

**SCULPTURES OF NOTHING:
PERCEPTION BEYOND THE CONCRETE**

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Abstract

My research investigates the contextual field of art practice that celebrates random and ephemeral phenomena in everyday experience. It investigates, through practice, how sculptural objects interact with temporal visual events. In doing so they engage the viewer's awareness to question perception of form.

This research paper traces a series of historical and interconnected paradigm shifts within the twentieth century avant-garde. From the emergence of non-objective to phenomenal art, each shift has increasingly focused on the experiential perception. Crucial to this investigation are the seminal art practices and theoretical insights of Kazimir Malevich, László Moholy-Nagy, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Irwin and James Turrell.

My sculptural practice uses a variety of materials and employs a methodology of both continual reduction of forms and expansion into space. In making works that intentionally interacted with the temporality of their environments the symbiotic relationship between material form and immaterial element are essential to reading my work as an expressive whole. My practise-based research found that sculptures of nothing, while functioning as valid sculptural forms in their own right, equally operate as structures for perceptual experience and thereby offer an ongoing contribution to research in this area.

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Introduction

Each day the substance of sunlight presents a multitude of phenomena and ephemeral visual events. However, our perception and experience of these temporal happenings is generally ignored or at best, limited. My research examines the contextual field of art practice that celebrates the random and ephemeral phenomena in everyday experience. As the American art theorist and critic, Rosalind E. Krauss (1941-) attests, the object represents time arrested while the ephemeral experience, represents, time passing.

One of the striking aspects of modern sculpture is the way in which it manifests its makers' growing awareness that sculpture is a medium peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing. From this tension, which defines the very condition of sculpture, comes its enormous expressive power. - Rosalind E. Krauss¹

In keeping with this view, my studio practice investigates the symbiotic relationship between structure or concrete form and the optical experience of its immaterial form.

My research establishes its foundation in the early twentieth century with the origins of non-objective abstract art which abandoned the idea that a painted image had to reference an object or subject in nature. Severing art histories centuries-old lineage, an art object could be self-referential or represent nothing. What eventually became apparent with non-objective abstract art and especially with monochromatic works was that rather than being a painting of something, the painting itself became an art object that could interact with the ephemeral and random happenings in its surrounding environment. The Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) is credited with discovering non-objective abstract art, and the Hungarian artist and educator, László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) made this radical interpretation of Malevich's work. Chapter 1 discusses these artists and their instrumental findings.

¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 5

World War II (1939-1945) saw an exodus of European avant-garde artists arriving into America and with it the centre of Modern Art's shift from Paris to New York. Contrary to the New York's local school of thought, which was dominated by expression and emotion, some artists chose to pursue Marcel Duchamp's art philosophy.² These artists celebrated everyday life over the hierarchical 'art object,' and included John Cage (1912-1992) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008). Their unconventional art practices provided structures that enabled the "nothing" in everyday to be perceived and these are explored in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 considers the subject of perception and how we respond to non-objective abstract art. Termed phenomenology, this understanding is associated with the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), who investigated the difference between what a thing is known to be and how it appears. Merleau-Ponty was hugely influential in stimulating artists to break away from the idea of traditional perspective. In New York, Minimalist artists explored phenomenology through severely reductive forms, while on the West Coast, contemporary artists such as Robert Irwin (1928-) and James Turrell (1943-) used the perceived substance of light and space to intentionally question visual cognition. These simultaneous shifts in practice resulted in Rosiland Krauss advocating and interpreting a new theory for an "expanded field" of artistic possibilities. Phenomenal art is, at its essence, the experiential perception of an individual. By way of example, this chapter also includes an account by American art historian, Kirk Varnedoe of his personal affront of experiencing a disparity between what he thought, and knew, to be true.³

In Chapter 4, I present my developing objectives, adjusted methodologies and analyses of the various outcomes of my studio practice this year. My sculptural

² Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968): French artist associated with Dada and Surrealism whose influence expanded painting possibilities through the introduction of the readymade. Herbert Read and Nikos Stangos, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art and Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 11.

³ Kirk Varnedoe (1946-2003): American art historian. Held positions as Professor of Art History of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), back cover.

materials including painted wood, metal and Perspex, and have spatially progressed from prescriptive wall reliefs to interactive installation artworks. While the contemporary practices I have explored in this contextual field have shifted from object-based works to nonobject works, my studio based research re-introduces the object as a valid structure for creating phenomena and perceptual experiences beyond the concrete.

Chapter 1:

Non-Objective Abstract Art: Making the Nothing Concrete

I invented nothing, but only felt in myself night and saw in it the new, and this new I named Suprematism, and it expressed itself in me as a black plane that has formed a square.

– Kazimir Malevich⁴

Introduction

In establishing a foundation for my Master's research project, this chapter will trace the origins and development of non-objective abstract art as 'discovered' by Kazimir Malevich, a leading figure of the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde.⁵ In the spirit of the Utopian revolution enveloping Russia at the time, Malevich strove to free art from the heavy weight of the 'old world' order by abandoning the idea of painted image with reference to an object or subject.⁶ Instead, Malevich painted severely reduced geometric forms, painted in flat solid colours floating on white backgrounds that were non-objective and completely self-referential.⁷ Malevich called his methodology Suprematism and the emblematic signature painting of his new art, was *Black Square*, 1915 (Fig. 1.0).⁸ This painting will be analysed to demonstrate why this iconic artwork and its initial presentation, has a legacy that significantly influenced modern art and continues to inspire artists today.

Whereas *Black Square* symbolised the beginning of Suprematism, Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918 (Fig. 1.2) marked its end.⁹ From a theoretical point of view, Malevich recognized that when his zero form (the square) lost its materiality and merged with the white ground (infinity), his abstraction could

⁴ Alison MacDonald and Ealan Wingate, eds. *Malevich and the American Legacy: 3 March - 30 April, 2011* (New York, NY: Gagolian Gallery, 2011), 3.

⁵ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), ix.

⁶ Iwona Blazwick, "Utopia" in *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015*, Iwona Blazwick and Sophie McKinlay, eds. (London, New York, London: Prestel; Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 15.

⁷ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, x.

⁸ Suprematism was the first system of purely abstract pictorial composition, based on geometric figures. Read et al, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 315.

⁹ Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (London: Laurence King, 2009), 794.

go no further. However, in 1928 when the Hungarian artist and educator, László Moholy-Nagy published his influential book *The New Vision* he compared *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, with a miniature cinema screen.¹⁰ This chapter will describe why Moholy-Nagy, who embraced new technologies, made this radical interpretation.

This chapter additionally explains how Malevich has informed my sculptural art practise. As sculptures of nothing, my artworks exist as non-representational objects within a world of their own, but subject to, the ephemeral experiences of the environment around them.

Background

The reductive abstraction of objects or scenes in nature had been explored for decades predominantly by Parisian artists in their developmental progression from Impressionism starting in the 1860s, to Cubism (1907-1914) and expanding into Futurism in 1909 by the Italian artists. Artists who were residing in Russia however, were only given access to these innovations by 1910, and consequently they had to play catch up.¹¹

For Malevich, as for many of the avant-gardists, the development of art theory ran parallel with the evolution of painting.¹² He was an intellectual and part of a long-standing tradition in Russian culture which merged arts with literature, philosophy, religion, politics and other forms of scholarly endeavour.¹³ As such, in the process of developing his personal art practise Malevich belonged to a series of exhibiting groups, which promoted theoretical debate, stimulated ideas, presented lectures,

¹⁰ László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist* (New York, Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1947), 39.

¹¹ The large private collections of the wealthy merchants Sergei Shchukin (1854-1936) and Ivan Morozov (1871-1921) who travelled to Paris often for their textile businesses and became avid collectors and benefactors of modern art. They opened their homes and collections to the public regularly. Contemporary Western art was also exhibited in Moscow and Saint Petersburg regularly from 1910 onwards. Albert Kostenevich "Collecting modern art: Monet to Kandinsky" in *Masters of Modern Art from The Hermitage*, Albert Kostenevich and Mikhail Dedinkin, eds. (Sydney, N.S.W.: Art Gallery of NSW and Art Exhibitions Australia, 2018), 20-49.

¹² Dimitri Sarabianov, "Kazimir Malevich and His Art, 1900-1930" in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935*, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1988), 69.

¹³ Sarabianov, "Kazimir Malevich and His Art, 1900-1930", 70.

provided like-minded support, and opportunities to exhibit work.¹⁴ There was a growing resentment amongst the avant-garde who thought that too much attention was being given to the western European artists and especially the French innovations, at the expense of individual Russian character.¹⁵ Russian art critics also started to challenge the status of 'new art' from Paris and presented it instead as the conclusion of a bygone art stopped at the threshold of non-figuration.¹⁶

Concurrently, on 28 July 1914, the First World War began.¹⁷ All international relationships for artists were stopped and travelling exhibitions petered out.¹⁸ Irrespective of the world war, where its army constantly faced humiliating defeat, Russia had been heading towards revolution against the Romanov Dynasty who had ruled the Russian Empire since 1613.¹⁹ The imminence of a revolution promoted a sense of energy and urgency for the avant-garde who supported ideas of change and a new way of being.²⁰ In his determination to disrupt art's established laws and frameworks Malevich developed his own *ism* which he called Fevralism.²¹ His conscious exploration of tactics, which were deliberately absurd and provocative, were aimed at questioning and exploring accepted reason.²²

Malevich's Fevralism paintings layered absurd combinations of realism with floating geometric planes.²³ His word drawings of the same time displayed the word as an object of art.²⁴ Malevich's experiments with Fevralism was the impetus for his quantum leap into Suprematism.²⁵ This completely new and unique style, was

¹⁴ Joop M. Joosten, "Biographical Outline" in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935*, 74-78.

¹⁵ Evgueny Kovtun, *Russian Avant-Garde* (New York, NY: Parkstone International, 2010), ix. PDF e-book.

¹⁶ Kovtun, *Russian Avant-Garde*, ix.

¹⁷ International Encyclopedia of the First World War 1914-1918 On Line https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_aims_and_war_aims_discussions_russian_empire (accessed October 14, 2019)

¹⁸ Uwe M. Schneede, "The Avant-Garde and the War: Visual Arts Between 1914 and 1918", trans. Ruth Martin in *1914-18 Paradoxes – Goethe Institute*, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/prj/nzv/par/en12354686.htm> November 2013, (accessed October 14, 2019)

¹⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Romanov-dynasty>, (accessed August 14, 2019)

²⁰ Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2009), 819.

²¹ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 3.

²² Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 5.

²³ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 18.

²⁴ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 11.

²⁵ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 52.

independent of previous trends in art, and was wholly represented in the emblem of a black square.

Malevich's Black Square

Despite its historical significance and countless depth of meaning, *Black Square*, 1915 appears to be a very simple painting. A black plane in the shape of a square painted in the centre of a square canvas painted with a white ground. The black and white squares compete with each other for dominance. Malevich called the shape a quadrilateral derived from the Latin word *quadrum*, meaning both square and frame.²⁶ Significantly, square shapes are never found in the natural world.²⁷

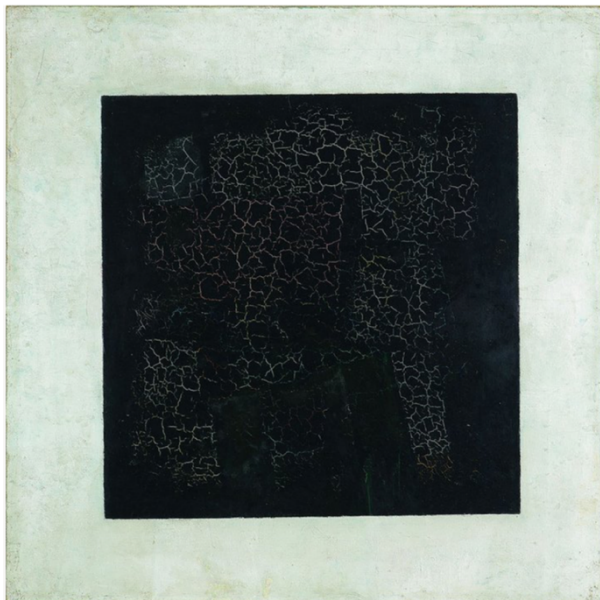


Fig 1.0
Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915

Oil on canvas. 79.5cm x 79.5cm
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/kazimir-malevich-1561/five-ways-look-malevichs-black-square>

According to the Russian art historian, Aleksandra Shatskikh (1956-), the work had been taking shape in the subconscious of Malevich's mind for some time but was "let out in some sudden event – a moment of ecstatic illumination."²⁸ Malevich describes, "fiery lightning bolts which were constantly crossing the canvas in front of

²⁶ This consideration came to be known as indexical painting. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 32.

²⁷ Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2009), 794.

²⁸ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 45.

him” and reported to one of his pupils that “the event was of such tremendous significance in his art that he could not eat, drink or sleep for a full week” afterward.²⁹

The tension in the painting comes from its textural surface of rapid chaotic strokes, which, demonstrate the urgency and speed of how it was painted.³⁰ The idea of stylistic texture is termed *facture* and is one of the more important considerations in Malevich’s writings about Suprematism. By interchanging matt, gloss, smooth, textured, sharp and fuzzy edges in his geometric compositions, Malevich gave his paintings ‘life’.³¹ X-ray images confirm the black square of *Black Square*, 1915 was painted over an earlier composition of several geometric forms.³² Arguably, this metaphorically suggests that the black square had become a void, absorbing all previous painted images.³³

Malevich launched his Suprematist manifesto and thirty-nine non-objective artworks in the historic *The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting “0.10”* (Fig. 1.1), staged in Petrograd (Saint Petersburg) in 1915.³⁴

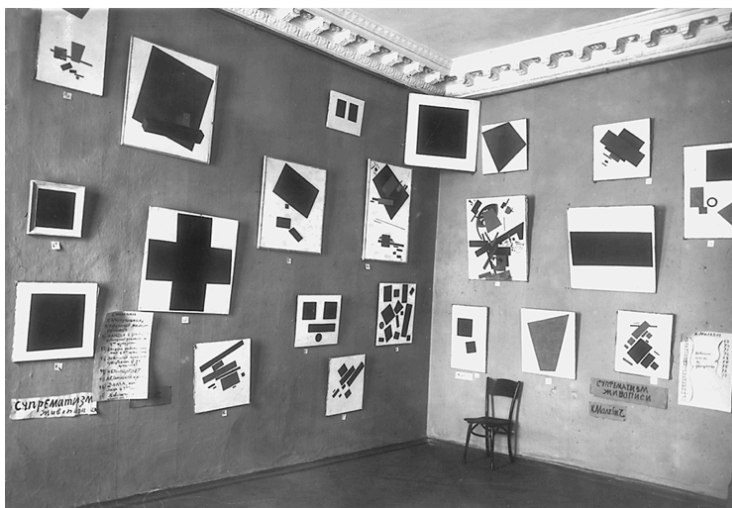


Fig. 1.1
The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting “0.10,” Petrograd, winter 1915/16.

The Malevich room with *Black Square* and other Suprematist paintings.
Russian State Archives:
Photo credits and dimensions unavailable:
<https://www.russianartandculture.com/exhibition-of-painting-at-fondation-beyeler-4-october-2015-10-january-2016/>

²⁹ As claimed by Anna Leporskaia, who was one of Malevich’s pupils at the time. Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 45.

³⁰ Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 45.

³¹ Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting” in *Art In Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 179.

³² Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 45.

³³ Wim Beeren, “The Exhibition: Nature and Contents” in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935*, 8.

³⁴ “Zero” in the exhibition name referred to Malevich’s nullification of object-based form and “Ten” was the number of intended participants in the exhibition but actually fourteen artists exhibited in the show – seven women and seven men. Albert Kostenevich and Mikhail Dedinkin, eds. “Kazimir Malevich” in *Masters of Modern Art from The Hermitage*, (Sydney, N.S.W.: Art Gallery of NSW and Art Exhibitions Australia, 2018), 182.

In a corner just under the ceiling, a place traditionally saved for icons, Malevich controversially hung *Black Square*. In doing so, Malevich was declaring that his zero of form actually signified everything.³⁵ Malevich painted four versions of *Black Square* and despite painting the first one in 1915, he dated them all 1913 as that was the year he initiated suprematism and he felt that was more important than the material form.³⁶ Malevich painted the additional versions of *Black Square* in 1923 ,1929 and 1932.³⁷

Malevich's White Square

Initially using black for the single shapes of his Suprematist paintings, Malevich moved through a period of using colour with increasingly multiple and inter-related shapes.³⁸ He then abandoned all colour for white. *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918 (Fig. 1.2), depicts a white square outlined by a faint pencil line tilted on an angle floating towards the upper and right-hand side of a square canvas.

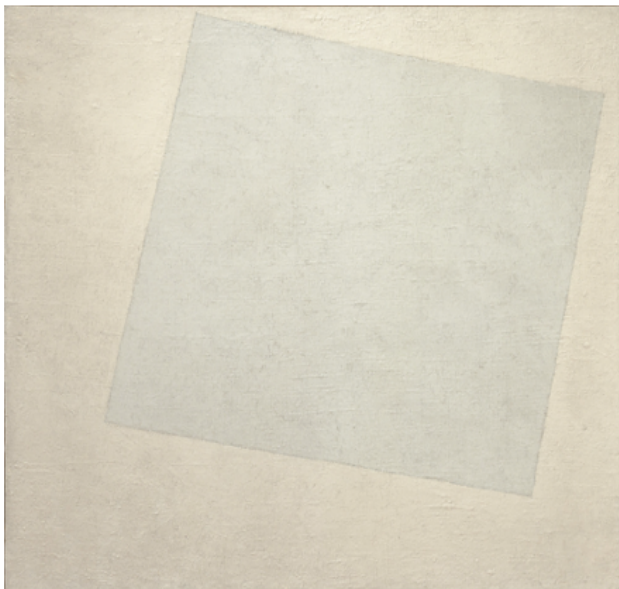


Fig. 1.2
Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918

Oil on canvas, 79.4cm x 79.4cm
1935 Acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange)
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80385>

³⁵ Kostenevich et. al. "Kazimir Malevich" in *Masters of Modern Art from The Hermitage*, 182.

³⁶ Kostenevich et. al. *Masters of Modern Art from The Hermitage*, 64.

³⁷ Kostenevich et. al. *Masters of Modern Art from The Hermitage*, 64.

³⁸ Sarabianov, "Kazimir Malevich and His Art, 1900-1930" in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935*, 69-70.

The square and the ground are two different shades of white. The monochrome surface is highly textured and therefore uses Malevich's key element of facture. The painting measurements are the same as *Black Square*, which, within Malevich's oeuvre signifies an immortal status reserved for defining moments.³⁹ Malevich concluded this final painting of Suprematism, as his zero of form, represented by the shape of a square dissolving into its white ground representing infinity. "I have overcome the lining of the coloured sky, torn it down and into the bag thus formed, put colour, tying it up with a knot. Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you."⁴⁰

The American art historian, Barbara Rose (1938-), writes that the monochrome renounces all illusionistic devices like perspective figure-ground relationships, but still answers the call for a concrete, literal art that has material presence of other real objects in the world.⁴¹ Rose also argues that the monochrome is often considered an experience of the metaphysical, the spiritual and the immaterial and she proposes these opposing meanings as merged in *Suprematist Composition: White on White*.⁴²

By chance Alfred Barr obtained *Suprematist Composition: White on White* and several other paintings by Malevich in 1935.⁴³ Barr was on a scouting trip to Europe to find works for his upcoming exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1936.⁴⁴ Malevich and his ideas of Suprematism, however, were suppressed by the Soviet Union for some thirty years and little was understood about his work or his theories at this time. Art historian, Yve-Alain Bois suggests the

³⁹ Shatskikh observes that the same dimensional sizing of 79.5 x 79.5cm was highly rare amongst Malevich's works. Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Kazimir Malevich: from Cubo-Futurism to Suprematism," in *Malevich and the American Legacy*, 174.

⁴⁰ Malevich, "Non-Objective Art and Suprematism," in *Art In Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Harrison et. al. 293.

⁴¹ Barbara Rose, "The Meanings of Monochrome," in *Monochromes: from Malevich to the Present*, eds. Valeria Varas and Raúl Rispa (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 21.

⁴² Rose, "The Meanings of Monochrome," in *Monochromes: from Malevich to the Present*, 21.

⁴³ Alfred Barr (1902-1981): American. Founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art 1929 -1943; Director of Collections 1943-1968.

⁴⁴ Yve-Alain Bois, "The Availability of Malevich," in *Malevich and the American Legacy*, 21.

yawning gaps in knowledge about Malevich's work were a blessing in disguise for American artists, in that they could relate to his work selectively and could therefore, be bolder in their responses.⁴⁵

László Moholy-Nagy and a Radical Interpretation

Moholy-Nagy was an intellectual theorist and influential educator who was fascinated with experimenting with new technologies.⁴⁶ A key educator in the foundational course at the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany he had explored both Suprematism and Constructivism in the early 1920s.⁴⁷ He was also familiar with Malevich's paintings including *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918 because it had been exhibited in Berlin as part of the 1922 *First Russian Art Exhibition*.⁴⁸

In 1927 Malevich received permission to travel to Poland and Germany to exhibit and promote his Suprematist works.⁴⁹ In Berlin, he visited the Bauhaus and met with Moholy-Nagy who in embracing shared beliefs, invited him to contribute to the Bauhaus books.⁵⁰ The following year Moholy-Nagy wrote his own influential text, *The New Vision*, which surmised his years of teaching at the Bauhaus from 1923 to 1928. It, moreover, endorsed unifying art and technology and promoted experimentation, art making, and universalism.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Bois, "The Availability of Malevich," 21.

⁴⁶ Walter Gropius in Preface to: Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist*, 6.

⁴⁷ The Bauhaus was an influential school of architecture and industrial design that provided students with groundwork in all of the visual arts founded by German architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in 1919 in the city of Weimar.

⁴⁸ A seminal event when Soviet Russian art was introduced to the West. See Maria Kokkori and Alexander Bouras, "Metallic Factures: László Moholy-Nagy and Kazimir Malevich" in *Leonardo*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2017 Published by MIT Press. 287. https://www.mitpressjournals-org.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1162/LEON_a_01426 (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁴⁹ Joop M. Joosten, "Biographical Outline" in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935*, 82.

⁵⁰ Malevich's text *The World as Objectlessness* was the eleventh book of the Bauhaus series and a section of which was reprinted in Appendix B. in Michael Seuphor, *A Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1958), 97-99.

⁵¹ "László Moholy-Nagy" The Art Story, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-moholy-nagy-laszlo-artworkshtm>, (accessed May 26, 2019).

Through his keen interest in photography Moholy-Nagy recognized that space could best be comprehended by means of light.⁵² As such, in *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy did not interpret *Suprematist Composition: White on White* in the traditional sense of figure and ground, but instead saw it as an “ideal plane for kinetic light and shadow effects which, originating in the surroundings, would fall upon it. In this way, Malevich’s picture represented a miniature cinema screen.”⁵³

Effectively, Moholy-Nagy understood the significance of facture in Malevich’s works and that in the absence of colour, revelation of form was achieved by light interacting with the textured surface. “The surface becomes part of the atmosphere, of the atmospheric background; it sucks up light phenomena produced outside itself.”⁵⁴ This is also the reason why Moholy-Nagy promoted the use of transparencies and polished metals in art making because their reflections and mirrorings brought the surroundings into the works.⁵⁵ This paradigm shift influenced the next wave of avant-garde artists in post-World War II America who will be discussed in the following chapter.

Studio Research

Throughout his Suprematist manifesto, Malevich argues that his artworks are living things. He wrote: “A painted surface is a real, living form,”⁵⁶ “Forms must be given life and the right to individual existence,”⁵⁷ “The square is a living, royal infant,”⁵⁸ and as a last example, “Each form is free and individual. Each form is a world.”⁵⁹ If, however, he thought that his painting, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918 was the end of Suprematism, one could argue that for Malevich, the

⁵² Walter Gropius in Preface to: Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist*, 6.

⁵³ Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 39.

⁵⁴ Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 39.

⁵⁵ Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 39.

⁵⁶ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting,” 179.

⁵⁷ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting,” 175.

⁵⁸ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting,” 181.

⁵⁹ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting,” 181.

life of the painting related only to the forms within them. Arguably, this is why Moholy-Nagy's interpretation is so important: in that, he sees the white painting as an object open to take on the surrounding environment.



Fig. 1.3
Anna Dudek, *I Am Saying It*, 2019

MDF, acrylic paint.
110cm x 110cm x 16cm

The intention of my artworks is that they stand alone as non-objective sculptures and intentionally interact with their surrounding environment. As an object, *I Am Saying It*, 2019 (Fig. 1.3), plays on visual perspective and reflected colour but the extension of the artwork into space also allows for intensified shadows, chance reflections and highlights the infinite variants of the colour white dependant on the properties of light. It is a sculpture of nothing made to perceive ephemeral experiences beyond its concrete form.

Conclusion

Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915 marked the beginning of a new era of art making where the need to reference objects or scenes from nature was redundant. Artworks could be self-referential and as Malevich's Suprematist manifesto constantly referred, artworks could have a life of their own. That said, it was not until Moholy-Nagy interpreted *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918 as a cinema screen open

to picking up the light and atmosphere around the work, that the shape was considered an object and part of the world itself.

Within my practice, my sculptures represent nothing, however, they are intentionally structured to engage with the ephemeral changes of the environment in which they hang. Effectively, I have positioned my work within Malevich's practice and Moholy-Nagy's interpretation to render the non-objective form as validly engaged with the world, or as Malevich would have it there is life and "each form is a world".⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," 181.

Chapter 2: Ideas on Nothing

Structure is simple because it can be thought out, figured out, measured. It is a discipline which, accepted, in return accepts whatever, even those rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses, train us to make what we make. – John Cage⁶¹

Introduction

This chapter extends my research by investigating my artworks as structures for everyday ephemeral experiences. I will reference the American composer and artist John Cage who, inspired by the artist Marcel Duchamp, explored the idea of the everyday by addressing temporal events, which normally escape perception. When Robert Rauschenberg reflected on the time he painted his *White Paintings* in 1951 (Fig. 2.0 & Fig. 2.1) he said that he was “experimenting with how much he could pull away from an image and still be left with an image.”⁶² However, it was his colleague and mentor Cage, who, understood them as receptors of ephemeral shadows and reflections. Effectively this placed Rauschenberg’s work in the same context as Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition White on White* as interpreted by László Moholy-Nagy.

Cage’s reading of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, can be seen in his influential composition, the silent *4’33”*. This composition involves a performer sitting down at the piano but playing nothing for the duration four minutes and thirty-three seconds.⁶³ In effect, within a structure of a timed performance of supposed silence, Cage had given preference to random noises of the everyday just as Rauschenberg’s paintings acted as receptive structures of random visual events of the everyday.

An analysis of my sculpture, *Where You Are*, 2019 (Fig. 2.3), will show an affiliation to the works of both Cage and Rauschenberg. The simplicity of a

⁶¹ John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing” in *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 111.

⁶² From an interview with Barbara Rose and Rauschenberg published in 1987. Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and The Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 296.

⁶³ Kyle Gann, in John Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, xv.

monochromatic oval shaped form, folding in on itself suggests a moment of introspection or silence, while the subtle shifting shadows of the folded plane speaks to the temporal nature of the work.

Background

World War II (1939-1945), saw an exodus of European avant-garde artists arriving into America and with it the centre of Modern art's shift from Paris to New York.⁶⁴ Moholy-Nagy fled Germany in 1928 when the Gestapo took over the Bauhaus. He moved to Amsterdam and London and then onto Chicago where he founded his school of design in 1939.⁶⁵ Duchamp, who had been playing international chess in Europe since 1928, also returned to New York in 1942.⁶⁶ Duchamp's philosophy for art, however, was contrary to that of the local and now dominant *New York School's* concerns of expression and emotion.^{67,68} With his Ready-mades, Duchamp had probed the hierarchy of art and in knocking it off its pedestal, had proposed that "life, everyday life was not only more important, but more interesting than art, and that what artists needed right now were new ways to deal with that humbling yet liberating truth."^{69,70} By the 1950s there was a renewed interest in Duchamp's ideas by artists looking to break away from the overbearing dominance of Abstract

⁶⁴ Purist-Abstract artists like Mondrian, Leger, and the Bauhaus's Gropius, Mies Van der Rohe, and Albers and also the Surrealists Ernst, Dali, and Breton joined Duchamp, who had already been living in New York since 1915. Honour and Flemming, *A World History of Art*, 833.

⁶⁵ "László Moholy-Nagy" The Art Story, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-moholy-nagy-laszlo-artworkshtm>, (accessed May 26, 2019).

⁶⁶ Duchamp had moved back to Europe in 1923 to play competitive chess.

⁶⁷ *New York School* refers to the heterogenous group of predominantly abstract painters who were centred in New York after 1940. The powerful and original work, which came to dominate contemporary art internationally, was also call Abstract Expressionism and Action painting. Duchamp called Abstract Expression "retinal" art that is art for the eye and not "at the service of the mind". Calvin Tompkins, "Asking the Question" in *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, eds. Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle (Philadelphia, Penn.: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012), 29.

⁶⁸ Honour and Flemming, *A World History of Art*, 833.

⁶⁹ Ready-made in twentieth century art refers to an everyday, usually mass-produced object, selected by an artist with a creative or thought-provoking purpose. Duchamp distinguished ready-mades from found objects as being concerned neither with taste nor aesthetics, the artist's mere act of selection determining them as "art".

⁷⁰ Tompkins, "Asking the Question" in *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, 32.

Expressionism. Concurrently, the shift in art-making to one which included chance, experimentation, and the unapologetic embrace of everyday experience was taking shape under the influence of the intellectual and innovative, John Cage.

John Cage (1912-1992)

John Cage grew up in Los Angeles and studied experimental composition and music with the avant-garde masters Henry Cowell (1897-1965) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951).⁷¹ This provided Cage with a thorough understanding of compositional structure, which he used not only in his music, but in his writings and lectures. In doing so, he created a means for his work to be experienced rather than just heard or read.

Cage's guiding principles of life and work through Oriental thoughts and philosophies, were first ignited in 1936, when he attended a pivotal lecture in Seattle named *Zen Buddhism and Dada* by Nancy Wilson Ross.^{72,73} In the same lecture, Ross praised both Moholy-Nagy, as a great experimenter and critic, and expressed why Dada and artists like Duchamp were the teller of truths not yet generally understood.⁷⁴ She finished her lecture with a quote from Edwin Rothchild's book *The Meaning of the Unintelligibility of Modern Art (1934)*: "We do not realize that the old familiar things were once new, spontaneous, even shocking, and therein lay the force and meaning of the spiritual energy which they embodied."⁷⁵

Thereafter, the highly motivated and inspired Cage started his artistic enquiry into percussion, which abandoned the restrictions and submissions of nineteenth century music. In 1940 Cage, the son of an inventor, completely transformed a grand piano into a percussion instrument that played only quiet sounds that purposely suited the bulk of music he had writing through the war years.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Kyle Gann, in John Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, xii.

⁷² Dada was an artistic movement that started in Zurich in 1916 by a group of mainly painters and poets who went to Switzerland to take refuge from World War I. Dada works were intentionally provocative and nihilistic.

⁷³ Nancy Wilson Ross (1901–1986): was an American novelist who became an expert in Eastern religions.

⁷⁴ Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2013), 78.

⁷⁵ Larson, *Where the Heart Beats*, 79

⁷⁶ Cage referenced these in his 1949 "Lecture on Nothing" "*when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to me to be no truth, no good in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendship.*" Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 117.

Cage met Moholy-Nagy in 1940 when they both were teaching summer school at Mills College, Oakland.⁷⁷ Cage noted that he found Moholy-Nagy's *The New Vision* and the various other books about the Bauhaus very stimulating.⁷⁸ After the summer, Moholy-Nagy invited Cage to teach a course called Sound Experiments at his design school in Chicago.⁷⁹ Cage accepted and moved there the following year.

In 1942 Cage moved onto New York and initially stayed with Peggy Guggenheim and her husband Max Ernst after meeting the couple in Chicago.^{80,81} Consequently, Cage met his idol Duchamp at a party hosted by Guggenheim to celebrate his return to New York.⁸²

In the period between 1948 and 1951 Cage redeveloped his ideas on sounds and silence, which he had previously perceived as distinct opposites. In 1951 Cage experienced the anechoic chamber in Harvard and was surprised to discover that there can be no such thing as silence, as even within a soundproof environment, he was still able to hear two distinct sounds emanating from his own body: the low one of his blood circulating and the high one of his nervous system.⁸³ Cage was forced to conclude that there is no objective silence, but rather an endless interweaving of intentional sounds with unintended sounds or noises of everyday life, which are not necessarily perceived.⁸⁴ When Cage was asked about the purpose of music he replied "to quiet the mind thus making it susceptible to divine influences." He endorsed this comment, stating that in his Zen learnings, "the divine influences are,

⁷⁷ Mills College was founded in 1852 in Oakland, California (San Francisco). It is a private liberal arts and science college and was the first women's college to be established on the West Coast of America. In 1940, on the recommendation by the college president, Cage was attempting to set up a centre for experimental music but the funding failed to eventuate and the project had to be aborted.

⁷⁸ John Cage and Joan Retallack, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words Art Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 87.

⁷⁹ Basualdo et. al., *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, 304.

⁸⁰ Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979): American art collector and benefactor, bohemian and socialite. Guggenheim collected modern art in Europe and America primarily between 1938 and 1946.

⁸¹ Max Ernst (1891-1976): Was a German painter who originally studied philosophy. He started the Cologne Dada group in 1919 and became an influential figure with the Surrealists. Married to Peggy Guggenheim he spent time in New York during WWII but afterward he returned to Europe and France.

⁸² However, it was not until the late 1950s, and Cage was established in his musical art practice, did he regularly spend time with Duchamp which was enabled by Duchamp promising to give Cage chess lessons.

⁸³ Joseph, *Random Order*, 47.

⁸⁴ Joseph, *Random Order*, 47.

in fact the environment in which we are.”⁸⁵ Cage wanted his audience to connect with the sounds of the everyday – to be in the moment.

Cage did not limit his art form to music. In 1949 he delivered his infamous *Lecture on Nothing* to the Artists club in New York.⁸⁶ ‘The Club’ had been founded by the painter, Robert Motherwell in 1948 and many of its regular members were engaged with the Zen craze of the period in respect to both visual aesthetics and personal spirituality.^{87,88} *Lecture on Nothing* is a performative work, where Cage used the same structure he employed in his musical compositions to facilitate a rhythmic reading. The text is printed in four columns but is dispersed with gaps of silence between the phrases and words, which were sometimes repeated, as in a chorus. In making tangible the intended silences, Cage had effectively written or made concrete, the ephemeral.⁸⁹

Robert Rauschenberg and the White Paintings

Though enrolled in Black Mountain College in 1948, Robert Rauschenberg moved to New York City in 1949 where he studied at the Arts Students League, and spent much of his time visiting galleries to view what other artists were doing.⁹⁰ In May 1951, he secured his first solo exhibition at Betty Parson Gallery.⁹¹ Cage attended the show and the two artists immediately found a kindred mindset.⁹²

⁸⁵ Joseph, *Random Order*, 56.

⁸⁶ Gann, in Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, xiii.

⁸⁷ Robert Motherwell (1915-1991): American painter, teacher and art theorist, originally associated with the Abstract Expressionists.

⁸⁸ See Gann, in Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, xiii. Visual artists Mark Tobey, Ad Reinhart, Franz Kline, David Smith, and Motherwell had been impressed by Japanese calligraphy and the “floating world” wood cut prints.

⁸⁹ Simon Aeberhard, “Writing the Ephemeral: John Cage’s *Lecture on Nothing* as a Landmark in Media History”, *Journal of Sonic Studies* 13. (2017) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/323127/323128> (accessed September 01, 2019).

⁹⁰ Black Mountain College was an experimental college founded in 1933 in North Carolina. It became a crucible for mid-20th-century avant-garde art, music, and poetry. Founded on the principles of balancing the humanities, arts, and manual labour within a democratic, communal structure, the school's mission was to create “complete” people.

⁹¹ Betty Parson Gallery (1946-1981) was owned by Betty Parsons (1900-1982) was one of the leading art dealers in New York City specializing in modern art, particularly the work of the Abstract Expressionists.

⁹² Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/lightboxes/paintings-bob-rauschenberg-betty-parsons-gallery-new-york> (accessed May 18, 2019).

The works in Rauschenberg's premier show were mostly black, white, yellow, and silver abstract paintings that incorporated unconventional art materials, such as locks of his hair and mirrors, along with newsprint and fabric collage. Rauschenberg pronounced that some of the paintings came out of a "short-lived religious period" and the titles included *Mother of God, Crucifixion and Reflection, Eden and Trinity*.⁹³ Cage, who had been motivated by both Duchamp's and Moholy-Nagy's artistic concerns, was drawn to Rauschenberg's use of reflective materials, which mirrored the paintings physical environment and as such, became objects capable of capturing temporal change.⁹⁴

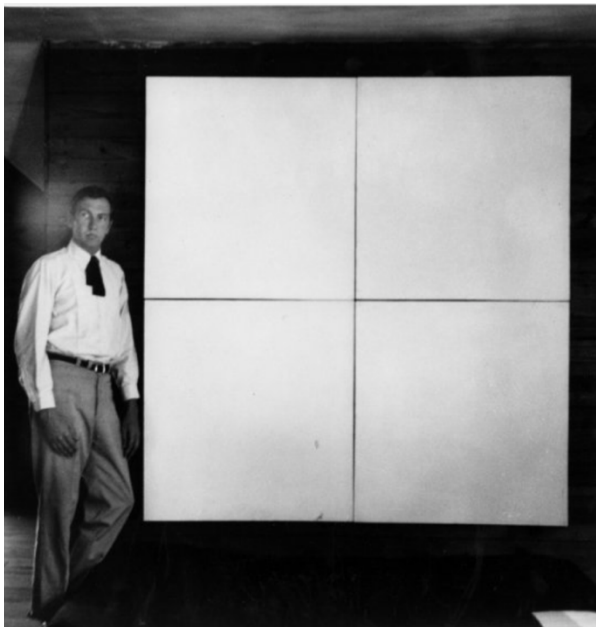


Fig. 2.0

Portrait of Rauschenberg with four-panel White Painting, Black Mountain, NC. 1951

Contact print, 5.7cm x 5.7cm

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation RRF 51.P002

https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/sites/default/files/images_artwork/51.P002_p.jpg

White

In October 1951, Rauschenberg returned to Black Mountain College, where Cage was also working at the time, and completed his *White Paintings*.⁹⁵ The paintings comprised simple rectangles and squares of undifferentiated matte white applied with a roller onto canvas panels.⁹⁶ There were five works in the series: one single square panel measuring 121.9cm x 121.9cm, four square panels joined to make

⁹³ Joseph, *Random Order*, 26.

⁹⁴ Joseph, *Random Order*, 42.

⁹⁵ Katherine Hardiman, "Monochromes and Mandalas", 2.

http://shuffle.rauschenbergfoundation.org/exhibitions/nasher/essays/Hardiman_monochromes-and-mandalas (accessed September 4, 2019).

⁹⁶ Larson, *Where the Heart Beats*, 233.

one large square measuring 182.9cm x 182.9cm in total, and three groupings of rectangular canvases hung in sets of two (182.9cm x 243.8cm), three (182.9cm x 274.3cm), and seven adjoining panels (182.9cm x 317.5cm).⁹⁷ The scale of these works as objects alone, would have commanded attention, let alone their radical lack of content.

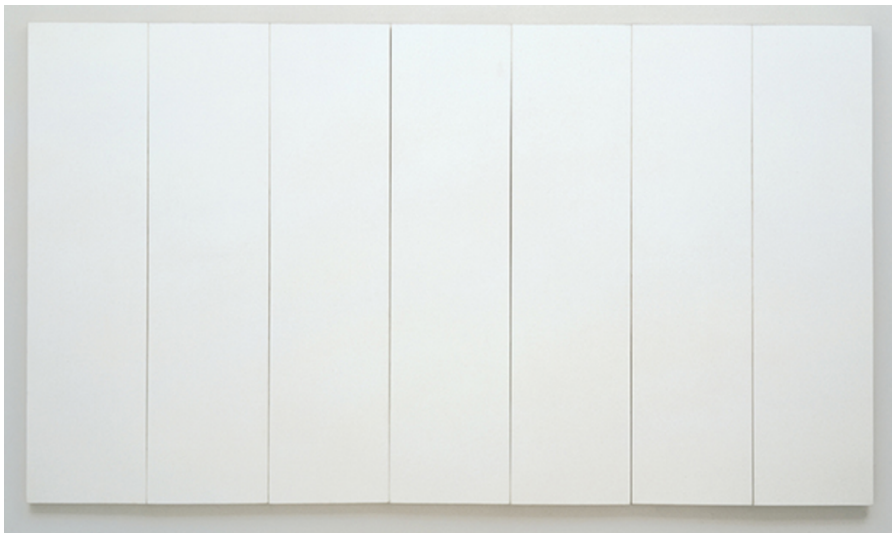


Fig. 2.1
Robert Rauschenberg,
White Painting (Seven Panel),
1951

Oil on canvas,
182.9cm x 317.5 cm overall
<https://au.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/march/02/when-john-cage-met-robert-rauschenberg/>

Rauschenberg was extremely excited about these works, but as art historian, Branden W. Joseph concluded, Rauschenberg may not have fully understood what he had cognized at the time.^{98,99} Joseph says Rauschenberg's interpretations moved from making religious references to the works "(1 *White as 1 GOD*)" to advancing the cannon of modernist art history by reducing a painting to its "essential" two dimensionality and making absolutely no reference to perspective or figure ground relationships.¹⁰⁰ By 1952, through the influence of Cage, Rauschenberg would come to a new understanding of these works.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/white-painting> (accessed September 5, 2019).

⁹⁸ Branden Wayne Joseph (1967 -): American art historian; currently the Frank Gallipoli Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, Columbia University, New York.

⁹⁹ Joseph, *Random Order*, 29-33.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph, *Random Order*, 30.

¹⁰¹ Joseph writes "By the summer of 1952, the *White Paintings* no longer figure as the final products of a determinant negation of artistic conventions...Rather...the positive and productive motor force driving a dynamic conception of "nature." Joseph, *Random Order*, 60.

John Cage on the White Paintings

Given his predisposition toward ephemeral happenings in everyday life, Cage understood the *White Paintings* as reflective “movie screens” that transcended the fixity of their pigment by acting as receptors of ambient and temporal events around them.¹⁰² In his 1961 book *Silence*, Cage devotes a chapter to Rauschenberg. He states:

Hallelujah! The blind can see again. Blind to what he has seen so that seeing this time is as though first seeing.¹⁰³

...the reflective surfaces changing what is seen by means of what is happening; lights going on and off; and the radios. The white paintings were airports for the lights, shadows and particles.¹⁰⁴

The white paintings caught whatever fell of them; why did I not look at them with my magnifying glass? Only because I did not yet have one? Do you not agree with this statement: After all, nature is better than art?¹⁰⁵

Cage invited Rauschenberg to exhibit the *White Paintings* as part of his 1952 production, *Theatre Piece No. 1* at Black Mountain, where Rauschenberg hung the works on the ceiling.¹⁰⁶

In responding to his own experiences in perceiving the *White Paintings*, Cage was inspired to make concrete an idea that had been percolating in his mind for several years.¹⁰⁷ Fearing that the development of music had now fallen behind that of art, Cage composed *4'33"*. Effectively the gap of ‘silence’ echoes the ‘emptiness’ of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, in that each paradoxically forms the conduit for infinite possibilities.

¹⁰² Branden W. Joseph, “White on White.”, *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Autumn, 2000), 103.

¹⁰³ Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 102.

¹⁰⁴ Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 102.

¹⁰⁵ Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 108.

¹⁰⁶ Katherine Hardiman, “Monochromes and Mandalas,” 14.

http://shuffle.rauschenbergfoundation.org/exhibitions/nasher/essays/Hardiman_monochromes-and-mandalas (accessed September 4, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 87.

The duration of 4'33" was guided by the chance-derived compositional methods Cage was developing through the use of *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*, an ancient Chinese text of divination.¹⁰⁸ Cage would, for example, use coin tosses or cast traditional yarrow sticks to answer specific questions about the score, including duration, tempo and other dynamics of composition.¹⁰⁹ His method, thereby involved asking questions rather than making choices.

The original score for 4'33" was measured out on conventional music paper, with staves and bar lines, but without notes and rests.¹¹⁰ Cage also made a graphic version of the score (Fig. 2.2) where he used three folded sheets of almost blank onionskin paper.¹¹¹ On these he drew simple vertical lines spaced according to an accompanying key, which explained that 1 page = 7 inches = 56 seconds and allowed the score to be read horizontally across the page.¹¹²

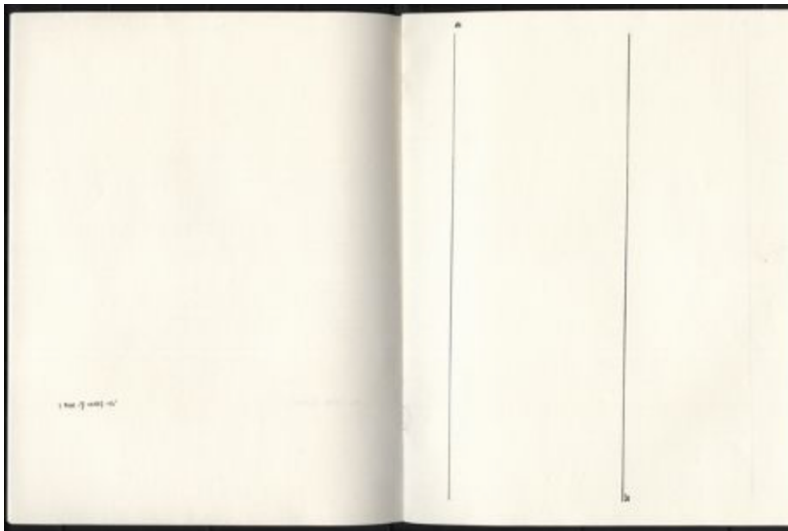


Fig. 2.2

John Cage,
4'33" (In Proportional Notation),
1952/53.

Ink on paper, each page: 27.9cm x 21.6cm and each page unfolded: 27.9cm x 43.1cm, Unique Edition The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Henry Kravis in honour of Marie-Josée Kravis, 2012. © 2014 John Cage Trust <https://au.phaidon.com/the-artbook/articles/2012/november/22/moma-gets-john-cages-silence/>

This score visually acts like a Rauschenberg *White Painting* in that the lights, shadows, and dust particles fall onto it while the piece is being "performed."¹¹³ Cage

¹⁰⁸ Díaz, *The Experimenters*, 79. Cage said he expressly employed only the structure of randomisation features of *I Ching* and not its divinatory aspects.

¹⁰⁹ Díaz, *The Experimenters*, 79.

¹¹⁰ Joseph, "White on White," 107.

¹¹¹ Joseph, "White on White," 107.

¹¹² Joseph, "White on White," 108.

¹¹³ Joseph, *Random Order*, 49.

felt that he had brought music up to speed with the “modernity” of Rauschenberg's art.¹¹⁴

Although their works were deemed radical at the time, Rauschenberg's and Cage's intention was not to momentarily shock. Rather as writer Roger Shattuck observed, they brought together memorable examples of “juxtaposition of disparate elements which led to lasting aesthetic tension.”^{115,116} As history has shown, the juxtaposition of painted canvases that depicted nothing, and a compositional score with no notes, have had a long and lasting influence on all kinds of art disciplines.

¹¹⁴ Joseph, “White on White,” 104.

¹¹⁵ Roger Shattuck (1923-2005) was an American historical writer best known for his books on French literature, art and music of the twentieth century.

¹¹⁶ Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (New York NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 331ff. in Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and The Neo-Avant-Garde* 6.

Studio Research

My sculpture, *I Am Saying It* (Fig. 2.3) engages with the temporal elements of the everyday and affiliates to the works of both Cage and Rauschenberg. The simplicity of a monochromatic oval shaped form folding in on itself, suggests a moment of introspection or silence. Hung near natural light, the structured gap between the two wooden planes provides for a space of accentuated shadows that shift with the timing of the day. The multiple layering of flat white paint creates a saturated surface that both sucks up the atmosphere of the surrounds and dazzles the eyes with tiny radiant colour particles. The shifts and changes in the work are reliant on the notion that nature operates in a continuum that is ephemeral and unpredictable. These qualities, while generally ignored or not perceived, are realised as important truths within my work.



Fig. 2.3

Anna Dudek, *Where You Are*, 2019

Birch plywood and acrylic paint
148cm x 111cm x 15cm

Conclusion

John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp each explored the idea of the everyday and addressed temporal events that normally escape perceptual grasp. They favoured processes over objects and created structures that celebrated the unpredictable. The development of my studio research has been to make structures, which engage with shifting natural light and changes in the environment, in order to harness ephemeral events as part of the artwork's performance. How we perceive the visual experience of ephemeral works is the subject matter of the following chapter.

Chapter 3:

Beyond the Concrete: Perception and Visual Experience

Introduction

This chapter will examine the visual perception and personal response to non-objective art and ephemeral experience. These ideas generally come under the umbrella of phenomenology and became important concerns for artists in America after the writings of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty were translated into English in 1962.¹¹⁷ Of particular importance was his 1945 *Phenomenology Of Perception*.¹¹⁸ During the early 1960s young artists were starting to turn their back on doctrines of Abstract Expressionism. The California-based artists began making work which used light and space, while the severely reductive forms of the Minimal Art movement were taking hold on the East Coast.¹¹⁹

American art critic, Rosiland Krauss was an important advocate and interpreter of phenomenology. She advocated the theory as a means for an “expanded field” of artistic possibilities, especially in sculpture and later photography.¹²⁰

Selected artworks by the American artists, Robert Irwin and James Turrell will be examined. Both artists have pursued a life-long investigation of light, space and perception. This research will also trace how their practices moved from making non-objective art to nonobject art.

An analysis of my artwork, *We Carry Our Homes Within Us* (Fig. 3.8), re-introduces the object and I will argue that, despite the concrete nature of the form,

¹¹⁷ Rosiland Krauss “1965,” Hal Foster et al, *Art Since 1900*, 538.

¹¹⁸ Jae Emerling, *Theory for Art History*, (Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2005), 215.

¹¹⁹ Minimal art describes abstract, geometric painting and sculpture executed in the United States in the 1960s. Its predominant organising principles include the right angle, the square, and the cube, rendered with a minimum of incident or compositional manoeuvring. See Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993), 1.

¹²⁰ Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery eds., *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, (New York, NY: Berg, 2007), 79.

the artwork remains capable of structuring a visual experience that questions personal perception.

Background

By the 1960s there was a new generation of artists who were looking to shake off the art-historical weight of Abstract Expression, previously dominant in New York and San Francisco.¹²¹ The Minimalist artist, Robert Morris (1931-2018), recalls his defiance:

When I sliced into the plywood with my Skilsaw, I could hear, beneath the ear-damaging whine, a stark and refreshing “no” reverberate off the four walls: no to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions, historicizing narrative, valuable artefact, intelligent structure, interesting visual experience.¹²²

Following this shift in thinking Morris and fellow artist/writer Donald Judd (1928-1994) started making three-dimensional “specific objects” which bridged sculptures and paintings.¹²³ The characteristics of these works were that they were impersonal, reductive, industrially made, geometric, serialised and anti-illusionary. Effectively, there was no sense of the intentions of the artist.

In joint defiance, while the minimalist artists were making objects in New York, a loosely affiliated set of Southern California artists started to experiment and manipulate light, as a material for exploring phenomena in art.¹²⁴ Pioneering artists included Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Maria Nordman, Bruce Nauman, Doug Wheeler, and Mary Corse. Rather than making discrete objects however, these artists found that redirecting natural light through the use of reflective or translucent materials, or by embedding artificial light within objects or architecture, could be used to create

¹²¹ Robin Clark, “Phenomenal: An Introduction,” in *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface*, ed. Robin Clark (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 20.

¹²² Rosiland Krauss “1965,” Hal Foster et al, *Art Since 1900*, 538.

¹²³ Other notable minimalist artists working in New York at the time were Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Walter De Maria.

¹²⁴ The Art of Light and Space, Ambient Art, and Environmental Art or Phenomenal Art are some of the terms that were coined in an attempt to describe this type of work. See Robin Clark, “Phenomenal: An Introduction,” 20.

situations for stimulating heightened sensory awareness in the receptive viewer.¹²⁵ Of critical importance to both these artist groups was the spectator's relationship to, and perception of, the work. This will be discussed in the Phenomenology section below.

Phenomenology

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), is inextricably associated with the expansion of the theory of phenomenology.¹²⁶ In the early 1960s, Merleau-Ponty's influential texts were translated into English. This correlates to the timing of the inaugural experiments of the Californian Light and Space artists and concurrent emergence of the Minimal art movement in New York.

According to Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not just the thinking mind; it is also an embodied experience.¹²⁷ He asserted that the body itself, through its memories and associations of past experiences, influences our perception of the world.¹²⁸ Because we all have different bodies and experiences, we all perceive the world through our own unique subjectivity lens. Merleau-Ponty also asserts that despite our attempts to make sense and give meaning to the world, there will always be an excess of unintelligible fact, which we cannot account for.¹²⁹

Merleau-Ponty's investigations into the difference between what a thing is known to be and the way it appears, stimulated artists to break the idea of traditional perspective, which presumed a static universe observed by a single, all-seeing eye.¹³⁰ Effectively, with regard to viewing objects, perception allows various perspectives, as

¹²⁵ Robin Clark, "Phenomenal: An Introduction," 20.

¹²⁶ Edmond Husserl (1859-1938) was a German philosopher and the founder of phenomenology, which is defined as exploring phenomena which is perceived directly through the senses. Emerling, *Theory for Art History*, 214.

¹²⁷ Emerling, *Theory for Art History*, 215.

¹²⁸ Emerling, *Theory for Art History*, 215.

¹²⁹ Michael Lewis and Tanja Staehler, *Phenomenology: An Introduction* (London & New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 1.

¹³⁰ Lynn Zelevansky, *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s - 70s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 112.

the spectator moves around, towards, or back from an object. The viewer knows the object as a three-dimensional form: seen from nowhere and everywhere.¹³¹



Fig. 3.0
Robert Morris, *Untitled (L Beams)*,
1965-67

Fibreglass, three units each
240cm x 240cm x 60cm
<https://www.thenewslens.com/article/62354>

Rosalind Krauss used Morris's artwork, *Untitled (L-Beams)* 1965-66, (Fig. 3.0) to explore these ideas of the self, as understood through bodily experience and with intention.¹³² Morris's L-beams are three identical shapes made from fibreglass and at a length of 2.4 metres. Though larger than body height, the beams are of a relatable scale, being about the height of a door.¹³³ They are positioned on the floor at different angles to present three very different looking forms. One is upended, the second lies on the ground and the third balances on its two end edges. Even though the viewer knows the forms are the same size it is difficult to perceive them as such. They appear significantly dissimilar, which is compounded through the different experience of approaching each object. As Krauss notes: "to superimpose a mental construct of 'sameness' on a world of unlikes...violates one's actual experience of the

¹³¹ Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*, 99.

¹³² Edmond Husserl also thought that intentional experience is at the core of perception. In her essay Amanda Boetzkes writes "The phenomenology of art is located at the crossroads between a receptive mode of confrontation – one that is acutely aware of the way in which the artwork initially presents itself to the senses – and a commitment to making a critical statement about what and how the artwork means in the history of art now". Amanda Boetzkes, "Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh," *Art History* 32, no. 4 (September, 2009): 691.

¹³³ Robert Morris, *Untitled (3 Ls)* 1965 refabricated 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/1774> (accessed September 5, 2019).

work."¹³⁴ This difference between what a thing is known to be, and the way it appears, became a key concern in the artworks of Robert Irwin.

Robert Irwin (1928-)

To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings or objects at all. What we are really dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perceptions. - Robert Irwin ¹³⁵

In his initial painting career, Robert Irwin had been an Abstract Expressionist.¹³⁶ From the late 1950s until the mid-1960s, however, he obsessively and ritualistically engaged a process of reducing his expressive and gestural compositions into tightly controlled "line" and "dot" polychromes.¹³⁷ The "dot" paintings (Fig. 3.1) were predominantly white, with minute painted dots of vibrant colour grid patterned across the works. The effect was such that the colours dissolved into a radiant optical haze. Moreover, the visual vibration rendered the works ethereal.¹³⁸

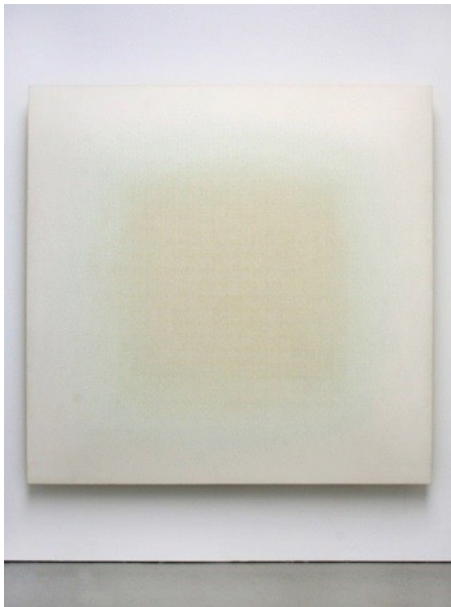


Fig 3.1

Robert Irwin, *Untitled (Dot Painting)*, 1963-65

Oil on canvas on shaped wood veneer frame,
206cm x 211cm x 20cm

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Gift of the Lannan Foundation

<https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/452822937523880315/?lp=true>

¹³⁴ Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture," 49.

¹³⁵ Robert Irwin, Brainy Quote, <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/robert-irwin-quotes>, (accessed September 6, 2019)

¹³⁶ Michael Govan and Anna Bernardini, *Robert Irwin | James Turrell | Villa Panza* (New York, NY: DelMonico-Prestel Books, 2014), 76.

¹³⁷ Irwin famously spent days and days-as much as twelve hours a day, for two or three years – staring at just a few horizontal marks on his canvases. See Govan et. al., *Robert Irwin | James Turrell | Villa Panza*, 78.

¹³⁸ John Stringer, *Seeking Transcendence : Edvard Munch, Mark Rothko, Ann Hamilton, Robert Irwin, Wolfgang Laib*, (Perth, WA: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2005), 10.

To accentuate this experience, the canvases were minutely adjusted so their centres protruded slightly, leaving the rest of the canvas to slope outwards.¹³⁹ Irwin had his Eureka moment while hanging his works for an upcoming exhibition and he observed the shadow of one of his paintings hung just off the wall. In a 2016 lecture, Irwin described how all of a sudden, the “qualitative physicality of his work, became more interesting than its quantitative content.”¹⁴⁰ Irwin stated: “I can no longer confine my eye to what was in the frame of my paintings. I discovered for the first time the world of the phenomenal immersed in the heretofore incidental shadow.”¹⁴¹ With his deep respect for art history, Irwin was compelled to question why art had been restricted to the idea of a frame, including sculpture, which he deemed a type of frame.¹⁴²

In 1966, Irwin started to investigate the idea of ‘breaking through the frame’ and dropped his use of square canvases in favour of round disc works.¹⁴³ As a hot-rod cars enthusiast, Irwin collaborated with a metal shop in Los Angeles to experiment with the properties of concave and convex discs.¹⁴⁴ He painstakingly sprayed between fifty and a hundred transparent, thin, grainy, matte-finished layers of automotive paint onto each work.¹⁴⁵ The result was a surface that was highly receptive to the properties of light.¹⁴⁶ Irwin’s *Untitled, 1966-67* (Fig. 3.2) for example, spanning a diameter of over one and a half metres, is affixed to the white painted wall by a specially designed mount so that the disc floats some 30cm off the wall.¹⁴⁷ With its significant dimensions and protrusion into the space of the viewer the object

¹³⁹ Clark, “Phenomenal: An Introduction,” 23.

¹⁴⁰ Stamford University, CA, “Robert Irwin: Why Art? - The 2016 Burt and Deedee McMurtry Lecture,” Published 29 March, 2016, You Tube video, 32:54/ 1:16:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ac-m3W9fGY>, (accessed September 6, 2019)

¹⁴¹ Adrian Kohn, “Work and Words”, in *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface*, 162.

¹⁴² Robert Irvine, “Robert Irwin: Why Art? - The 2016 Burt and Deedee McMurtry Lecture,” (accessed September 6, 2019)

¹⁴³ Govan et. al., *Robert Irwin | James Turrell | Villa Panza*, 80.

¹⁴⁴ Carolee Thea, “Robert Irwin,” in *A Sculpture Reader: Contemporary Sculpture Since 1980*, eds. Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer (Hamilton, N.J.: International Sculpture Centre, 2006), 74.

¹⁴⁵ Thea, “Robert Irwin,” 74.

¹⁴⁶ Stephanie Hanor “The Material of Immateriality” in *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface*, 145.

¹⁴⁷ Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79227> (accessed September 6, 2019).

has a commanding presence. However, Irwin proceeds to illuminate it from the front by employing four-part cross lighting.¹⁴⁸ The resulting cruciform of shadow appears to merge with the disc, blurring the distinction between the actual and illusion.¹⁴⁹ The wall, the shadow and the disc all become positive and equal elements of an artwork that radiates pure energy.¹⁵⁰ The perception of the object per se is lost.

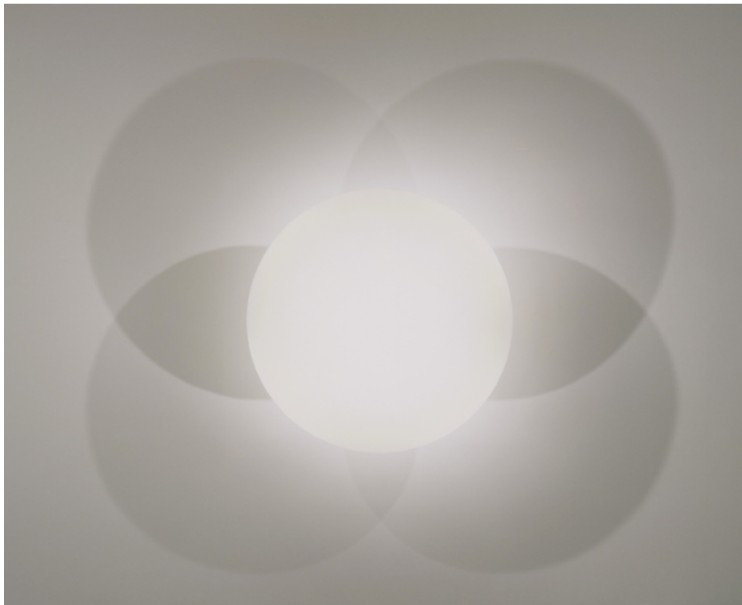


Fig. 3.2

Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1968

Acrylic and cellulose nitrate
lacquer on aluminium and light
Disc 153.2 cm in diameter
[https://www.moma.org/
collection/works/79227](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79227)

As Irwin continued to make and develop his discs during the late 1960s he started to use industrially coated vacuum-formed acrylic. This had a more translucent finish compared to the spun aluminium works. In *Untitled*, 1969 (Fig 3.3), the object's edges appear to dissolve into the walls, while the horizontal band of painted black bisecting the disc gives the uncanny impression of a black hole puncturing the centre of the work.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Hanor "The Material of Immateriality," 152.

¹⁴⁹ Thea, "Robert Irwin," 74.

¹⁵⁰ Hanor "The Material of Immateriality," 147.

¹⁵¹ Govan et. al., *Robert Irwin | James Turrell | Villa Panza*, 80.



Fig 3.3

Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1969

Acrylic on cast acrylic, 116.8 cm
 Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund,
 Katharine Ordway Fund,
 Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund, and
 Charles B. Benenson, B.A.1933, Fund.
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/220008>

Irwin's discs achieve the maximum effect when viewed front on like paintings. However, when viewed from the side the illusion is lost and the object takes on a functional status (Fig. 3.4). Irwin was aware of this limitation and concluded "all ideas and values have their roots in experience," which is always, importantly, "conditional."¹⁵² These works also function in highly controlled area with artificial lighting rather than being subject to natural sunlight.¹⁵³



Fig 3.4

Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1969 (side-view)

Acrylic on cast acrylic, 116.8 cm
 Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund, Katharine Ordway Fund,
 Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund,
 and Charles B. Benenson, B.A.1933, Fund
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/220008>

¹⁵² Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1969, Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/31595/untitled>, (accessed June 15, 2019)

¹⁵³ Hanor "The Material of Immateriality," 147.

In 1970, Irwin closed his studio in order to pursue an art practise of nonobject art. He considered this the next logical progression in the history of modern art.¹⁵⁴

Irwin argued:

If you begin to assume that the object is no more real than the space around it, no more important than the shadows, it is simply one of a series of events, and you begin to try to deal with the consequences of that, then it becomes obvious you can't make an object any longer or you can't make anything that is not relative to the circumstances that is exists in.¹⁵⁵

Responding to his own question "how do you create phenomena without an object?" Irwin created his "conditional response pieces."¹⁵⁶ These architectural installations used the elements of light and scrim to question how perception is conditioned in the viewer.

One of Irwin's initial scrim works, *Untitled*, 1971 (Fig 3.5) was installed at the Walker Arts Centre in Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹⁵⁷ His preparatory drawings and notes refer to the work as *Slant/Light/Volume*.¹⁵⁸ The work uses artificial lights and a roll of scrim stretched horizontally and evenly on an angle from the ceiling to the back wall and floor of the gallery space.

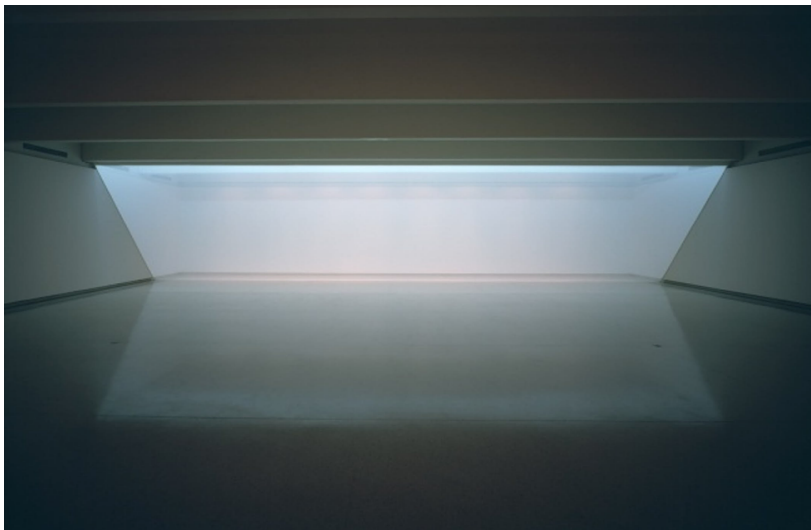


Fig. 3.5
Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1971.

Synthetic fabric, wood,
fluorescent lights, and
flood lights
243.8 x 1432.6cm
Walker Art Centre,
Minneapolis;
Gift of the artist, 1971
<https://walkerart.org/calendar/2009/robert-irwin-slant-light-volume>

¹⁵⁴ Robert Irwin, "Some Notes on the Nature of Abstraction" in *Robert Irwin: Primaries and Secondaries: 21 October 2007-13 April 2008* (San Diego, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2008), 169.

¹⁵⁵ Adrian Kohn, "Work and Words", in *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface*, 162.

¹⁵⁶ Govan et al, *Robert Irwin | James Turrell | Villa Panza*, 57.

¹⁵⁷ Govan et al, *Robert Irwin | James Turrell | Villa Panza*, 57.

¹⁵⁸ Walker Art Centre, <https://walkerart.org/calendar/2009/robert-irwin-slant-light-volume> (accessed September 11, 2019)

The scale and supposed simplicity the work provides a philosophically rich exercise in the physical, sensory and temporal experience of space. This is, to some extent, conveyed in the viewers interaction with the work in Fig. 3.6 below.



Fig. 3.6
Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1971
(side view).

Synthetic fabric, wood,
fluorescent lights, and
flood lights
243.8 x 1432.6cm
Walker Art Centre,
Minneapolis;
Gift of the artist, 1971
<https://walkerart.org/calendar/2009/robert-irwin-slant-light-volume>

Phenomenal art, however, is at its essence the experiential perception of an individual. Language and photographic documentation, as such, fails to fully capture phenomena or articulate experience. Perception, biased by somebody else's interpretation or focus, was one of the reasons Irwin has been reluctant to allow images of his art.¹⁵⁹ Irwin also added: "When you write about it, it just gets screwed up."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Kohn, "Work and Words",163.

¹⁶⁰ Kohn, "Work and Words",165.

James Turrell (1943-)

I'm interested that light has thingness itself, so it's not something that reveals something about other things you're looking at, but it becomes a revelation in itself. – James Turrell¹⁶¹

From his Quaker upbringing, and young childhood memories of piercing star constellations into the blackout curtains of his bedroom with a needle, Turrell has maintained a lifelong obsession with the sky and light.^{162,163} In 1965 he graduated from Pomona College (a private liberal arts college in Claremont, California) with a bachelor's degree in perceptual psychology. This included extensive course work in art, maths and astronomy.¹⁶⁴ Turrell is also an avid pilot, who, having logged more than twelve thousand hours of flying, has an acute insight into how light functions to create visual illusions and horizonless space, as is experienced when flying out of flip turns or through cloud and fog.¹⁶⁵ Turrell was also influenced in his approach to art making when he attended a John Cage performance of 4'33" while at Pomona in the early 1960s.¹⁶⁶ He was struck by the way people walked out during the performance and understood that there was something in experiencing the work, which challenged his understanding of things. He said "People create their own realities by what they think and how they think the world is arranged."¹⁶⁷

Turrell's experimental practice of exploring perception began in 1966 after his graduation from Pomona College. On moving into the former Mendota Hotel in Santa Monica he transformed his rooms into a series of seamless white spaces. Reminiscent of László Moholy-Nagy, Turrell had been inspired by watching the light

¹⁶¹ James Turrell, AZ Quotes, https://www.azquotes.com/author/21907-James_Turrell, (accessed September 5, 2019).

¹⁶² Turrell quoted "I was maybe 5 or 6, and my grandmother would begin sitting me in the Quaker meeting house. I asked my grandmother, 'What am I supposed to do?' and she said, 'Just wait, we're going inside to greet the light.' I liked that – this idea to go inside and find that light within, literally as well as figuratively." James Turrell, AZ Quotes, https://www.azquotes.com/author/21907-James_Turrell, (accessed September 5, 2019).

¹⁶³ James Turrell in "Spaces Inhabited by Consciousness" in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Govan and Christine Y. Kim (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2014), 208.

¹⁶⁴ Christine Y. Kim, "James Turrell, A Life in Art" in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 52.

¹⁶⁵ Kim, "Entering the New Landscape" in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 250.

¹⁶⁶ Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, 116.

¹⁶⁷ Kim, "James Turrell, A Life in Art" in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 39.

beam of the slide projector in his Art History lectures.¹⁶⁸ He purchased a projector and proceeded to modify and strengthen its light mechanisms.¹⁶⁹ By projecting this intense light into the architecture of these darkened white spaces, Turrell developed two series of works: Cross Corner Projections and Single Wall Projections.¹⁷⁰



Fig 3.7
James Turrell,
Afrum (White), 1966
Projected light, dimensions
variable
[http://jamesturrell.com/
work/type/projection-pieces/](http://jamesturrell.com/work/type/projection-pieces/)

Afrum (White), 1966 (Fig.3.7) was the first of these works. Comprising a rectangle projected across a corner, the work, when viewed from a distance, appears to look like a solid three-dimensional white cube hovering off the floor attached to the corner of the space. It was not until the viewer advanced right up to the corner that they were able to recognise it as light on the wall.¹⁷¹ Turrell did not hide the source of the light. As such, though the viewer could understand how the object was created, its illusion as a three-dimensional object held and the viewer was made to question their own perception.¹⁷² Looking back on these works as a mature artist, Turrell reflects that although these “objects” were effective in terms of questioning

¹⁶⁸ Kim, “James Turrell, A Life in Art” in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 37.

¹⁶⁹ Kim, “The Cave Wall” in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 52.

¹⁷⁰ Kim, “James Turrell, A Life in Art” in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 52.

¹⁷¹ Kim, “James Turrell, A Life in Art” in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 52. In the end, there were thirty-six different iterations of these Projection works, all appearing as independent three-dimensional objects with varying shapes and colour and also varying relationships to the spaces that surrounded them, be it sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, floating on walls, or shooting through the ceiling.

¹⁷² Clark, “Phenomenal: An Introduction,” in *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface*, 40.

direct perception, the works were restricted to being about “light on the surface” rather than “something about light.”¹⁷³

Rather than thinking about light in the traditional sense of illuminating things, Turrell’s art practice developed into one of showing the “thing-ness” of light.¹⁷⁴ He viewed light as an optical material that exhibits wave phenomena, which as a substance, he has learned to mould and shape. He has likened light to sound and by the process of trial and error, Turrell made “instruments” to create the forms of light he wanted to create.¹⁷⁵ These instruments for structuring space and light appear neutral so that the viewer is drawn to the in-between zone, not formed or made by the massing of material.¹⁷⁶

By way of example, one such instrument is the space division construction, *Laar*, 1976 (Fig. 3.8), which was exhibited in the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in late 1980.¹⁷⁷

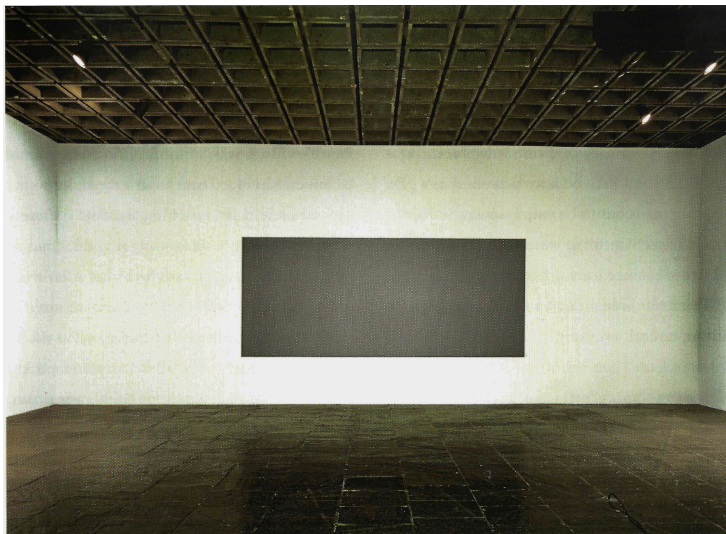


Fig 3.8

James Turrell, *Laar*, 1976

During the exhibition
James Turrell: Light and Space
(October 22, 1980-January 1, 1981) at
the Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York.

In Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing:
Abstract Art Since Pollock*, (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 2006),
Plate 3.21, 119.

© Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York.

Art historian, Kirk Varnedoe wrote about his own experience of this work.¹⁷⁸

Here’s what it felt like: You get off the elevator. Directly in front of you, on the far wall of the

¹⁷³ Elaine A. King, “Into the Light: James Turrell” in *Conversations on Sculpture*, eds. Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer (Hamilton, N.J.: International Sculpture Centre, 2007), 118.

¹⁷⁴ Govan, “Inner Light: The Radical Reality of James Turrell” in *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 13-14.

¹⁷⁵ Elaine A. King, “Into the Light: James Turrell,” 120.

¹⁷⁶ Elaine A. King, “Into the Light: James Turrell,” 117.

¹⁷⁷ Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 119.

¹⁷⁸ Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 119-120.

gallery, is a huge grey painting. You cannot quite discern what the surface is, but it is quite thick, it has a visible texture. You are looking at it, and it is very subtle, extremely luscious in some ways. You start walking towards it. As you do, your eye, like the auto-focus mechanism on a camera, continually tries to get hold of the surface of the piece, but somehow it can't. Finally, you arrive at the painting and discover that you can't get a fix on the surface because there *is* no surface. You are looking at a razor-sharp edge framing a second room beyond you. There is no light source visible in this second room, but something is filling it with this eerie grey light so that the empty space looks, from a distance, like a solid surface. What you have perceived as a grey painting turns out to be empty space. Suddenly, in a stomach-turning way, you are forced to change substance for void, reality for illusion.

Varnedoe's perception had been assaulted, in that his trust in himself was now questioned and he is left to mourn the loss of the object as there was no grey painting.

Studio Research

My sculpture, *We Carry Our Homes Within Us* (Fig. 3.9), re-introduces the subject of an object but in such a way that it is capable of structuring an event that questions perception. With this work I painted the underside of the front monochromatic plane in a vibrant ready-made fluorescent orange.



Fig. 3.9
Anna Dudek, *We Carry Our Homes Within Us*, 2019

Birch plywood, acrylic paint.
116cm x 120cm x 16cm

At a distance the vibrating reflective shadows have the effect of a neon light illuminating the centre of the sculpture. On close inspection the illusion dissolves and is revealed as a play of light and colour in space.

Conclusion

This chapter explored ideas about perception as explored by a new generation of artists in North America looking to defy the domination of Abstract Expressionism. Inspired by the philosophy of Phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the Minimalists on the East Coast made “specific objects” while the West Coast artists used light and space to question the experiential disparity between what we think and know to be true. The art critic and theorist Rosiland Krauss, recognised this shift in art making and became an advocate and interpreter of its theory. An analysis of selected artworks by Robert Irwin and James Turrell explored how these artists moved towards an art which deals with phenomena but has no object. My artwork re-introduces the object as a structure for creating phenomena and perceptual beyond the concrete.

Chapter 4:

Studio Research: Structuring Ephemeral Experience

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to provide an overview of my studio based research in relation to the historical and theoretical discourse put forward in this paper. At the commencement of this project I knew I was interested in the phenomena of shifting daylight interacting with structured sculptural forms, however I did not have a thorough understanding of the contextual field of this type of work or its developmental potential. As my research and understanding advanced I was able to adjust the methodology of my art making in order to try to address identified shortfalls or alternative potential possibilities.

My research objectives, processes and outcomes are presented through three bodies of work: prescriptive wall relief sculptures made from painted plywood; monochromatic reductive works made from painted metal or acrylic; and free standing transparent acrylic sculptures that activate ephemeral colour events by combining sunlight with an applied dichroic film.¹⁷⁹ These bodies of works are documented with the intention of exploring alternative sculptural possibilities within this field of research.

All my sculptures were constructed with the objective of drawing attention to both the non-objective concrete forms and the ephemeral experiences that they structure. In doing so the synchronicity and importance of both material and immaterial elements, may be read in the understanding of each work as a whole. My artwork titles were chosen from composed phrases within John Cages' 1949, *Lecture on Nothing*. While venerating Cage, this choice was made because the phrases

¹⁷⁹ 3M™ Dichroic Glass Finish DF-PA is a multi-layer Polymeric film which can be applied to internal glass or plastic surfaces. The film appears to change colour when viewed at various angles. The "Blaze" Product shift colours in the warm tones of cyan/blue/magenta and red/gold colour regions of the spectrum. The "Chill" Product shift colours in the cool tones of blue/magenta/yellow and gold/blue colour regions of the spectrum. I chose the Blaze option. <https://www.spicers.com.au/3m-dichroic-glass-finishes>

resounded with particular works and unified the complete body of my MFA2 studio research.

Project 1: Structured Wooden Wall Reliefs

Objective

The objective of this project was to construct painted wooden wall reliefs that interacted with the properties of light. In doing so the work structures an ephemeral experience that questions the viewer's visual perception.

Methodology

Due to the nature of the cutting equipment in the NAS workshop, any sculptures constructed from planes of wood are limited to hard-edged geometric forms. Referencing Malevich, I chose the shape of a square as the base of my initial works. These are secured to the wall in a traditional format like that of a painting. The scale of these squares was dictated by my full arm stretch. Effectively this allows the largest possible size that I can manage and move on my own. The compositional elements of the frontal angular planes were chosen from a variety of my two dimensional drawings. To maximise the amount of light coming into these reliefs the planes had to attach to the sides of the base, as opposed to the top, which would block out any overhead lighting. See Fig. 4.0

To broaden the scope for my sculptures beyond the hard-edged geometric forms I had three identical large oval shapes laser cut offsite.¹⁸⁰ The scale of these was limited by the 1200mm width of the plywood sheets. Each oval was then cut in two on a variant axis, which was subjectively chosen from a selection of my paper maquette studies. See Fig. 4.1

¹⁸⁰ The Birch plywood was supplied and laser cut by Carbon8 in Marrickville. <https://www.carbon8.com.au>

The construction and surface treatment of all these wooden works was the same. Each panel facade and edge was painted with at least six layers of paint to saturate the surfaces. Matte white was predominantly used with the exception of a selected few surfaces painted in high chrome colours, which are bordered by a thin line of matte white paint. Structurally, each 'floating' panel is secured to the base panel by angled wedges. This allows a sliver of light to enter the work between the gaps of the adjoining panels.

The works were not specifically lit with spotlights, but hang within a relatively well-lit studio space with a westerly facing window that passes direct sunlight in the later part of the afternoon. Containing the whole, I painted the studio walls with the same matte white paint as I used for the sculptures.

Outcomes



Fig. 4.0
Anna Dudek, *That We Possess*, 2019
MDF, acrylic paint
110cm x 110cm x 15cm



Fig. 4.1
Anna Dudek, *There Are Silences*, 2019
Birch plywood, acrylic paint
56cm x 112cm x 11cm

The painted wooden wall relief sculptures are successful in interacting with the properties of light. The matte white surfaces absorb surrounding phenomena, while the coloured surfaces vibrate and reflect colour outwards. Every plane and edge of

the work emanates a different shade of white depending on its angle to, and interaction with, the light. At some viewpoints the edges of the work appear to disappear completely into the surrounding walls, questioning the visual perception on the viewer. The thin borders of white around the chromatic coloured planes throw off their own thin bright white reflection adding to the layered multitudes of shadows.¹⁸¹

An outcome of this experimentation shows that the ephemeral phenomena is dominated by the subject of reflected colour, rather than the subtle temporal events such as shifting shadows. To address this issue, for my sculpture *Where You Are* (Fig. 3.7) the folded oval form was painted only in matte white. This results in deepened shadows and a more interactive engagement between the work and its environment. The wedges used to secure the floating planes are a necessary structural element.

The scale and presence of these sculptures invite the viewer's attention. Changes in natural daylight which cause the shifts beyond their concrete forms, however, may be too subtle for appreciation by the casual viewer. There is moreover, a rigidity to their traditional placement, sitting flush just off the wall, which does not challenge or question the physical relationship of the viewer to the work.

Project 2: Non-Wooden Sculptures

Objective

Applying the restriction of using only monochromatic white, the objective of this project was to investigate other materials, which could simplify the sculptural forms. It was also an opportunity to extend the sculptures further from the wall into

¹⁸¹ The vocabulary used to describe cast shadows in art comes from descriptions in astronomy. The umbra is the darkest part of the shadow followed by the penumbra which is the lighter outer shadow followed by the antumbra which is more obscure and extends out from the penumbra in a lighter and less distinct way. Sheri Doti, <http://www.artinstructionblog.com/drawing-lesson-a-theory-of-light-and-shade> (accessed August 11, 2018)

the space of the studio. Lighting the works to control the event shadows over the random ephemeral experience of shifting daylight, was also explored.

Methodology

A rectangular sheet of aluminium was directed repeatedly through a metal rolling machine to create a sustained curved bend. Multiple layers of matte white were applied to the primed form, which was then secured to the wall with screws. My original intention with this work was for the viewer to walk into the curve of this bend of white so that frontal and peripheral vision would just be an expanse of vibrating matte white. However, the curved sheet was unable to fully support its own weight and stay fully upright. Instead, the piece bowed into a graceful structure, which projected into studio space, and displayed kinetic qualities as it moved with the breeze from the open window.

A semi-circle made from white opaque acrylic Perspex was folded using heat along a determined axis to make a reductive sculpture. This was attached to the wall with a clear Perspex backing so that it appears to float just off the wall. The acrylic is highly reflective of the surrounding environment, while its opacity provides an alternative visual experience compared to the flat white paint of the walls.

Both sculptures were lit at the front by a cool spotlight to document the difference in their interaction with artificial and late afternoon sunlight in the studio.

Outcomes

Although the aluminium sheet is an elegant form it could be further refined to appear to be seamlessly coming out of the wall, rather than being attached to the wall by painted out screws. This work is successful in that it has many alternative perspectives and advances into the space of the studio and the viewer. In doing so it negates a single rigid frontal viewpoint. Another success is the deceptive nature of the material content. Effectively, the weight of this aluminium sheet is strong enough to keep its form, while remaining flexible enough to display kinetic qualities without distorting. The form itself presents strong shadows under both natural and artificial light. The strength of the spotlight, however, helped to visually dissolve the sculpture edge with the wall. I am satisfied that this work delivers a sculpture combining both material and immaterial content.

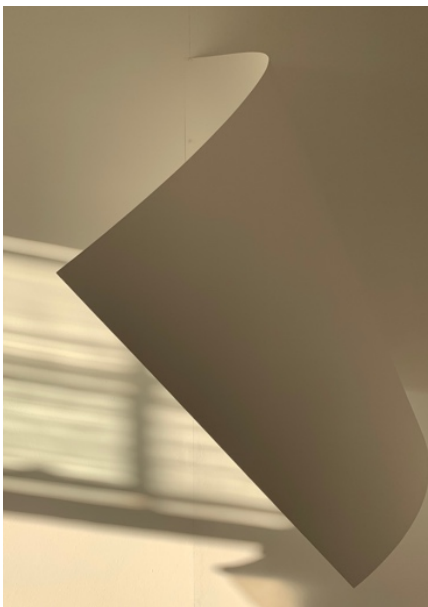


Fig. 4.2
Anna Dudek, *I Am Here*, 2019
Aluminium metal sheet, acrylic paint
130cm x 80cm x 71cm
Natural sun light

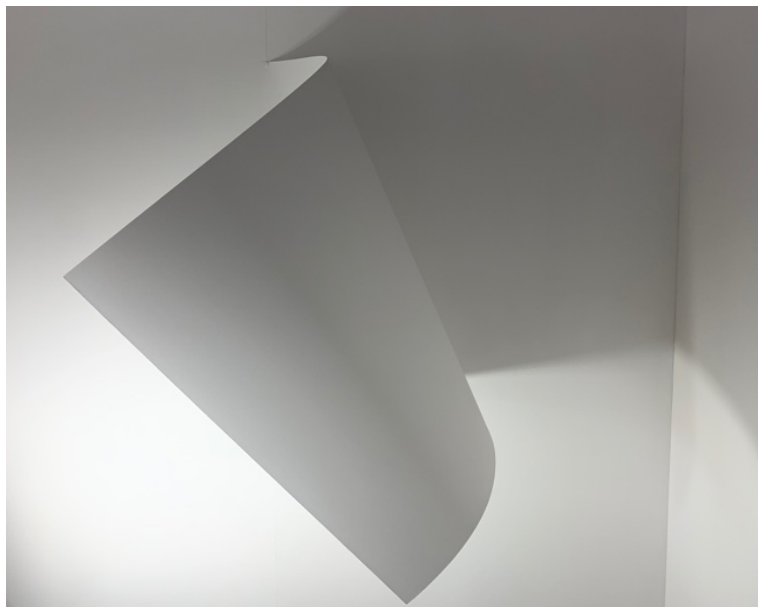


Fig. 4.3
Anna Dudek, *I Am Here*, 2019
Aluminium metal sheet, acrylic paint
130cm x 80cm x 71cm
Cool spot light

Although the opaque acrylic has interesting reflective properties it retains the look of plastic and appears insubstantial when compared to the richness of the painted works. This may be exacerbated because the material used for this work was only three millimetres thick. The spotlight directed at the sculpture amplified a multiple of shadows, as with Robert Irwin's acrylic discs, however, this was only apparent when the sculpture was viewed from the side. This is less of an issue with the acrylic as folds in the form can be created using heat, without the need of unattractive structural supports.



Fig. 4.4
Anna Dudek, *Because It Happens*, 2019
Acrylic Perspex
113cm x 51cm x 23cm
Natural light



Fig. 4.5
Anna Dudek, *Because It Happens*, 2019
Acrylic Perspex
113cm x 51cm x 23cm
Side view with cool spot light

Project 3: Free Standing Sculpture

Objective:

To create a reductive free-standing sculpture that interacts with the properties of light to instigate ephemeral events.

Process:

In order to present a cohesive body of work I chose to further explore the oval as a primary form. Experimenting with a full size cardboard maquette (of one of the sculptures made in Project 1) resulted in a self-supporting kinetic structure made from two sides of an oval plane joined at the top. To test its fabrication in acrylic Perspex a scaled down version was used to determine whether the form could be cut on the appropriate axis and glued together on a clean sharp angle or whether it would need to be folded. Dichroic effect acrylic sheets are no longer available in Australia. As such, I tested a dichroic film applied to clear Perspex instead. The film's reaction to glue and heat was also tested.

The film proved difficult to apply and needed to be adhered to the flat acrylic sheet before the oval shape was cut. The thickness of the acrylic sheet was increased from three to six millimetres. The result is an increase the overall strength of the sculpture but the structure still remained too brittle to join on an angle at the top edge. This necessitated the shape being bent with heat. This caused the film on the maquette to bubble along the bend, despite being on the outer side of the Perspex. Consequent experiments showed that this can be eliminated if the film is left to adhere for a few days before heating.

Outcome:

The effect of light working through the dichroic film on the transparent sculpture is playful and interactive. This outcome provides different colour events as the viewer moves around the work, and projecting ephemeral reflections on the surrounding walls and artworks.



Fig. 4.6
Anna Dudek,
This Space of Time I & II, 2019

Acrylic Perspex with dichroic film,
NAS Studio Installation
Each 80cm x 147cm x 43cm

On initial viewing the ephemeral effect of the film dominates the material form of the sculpture. However, in direct sunlight especially (Fig. 4.7), these sculptures work in an effective way to confuse the viewer as to what is material form and what is its immaterial effect.

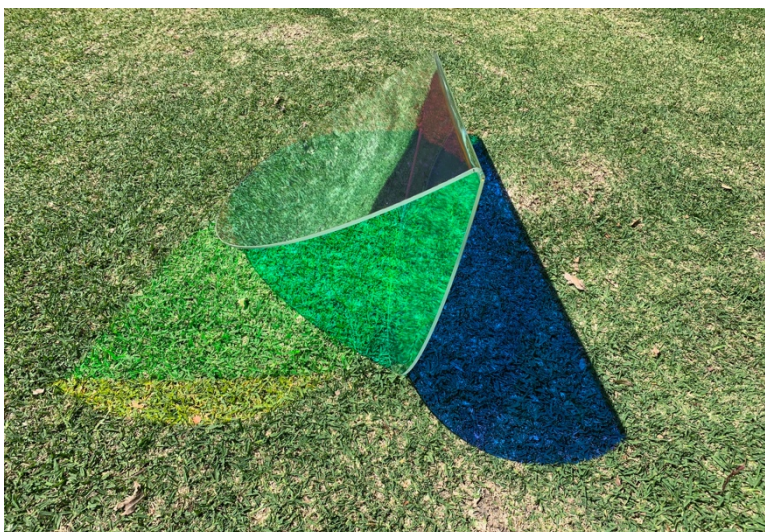


Fig. 4.7
Anna Dudek,
This Space of Time I, 2019

Acrylic Perspex with dichroic film,
NAS outdoor Installation
80cm x 147cm x 43cm

Conclusion

The three projects documented describe research undertaken in my studio this year. A variety of materials and methods were used to make non-objective forms, which represent nothing, but act as structures that enable the perception of ephemeral events. Each work operates as its “own world,” engaging the immaterial from the environment of its surrounds, while advocating its material concrete identity.

Exegesis Conclusion

Nature operates in a continuum that is ephemeral and unpredictable. These qualities, while generally ignored or not perceived, are realised as important truths within my work.

By employing a variety of materials and experimenting with reductive techniques, my methodologies explore the developmental potential of creating concrete forms that intentionally interact with the temporality of their environments. As such, the synchronicity of both material and immaterial elements is essential to reading my work as an expressive whole.

The different materials used in my sculptures result in different ephemeral outcomes. The structured wall pieces focus on the play of reflected colour shadows and question their light source; the monochromatic non-wooden works appear more seamless and extend into the perceptual space of the viewer; the dichroic film works accentuate the phenomena of shifting light to engage the viewer and activate the installation space.

Language and photographic documentation fails to capture phenomena or articulate experience fully and can be subject to bias through someone else's interpretation. Phenomenal art is, at its essence, the experiential perception of an individual. Due to the diurnal nature of daylight, the optimum experience of ephemeral works is limited.

This investigation continues to explore perception of phenomena as a subject for art. It finds that sculptures of nothing, while functioning as valid sculptural forms in their own right, equally operate as structures for perceptual experience and thereby offer an ongoing contribution to research in this area.

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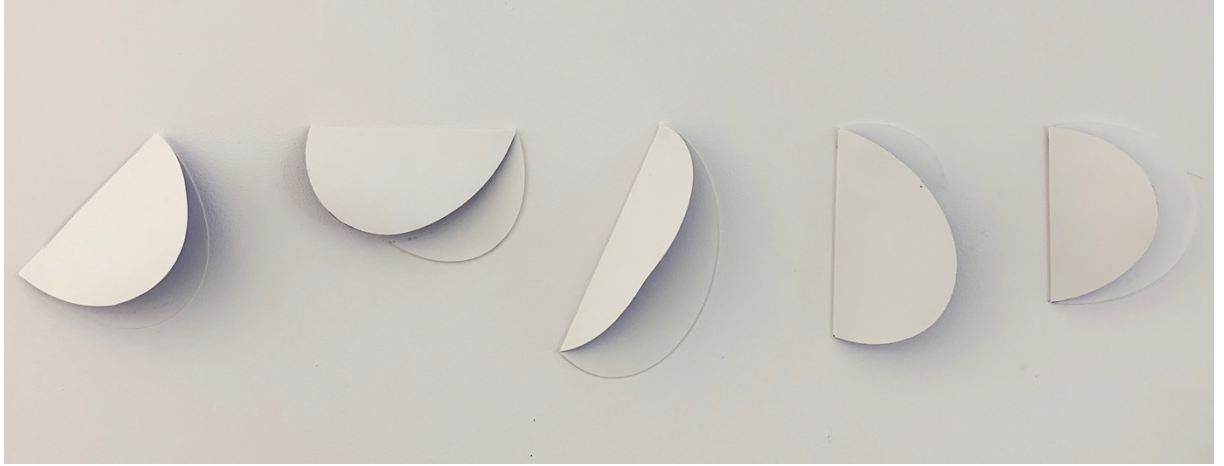
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Appendix:

Additional photographic documentation.



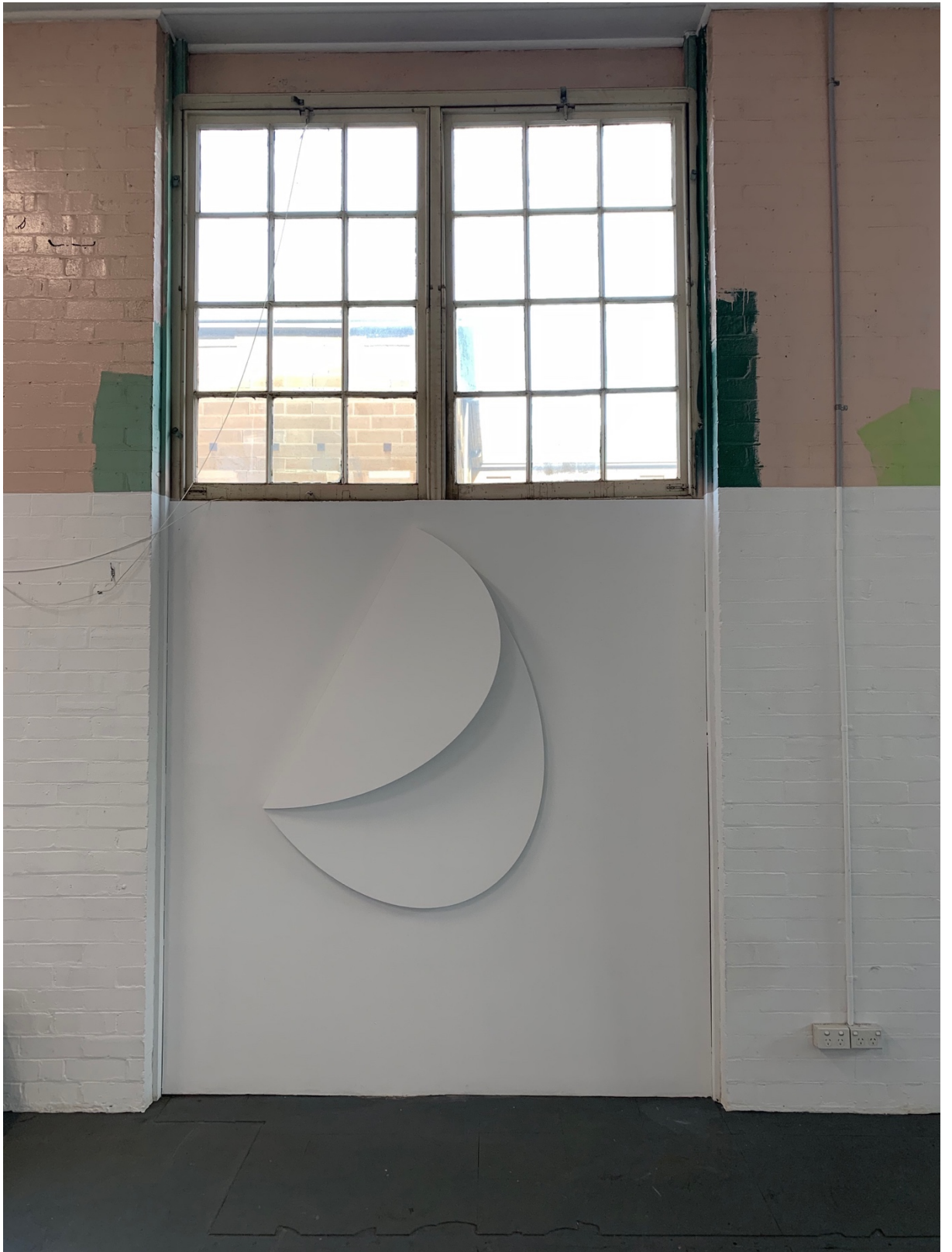
Anna Dudek, Paper maquettes for oval forms



Anna Dudek, Painted paper maquette for oval forms



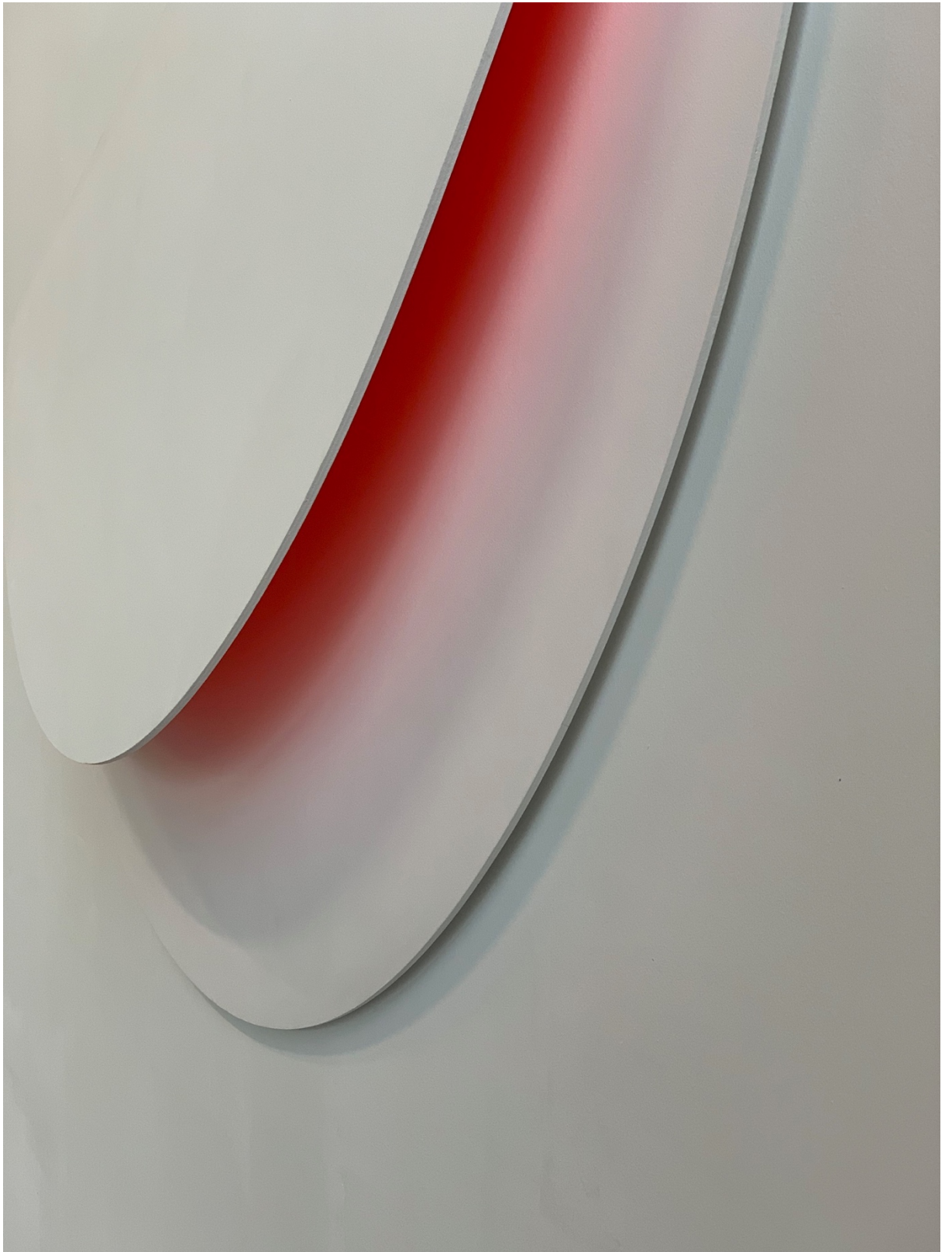
Anna Dudek, *There are Silences* (2019) and *We Carry our Homes Within Us* (2019)
156cm x 112cm x 11cm and 116cm x 120cm x 16cm
Birch plywood, acrylic paint. Installation NAS Building 25.



Anna Dudek, *Where You Are* (2019) 148cm x 111cm x 15cm
Birch plywood, acrylic paint. Installation NAS Building 25



Anna Dudek, *There are Silences* (2019)– detail
Birch plywood, acrylic paint. 156cm x 112cm x 11cm



Anna Dudek, *We Carry our Homes Within Us* (2019) – detail
Birch plywood, acrylic paint. 116cm x 120cm x 16cm



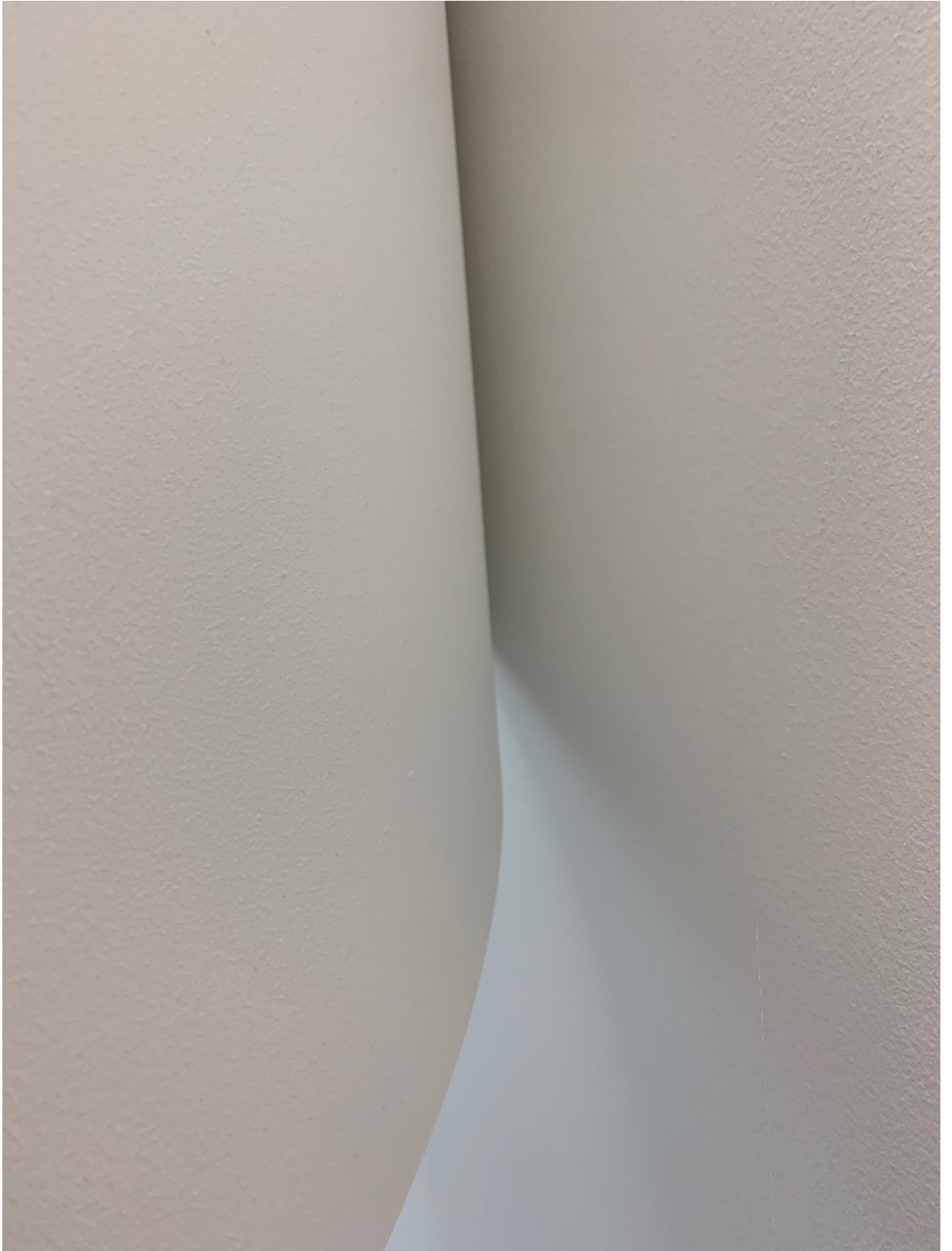
Anna Dudek, *It Became Something* (2019)
Birch plywood, acrylic Perspex, acrylic paint. 110cm x 149cm x 14cm



Anna Dudek, *For At Any Moment* (2019)
Birch plywood, acrylic paint. 41cm x 100cm x 11cm



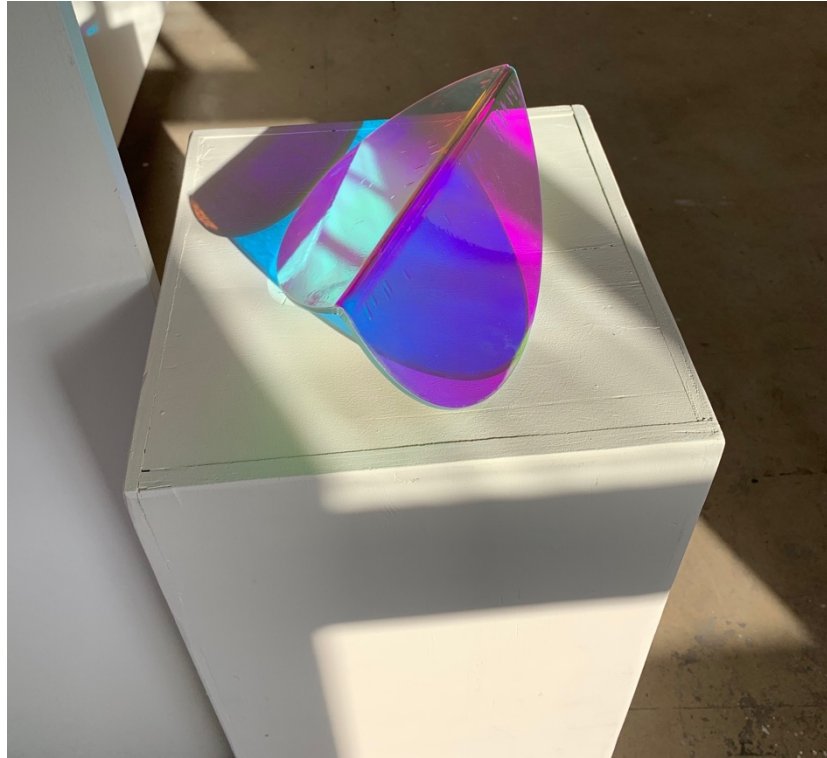
Anna Dudek, *I Am Here*, 2019
Aluminium metal sheet, acrylic paint. 130cm x 80cm x 71cm



Anna Dudek, *I Am Here*, 2019 – detail
Aluminium metal sheet, acrylic paint. 130cm x 80cm x 71cm



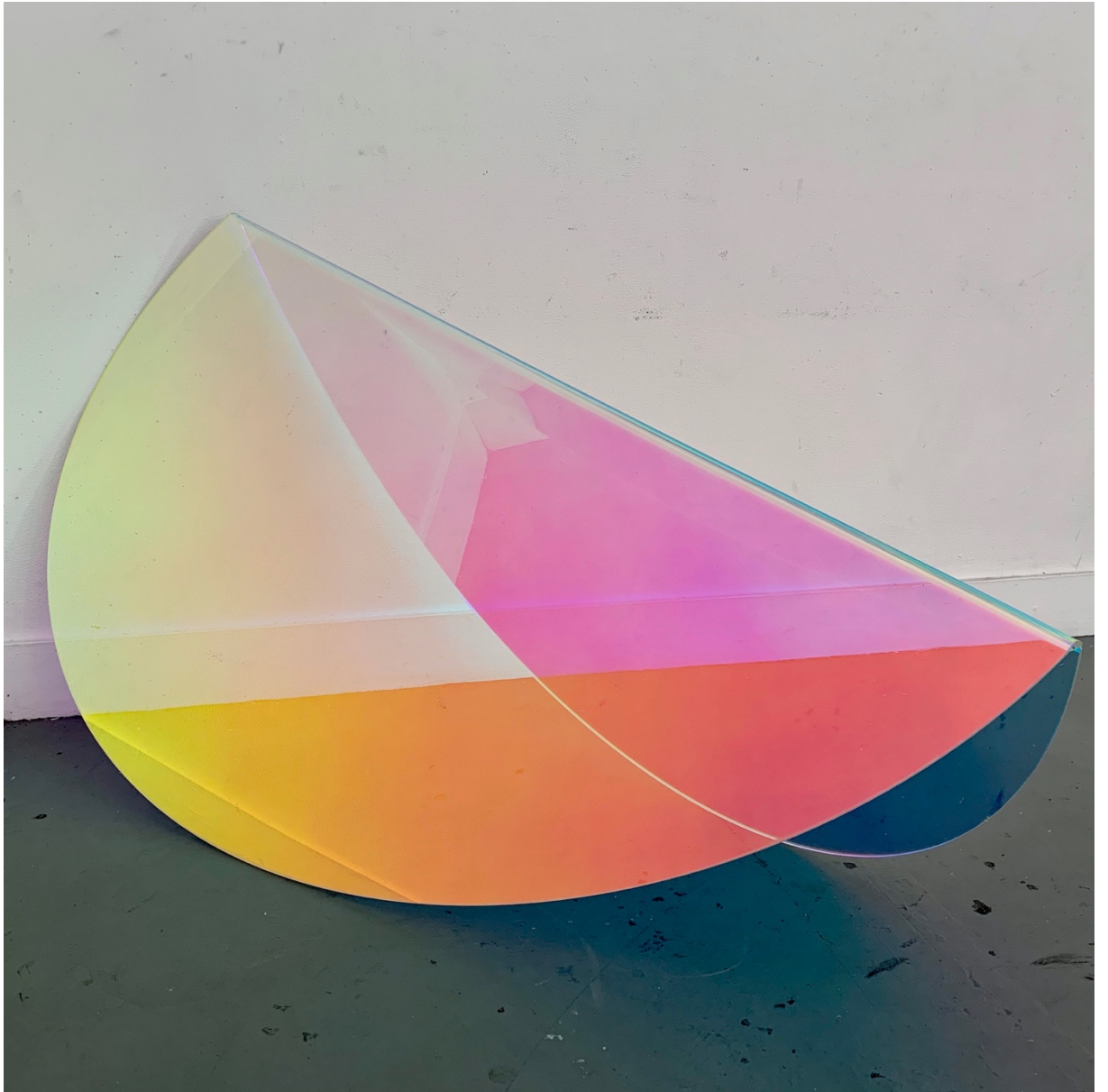
Anna Dudek, *Because It Happens*, 2019
Acrylic Perspex. 113cm x 51cm x 23cm



This Space of Time, 2019 – Maquette. Acrylic Perspex with dichroic film,
8.5cm x 29cm x 17cm



This Space of Time, 2019 – Maquette. Acrylic Perspex with dichroic film,
8.5cm x 29cm x 17cm. Installation in Rayner Hoff Project Space



This Space of Time I, 2019. Acrylic Perspex with dichroic film, 80cm x 147cm x 43cm.
Installation NAS Building 26.



This Space of Time I, 2019. Acrylic Perspex with dichroic film, 80cm x 147cm x 43cm.
Installation NAS Building 26.