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ARRESTED MOVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

I recently explained to my father that I undoubtedly became a designer due to his influence and generosity to me back in the 1970s. An obsessive rummager of the remainder bins downstairs at Auckland's Whitcombe & Tombs, he would often return home on a Thursday night (payday) with not only fish and chips, but also variety of bargains – the best of which were art books. After some clear misses with Goya, Titian and Velazquez, he eventually cracked it with a compendium of 1960s Op art, a poster book of MC Escher and books of surrealist painters including Salvador Dali, Magritte and Max Ernst. The visual illusions, fantasy and graphical mastery evident in these books inspired me to spend countless hours drawing, trying to imitate the amazing artworks. He also surprised me with my first records, notably David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*, a Hendrix/Who sampler; and an obscure T-Rex album – things that he knew nothing about since he loathed all modern music, but nonetheless they sparked a lifelong passion for music in me. To a young teenager these were treasures, and provided an escape from the stiff, expatriate British culture of my parents, historical maps, opera and *The Goon Show*. We weren't allowed to watch anything American. More than one friend who came to skateboard after school described our place as being "a bit of a morgue".

School centered on art, history and music – my plan was to be an art historian based in Italy. But after the arrival of Punk and New Wave, I ditched the clarinet for the sax and decided I needed to go to art school. I didn't expect this would mean I'd end up in Dunedin – I barely knew where it was – but, armed with a lot of jerseys, blankets and a Conway heater, I turned up at Dunedin School of Art. Since it was the 80s, I put all those years of classical music lessons to use by joining a rock band within the first week. This was indeed the life. Although I didn't follow a very straight path, I eventually ended up with a fulfilling career in digital design and illustration. However, a couple of decades later, 2019 found me wondering what the point of it all was. I had originally wanted to be an artist (or a musician), but had begun to resent the marketing side and felt conflicted about working as a creative in what can at times feel like a dishonest industry. I felt I had spent years designing things for other people that were meant to be beautiful, but often just ended up being discarded as rubbish.

I needed a break from design and marketing and planned to set aside my familiar digital tools and start an MFA. I thought I'd take up painting.

REBOOT / TWO YEARS OF WEEKENDS

I soon found out that painting is hard, and maybe I should have spent a few years preparing before starting this. Also, I didn't seem to have any ideas. Panic set in and I felt a bit sick about what I had gotten myself into. I had to make a start, so I turned to what I knew best: photography.

I started by wandering around in Dunedin's industrial precinct – a ghost town in the weekends – taking hundreds of photos of buildings, metallic debris and any textures that caught my eye. Not put off by the strange looks from the person who handed me back my photos, I felt I had something to start with as I flicked through them. One particular shot of metallic roller doors showed some potential; the imperfect parallel lines had a rhythm, and the natural rust, paint and dents provided colour and contrast to their linearity.



Figure 1. Series source material, photo.

I made some blurred versions on the computer which smoothed out the representational reference points, and prepared a number of variations of some of them – flipping them to provide mirror versions, boosting the colour and contrast, as well as sharpening and blurring some into abstraction. Once printed, I sliced the photos into uniform narrow strips and began rearranging them into panoramic compositions, with the strips carefully mounted at varying levels.

I had been working on the floor; and found that my fixed viewing distance had unconsciously set the focal point at which the strips optically interacted with each other. The consistency of the slices and precise mounting created a rhythm, and the juxtaposition of blurred and sharp strips made some appear to be set forward and others set back. Because some strips were mounted in the reverse of this pattern – blurred in the foreground and sharp at the back – they confused the optical assumption of their position in space in relation to each other and created a depth-of-field effect. When viewed from the focal point, the composition stimulated the eyes with an optical vibration.

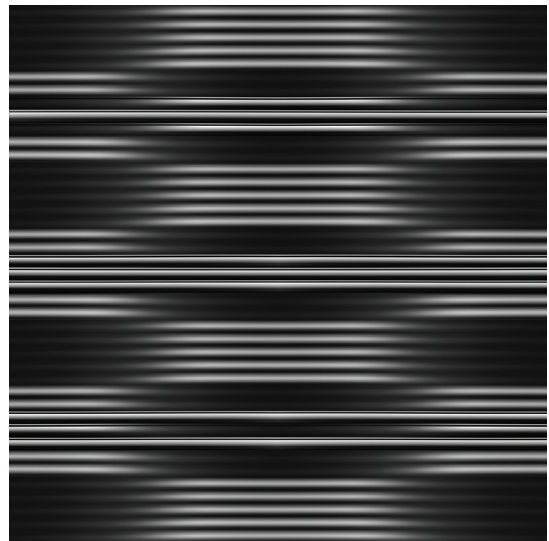


Figure 2. Matthew Trbuhovič, *Flow III*, 2019, strip-cut inkjet prints mounted on board, 600 x 600 mm.

IT'S A PROJECT NOW

My research began as a survey of Constructivism and Op art, centering on Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely, before broadening to include Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jim Lambie and Gerhard Richter. I was intrigued by Richter's process of abstraction – starting with a single abstract painting, then reducing a portion or slice into multiple pattern states and iterations over successive years, resulting in an entirely new optical work with little relation to its source.¹ New Zealand artists Ralph Hotere, Mervyn Williams, André Hemer and Sara Hughes were particularly relevant, and demonstrated that Op was alive and well in contemporary New Zealand.

The 1960s movement had been relatively short-lived and was regarded at the time as gimmicky and superficial by some critics, in particular Clement Greenberg, who went as far as to label it as kitsch.² Op had the misfortune to emerge when advertising was reaching a state of maturity as a powerful visual mechanism for consumerism. It has taken until the twenty-first century for Op art to undergo a revival, in a time where advertising and social media reign supreme and are almost unavoidable in our daily lives. In contrast to its precursor, contemporary Op art isn't revolutionary among contemporary art movements, and is not influenced by the political ideologies that existed in the 1960s. Many of its devices are familiar to us from everyday use in advertising, fashion and graphic media. While still providing a vehicle for conceptual and socio-political expression, contemporary art appears to be concerned with the generation of personal and social experiences, engaging and immersing viewers with installations, light and moving image displays, and capitalising on the possibilities that twenty-first-century technology and materials can offer to artists.

COVID CREATES A GLITCH

Covid-19 arrived, and New Zealand's first lockdown abruptly halted my printing efforts. The only way to continue was to rethink my process and switch to working on a computer. Using a digital canvas and an illustrated version of the original photographic strip, I began work on a new series using seven variations of the new illustrated unit. It seemed ironic to be using my design tools and processes for my MFA, but there were benefits. I could draw an analogy between my strict set of variations and Vasarely's concept of Plastic Unity,³ experimenting and testing out options quickly without laboriously cutting up prints. While the work was being 'designed' with commercial tools, I was satisfied that it was, in essence, anti-marketing. The compositions were simple, monochromatic and lacked any readable subject matter or obvious messaging. Their purpose was solely to become activated by the viewer's concentrated gaze and produce an optical vibration.

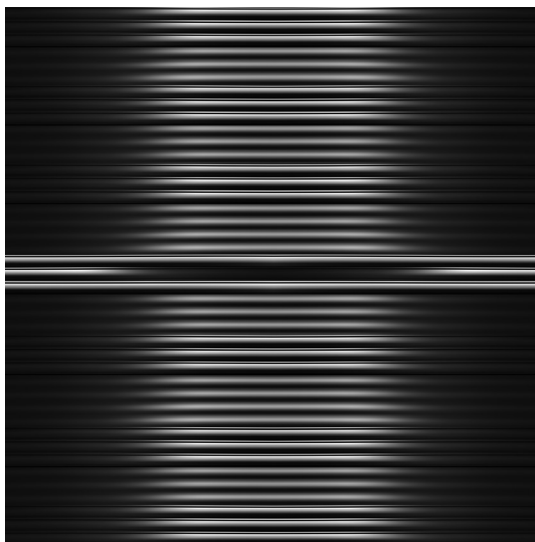


Figure 3. Matthew Trbuhović, *Flow I*, 2019, strip-cut inkjet prints mounted on board, 600 x 600 mm.

Throughout the project there was debate as to whether it was photo-collage, post-photography or sculpture. Although the original source material was photographic, the mechanical act of taking a picture and the use of the photographic medium had little relevance to the finished work. My original photo had undergone multiple transitions and translations through different states and media – from a stable physical reality to a digitised and

printed photo; deconstruction and reconstruction; and finally to a state where eye and brain and space and time play the central role. Perhaps it doesn't even matter, since Gerhard Richter refers to his *Strip* series (2011-2015) as paintings⁴ even though, technically, they are digital prints.

Working digitally provided many challenges, and attempting to share progress with my supervisors by Zoom was a disaster. They couldn't see the optical vibration I was experiencing because, like much Op art, it seldom translates through media successfully and requires the viewer to be physically present to experience the complete and personal optical effect. A photograph, print or digital file of an Op image rarely engages or activates optically in comparison to physical presence. Time and movement in a three-dimensional space are key factors required for Op imagery to reveal its vitality experientially.

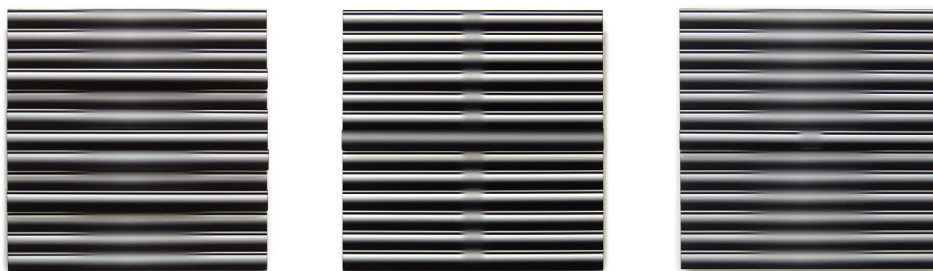


Figure 4. Matthew Trbuhović, *Wave I, II, IV*, 2020, strip-cut inkjet prints mounted on board, 315 x 315 mm.

Post-lockdown, the new monochromatic series was printed, cut and assembled with layered mounting for the final exhibition, along with a series of digitally developed miniatures. Two new large-scale digital designs were printed to test the effectiveness of an increase in size and, despite being flat prints, their optical vibration and illusion of depth was intense and demonstrated that layered mounting was not necessary to achieve the three-dimensional quality I had been pursuing.

BUT WHAT'S THE POINT?

At the gallery I was asked by someone in my marketing team what the work was about. Although my intention had been to reject a 'purpose' in the way that design is used for commerce, explaining these motivations didn't seem important and had the potential to detract from the immediacy and simplicity of the work. My objective was now to minimise external distractions and provoke curiosity, allowing the viewer to remove themselves from their own reality and the clamour of modern life – even if just for a brief moment – in order to become absorbed in a singular sensory experience.

Matthew Trbuhović has worked as a Digital Designer in Ōtepoti/Dunedin since 1996. His interest is primarily in post-photographic optical art, and he completed his MFA (with Distinction) at Dunedin School of Art in 2021.

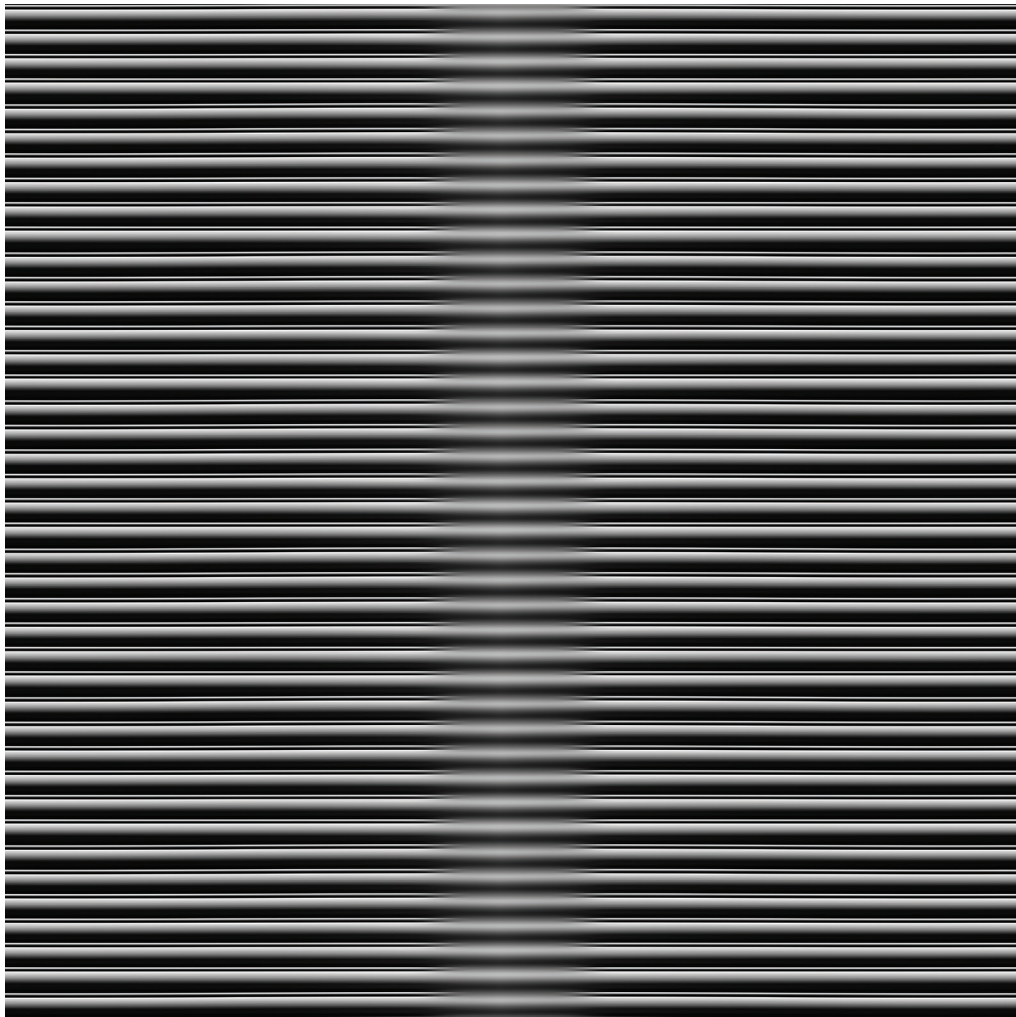


Figure 5. Matthew Trbuhović, *Turbulence I*, 2020, inkjet print mounted on board, 1000 × 1000 mm.

- 1 See "Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting (724-4)*," 1990, 920 × 1260 mm, oil on canvas, <https://www.gerhardrichter.com/en/art/paintings/abstracts/abstracts-19901994-31/abstract-painting-6851/?referer=search&title=Abstract+Painting+%28724-4%29&keyword=Abstract+Painting+%28724-4%29> accessed 20/11/20.
- 2 Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde Attitudes," <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/avantgarde.html>. Lecture originally published by the Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1969 (accessed 1 November 2020).
- 3 Gaston Diehl, *Vasarely* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1973), 64.
- 4 See <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/abstracts/strips-93>.