

A loop and a tern plot

with chlorophyll

to transfer across matter again.

Maeve Connolly
To Unfold Indefinitely

There is a moment in Bea McMahon's *Volume* when a young woman, allowing her body to be toppled from a small rowing boat, disappears underwater and does not resurface. Her entry into the water is not dramatic; she does not jump or fall. Instead she is gently unbalanced by another passenger, as though her own body was an object over which she had little command. This event occurs in a sequence with the title 'to transfer across', a phrase that might describe the mundane action of the boat or suggest a more final crossing. Watching this element of *Volume* on a small screen, before encountering the work in full as an installation, I was reminded of Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*. This painting, usually interpreted as a depiction of the oarsman Charon conducting the deceased to the afterworld, is directly referenced in McMahon's two channel video installation *Reciprocal 0* (2007), featuring a lone hooded figure who dances at night on a traffic island enclosed by tall trees. Yet even if she sometimes employs art historical (and mythological) references in the composition of images and scenes, McMahon often stages interactions between actors, objects and places in order to explore multiple - and potentially conflicting - signifying systems. So the same actor might be cast, for example, as an ancient historical figure and a chemical process, and the actions performed might be drawn from a mythological

source or refer, much more abstractly, to the etymology of a word.



Still from *Reciprocal 0* (2007), two channel DV projection [duration 3:22; 9:58]

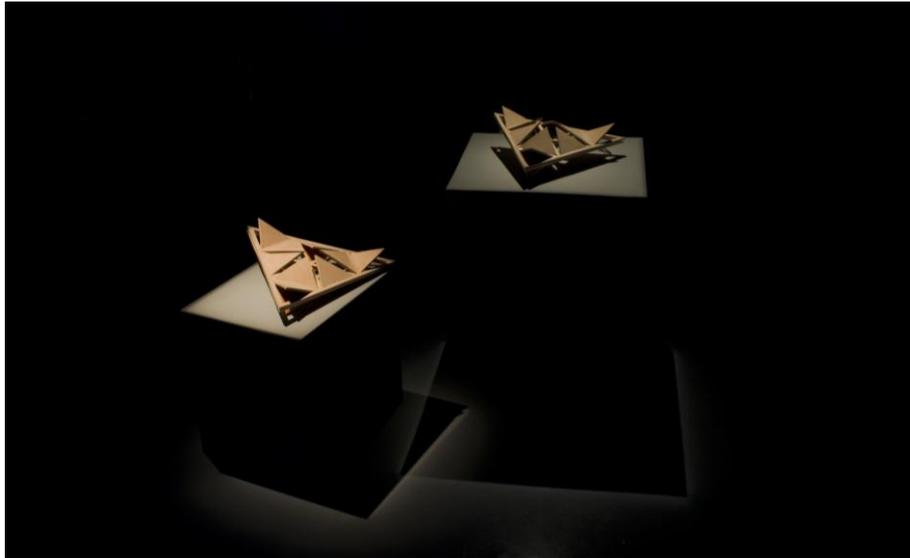
In this instance, 'to transfer across' refers both to physical passage and the word 'metaphor', from the Greek *meta* (over, across) and *pherein* (to carry, bear). While developing the body of work to which *Volume* belongs, McMahon also explored the etymology of metaphor through the experimental production of ceramic amphoras. Combining volume and surface, amphoras are containers that bear narrative decoration and, as ceramic objects, they are the solid form of a material that was itself once liquid. Her interest in material and conceptual objects - and the mutable relations between them - seems to parallel, and perhaps even extend beyond, a mode of inquiry that has been described as 'epistemic'. As theorised by Karin Knorr-Cetina within the context of

science studies, 'epistemic practice'¹ involves complex encounters with 'objects of knowledge', encounters that routinely take place within a laboratory environment. While it is possible to find parallels between the art studio and laboratory as sites of practice², artistic production also often extends from the studio (or other locations) into the gallery and other sites of exhibition. This quality of extension³ is particularly evident in McMahon's exhibition 'Root' at Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, consisting of *Volume* and two ceramic sculptures presented on spot lit plinths of different heights: *Skin Spectrum - Indigos and Reddish Yellows* and *Skin Spectrum - Greens and Browns*.

¹ Karin Knorr-Cetina, 'Objectual practice', in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds Theodor. R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr-Cetina & Eike von Savigny, London and New York: Routledge, 2001: 175-188.

² See Peter Galison and Caroline A. Jones, 'Trajectories of Production: Laboratories, Factories, Studios', *Laboratorium*, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Vanderlinden, Cologne: Dumont, 2001: 205-210.

³ My use of this term is informed mainly by Knorr-Cetina's account of objectual practice but also somewhat indebted to Marshall McLuhan's conception of new technologies as extensions of human senses. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill, 1964.



Skin Spectrum - Indigos and Reddish Yellows and *Skin Spectrum - Greens and Browns*. (2012) Ceramic 46cm x 40 cm x 10cm; installation Temple Bar Gallery and Studios; photo Ronan McCrea.

Volume is a 'moving image work' in multiple senses; it consists of a three channel HD synced video with sound and two kinetic sculptures, one of which is a three-sided rotating mirrored object that serves as a projection screen, its shiny surfaces coated with milk to reduce reflection. Parts of *Volume* are projected on a large, static screen, installed in one corner, and onto the mirrored object, which additionally appears as a kind of prop within the action, its reflective surface momentarily camouflaging its own presence and that of an actor. The water into which the young woman allows her body to fall is just one of several reflective substances encountered within the context of a multi-

layered exploration of perception, representation and objecthood, enacted in the meadows and waterways appearing on screen and extended into the gallery, where objects are encountered as moving images, reflections and material things. The 'drowning' of the young woman is in fact an allusion to the story of Hippasus, an ancient Greek mathematician allegedly thrown from a boat because his discovery of the square root of two challenged the Pythagorean theory of divine correspondence between numbers and the universe.

The exhibition takes its title both from the story of Hippasus and from the branching structure commonly deployed to visualise the theory of evolution, so it invokes two distinct instances of conflict between knowledge (or belief) systems. McMahon does not set out to illustrate or explain these beliefs, and instead presents interactions between characters and objects in which metaphorical, mythological and metaphysical frameworks for interpretation seem to overlap. So the body slipping into water is simultaneously a passage to another realm, a reference to the dissolution of concepts of divinity, and a transition between two states of being. *Volume* is described by McMahon in the press release for *Root*, as 'an examination of the light interchange at the surface of things', which involves conceiving of 'the site of the boundary of a body as a soft crossing or thoughtful crossing'. This statement refers in part to the bounding properties of skin and water, as surfaces that are permeable and yet capable of reflecting or absorbing light. So water is imagined as a kind of mirror, a surface for boats to move across, a

body to be entered, and a boundary that can be used to establish both divisions and connections between people and places.

Volume also responds specifically to the boundaries between water and land in the Dutch polder landscape of Het Twiske, where it was shot. This landscape is both 'untouched' (in the sense that it has been maintained as a polder) and profoundly 'made' because its status as land is the result of human labour. Skin, while not obviously mirror-like, also reflects light in varied ways and it too plays a role in the formation or alteration of boundaries between people and objects, and in the imagining of 'social bodies' whether understood as individuals or as collectives. McMahon is equally attentive to the material properties of substances such as film, milk and fired clay. Part one of *Volume* ('A loop and a tern') owes its form to notion of a twisted loop of film as a Möbius strip. A bird captured in flight on HD video is visible against the backdrop of a bright blue sky, but suddenly seems to fall into nothingness before reappearing on the left of the screen in horizontally reversed form. So rather than using the technique of 'looping' to create the illusion of continuous motion, McMahon treats the shot of the bird in motion as if it were filmic matter capable of being twisted.



Still from *Volume (2012) - Part 2. plot*; 3 channel synchronised HD video with sound and kinetic sculptures. Duration 11:41.

The focus on surfaces becomes even more pronounced in part two ('plot'), which seems at first to consist solely of a still image of stony ground overlaid with text, alternating between the words 'still' and 'moving'. But, as evidenced by the intermittent crawling of an insect, this sequence is actually composed of both still and moving images of the ground and so it draws attention to the act of perceiving (or misperceiving) motion. The relation between rock, insect and implied observer in 'plot' might also be an oblique reference to the destabilisation of the Pythagorean worldview wrought by Hippiasus. The divine order that Hippiasus disrupted was decidedly human-centred, so that motion and stasis would have been judged primarily in relation to human experience. Once this vantage point is contested the world can be conceived differently, as a planet

(orbiting around a much larger sun) on which insects, rocks and humans are always 'moving'. Part three of *Volume* ('with Chlorophyll') deploys much more conventional cinematic narrative techniques, introducing the young female protagonist who will subsequently topple passively from the boat. The camera follows as she walks purposefully through meadows near the water's edge, and a disembodied female voice is occasionally heard addressing others ("keep moving") or referring to earlier actions ("I've been here before"). There are also other vantage points on this landscape, and the camera subsequently moves through the grasses just above ground level, as though depicting the worldview of a much smaller creature.



Still from *Volume* (2012) - Part 3. with chlorophyll

Later in part three, the surface of the image appears to shimmer or distort, as though the action is being reflected in a watery mirror. This almost imperceptible visual distortion cues visitors to the presence of projected images on another surface - the mirrored object positioned at floor level in the gallery. Long grasses, shot from a low angle, are visible on this milky screen but they are not photographed directly - instead, they are reflections of the surrounding meadow. So as it begins to turn, at Het Twiske and in the gallery, the object presents 'itself' simultaneously as image, prop, kinetic sculpture and temporary combination of liquid and solid matter. Motionless during part four ('to transfer across'), the mirrored object and a second, slightly smaller, green kinetic sculpture also begin to rotate toward the close of part five of *Volume*, titled 'matter again'. First, the mirrored screen reflects images of pure colour produced using 35mm slide film and transposed to HD video.⁴ Then the green metal object, with a triangular form loosely resembling the *Skin Spectrum* ceramics, begins to spin as though its

⁴ This element of *Volume* might be read as an extension of the exploration of film as material substance, or more specifically as a response to differences between film and digital video. Thomas Elsaesser notes that traditional still photography and cinema produced luminosity through transparency but with the switch to digital technology, luminosity is achieved through refraction, opacity and saturation. Elsaesser discussed this issue in his keynote lecture, 'The Cinematic Dispositif After Film: Purification, Saturation of Mutual Interference', presented at the conference *Display/Dispositif : Aesthetic Modes of Thought*, Kunsthistorisches Institut, University of Cologne, May 10 2012.

purpose is to split (or harvest) the light reflected by the nearby turning screen.



Root installation view Temple Bar Gallery and Studios (2012); photo Ronan McCrea.

At this point the projected imagery of colour 'fields' gives way to a doubled shot of the female protagonist, standing against a white backdrop and holding one of the *Skin Spectrum* ceramics in front of her face. The rotations of the screen then begin to gather speed and the combination of rapid motion and a doubled image - emitted by two projectors - produces an illusion of depth similar to the effect created by holography. This effect is especially potent from a specific vantage

point exactly between the projectors, a position exactly between the twin pillars that form part of the architecture of the gallery. As the screen spins, its action suggests an attempt to somehow fuse the woman's body with the pale flesh-coloured sculpture she holds in her hands.



Superimposed stills from projection onto spinning screen in *Volume* (2012); *Part 5 matter again*

This action of the woman on screen, holding the object with which she appears (momentarily) to merge, resonates with a description of McMahon's practice found in the press release for *Root*, which notes that she 'handles readymade conventions and concepts and reworks them'. What does it mean to *handle* conventions and concepts as though they are material things? Knorr-Cetina's theorisation of epistemic practice offers a starting

point from which to consider the relationship between concepts and material things, as 'objects of knowledge'. From the outset, she is careful to distinguish epistemic objects from their everyday counterparts:

The everyday viewpoint, it would seem, looks at objects from the outside as one would look at tools or goods that are *ready to hand* or to be traded further. These objects have the character of closed boxes. In contrast, objects of knowledge appear to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely [...]. Since epistemic objects are always in the process of being materially defined, they continually acquire new properties and change the ones they have.⁵

Here, the term 'ready to hand' is used specifically to recall Heidegger's account of the ways in which objects tend to become transparent in use, as the unproblematic means to an end.⁶ Analysing the difference between objects and things in Heidegger's thinking, Graham Harman emphasises that the 'ready-to-hand' object *withdraws*, so to speak, into its readiness-to-hand, in order precisely to be genuinely ready-to-hand.⁷ Here I am especially interested in the idea of withdrawal, which implies a sort of movement or volition on the part of the object.

⁵ Knorr-Cetina, 181. Emphasis added.

⁶ Knorr-Cetina, 178.

⁷ Heidegger, cited by Graham Harman (with emphasis added) in 'Heidegger on Objects and Things', in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, Karlsruhe and Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM and MIT Press, 2005, 268.

Objects can lose this quality of ready-to-handness for several reasons and, as Harman notes, the best-known example in Heidegger's analysis is when a hammer breaks and 'makes us see it for the first time "as" a hammer', much the same way that 'earthquakes remind us of the importance of solid ground, while medical problems call our attention to our invisible reliance on healthy bodily parts'.⁸ Heidegger also allows for exceptions to the ready-to-handness of objects as a consequence of 'advanced theoretical behavior', which Harman describes as 'deliberately tearing objects from their invisible action and putting them openly on display "as" what they are'.⁹ Elsewhere, informed by Harman and by Merleau-Ponty, Francis Halsall has emphasised that the 'experience of art as art'¹⁰ also involves the suspension of normal perception, slowing or disabling it so that the very act of perception is made available as 'an object of perception itself'.¹¹ Consequently, he argues, art objects (like philosophy) can operate as ways of thinking, revealing the limits of knowledge and the incomprehensibility of the world. McMahon's practice can be situated in relation to a broader engagement with philosophy and science studies

⁸ Harman, 268.

⁹ Harman, 268.

¹⁰ Francis Halsall, 'Aesthetics for Moss Piglets, or Art Needs to be Weird because the World is Weird', *Forms of Imagining # 2: Project Arts Centre 2008*, edited by Tessa Giblin, Dublin: Project Arts Centre, 2012, 224.

¹¹ Halsall, 224. I discuss Halsall's ideas in relation to curatorial practice and media theory in Maeve Connolly, 'Moss Piglets, Meteorites and Mind-Games', *Fugitive Papers* Issue 3, Autumn 2012: 16-19. [www.fugitivepapers.org]

(and intersections between them) in contemporary art, and in 2007 her work was included in an exhibition taking its title from the concept of 'blackboxing' advanced by Bruno Latour, according to which 'technical work is made invisible by its own success'.¹² This show, curated by Tessa Giblin at Project Arts Centre, explored the various ways in which artists (and intellectuals) engage with 'discrete bodies of knowledge - finding concrete ways to address the increasing abstraction of complex mathematics and physics, and building back roads into politically unstable global scenarios where international reportage is diffused by popularising rhetoric and smoke-screens'.¹³

¹² This reference is drawn from Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹³ Press release for 'Blackboxing', November 1 - December 1, 2007, Project Arts Centre, Dublin
<http://projectartscentre.ie/archive/archive-va-detail/290-blackboxing>



Still from *Volume* (2012) - *Part 1. A loop and a tern*; image Kiki Lameer

While the concept of blackboxing is important in understanding how artistic practice can operate and even mediate between everyday and expert contexts, it cannot account for the ways in which objects of knowledge are actually experienced within artistic practice. If these objects lose their readiness-to-hand, does this mean that they no longer 'withdraw'? Perhaps they actually continue to move away, but at a different volition, because as objects of knowledge they constantly 'acquire new properties and change the ones they have'.¹⁴ Knorr-Cetina notes that in Heideggerian philosophy, knowledge processes are imagined to involve the objectifying of objects, through detachment.¹⁵ But she focuses instead on

¹⁴ Knorr-Cetina, 181.

¹⁵ Knorr-Cetina, 187.

differentiation between subject and object, theorising a kind of 'being-in-relation' in which objects of knowledge are conceived as 'processes and projections rather than definitive things'.¹⁶ The role of desire is very important in her account, because objects of knowledge are never 'fully attained'. They are revealed, through observation, inquiry and material definition, not as *themselves* but rather as 'representations or stand-ins for a more basic lack of object'.¹⁷ The affective dimension is not incidental but rather integral to processes of scientific (and artistic) inquiry because, as theorised by Knorr-Cetina, the epistemic object 'uniquely matches the "structure of wanting"' outlined in the Lacanian schema of the 'mirror stage', which involves an impulse toward an image of apparent wholeness, projected onto others.¹⁸ There is consequently a complex and interdependent relation between objects of knowledge and desire, because they are bound up with 'wants' that cannot be entirely fulfilled, and are integral to the continuation of object-oriented practice.¹⁹

¹⁶ Knorr-Cetina, 181.

¹⁷ Knorr-Cetina, 181.

¹⁸ Knorr-Cetina, 185.

¹⁹ Knorr-Cetina, 185.



Still from *Volume* (2012) - Part 4. *to transfer across*.

I find this account compelling because it emphasises both the material instantiation of objects of knowledge at various points in a process of inquiry and their simultaneous condition as constantly 'unfolding structures of absences: as things that continually "explode" and "mutate" into something else'.²⁰ While 'withdrawing' objects might be imagined to recede or shrink, unfolding objects seem to invite a kind of pursuit. But it is possible that even if pursued they will always remain somehow out of reach, not least because of the fact that scientific inquiry - like artistic inquiry - frequently involves projections of ideal or imagined objects. Epistemic practice is also marked by the notion of extension beyond the laboratory, and Knorr-Cetina cites the example of a computer being

²⁰ Knorr-Cetina, 182. Emphasis added.

unfolded into 'signifying screens and subscreens, which stimulates in users an epistemic and affective relationship with the instrument'.²¹ As this example suggests, affective aspects of objects of knowledge can carry over to everyday settings - possibly in ways that are analogous to the action of 'transfer' explored by McMahon, through reference to physical motion and metaphor. The example of the computer and its users also demonstrates that objects of knowledge may be shared and articulated through the actions of communities or groups.

Through her handling of concepts and material things, McMahon's work makes manifest the mutable characteristic of objects of knowledge as they unfold indefinitely. Her work also seems attuned to the affective dimension of 'objectual practice' and to the structure of wanting that is bound up with imagined images of wholeness. It is perhaps for this reason that mirrored and reflective surfaces are so pervasive in her practice, sometimes figuring as a means to explore failures or limits of representation. These themes find expression in an installation from 2008, *[in,the] visible state*, incorporating video projections onto two mirrors coated with buttermilk. This work is replete with material and textual references to reflective surfaces, ranging from close-up shots of the viscous surface of the human eyeball to the story of a Dublin university campus, where a large square that might have served as a space

²¹ Knorr-Cetina, 184.

of social gathering (or protest) was instead transformed into a shallow lake.²²



InDivisible (2010), synched 2 channel HD video [7:48]; installation view The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh

InDivisible (2010) also draws attention to limited or restricted visibility, and prefigures aspects of McMahon's exploration of boundaries and bodies in *Volume*. Made on residency in Pittsburgh, *InDivisible* includes elements shot by two cameras positioned on a

²² For a more detailed discussion see Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books and University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 198-203.

device that replicates the short distance between human eyes, and it has been contextualised through reference to Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, whose protagonist states in the opening paragraph; 'I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.' Even though this work was devised for viewing with 3D glasses, McMahon does not attempt to create a wholly convincing illusion of three dimensional space. In fact several sequences contain entirely different images for each eye, and these images (of creatures such as lions and eagles) compete for the viewer's attention, drawing the eye out of the frame and toward the physical environment of the gallery installation. *Volume* continues this investigation of perception and visibility, but materially and conceptually extends it through the production and display of objects, like the mirrored kinetic sculpture and the *Skin Spectrum* ceramic, which have a doubled existence inside and outside the 'frame'. As a result, the exploration of the surface of things that she enacts within the landscape of Het Twiske is unfolded into the exhibition, transforming the gallery into a space where objects of knowledge are shared.

In 2012, Temple Bar Gallery + Studios (TBG+S) embarks on a series of commissioned exhibitions, in which artists are invited to produce a solo exhibition specifically for our exhibition space in Dublin city centre. Bea McMahon is the second artist to take part in this series and this publication has been produced for the exhibition, 'Root'. The publication and exhibition are made possible through the support of The Arts Council of Ireland and the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam.

Bea McMahon has described this publication as an artwork in itself and a final piece in the exhibition 'Root', a body of work which presents concepts of boundaries such those which exists between water and land, numbers and the universe, skin and what lies underneath. The writings of Maeve Connolly in this publication illuminate these preoccupations.

Through our national and international studio residencies and our exhibition programme, we at TBG+S support artists to make and exhibit their work. By working with artists like Bea McMahon from the early spark of an idea through to its realisation in our gallery, we manifest our ethos to share with our communities.

Rayne Booth

Exhibition Curator
Temple Bar Gallery + Studios



Tern photographs © Kiki Lameer

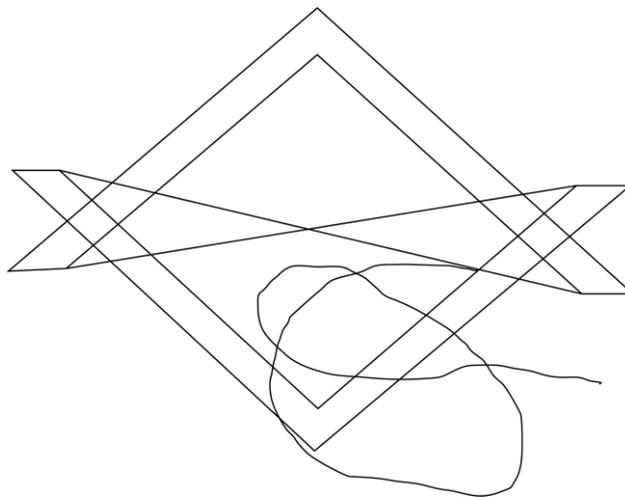
Pieta, Bellini, Giov. (c.1431-1516) Scuola Grande di San Rocco,
Venice, Italy

Ulster Scots with spirals from Giovanni Franscesco Cresi, *Il Perfetto
Scrittore*, Rome, 1570

Plant drawing, The artistic Crafts Series of technical Handbooks,
writings and illuminating, Edward Johnston, 1915

'Root' installation shots at Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, 2012,
Ronan McCrea

Jesus and Chlorophyll by Bea McMahon
with an essay by Maeve Connolly 'To Unfold Indefinitely'



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