The New Fresh Cut Installation, IMA* (2008) recalled a 1986 exhibition at the same institution titled *Recession Art and Other Strategies*, curated by then-director Peter Cripps. In the midst of the excess of the 1980s' international art-market boom and the year before the 1987 Black Monday financial crash, Cripps's exhibition presented artworks produced through improvised approaches and humble materials by Gunter Christmann, Robert MacPherson, John Nixon, Peter Tyndall, and Cripps himself. These un-monumental artworks made within the context of the smaller Australian art market challenged the commercial 'saleability' of the artworks circulating more broadly at the time. In his essay in the exhibition catalogue, Cripps references musician/inventor Percy Grainger as a source of inspiration for the project.¹ Grainger's 'free music' instruments were made from found materials that were close to hand, such as ping pong balls, bamboo, and cardboard tubes to create instruments that circumvented the standardised sounds of common instruments. For his exhibition, Cripps chose

¹ Percy Grainger's innovations in composition and musical instrument building are significant, however it is important to acknowledge that his highly conservative views on race cannot be disassociated from his legacy. See Kay Dreyfus, "Grainger, George Percy (1882–1961)", in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1983).



LCD, 2013, 3 x 3 LCD video wall, motor, crystal pendant, and video camera. Photography: Richard Stringer.

artists who “dispensed with orthodox techniques” when making work in the field of visual art.²

Through his choice of found materials and an inventive approach Manning speaks to the ideas of Cripps’s exhibition in our current time. While Cripps distinguishes between the fields of music and art, Manning brings Grainger’s interest in creating new sounds with Cripps’s approach to sculptural forms. He often repurposes everyday objects and broken electronics in order to reject the standardised purpose of these commercial items. For example, in *LI-FI* (2016) Manning uses horn speakers made for sounding alarms, redeploying them as musical instruments by linking them to light sensors that are triggered by modulating LED candles, spinning around on record players. For *Liquid Display* (2015), a surveillance camera’s feed

is used to capture a shifting colour field of light through a dangling prism. These artworks exemplify how Manning continuously repurposes found objects in a way that undercuts the original intention of their design. The artist demonstrates how the materials used in surveillance and enforcing compliance can also be the same ones that produce the sound and optics of disobedience and beauty.

Propelled by his previous practical experience as an audio-visual technician, Manning has experimented with a broad spectrum of technology: from low-fi filters and florescent tubes to hi-fi LCD monitors and projectors. As a self-taught artist, Manning intuitively seeks out other artists and his references are as wide ranging as his choice of materials. Key inspirations are the dynamic metal contraptions of Nicolas Schöffer that put light and shadow into play and speak to the aesthetics of modernist technology. Like Schöffer, Manning draws on the aesthetics of the technology of his age to create equally enchanting kinetic light sculptures. Manning’s electronic sculptures are held together with cable ties and wood to create delicate assemblages. They appear precarious—evoking the work of Peter Fischli and David Weiss, whose arrangements of low-rent found objects hang on the edge of dramatic collapse. Writing on Fischli and Weiss and referencing Immanuel Kant, Arthur Danto notes that what characterises the artists’ best work is that “it seems purposive while lacking any specific purpose”.³ Like Fischli and Weiss’s works, Manning’s absurd structures reject the capitalist desire for productivity.

In addition to the precarious sculptural qualities in Manning’s work, another recurrent motif is the use of light, particularly the use of additive colour mixing; i.e., when coloured light beams—or spectra—overlap to produce other colours. In *Spectra* (2012–ongoing), coloured fluorescent lights on a series of horizontal rods attached at various heights to a central cable are suspended from a single point in

² Peter Cripps, *Recession Art and Other Strategies* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1986), 2.

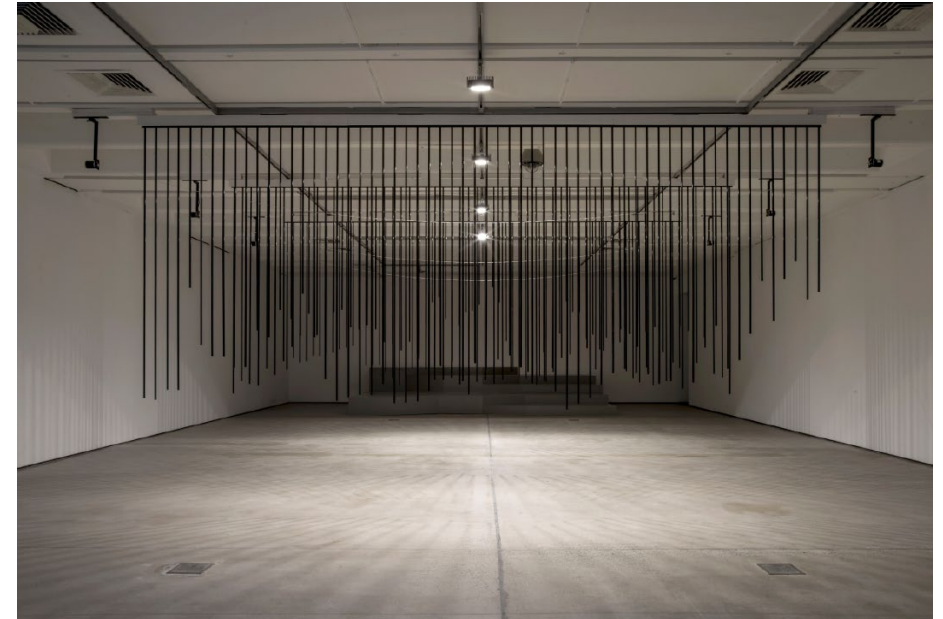
³ Arthur C. Danto, “The Way Things Go”, in *Fischli Weiss: Flowers & Questions: A Retrospective*, ed. Peter Fischli, David Weiss, and Bice Curiger (London: Tate, 2006), 214.

the ceiling, thus creating a mobile. A domestic fan attached to the end of the rod dictates each light's rotation and speed. The fans rotate on separate arms; quavering against the force of gravity, they spin with and against one another. The separate coloured lights meet and mingle to create new mixed colours on the white walls of the gallery space. The colours mix at random, creating ethereal results that are akin to the Aurora Australis and Borealis. Manning invests his inventions with loose enough parameters to allow for unplanned happenings, which gives the works a sense of animism.

Manning's interest in light stems from his interest in its wave form, his career as a musician, and his research into sound waves.⁴ Wave, vortex, and helix forms manifest in both his light and sound works, and these forms are the focus of a series of mobiles that utilise household fans. In *Domestic Ascension* (2011), held in the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia collection, two oscillating fans are attached to either end of a rod, and spin until the hanging fixture cannot take any more tension, such that it is forced to unwind itself. From each fan, a piece of cord forms a spiral as they spin in motion. This dancing machine is reminiscent of the kaleidoscopic images of industry in Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1923–1924), where utilitarian modern machinery is portrayed as elegantly agile. Both Léger's and Manning's works release objects from their original functionality, expressing unproductive frivolity. The later work *Spiral* (2015), held in the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art collection, is realised on a greater scale using an industrial-sized fan and a thick black ribbon. This work actively engages with the scale of the contemporary art museum, with the ribbon whirling down over five metres from the ceiling to the floor. One of Manning's most minimal works, its focus has shifted from the materials used to the spiral form. For the artist, spirals are metaphors for the way that light waves move through space.⁵

⁴ Ross Manning, in conversation with the author, May 2017.

⁵ Ibid.



Wave Opus III, 2017, powder-coated aluminium, timber, acrylic paint, rope, and motors. Installation view, *Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.

In *Wave Opus I* and *Wave Opus II* (both 2016), the wave form is reprised horizontally and linked directly with sound. In these artworks, a horizontal piece of cord with two motors on either end spins across a series of vertically positioned and remarkably varied clock chimes that are spread across a plinth, creating a dense percussive sound. The motors that activate the white string are set consecutively for each work on a two- and three-minute timer that is triggered by a motion sensor. Therefore, the work simultaneously produces (chimes) and visualises (spinning cord) sound waves. Manning has been using a similar arrangement of objects in his performances for many years, often placing them on the floor or a table. To change the sound, he moves the individual chimes closer or further away from the rotating string. In a museum context, Manning seeks out an arrangement of chimes complex enough to remain in a static position in relation to the string. The artist evokes a performance by using the timer system to create moments of active sound

and moments of rest. Manning seeks a dense percussive sound that is ultimately determined by the proximity of the chimes and the tautness of the cord.

The exhibition *Dissonant Rhythms* provides an opportunity for Manning to work on an ambitious scale. In response, Manning has reflected on how his sound works have changed over the course of his practice. Having previously worked on contained sculptural instruments, the artist shifted to thinking about how a composition could work across the entire physical space of the gallery and scenography. The new commission at the IMA, *Wave Opus III* (2017), stretches across the entire ten-metre width of the gallery. There are three sets of ‘chime curtains’ spaced two metres apart, made from aluminium tubes—the sort of material used for pool fences. Their base height undulates along the span of the gallery. Each curtain has two motors at either end that spin a cord across the chimes to create sound and also creates the wave pattern. For this commission, Manning has designed ways to work with the space and to slow the visitor down as they move through the gallery. *Wave Opus III* is a performance in the sense that it is activated every fifteen minutes for the duration of four minutes, and grandstand seating is provided at the far end of the space. Timers set the artwork in motion and for the short performance, the audience is enveloped by sound as if they are seated in middle of the percussion section of an orchestra pit. The sound sculpture is illuminated so that shadows fall from the chimes onto the floor and up the walls to amplify the formal qualities of the artwork. The space around is dimly lit, drawing complete focus to the resonant rhythms of this gigantic instrument. The artist notes that if visitors move through the gallery when the work is playing, they will experience the foreshortening and directionality of sounds. The hard surfaces of the white cube are renowned for their aurally inhospitable nature. This large sound sculpture thus draws the visitor’s attention to how sound occupies space and the acoustics of the museum.

The wave design that is cut into the base of the curtains creates different lengths of metal that in turn produces differently pitched chimes. The stylised design is taken from the speech pattern created by the artist enunciating “With taste there is no dispute” and “There is no accounting for taste”. Here Manning outlines the fundamental principle of instrument building as an expression of personal taste. Manning’s curiosity about instrument building, in part, stems from the idiosyncratic nature of this craft. As the artist points out, “how you play the instrument comes from the way it is built, which is all about personal taste”. This is in contrast to the ‘prescribed sound’ of commercial instruments. The artist proposes that the act of creating a new instrument as one of radical freedom.⁶ By using pool fences, clock chimes, fans, horn speakers, found metal, record players, sensors, and string, Manning circumvents the familiar sounds of traditional instruments. Although his works are made from unlikely materials, Manning incorporates the structures of rhythm and melody into them. So, while *Wave Opus III* has a level of finesse that may seem like a departure from Manning’s earlier work, there is continuity with his previous methodology. His kinetic inventions are characterised by a sense of animate wonder and an eccentric reflection on found materials and contemporary technology.

What would happen if we all approached the world with same sense that Ross Manning has of the unrealised potential latent in objects? Made from everyday materials and recombined electronics, Manning’s kinetic instruments and light sculptures propose a sense of freedom. Through these works, Manning pushes us to question why we would only use objects for the purposes that they were designed for. Why we would only make music from existing instruments? And furthermore, he asks what alternatives we can imagine—and perhaps invent—to a capitalist system that is designed on efficiency and commercial viability.

⁶ Ibid.

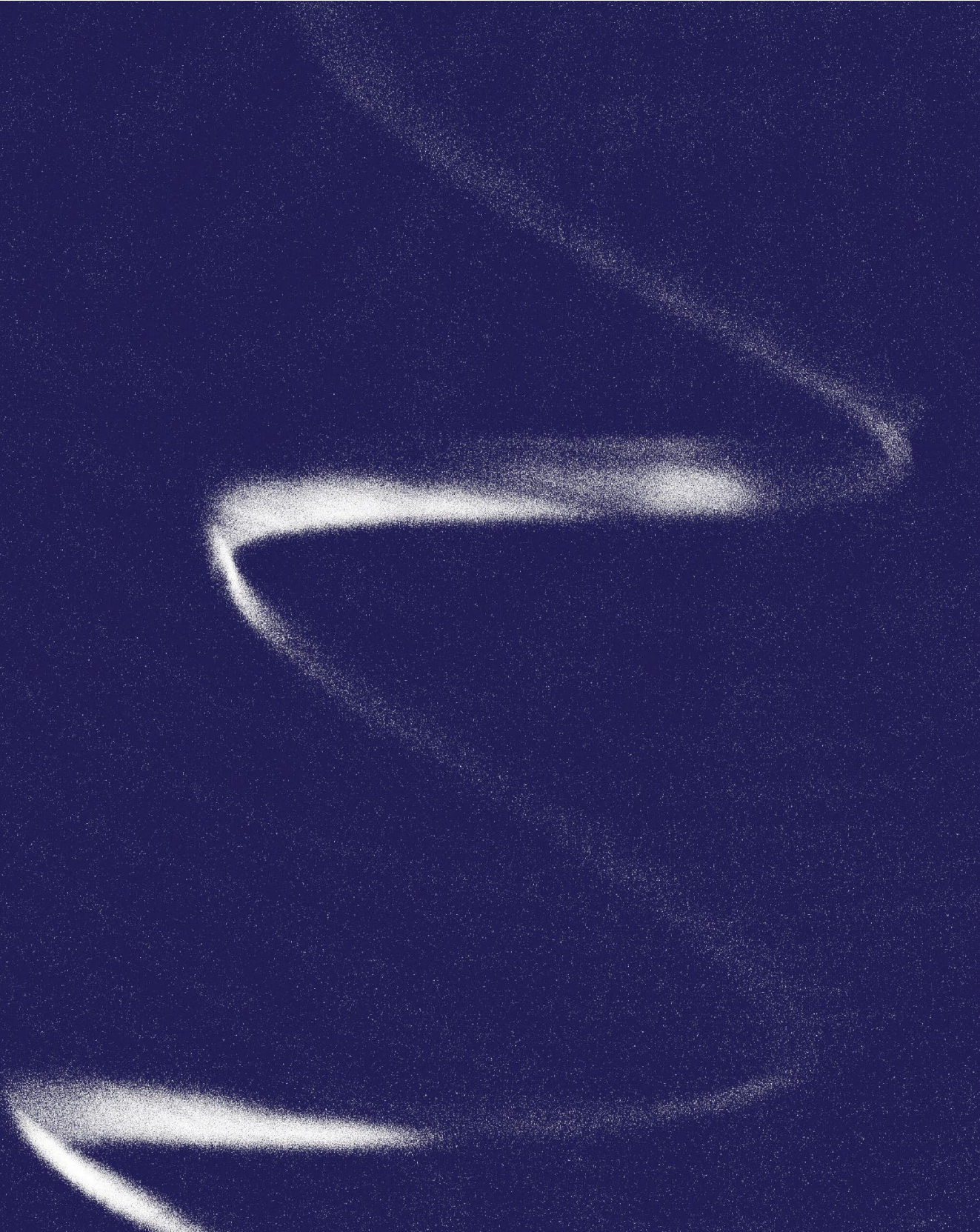


82-87

Six Short Films, 2016, overhead projectors, theatre gel, motors, interval timers, and rollers. Photography: Sam Hartnett. Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.







Danni Zuvela

UNDER THE RAINBOW

If what art must distract its viewers from—in order to function critically as art—is not just the cares and worries of the world but, increasingly, distraction (entertainment) itself, how to distract from distraction without simply reproducing it?

— Peter Osborne¹

SATURATION POINT

Ross Manning's work is sensuous. A typical Manning artwork is an environment that directly addresses the spectator's body with pulsing fields of prismatic coloured light and sound. In addition to the kaleidoscopic kinesis, Manning's formal arrangement of the space and its objects creates a dispersed field of view in which there is not one focal point or plane of perspective, but a fracturing of these into many possible viewing positions. There is, typically, at least one self-announcing, self-playing device—the mobiles of *Spectra* (2012–ongoing) and *Wave Opus III* (2017), the rolling scroll of *Pianola Loops* (2011), the feedback system in *Bricks and Blocks* (2016)—which the artist has customised to produce a particular environment.

The spectator is not usually supposed to touch or play with the devices; their job is simply to partake in the flow of different vibrations that the artist has organised to take place in time for the unique moment they are there in attendance. This is not to say that Manning makes individual works for individual spectators, but rather that his systems generate perceptually oriented environments predicated

¹ Peter Osborne, *One Thing or Another* (London: Verso, 2013), 177–178.

on constant change and subtle difference, in a specifically ephemeral operation in which no two moments are exactly alike.

The sensuality at the core of Manning's work is what makes it seductive, and also what makes it critically ambiguous. This work is unapologetically aesthetic in its sculptural and kinetic forms, graphic rigour, and the self-enclosure of its systems, and there are none of the hallmarks of overtly contemporary practice today (social engagement, collaboration, interactivity, discursivity, etc.). As an artist, Manning remains resistant to trends and is unconcerned by fashions, preferring instead the pursuit of an esoteric artistic language of objects, environments, and affects. Over the last decade, Manning's practice has been remarkably consistent, returning repeatedly and across varied spatial interventions to key themes of energy and vibration, expressed as environments of light and sound. The allegiance of these affect-generating schemes seems to lie more with modernism than the questions of contemporary art today.

But it's been nearly ten years of the productive if frequently anxious debate over notions of 'the contemporary',² a period that is roughly contiguous with Manning's exhibition history as an artist. Ours has been an era of renewed discussion about the formats in which art (and criticism) actually occur, and consequently a period in which we have come to learn that the categories of what constitutes a contemporary artwork are more unstable, more porous, and more open to challenge than ever before. In other words, an artwork today seeming modernist is not necessarily an immediate disqualification from it also being contemporary.

2 As articulated in *e-flux journal's* influential compendium *What Is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010); Terry Smith's book *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Giorgio Agamben's essay "What Is the Contemporary?" in Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Furthermore, if we now expect contemporary art to reflect its own present—to "manifest its own contemporaneity", as Boris Groys puts it³—then we are also now aware that this need not mean overt devotion to presentism. Rather, a certain untimeliness can in fact be a marker of the contemporary, following Giorgio Agamben's much-quoted thoughts, that 'contemporariness' can be considered a "relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it ... *through a disjunction and an anachronism*".⁴ Agamben suggests that those who "are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust to its demands,... precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of *perceiving and grasping their own time*".⁵

Manning, chronically, makes environments generated by devices to effect direct perceptual registration with the spectator. The prevalence of the machines and Manning's meticulous approach to composition with them seem to invite consideration as sculpture and as expressions of technological wonder. But considered less as form and more as actions and effects, Manning's work can open onto questions that seem especially contemporary—questions about the role of art in larger flows of global capital, tastes and ideas, and the place of affect and experiential work to initiate those questions.

Spectra, Six Short Films (2016), and *Melody Lines* (2016–ongoing) are typical total environments created by Manning in which a humming overhead matrix suffuses the space with ever-changing multicoloured fields of light. In these, the spectator experiences a world of colours spreading, blooming, and fading, grading into and handing over to one another in ceaseless flow. Manning's *Pianola Loops* is a different

3 Boris Groys, "Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk", in *e-flux journal* 50, December 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>.

4 Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?", 41, emphasis in original.

5 Ibid, 40, emphasis added.



Melody Lines, 2016, overhead conveyor system,
glass, colour filters, and fluorescent tubes.
Installation view, Carriageworks. Commissioned
by Carriageworks and Performance Space, 2016.
Photography: Zan Wimberley.



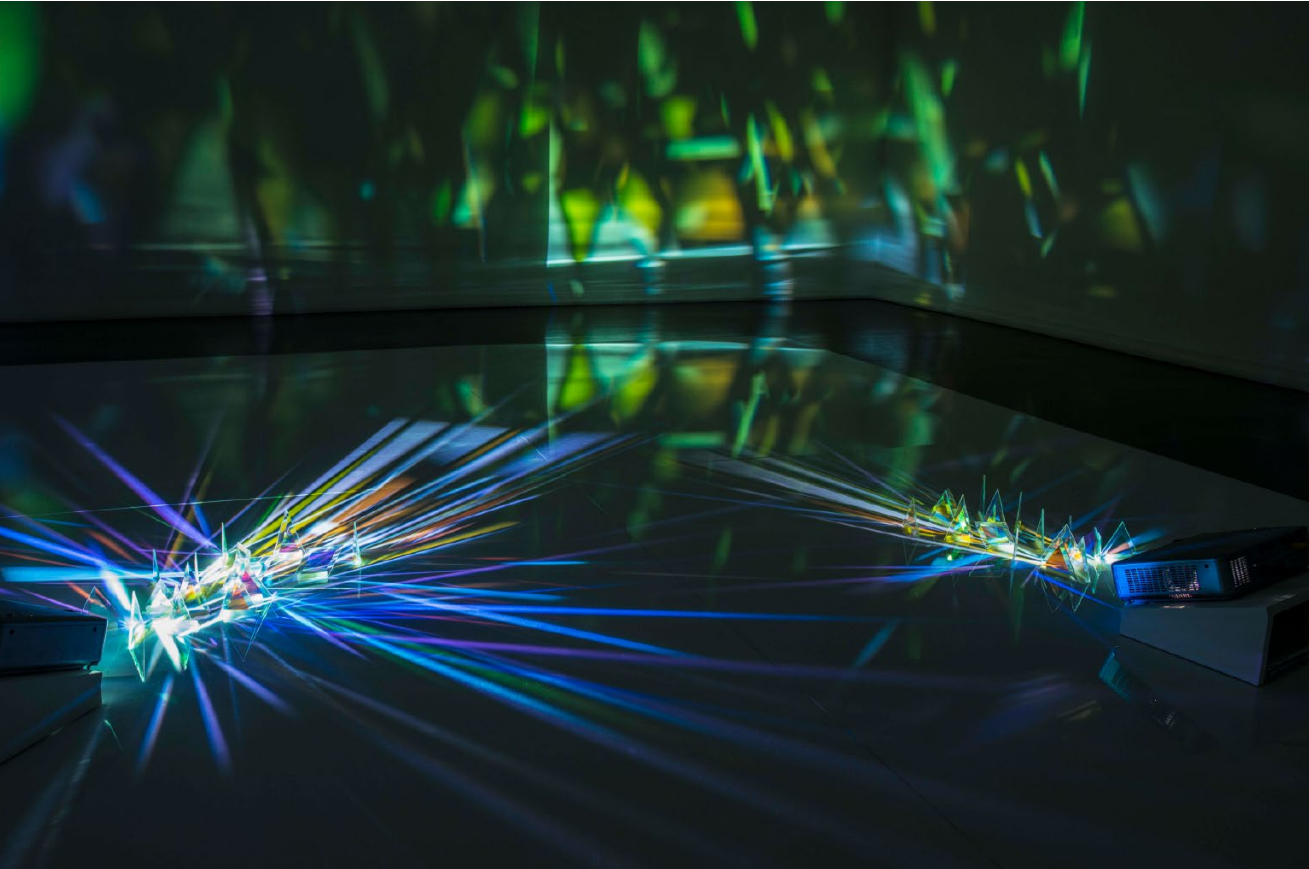
Six Short Films, 2016, overhead projectors, theatre gel, motors, interval timers, and rollers.
Photography: Sam Hartnett. Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

type of coloured light environment, with a smaller body of light that is unable to radiate. Funnelled through small holes in a scroll of paper that cycles through like a mechanical belt, the beam can only escape intermittently, and then imperfectly, in jagged showers of tiny dots. The spectator is not so much bathed in coloured light as its absence, where, in the shroud of darkness, attention attunes to the shower of iridescent flecks, a flickering contingent on the dark. These are works built to solicit the spectator's perception in a somatic language of hue, intensity, and constant motion.

Unmuffled mechanical rhythms foreground the agency of devices in these coloured light environments. While every Ross Manning system makes machine music, sound is elevated to subject in the waveform chime structure of the newly-commissioned work *Wave Opus III*. This assemblage defines the space paradoxically: when performing, it is the centre, the vibrating source issuing the sound waves rippling through those present, caressing individual ears, creating a shared audience body in the sensual exchange of the encounter of listening. In its other, silent life, however, *Wave Opus III*'s imposing form dictates the space it inhabits with an assertive linearity that echoes the borders and barriers of material spatial control. *Wave Opus III* shows how Manning can use installation to operate multiple registers, from an immediate and phenomenological space of affect to a critical space of machines as metaphors.

As total environments of kinetic light and sound happening in time, Manning's works tend to operate as both sculpture and event: they are installations that are also performances. The decade over which Manning has been exhibiting his total environments is one in which the role of the museum has undergone a crucial shift; in Groy's words, it "has ceased to be a space for contemplating non-moving things" and instead has become "a place where things happen", a "stage for contemporary art events".⁶

⁶ Groy, "Entering the Flow".



Dichroic Filter Piece (extended projection), 2012–2017,
dichroic filters, cut glass, media players, and data
projectors. Photography: Tony Nathan. Image courtesy
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Manning's works' constitutive eventfulness may be how they most clearly manifest contemporaneity, if we read his environments as Gesamtkunstwerks in the sense that Groys introduces: the formerly avant-garde form, initially proposed as a substitute for a traditional museum, is now an agent in a 'flow'. In such a context, they exist as projects in an art world supply-chain of endless new events whose purpose is to synchronise the institution with the larger flow of time by generating the material for the ever-expanding online archive of documentation through which they will be chiefly realised, consumed, and remembered. As lyrical environments full of motion, Manning's work is readily assimilable in the "action to make art fluid,

to synchronize it with the flow of time";⁷ to become a stage for a contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk—contemporary, in other words, in its complicity.

FORCES WITHOUT CONTACT

The movement from one energy state to another, either within or between larger classes of energy (mechanics or electromagnetism), is called transduction. Audible sounds and other acoustical phenomena belong to mechanics: all sound is mechanical in this sense. Just as the wind blows across distinctions of naturally occurring and human-made, of nature and technology, so too does energy move across states as transduction. Energetic movement is in this way a continuation locatable at transformation, the position of transducers.

—Douglas Kahn⁸

Certain forces cannot be directly apprehended, but rather can only be witnessed as effects—think of the wind, the tides, magnetism, gravity. Douglas Kahn has coined the term 'aelectrosonic', meaning to tap into and listen to some of these ever-present electromagnetic flows in which we are perpetually, if invisibly, embedded. If their recruitability to the imperative for a constantly revolving, institutionally renewing flow of spectacle in the art system is what makes Manning's work complicit with that system, it is also what may provide opportunity for a critical reflection on the same system and its operations. Manning, 'hearing' aelectrosonically, creates systems of transformation for the location of energetic movements in order to render them, on some level, knowable. Transduction is not just enacted, but thematised: from our perspective in the cooled-down, self-reflective space of contemporary

⁷ Groys, "Entering the Flow".

⁸ Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound/Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 7.

art installation,⁹ the constant exchange of energies from one state to another that characterises all of Manning's systems can be read as articulations of these forces at human scale, and how they and other invisible, intangible, and yet material forces may work, and work on us.

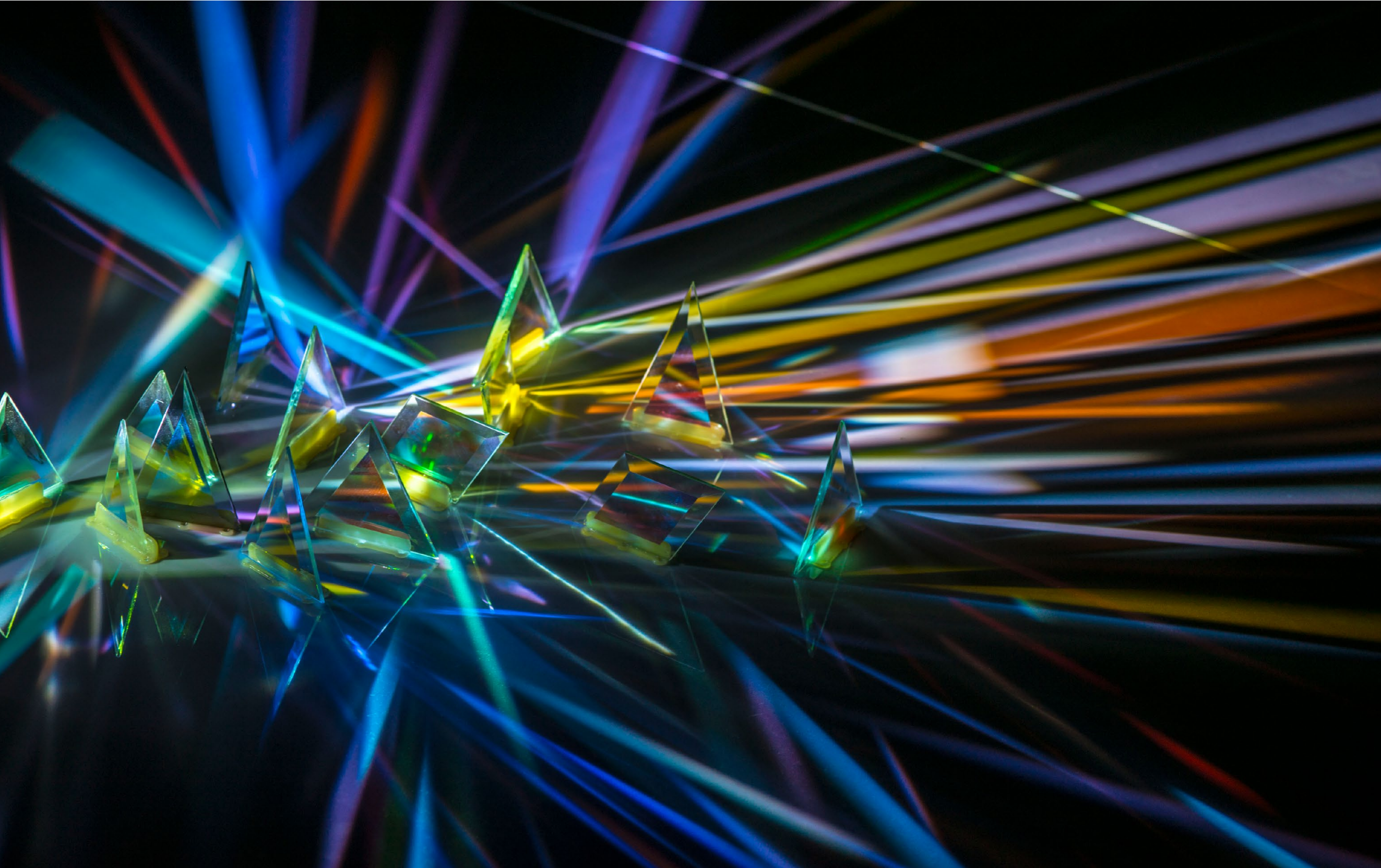
Suffusion is the word we use for the process by which one substance gradually spreads over, and gives an unusual quality to, another substance. Like infusion, suffusion's root *suffundere* is in *fundere*, to pour, and as with infusion, there is the sense of permeation and fusion. But suffusion goes further, perhaps deeper; filling becomes flushing, a spreading over and throughout, an overflowing, a pouring beneath. We speak of a room suffused with sunlight, how a blush suffuses the cheeks, that the sunset is suffusing the horizon. It is a fluid term, signalling incremental change at the level of moments, perceivable not as a singular state, only in states of becoming.

Manning's environments are suffused with light and sound, and the term seems to come closest to describing the feeling of being a spectator in his work. If the last decade or so of intense critical discussion in art have encouraged a shift to consider how artworks open onto the contemporary, even or especially because of their untimeliness, the centrality of the role of suffusion in Manning's work seems to point to a particular quality of action in our time.

In the idea of suffusion, the suffix *suff-* is a version of *sub-*, under, so suffusion is technically not just to pour, but rather 'to pour underneath'. While there is violent and abrupt change in our world, there is much more incremental change slowly happening at levels and in ways that make difficult the registration of discrete points of change in a way that is graspable. Much change does not happen instantaneously but in a slow, creeping attrition. The abstractions of global financial

capital, the inculcation and commodification of ideas, capital's engineering of desire and consciousness, the cultivation by algorithms of our daily and future activities are all operating subtly, minutely, significantly, but also unsupervised, soaked in, working away in the background, where they are just beyond our ability to perceive their action. Ross Manning's work exudes sound and light, but to be dazzled by its pouring radiant noise is to overlook the possibility that the artist's real work may be a kind of dramatisation of the action of those larger forces flowing stealthily beneath contemporary life.

⁹ Groys, "Entering the Flow".



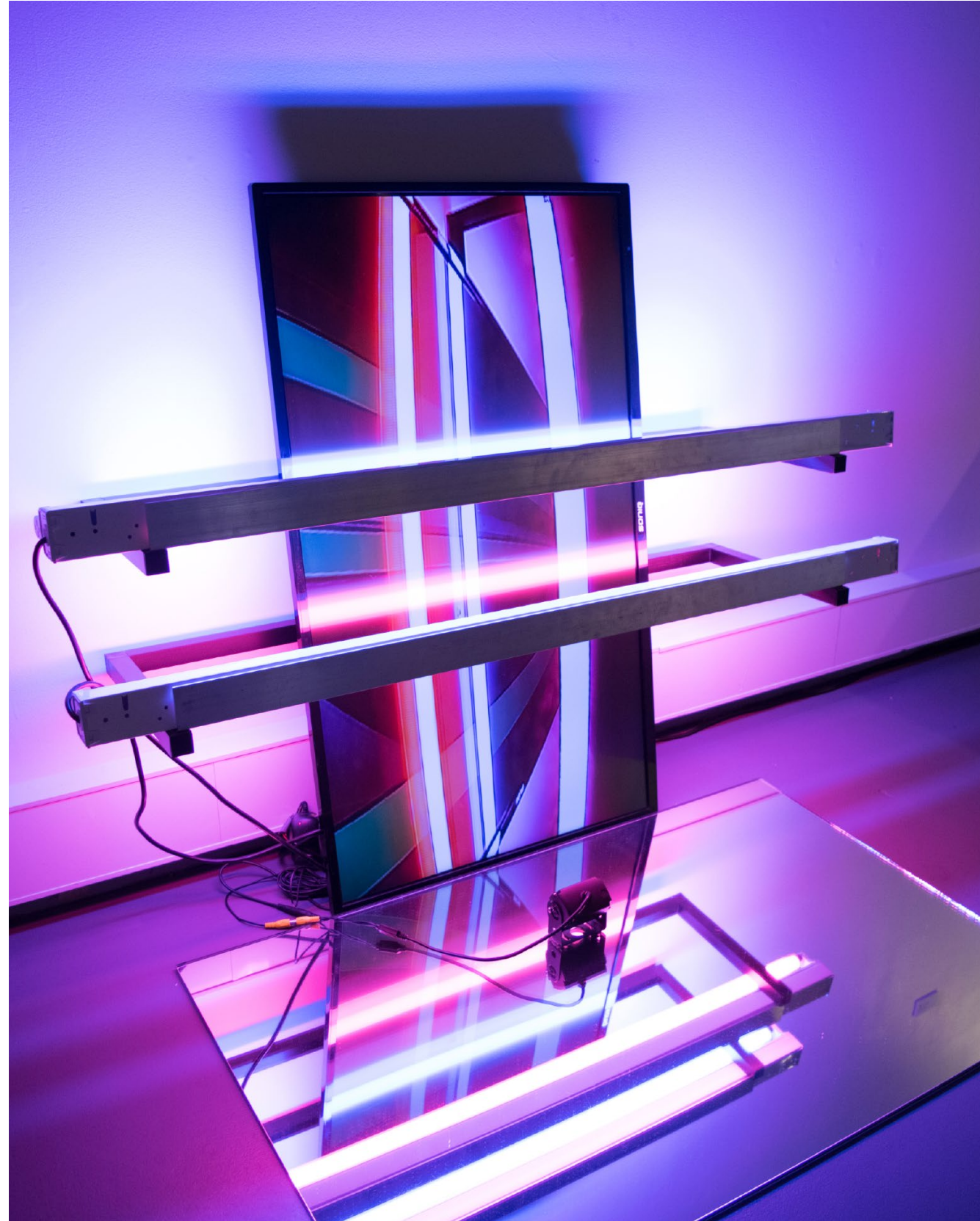


100–103

Dichroic Filter Piece (extended projection), 2012–2017, dichroic filters, cut glass, media players, and data projectors. Photography: Tony Nathan. Image courtesy Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

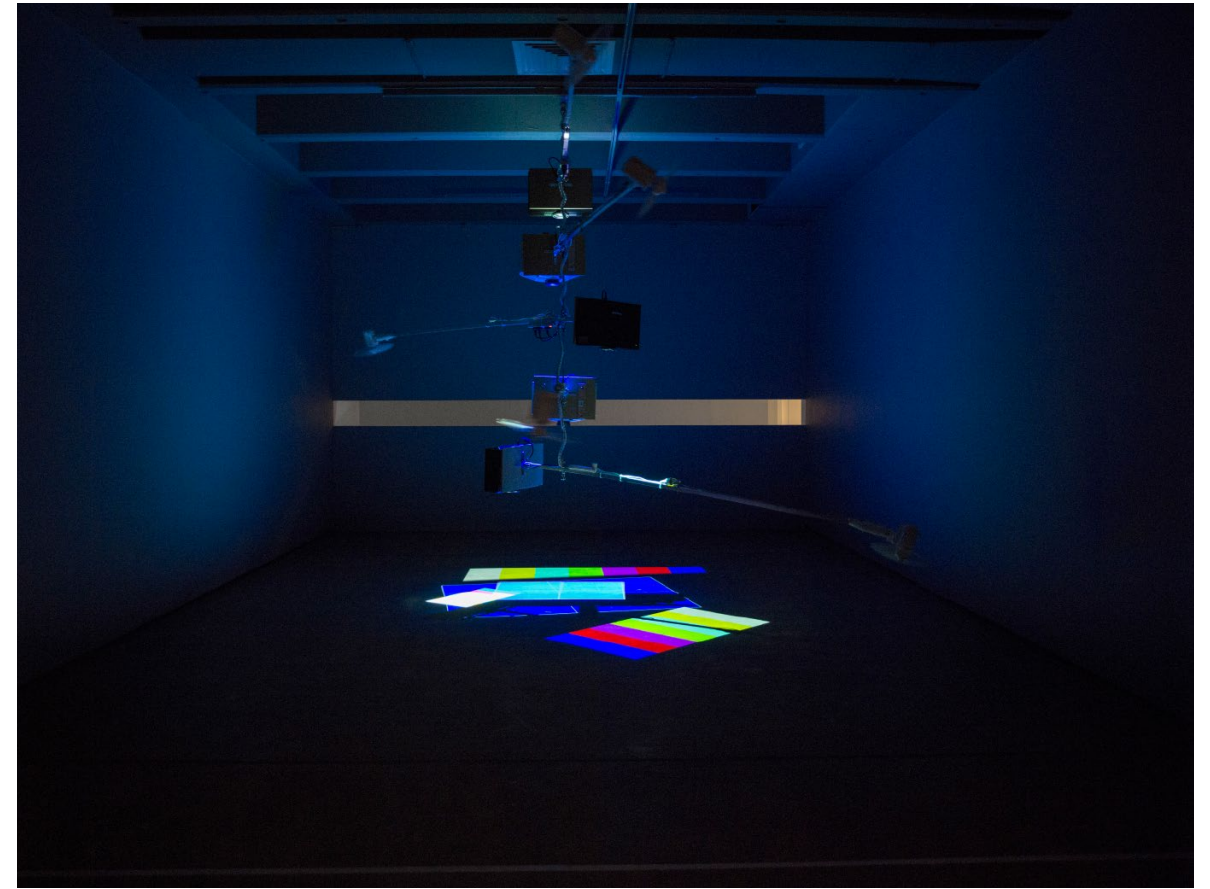
105–107

Bricks and Blocks, 2016, LCD TV, video camera, fluorescent lights, and mirror. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.





*Memory Matrix and Antiquity (for
synchronised multichannel video)*, 2015, data
projectors, aluminium, fans, and steel cable.
Commissioned by the Institute of Modern
Art. Photography: Carl Warner.



111

Small Spiral, 2012, fan, LED light, wool,
and rope. Photography: Carl Warner.

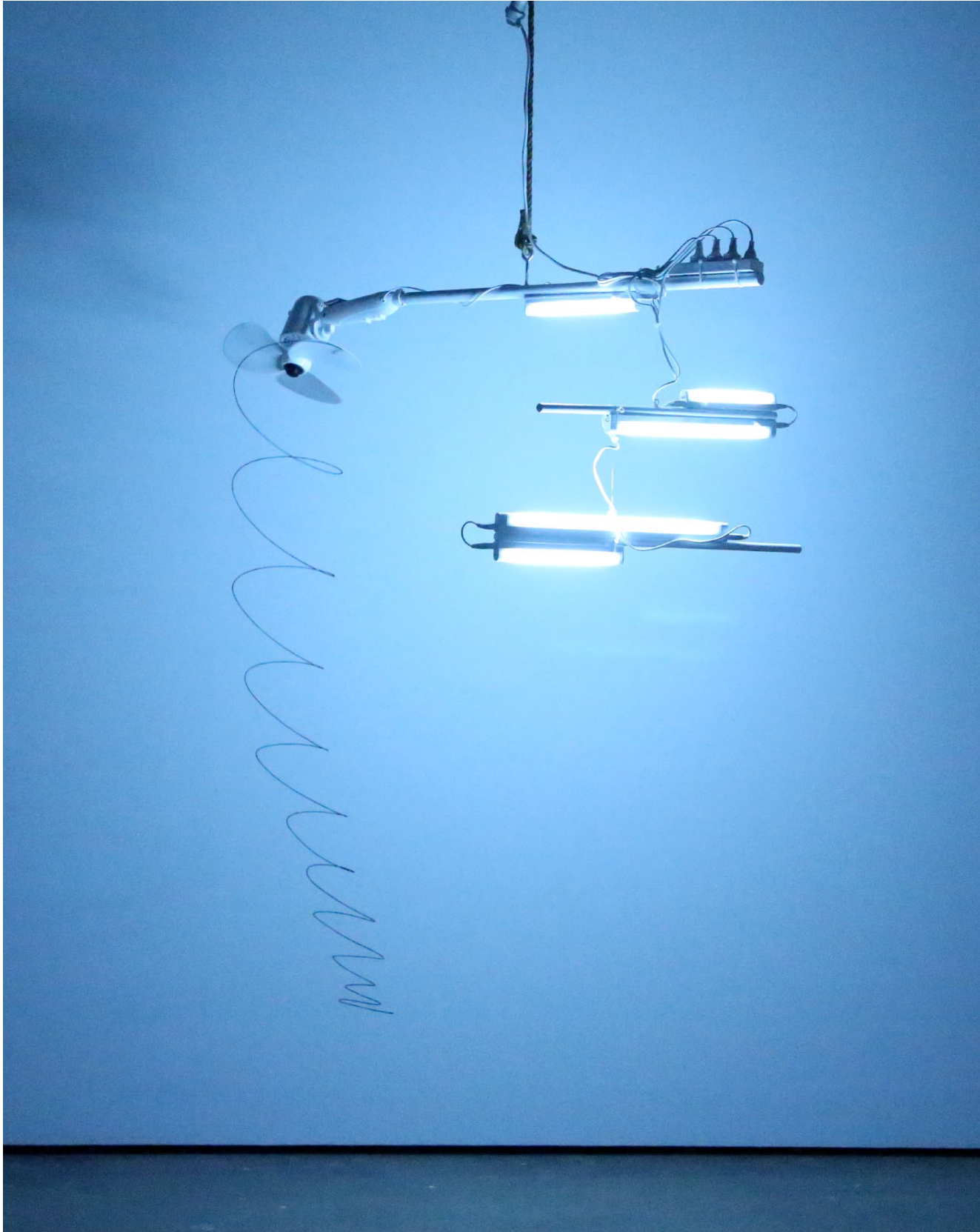
112–113

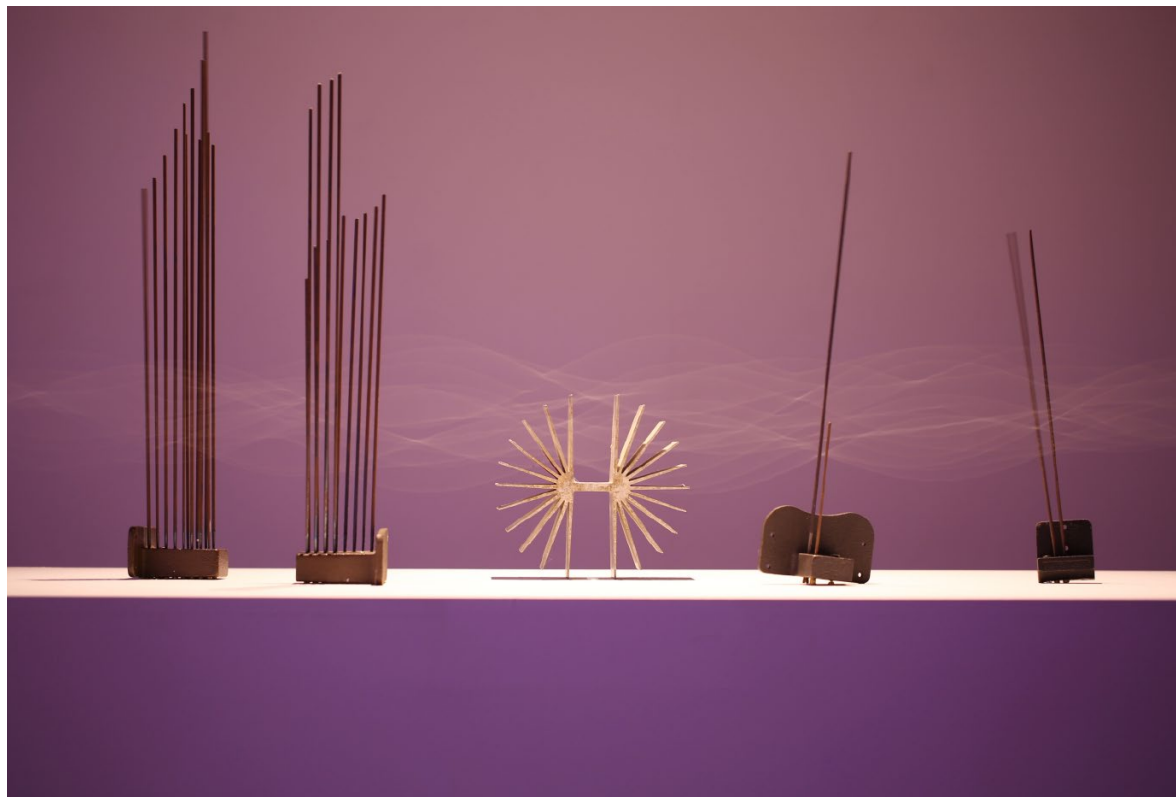
Spiral Sequence, 2013, oscillating
fans, LED lights, rope, and dowel.
Photography: Alex Cuffe. Courtesy
McClelland Sculpture Park &
Gallery, Melbourne.





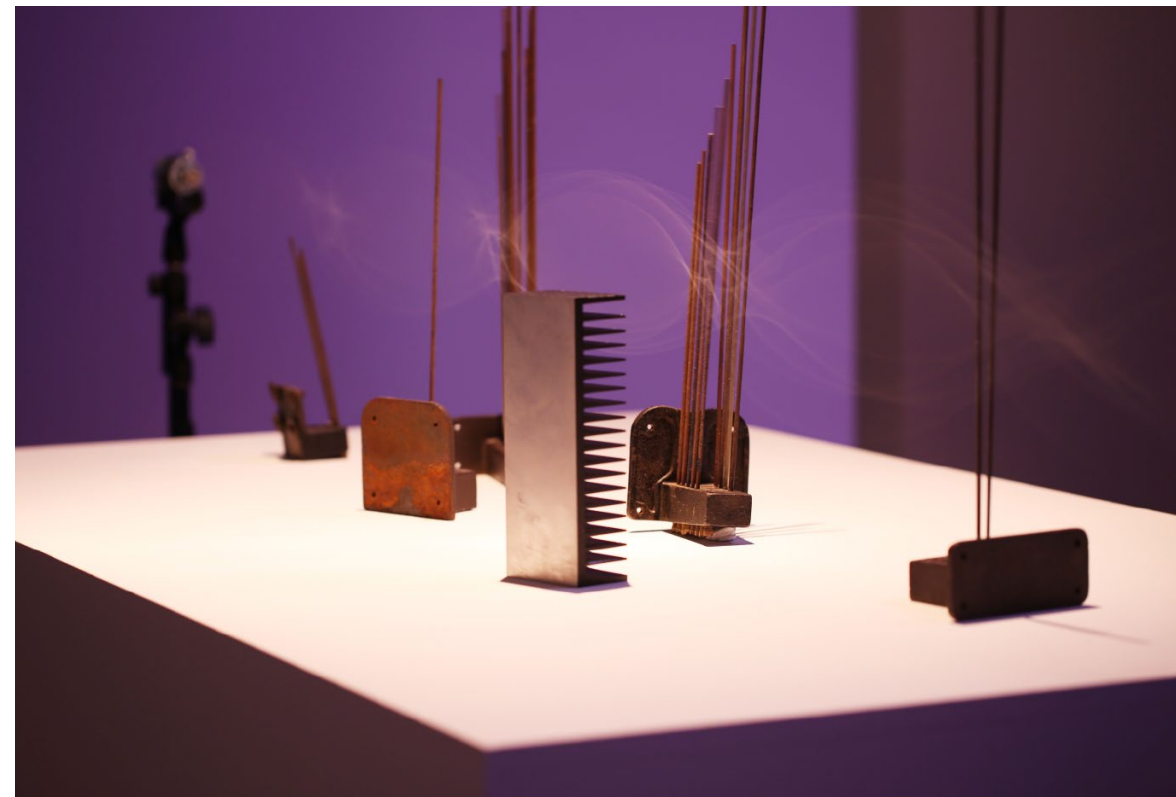
Light Sequence and Spiral, 2012, compact fluorescent lights, oscillating fan, black wool, dowel, power board, and cables.
Photography: Alex Cuffe.

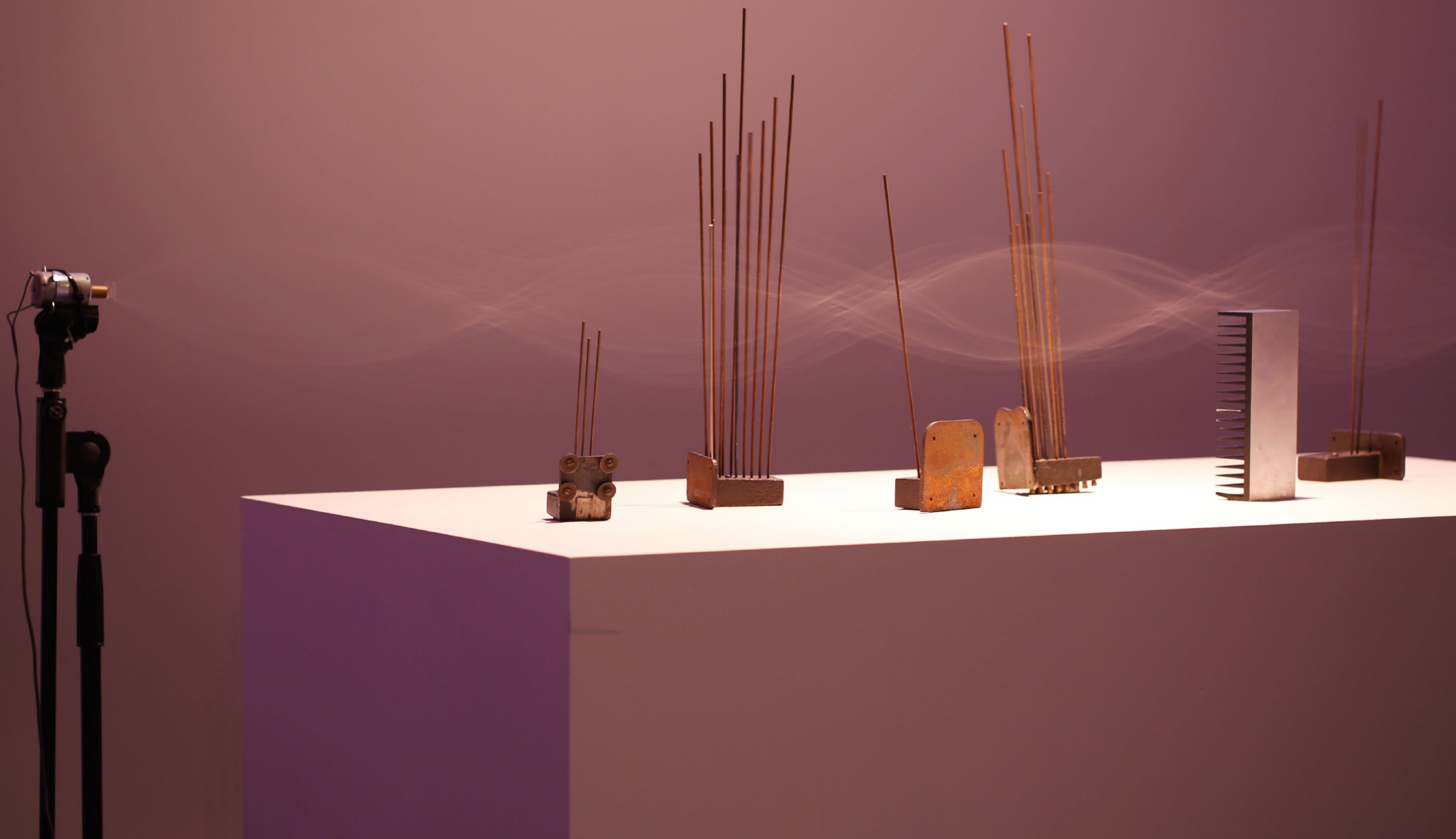




116–119

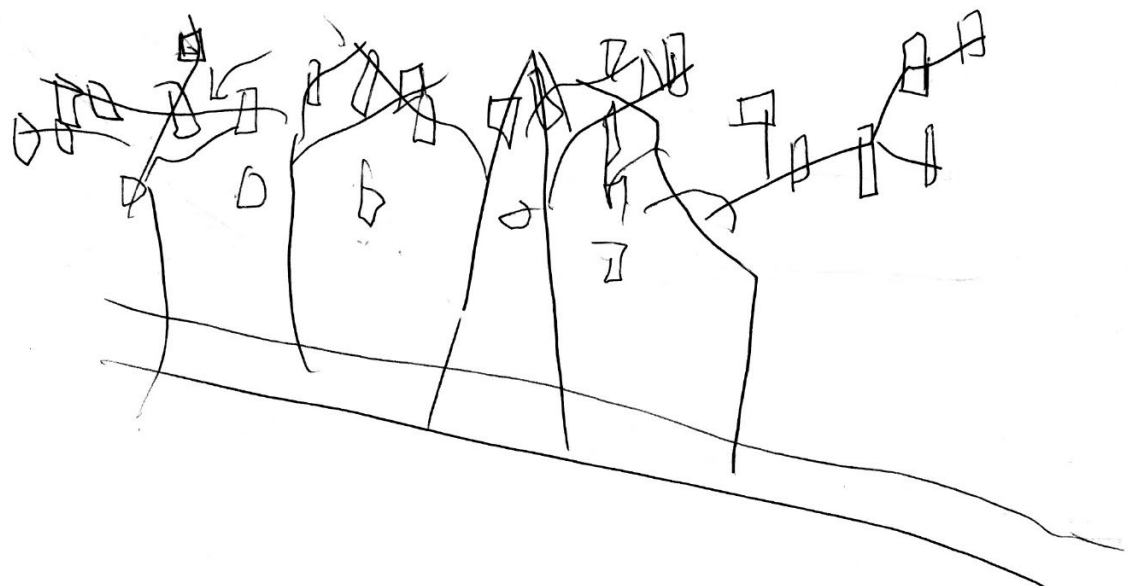
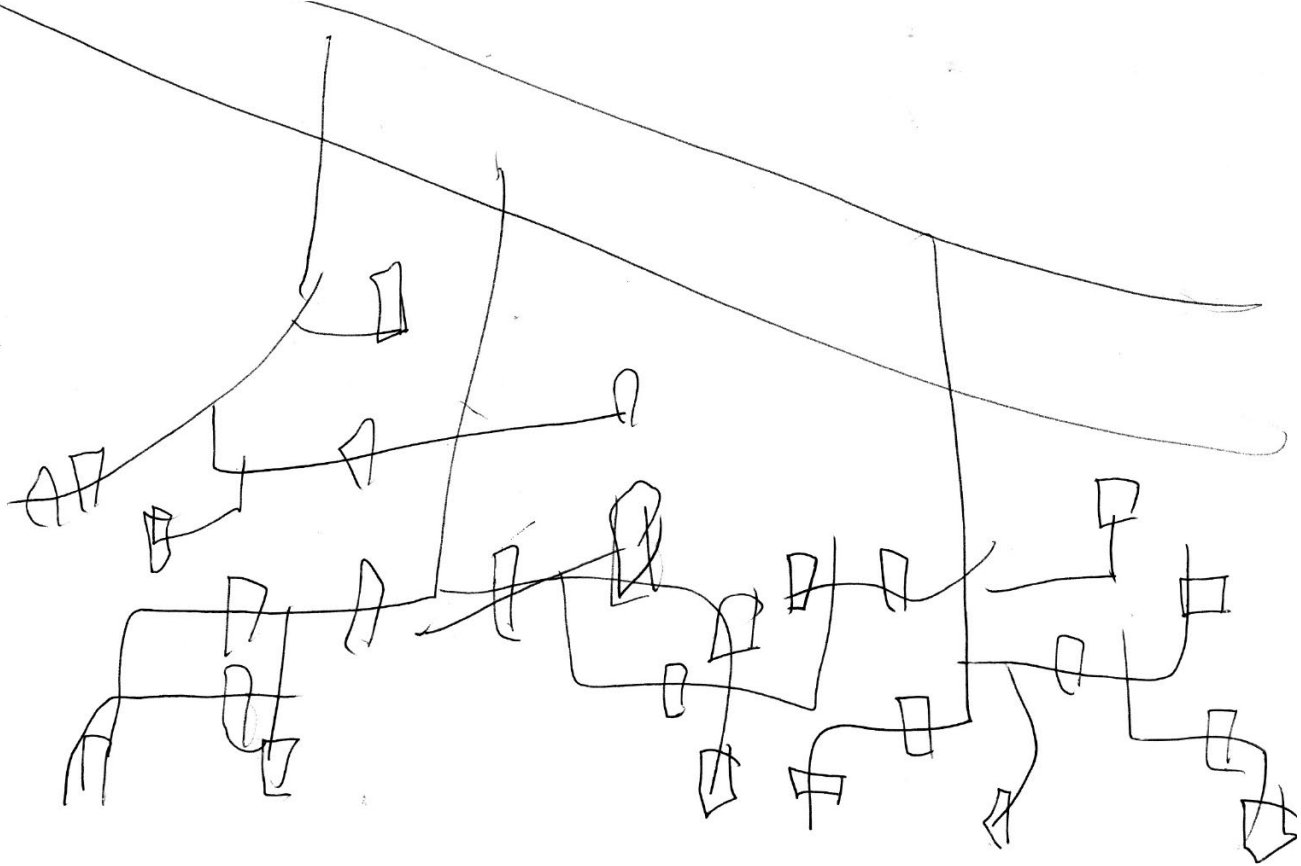
Wave Opus I, 2016, modified clock chimes, heat sink, DC motors, hook-up wire, motion detector, contact microphones, and audio equipment.
Photography: Sam Cranstoun. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.





Point Cloud Opera, 2016, LCD monitor, CRT TV, video camera, tripods, fluorescent lights, halogen lights, lamp, fan guard, and cables. Photography: Cho Jungyoun.





ROSS MANNING

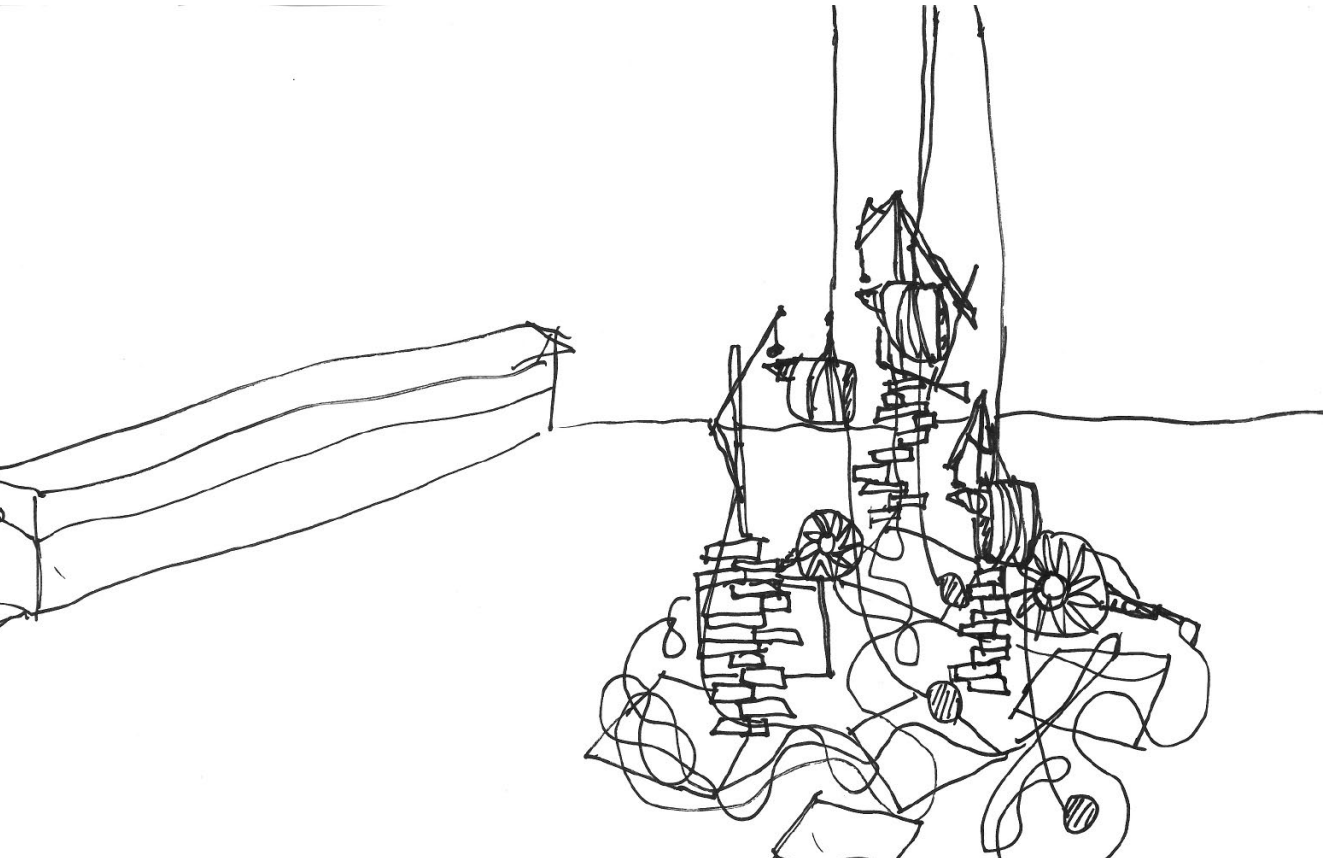
Born 1978, Brisbane. Lives and works in Brisbane.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES

- 2017 *Ross Manning: Dissonant Rhythms*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
Wrong Notes, Gallery Augusta, Helsinki
- 2016 *Ross Manning: Melody Lines*, Carriageworks, Sydney (commissioned
by Carriageworks and Performance Space)
New Work, Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Sound Room LVI, live performance, Third Space, Helsinki
- 2015 *The Travelling Brain*, Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney
NO OPUS, Coreflute ARI, Brisbane
- 2014 *Perpetual Motion*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane
- 2013 *Volumes*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth
- 2012 *Spectra*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Field Emmissions, Starkwhite, Auckland
- 2011 *Gleaning the Cube*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane

2010 *3 songs*, Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, MONA FOMA, Hobart
Double Refraction, Lismore Regional Gallery, Lismore

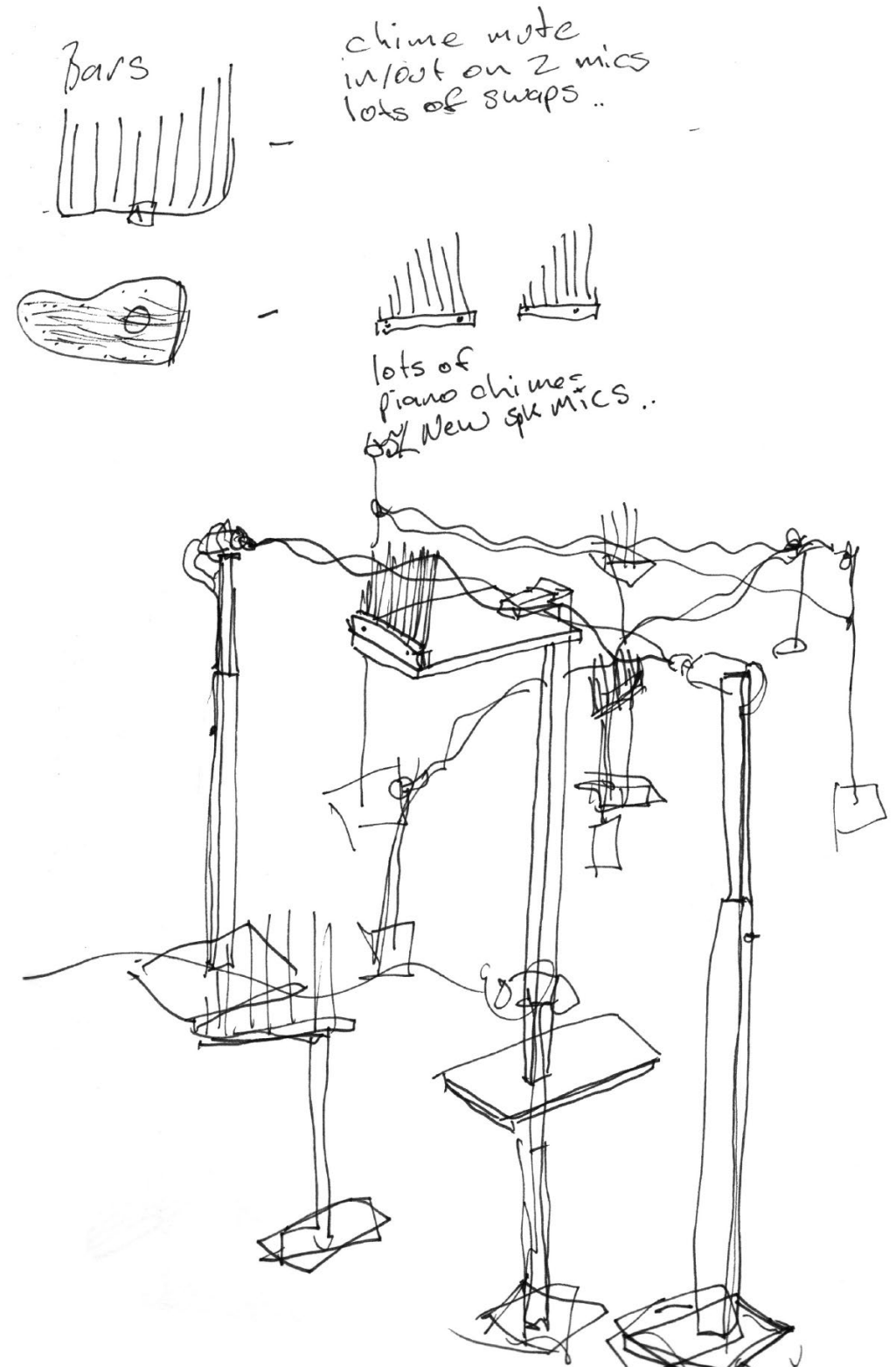
2009 *Input Ruins*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Sunshine and Zincaloom, Ptarmigan, Helsinki

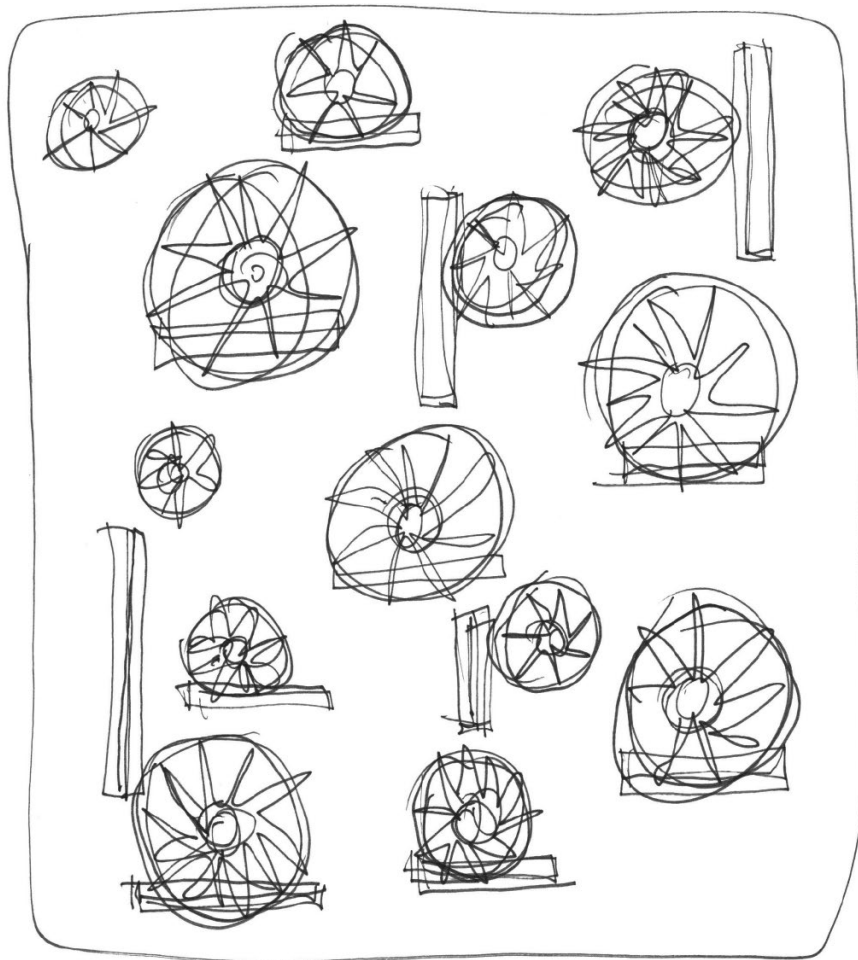


SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES

- 2017 *MCA Collection: Primavera at 25*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney
Unconscious Archives #24, Cafe Oto, London
- 2016 *Why Not Ask Again*, 11th Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai
Set in Motion, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Iye Centre, New Plymouth
A Device for Measuring, Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Colourshift, LOOP Alternative Space, Seoul
The Creativity of Things, Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane
- 2015 *Light Play*, The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane
Sound Spaces, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
GOMA Q: Contemporary Queensland Art, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Guirguis New Art Prize, Federation University Australia, Ballarat
The Kaleidoscopic Turn, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Imaginary Accord, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
Interplay, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul
Chromatic Syncopation, First Draft, Sydney
- 2014 *Different Rhythms*, DARK MOFO, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart
You Imagine What You Desire, 19th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney
MCA Artbar, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney
Vivid Festival, Sydney
Sensory Overload, McClelland Sculpture Park & Gallery, Melbourne

- 2013 *Sound & Vision*, Counihan Gallery In Brunswick, Melbourne
Foundation's Edge, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane
Bazinga!, Starkwhite, Auckland
exUrban Screens, Frankston Arts Centre, Frankston
- 2012 *NEW12*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
Tetsuya Umeda <- Ross Manning, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns
Shakin': The Kinetic Aesthetic, Gold Coast City Gallery, Gold Coast
Sonic Spheres, TarraWarra Biennial 2012, Healesville
The National New Media Art Award (finalist), Queensland Art Gallery |
 Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Volume One, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney
- 2011 *The Melbourne Jazz Festival*, Melbourne
The Churchie National Emerging Art Prize (first place), Brisbane
New Primitive, MAAP-Media Art Asia Pacific, Brisbane
The Plastic Arts & Rukus, Wandering Room, Brisbane
Out Hear, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne
New Psychedelia, The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane
- 2009 *Come Hither Noise*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle
Primavera 2009, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney
A New Truth to Materials, Boxcopy, Brisbane
The Light, Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Batteries Not Included, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
Arto Lindsey: The Penny Parade, Berlin
- 2008 *The New Fresh Cut*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane





COLLECTIONS

Artbank, Sydney (commission)
 The Australian Synchrotron, Melbourne
 The Chartwell Collection, Auckland
 Lady Cilento Children's Hospital, Brisbane
 Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
 Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney
 Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
 The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

Centre for Children's Health Research, Lady Cilento Children's
 Hospital, Brisbane, 2014
 Vibrant Laneways, Brisbane City Council, Brisbane 2013

MUSIC RELEASES

Reflex in Waves, LP, Institute of Modern Art and Room40, 2017
LED, EP, 2016
Natural Causes, cassette, Vitrine, 2016
Deforming A Virtual Ribbon, cassette, more mars team, 2016
Interlacing, LP, Room40, 2015
Delicate Shades of Hell, cassette, Greedy Ventilator, 2015
Harmonious Angles, LP, 2012



CONTRIBUTORS

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DR CALEB KELLY is an academic and curator engaged in sound as it relates to art and music. He is the author of *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction*, and the editor of *Sound*. Kelly is a senior academic at UNSW Art & Design, Australia.

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Ross Manning: Dissonant Rhythms

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