FROM CENTRE

William Angus-Hughes, Rana Begum, Martin Church, Nathan Cohen, Rhys Coren, Natalie Dower, Judith Duquemin, Julia Farrer, Ben Gooding, Lothar Götz, Hanz Hancock, Tess Jaray, Silvia Lerin, Peter Lowe, Patrick Morrissey, Laurence Noga, Charley Peters, Richard Plank, Giulia Ricci, Carol Robertson, Robin Seir, Steve Sproates, Trevor Sutton

11–26 April 2015

Slate Projects & Saturation Point Projects
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On a Clear Day
Alex Meurice

In 1967, seemingly once and for all, Agnes Martin abandoned painting, left New York, bought a trailer and moved to the New Mexican desert. After four, solitary years on the mesa, Martin was invited by Luitpold Domberger – a master screenprinter renowned for collaborating with Josef Albers, Max Bill and Victor Vasarely, to execute a series of screenprints. Titled On a Clear Day, this austere achromatic work develops the grammar of linear divisions which Martin would use for the rest of her life. Inspired to paint for the first time in many years, Martin relinquished the browns and greys of her earlier work for luminous and joyful pastels. In a note from 1975, she wrote:

Art work that is completely abstract – free from any expression of the environment is like music and can be responded to in the same way. Our response to line and tone and color is the same as our response to sounds. And like music abstract art is thematic. It holds meaning for us that is beyond expression in words.

These prints express innocence of mind. If you can go with them and hold your mind as empty and tranquil as they are and recognize your feelings at the same time you will realize your full response to this work.*

If the meaning of abstraction lies beyond words, here we can only write circumstantially, of abstraction's materials, processes, influences and origins.

From Centre would not have been possible without the recent success of Saturation Point, the online editorial and curatorial

This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous time and help of numerous individuals, above all the artists exhibited. I especially would like to thank Patrick Morrissey, Hanz Hancock and Charley Peters from Saturation Point for proposing to collaborate on this exhibition and for their devotion to reductive art and artists. Thanks also to Emma Hill of Eagle Gallery, and to Domo Baal, who represent several of the artists exhibited. Thank you to Stephen Barrett for designing this publication, to Nathan Cohen and Laura Davidson for writing their essays on such short notice, to Damian Griffiths for photography and to Martin Church for his technical assistance. Last but not least, a heartfelt thanks to our kind landlords for providing this magnificent space.

A student of the late Kenneth Martin himself, Peter Lowe belonged to the Systems Group, whose influence is seen in many of the works exhibited here, and whose principal members included Malcolm Hughes, Jeffrey Steele, Michael Kidner and Jean Spencer. The Systems Group artists sought to abandon the utopianism of earlier constructivists, and built complex spatial compositions from simple geometrical elements by applying rules derived from mathematics. Mathematics is essentially an attempt to create order in a chaotic world, and the strict rational aesthetic of the Systems Group thus provides a foundation for art to address deeper, less visible realities, patterns of the world and of the mind. In their essays published here, Nathan Cohen and Laura Davidson hint at multiple sources and contexts for contemporary geometric abstraction, from the infinite horizon of algorithms to backstrap weaving and neurology. The twenty-three artists exhibited in From Centre are prolific in exploiting these new possibilities for reductive geometry, at times architectonic, hieratic, kinetic, mosaic, poetic, nostalgic or ironic. This plethora of attitudes, materials and processes avoids any narrative or imagistic content to locate meaning beyond verbal description. Agnes Martin’s advice, to ‘go with’ the innocence of her prints, can help us to perceive how these works have aligned thought, feeling and imagination through abstraction.
1 Natalie Dower (b. 1931)
Polymorph, 2013
Oil on canvas, 61 × 86.5 cm

2 Tess Jaray (b. 1937)
Window for Katharina (Dark with Pink), 2013
Cut panel, 131 × 131 cm

3 Peter Lowe (b. 1938)
Painting, Triangles within a Dodecagon, 2000
Acrylic on canvas, 92 × 92 cm

4 Trevor Sutton (b. 1948)
Christow, 2013
Oil and paper on board, 94 × 64 cm

5 Julia Farrer (b. 1950)
A Knot in Time II, 2013
Acrylic on panel, 86 × 83 cm
Richard Plank (b.1951)
BTS 50A, 2015
3D printed sculpture, 14 × 14 × 20 cm

Steve Sproates (b.1952)
Five Planes in Four-Space, 2005–15
Mixed media relief, 43 × 43 cm

Judith Duquemin (b.1953)
4 Pentagons and 3 Rhombi No.6, 2014
Acrylic on linen, 50 × 40 cm

Carol Robertson (b.1955)
Aura, 2014
Oil on canvas, 40 × 40 cm

Patrick Morrissey (b.1957)
Cheerless Marches, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, 91 × 91 cm
Abstraction may be viewed as a transformative process whereby the artist conceives of forms that convey ideas and finds ways to articulate them. For some artists the initial inspiration may be observed forms, experiences or places, and for others the enquiry may begin with exploring formal relationships between artificially conceived spatial and structural elements, which are not intended to be a likeness of other forms, or a combination of these approaches. There may be a desire to express ideas that speak of experience of interaction and exploration of how our perception enables and challenges us in this endeavour.

*Art, we shall find, is inseparably related to [our] growing faculty to visualize and reason about [ourselves] and [our] environment in an ever more accurate manner.*
Charles Biederman

There is a long legacy of abstract imagery in the pictographs, paintings, pottery, weaving and artefacts to be found globally which continue to be profound sources of influence for artists today. These include many types of pattern including spiral, maze, grid, linear, diagonal and concentric forms arranged in varying combinations of complexity.

*Just as the grammar of music consists of harmony, counterpoint, and form which describes the structure of a composition, so spatial structures, whether crystalline, architectural, or choreographic, have*

Three Rivers petroglyphs, New Mexico, USA
their grammar which consists of such parameters as symmetry, proportion, connectivity, stability, etc. Space is not a passive vacuum; it has properties which constrain as well as enhance the structures which inhabit it.†

Arthur Loeb

Our fascination with symmetry and asymmetry is evident in the forms and structures we create and informs compositional choices applied to all aspects of manufacture. We find in natural forms evidence of ordering principles that excite our curiosity and we have developed a deeper understanding of structure inventing the Golden Ratio, perspective, tessellation, Fibonacci sequence, impossible figures, nonlinear dynamics, n-dimensional and fractal geometries, to name a few.

We may discover some of these forms and spatial constructions as we contemplate how to evolve our artwork. In doing so we encounter a rich tapestry of formal elements and ways to articulate them with which we can further our invention and better understand the forms and images we wish to create.

As the mathematician David Hilbert observes intuition plays an important role in this process:

The abstract tendency has led to the magnificent systematic theories of Algebraic Geometry, or Riemannian Geometry, and of Topology; these theories make extensive use of abstract reasoning and symbolic calculation… Notwithstanding this it is still true today that intuitive understanding plays a major role in geometry… With the aid of visual imagination we can illuminate the manifold facts and problems…‡

This is an evolving process and one which can offer insight into how we perceive space. When Brunelleschi stepped back into the door whose frame outlined the view of the building he wished to represent, the fixing of the edge of the observable space defined it as a picture plane onto the three-dimensional space beyond, marking a moment where the framing element established a means to create a spatially measurable illusion of reality. However, it also defined a boundary between the real world of the viewer and that of the image and ensures our perception of what is depicted remains consciously an illusion.

We may take this invention for granted today and are familiar with looking at artworks that represent to us a likeness of the world we are familiar with in a way that is spatially convincing, allowing us to engage with the illusion of space as an extension of our real world reality.

This abstraction can also be extended to construct images that are not seeking to represent a likeness of observed form but as a starting point for inventing pictorially and spatially. If the elements that compose the image define its boundaries, rather than sit within a predetermined frame, an alternative dynamic in its relationship to the space within which it exists is created. Locating the artwork directly within its environment using the architecture as its support can render its form architectonic, and utilising space to construct an artwork in the round produces an architectural form integrating the observer within it. Kinetic, optical, light and digitally interactive elements are also explored by artists, including art forms that offer an immersive sensory experience.

An idea can be described in reference to the functions and the actual functioning of the brain, since it is the representation stored in the brain of the essential characteristics seen and selected.\(^5\)

Raffaella Folgieri and co-authors

Neuroscience, and in particular the new discipline of neuroaesthetics whose goal is to find the neural basis of mental processes precisely related to art seeks to explain abstraction as a function of the brain’s structure. As we learn more about the way in which different parts of the brain process stimuli so, perhaps, we shall gain a deeper understanding of why we see and invent the forms we create. Folgieri and his co-authors explain that:

*The premotor cortex enacts complex actions through the connection with the primary motor cortex, which controls simple actions. When this connection between premotor cortex and the motor cortex is inhibited, the secondary motor cortex can function as the ring of a transmission chain, a cog, which can still compute complex configurations that allow us to carry out inferences and that may change over time. These secondary configurations… give rise to what we perceive as an artwork. The cogs, which are embodied at the same time because they are part of the sensory-motor system and abstract since it does not include any details, allow us to have an immediate understanding of the embodied form of abstract art. The artist is a neurologist in action, who not only knows the laws of the brain but also knows how to put them into practice.*

It remains to be seen to what extent our ability to envisage the poetics of space, the landscape of the imagination and the creative intellectual processes that generate art can be accounted for by an analysis of our brain structure and its functions, but it is significant that this has in recent years attracted the interest of scientists.

When making choices about how to construct an artwork there are questions we may ask about how to build pictorially and spatially in ways that translate a deeper understanding of how we observe and perceive, and which in turn can be comprehensible to those who view what is created.

Isaac Newton’s observation relating to seeing further by standing on the shoulders of giants is also relevant to the artist as we seek to discover new insights made real through the art we make but also build upon the work of those who have preceded us in engaging with this challenge, a process embracing diverse sources of visual inspiration and intellectual enquiry. Consequently, the history of our quest is a rich one which is international and shared by artists across generations.

Artists are constantly pushing the limits of the technologies and materials they work with often resulting in new and challenging forms. This is an experimental process which can be unpredictable but also throws up the possibility for invention and the advancement of methods and processes that encourages collaboration between artists, technologists and scientists.

In his edited anthology *DATA* (1968) Anthony Hill presents contributors [who] are specialists representative of interrelated fields of interest to plasticians: philosophy, mathematics, physics, engineering, sociology and urbanism\(^\dagger\) indicating the breadth of intellectual exchange and enquiry this art embraces. To this


we might now add advances in artificial intelligence and robotics, neuroscience, psychology, optics, materials and bio-science and the impact of computation and digital processes as areas of research engaging artists today.

Observers of developments in art over the past century will note that there is a breadth of interaction that takes place with each generation forging connections and engaging in dialogue and dispute. The -isms, coined by critics, writers, theorists, and sometimes the artists themselves, are various, each seeking to define an aspect of this enquiry. From a European perspective we may be familiar with the advances made by artists whose work has been categorised as Cubism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Futurism, Concrete, Constructionist, Synthesist, Structurist, Cybernetic and Systematic, to name a few. Yet discovery and invention can be a deeply personal experience and we should be wary of its misrepresentation in ways that might narrow understanding and lead to a misconception that the artists associated with these titles are somehow homogeneous in their thinking.

There is a rich history of artists’ engagement with each other and their communities through publication, exhibitions and events and the period from the 80s to the present has witnessed a number of these activities, usually artist led and often coordinated internationally. British and European manifestations of these include, among others: Arbeitskreis (various artists including Hughes, Spencer); Archive 90 (Cohen, van Zon); Constructivist Forum (Cohen, Johnson); Countervail (Chaplin, Charlett, Dean, Dower, Giles, Spencer, Tebby, Wilbraham); Exhibiting Space (Clarke, Lignon, Pearson, Thomson); Konkret (Sayler); Mesures (Husquinet, Maury); Pro (Ilgen); Saturation Point (Hancock, Morrissey) and individual artists curating exhibitions and events internationally. As documentary material currently held in archives and

the records of artists becomes available so more in depth research into this field can chart individual and group activities as they progress.

And so to the future. That we are capable of inventing with a means of expression that can translate ideas and insights, embrace new thinking and approaches to visualising what we see and encounter and articulate this in ways that enable engagement internationally in this experience, is a creative and challenging prospect. This will continue to evolve as we do. As Paul Klee writes:

\begin{quote}
Sometimes I dream of a work of really great breadth, ranging through the whole region of element, object, meaning and style.

This I fear, will remain a dream, but is a good thing even now to bear the possibility occasionally in mind.

Nothing can be rushed. It must grow, it should grow of itself, and if the time ever comes for that work – then so much the better!**
\end{quote}


Further reference

September 1993 is an important footnote in the social history of the internet. Referred to as ‘Eternal September’, it is the date when AOL first began offering internet subscription services to the mass market. Early adopters of the web were a tight community and this sudden influx of new people changed the dynamic of the net; it had begun as an intimate place. When the amount of people connecting to the internet consistently grew month on month it was as if it was September had never ended. For this group cyberspace quickly grew into an intricate sprawl. As the amount of people connecting to the internet is still growing, we are still living in the moment of ‘Eternal September’. After this juncture our realities rapidly shifted towards a culture of mass information and ubiquitous computing, where infinity became lived rather than just conceptual.

Just like the constant stream of new users to the internet during September 1993 our computational structures are not designed to contain quantities, which reduce or remain static. We are governed by calculations that are designed not to cease and, are in fact predicted to rapidly accelerate with no conceptual end. Instead of getting rich from mining minerals, we discuss the vast wealth of data we can mine. And unlike finite materials, data can rapidly be found, regenerated and moved. Ubiquitous computing has allowed what was once immaterial to become valuable material. Algorithms are often generically articulated as the filtering architecture of this new gold. A rational agent setting parameters around data streams with limitless horizons. The algorithm has become a modern myth; a buzzword for the zeitgeist whilst governing our lives like a monotheistic deity.
we don’t really know well enough to disrupt. To attest to this using an example from the art world; Artsy capitalised on the significance of algorithms in popular culture by hosting the world’s first algorithm auction in March this year.

In all honesty, using ‘algorithmic’ as a descriptor has become that person at a private view you want to gently remove yourself from. Luckily it seems like other people are heading for the exit too, leaving the tedious algorithm alone to parse water into all the wine it wants. At the conference ‘Governing Algorithms’ in New York in 2013, three insurgents wrote a manifesto asking for more specificity when using the term. ‘Governing Algorithms: A Provocation Piece’ continually incites the reader to consider what they actually mean when they are discussing or referring to algorithms. The authors appear to be asking us to seek out alternate terms and concepts to interrogate in reference to the popular interest in computational culture. Reductive, geometric and systems practices have indeed been described as algorithmic. This is not in itself an incorrect judgement; set parameters are very much articulated within working processes and aesthetics. However, there is a need to push beyond this to consider the new space of enquiry ubiquitous computing has enabled in the contemporary context. We need to turn the algorithm inside out and examine what is happening in its interior.

With infinite data the algorithm becomes a space defined by an interior material that retains spatio-temporal qualities. Process no longer has to be limited by parameters predefining the variables of a space, action, duration or form (for example). Perhaps then, the current challenge emerging for artists working with a reductive approach is negotiating a culture governed by machines capable of processing computational data to infinity. Reductive art has to negotiate its own ‘Eternal September’ where a culture of mass information commands that there are inputs without end. The endless and infinite define our epoch; algorithms are merely the bystanders enabling constant generation of material.

There are glimpses of the infinite in From Centre; in Patrick Morrissey’s painting In Awe of Industry (2011) a black square flutters across a white background into a space beyond the surface. The static canvas becomes self-aware whilst the iterations of the square fly off its parameters, conscious only of its place within its own internal logic. Similarly, paintings by Charley Peters contain geometric iterations, demonstrating variables concerned only with infinite self-generation beyond the surface. In particular the introduction of colour gradation in Configuration #31 (2014) and Configuration #32 (2015) suggests an intricate infinity with ceaseless potential for the tonality of colour. Additionally, the titled angle by which the iterations are presented in Configuration #32 (2015) define the static surface as capable only of narrating a cross section of the shifting geometric system. Whilst the configurations present in both Peters’ and Morrissey’s paintings both propose infinite fluctuations of geometry, the linear is not (yet) generating anarchic forms.

Across Giulia Ricci’s Order/Disruption Painting no.2 (2012) an elaborate mass of blue and white triangles reform to spawn shapes within the surface that are not themselves geometric. It seems implausible; the geometric pattern has become wild and uncontrollable. The mutating forms push against the defined linearity of the neighbouring triangles and what the viewer is seeing is only a screenshot of their regeneration. Instead of having fixed parameters, the triangle in relation to other triangles has endless potential. The disruptive forms ripple out across the patterned surface, as if they have the potential to constantly

wobble. Martin Church’s painting *Definitions (Study No.3)* (2009) moves beyond this with a heaving muddle of geometries, mutating forms and contrasting colours. There are way points marked around the bursting geometric shape containing frenzy within. These lines prevent the painting from becoming entirely entropic. Distinct boundaries remain, despite the forms apparent on the canvas holding unlimited probabilities. There is a metaphor here that is not alien to our lived existence, even if subconscious, to attempt to navigate through a contemporary culture that is shaped by the multitude and infinite possibility.

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11 Hanz Hancock (b.1958)
Ebron Vras (The Big Sky), 2011
Mixed media, 66 × 66 cm

12 Laurence Noga (b.1961)
Inbetween Violet and Green (2), 2015
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 66 × 184 cm

13 Nathan Cohen (b.1962)
Korinthos, 2014
Casein and pigment on panel, 110 × 100 cm

14 Lothar Götz (b.1963)
Purple Rain, 2014
Acrylic, gouache and silver pencil on board, 120 × 90 cm

15 Charley Peters (b.1973)
Plexus RGB, 2015
Acrylic on plywood, 40 × 30 × 5 cm

16 Silvia Lerin (b.1975)
Projection R-B, 2013
Mixed media and enamel on canvas and wood,
205 × 146 × 108 cm
17 Giulia Ricci (b.1976)
Order/Disruption Painting no.2, 2012
Laser engraved laminated board and acrylic paint, 61 × 101 × 1.8 cm, edition of 3

18 Rana Begum (b.1977)
No.317, Fold, 2012
Paint on powder-coated mild steel, 60 × 71 × 14 cm

19 Martin Church (b.1977)
Definitions (Study No.3), 2009
Oil on canvas, 120 × 120 cm

20 Ben Gooding (b.1981)
Axis No I, 2015
Lacquer on 6 layers of perspex, 60 × 60 cm

21 Rhys Coren (b.1983)
Midnight Cocktail, 2015
Acrylic, spray paint, chalk, laser cut wood, 91 × 66 cm

22 Robin Seir (b.1986)
Untitled, 2012
Mixed media on canvas, 190 × 130 cm
Reconnecting the Corporeal
Laura Davidson

The initial survey of each video thumbnail describes a short video of a ‘native’ craftsperson in Guatemala or Peru, framed by the parameters of short duration and varied pixelation. Clicking on the top few search results the videos all have a similar formula. The individual in each video is sitting, both hands active with wood and yarn, deftly weaving. Stretches of unfinished patterns of grids and abstract forms pull back to the weaver themselves. Backstrap weaving allows the body to maintain the tension of the fabric stretching out in front of the weaver, after the mind has authored the patternation. The corporeal centres the tension of the pattern; the programmed grid lines of weft and warp become an exploratory synchronicity of body and mind.

Backstrap weaving is historically rooted within the cultures of the Mayan people, a civilisation also known for their interest in mathematics and the sciences. Weaving in the generic lends itself not just to a grid aesthetic but, also to the birth of computer programming. It is common to quote anecdotally that Ada Lovelace, the author of the first programme for Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine, drew from her knowledge of mathematics and the punch cards of the Jacquard loom to write her first algorithm. Weaving links computation back to craft, thought, surface, material, corporeality, the gesture; the mark.
There are of course mechanised processes within the work on display that contradict this hypothesis; Rhys Coren, Tess Jaray, Richard Plank and Giulia Ricci all use laser cutting to create forms that appear hand crafted. Their geometries make a journey from thought, through the hand, to the screen, into the machine, onto the surface, back to the hand and the mind. Works by Coren such as *Shame on you (if you can't dance, too)* (2015) and *Midnight Cocktail* (2015) are layers of precisely sliced geometries framing a looped squiggle. The word squiggle sounds inarticulate, but the loop is neither square, nor rectangle, nor circle; it is describable as the output of an absent minded doodle by someone. It is a pleasing contradiction to have a line seemingly handcrafted, outlined by laser and juxtaposed with articulate geometry. Coren’s animation *If We Can Dance Together* (2014) also operates with this juxtaposition, where loosely scrawled circles are elements in a programme designed to make them move in response to music.

There are oppositions set between human and machine, as if they are to ceaselessly continue as Cartesian binaries. This type of opposition suggests the digital can only extend from machine practices. In fact, the etymology of ‘digital’ stems from the Latin ‘digitus’ meaning finger or toe. Symbolically the usage of the word is suggesting a performed interaction between the human body and its environment. The digit therefore, is a way the corporeal can immerse oneself within the physical environment in order to make sense of it. The fingers and toes provide an interface for the brain. Digits were also used as early mathematical tools; for calculating trades and time. The finger, the human hand and thus the gesture are apparent in *From Centre*, even if the output looks and has been mechanised. The indexical processes seen throughout the work exhibited

In the gallery space names are attributed to works, which are then attributed to the bodies that made them. Strong circuits of geometry undulate across the space, exemplifying a quasi-machine driven aesthetic. Moving closer there are indications of imperfections within these forms. On failure, the machine would repeat the same imperfection whenever the faulty command line was issued for a specific action or output. Lines can be seen to waver sporadically. There are distinct limits to the iterations of form on display. If a machine had manufactured these forms based on instruction only, there would be an endless repetition of the same form exploring every variable. It would become a body of work that could not fit in physical space. Finally, a single producer has been attributed to the majority of the work. A single author suggests a human fascination with conceptual ownership as opposed to the emergence of a networked creativity.* The narrative here is of course leading the reader towards what they perhaps already know; that the forms presented in *From Centre* are created by the symbiosis of human body and mind.

Robin Seir appears to actively want to subvert meticulousness geometries by producing them with sporadic blemishes on the surface. There is of course an apparent self-awareness here – of the history of this genre of painting. This makes the blemishes humorous in a way that could be seen as a teenager rebelling against their parents. In *Untitled* (2012) he makes the canvas endearing as opposed to calculated, rendering the geometries humanised. The blemishes draw attention to an act that machines stumble upon recreating; mistake and accident. Seir is generating flawed systems intentionally, as if to remind us that through a culture dominated by the machine the hand still endures. By imposing a smudge onto the surface of a painting, Seir is inscribing value. The ‘clumsy’ hand; renders the object unique.

*See the OpenSource movement in software design or botnets, where a programme pulls in many computers on a network to carry out an attack on another system.
are in fact driven by the script of the mind, for the body to execute. There grasps for meaning in the practices in *From Centre*, which can appear machine inspired aesthetically yet are explicitly presented as being generated by a human being; an action extended from the body. It brings us back to the nameless backstrap weaver, harnessed to the warp and weft, incubating the pattern with their corporeality.
Published by Slate Projects on the occasion of the exhibition

FROM CENTRE

11–26 April 2015
Loud & Western building, 65 Broughton Road, London SW6 2LE

Curated by Alex Meurice and Saturation Point Projects

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Cover: Charley Peters, Index Ratio #9, 2015, ink on paper, 216 × 306 mm

Designed by Stephen Barrett
Printed by Hato Press and Healeys Print Group

Founded in 2011 by Patrick Morrissey and Hanz Hancock, Saturation Point is an online editorial and curatorial project for reductive, geometric and systems artists working in the UK.
www.saturationpoint.org.uk
@saturationsite

Founded in 2013 by Alex Meurice, Slate Projects is an itinerant contemporary art gallery based in London, supporting artists through a regular programme of exhibitions, publications and art fairs.
www.slateprojects.com
@slateprojects