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The Pattern Exchange

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Fredric Jameson, amongst many others, writes of the schizophrenic as a subject symbolic of the postmodern age¹: as we become less fixed or stable in parallel with the incessant flux of contemporary capitalism, we begin to experience time and space in radically different terms. As he writes; now *'temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and "material"...* But what might for us seem a desirable experience... is here felt as a loss, as *"unreality."*² In such a view, perception of the contemporary world is coupled with a peculiar estrangement from the present moment. The contemporary subject feels - and has recourse to - *all times at all times*, within a capricious present that paradoxically eludes her. Within such a horizon, subjectivity, labour, and even places become subjected to radical destabilization also.

One symptom common in schizophrenic behaviour is a kind of pattern creation - of attributing sense where usually there is none, and of perceiving hyperbolic webs of meaning in which the protagonist plays a typically central, if not messianic, role. This experience goes by the name of *apophenia*. Considered analogously, the postmodern subject operates similarly, striving to create meaning and patterns of sense within a dizzying and multiple experience of reality. I often think of contemporary art as one such attempt: functioning as a sense or pattern-making machine, it grants a kind of unresolved and uneasy traction on the contemporary world. *The Pattern Exchange* offers a number of such artistic points of entry - each cognisant of a world that seems to grow ever more vertiginous and abstract. All of these entry points, in their own way, work to glean some sense of this world - even, perhaps, when there is none.

It was these thoughts that occupied me as I studied Sarah Lincoln's digital film work, *how things float* (2014). In it, Lincoln steadies her gaze on the Waterford coastline, with particular attention being paid to the set of material conditions that convene there - conditions that slowly dim the fishing industries, and further contract the economic

vigor of Ireland's southeast. Sonically and visually, there is a degree of disorientation to the work, as though trying to test out and discern this place's particular pattern. A picturesque seascape of a summer's day is cut off hastily, and seeps into a wild vista, from the deck of a trawler. The Waterford coastline is unearthed as a site of convergence: from EU fishing quotas to tourism, coastal erosion, and economic stasis, meaning is created through forces external to its remit. No longer singular, it becomes the site of a clouding *all-at-onceness*.

This *all-at-onceness*, too, is to be sensed within contemporary experiences of subjectivity, and in particular, labour. It has become a commonplace to state that as industrial production is outsourced to the so-called developing nations, the Western worker is increasingly subject to the demands of what is termed *'immaterial' labour*³. Though valorised through ideals like 'autonomy' and creativity, this shift introduces an even further abstraction with regard to the conditions of contemporary labour. At the same time, though, the distinction between material and immaterial labour is misleading: *all* capitalist labour is founded on a fundamental abstraction - namely, the abstraction of the commodity form, wherein, as Marx claimed, the relations between people come to assume the relations between *things*⁴. Both material and immaterial labour, then, are founded on fundamental processes of displacement, and of abstraction.

Sarah Browne's work presented here, which assumes a two-pronged form - a series of small black and white laser prints (*Hand to Mouth*, 2014); and a modified clock, *Zero Hour Contract* (2013), alongside a Shetland Islands knitting belt - appears to similarly problematise this distinction between material and immaterial labour⁵. The series that comprises *Hand to Mouth*, constructed through the physical weaving of mutually incongruous images, cause a shock of recognition: in them, the contrast between the craft-industries - here, represented through historical images depicting women of the Shetland knitting industries - and the contemporary freelance worker, interminably multitasking and '24/7', is undone. The Scottish women, too, were multitaskers, invariably on

the brink of precarity: to such an effect, the knitting belt was often used – and continues to be used – so as to allow the worker to carry out other tasks simultaneously. Browne reneges on the conceptualisation of any one idealised labour: instead, each form – material or immaterial – is the net result of external – namely economic and social – demands. In so doing, she problematises the dominant thinking around contemporary immaterial or ‘creative’ labour as a simple good, or as an end in itself.

Quite understandably, the ways in which we attempt to gain traction on this contemporary world often involve forms of ritual: comforting in their make-up, rituals reinscribe the subject within a wider and more vital set of meanings. They also stop time, in a sense, by connecting this ritual to those that have happened, and those that will happen again, in the future. Gareth Kennedy’s works, *I feel*, operate in an analogous fashion: his ritual, though, wears the signs of its fabrication freely. Here Kennedy starts anew, commissioning an object – a butter churn – and creating its accompanying tradition. Made for a 2011 public art commission in a rural county Kerry town, the project is documented through a nostalgic super 8 film, *IKEA Butter Churn for Gneeveguilla* (2011), which tracks the churn’s progression through the town’s main street, dragged along high atop a flat bed lorry. Finally, butter made by it is ceremoniously put into the ground. Alongside this film, the churn itself is presented with some buckets, atop the IKEA counter from which it is made.

At the same time, though, ritual is almost incommensurate with the contemporary moment. Through its composition of IKEA materials, Kennedy’s butter churn strives at a kind of *deep* time, to which it is structurally foreclosed. IKEA, which as Jameson might say, remodels the modern *as style*⁶, is synonymous with the short-life, mass-produced epiphenomena of the contemporary. Kennedy’s ritual, then, is to me one of contemporaneity itself: it comprises a heterogeneous conflation of styles and times, which at no point reaches resolution. This contradictory – and absolutely contemporary – sense of ritual is for me also present in Paul Bokslag’s work, *Resonance* (2015). This takes the form of six large paper works, combined so as to form a sculptural construction that bisects the passage of light into the gallery space. Cumulatively, the paper seems to teeter on the edge of its collapse: one more cut, and the balance of empty space and paper would be disrupted irrevocably. *Resonance*, then, is an exercise in control, and in instinct. The hand instinctively knows – or feels – when to stop. These parameters, then, are not learned, but tested out and intuited: much like with the ritual, the demands of the work are wholly given through an engagement with the material, in the moment. In this contemporary moment, though, ritual becomes a sequence of disconnected moments, adrift and almost like the process of Bokslag’s paper cuts – each mark made separately, and disjointed from the next.

Let’s return briefly to place. Many theorists have discussed the postmodern turn as one encompassing the supersession of space, over time⁷. In short, this hinges on a reorientation of value – it is in terms of place, and of space, that the contemporary moment is staged: more

importantly, who has access to these places and spaces? Privatisation of once-public spaces (or indeed services) create an economy of *access*: increasingly, these spaces recede – or are *receded* – from view. Fiona McDonald’s work here is similarly marked by a preoccupation with access, through a study of Dublin’s Great South Wall. Completed from 1730-1731, the embankment constitutes an iconic landmark, constructed to bisect Dublin Bay, in so doing rendering it more amenable to trade. The Wall juts out into the Bay, the Poolbeg Lighthouse – its days also now possibly numbered – towards its most easterly frontier. McDonald traces its path, both historically and physically: on one wall, five spare diagrammatic pictures illustrate the public’s access to the wall, over time (*Mapping: Public Access*, and *2015 Mapping Levels*, 2015); alongside these, a slide projector on the floor documents her route along its reaches through a series of light drenched stills (*Walking the Wall*, 2015). The Great South Wall, too, is under threat. It is now a site of conflicting interests, economic, political, preservationist or otherwise. It appears though as Dublin grows strangely *atemporal* – 24/7, and all times, all at once – it grows ever more contested on spatial terms.

Above are some slight thoughts in response to *The Pattern Exchange*. The works, as I claimed above, offer different paths and responses to a world that grows – at least in some respects – increasingly imperceptible, and maddening. Their approaches, too, are slight: each strives to reorient a certain thinking about this or that, or to muddy one particular way of looking at the world. Their world is the contemporary one: by all accounts fast as light, weightless, and even invisible. But the artists offer a kind of sense-making machine – or even a pattern – a way of implicating the viewer within situations seemingly exterior and unrelated to them. They build spaces to which we have access.

The Pattern Exchange 6 February – 4 April 2015

Paul Bokslag, Sarah Browne, Gareth Kennedy, Sarah Lincoln, Fiona McDonald, Studio Weave. Curated by Rosie Lynch and Hollie Kearns

¹ See also Deleuze & Guattari (1972) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and (1980) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Also, Jean Baudrillard (1983) *The Ecstasy of Communication*.

² Fredric Jameson (1983) *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, pg. 120.

³ For example Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) *Immaterial Labour*, in Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy*, pp. 132-146.

⁴ Karl Marx (1990) *Capital vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy* London: Penguin, pg. 373-4.

⁵ Browne’s two contributions to the exhibition ran sequentially, with *Zero Hour Contract* and the knitting belt being installed first, and the series *Hand to Mouth* after. Unfortunately I did not have an opportunity to see the first instantiation.

⁶ Jameson (2002) *A Singular Modernity*, London & New York: Verso.

⁷ Most recently Jameson (2015) *The Aesthetics of Singularity*, *New Left Review* 92, March-April 2015, pp. 101-132.

Image credit: All photos by Kasia Kaminska.

Foreground: Fiona McDonald, *Walking the Wall*, 2013 Background left: Paul Bokslag, *Resonance*, 2015 Background Right: Gareth Kennedy, *IKEA Butter Churn for Gneeveguilla*, 2011.

Right: Gareth Kennedy *IKEA Butter Churn for Gneeveguilla*, 2011, Left, Sarah Brown, studio object and *Zero Hour Contract*, 2013 Paul Bokslag, *Resonance*, 2015