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Andrew Bick

“To learn the game of seeing, like anything else in life, takes patient practice, because, unfortunately, we generally look without seeing. The rules are inside each of us, and only experience can show how well you’re doing at it.” (Willys de Castro, *Folha da Noite*, 1959)

The paintings of Andrew Bick can perhaps best be described as contradictory constructivist. They overtly refer to historical Constructivism and Concrete Art, while at the same time subverting the rigid divisions between the different camps existing at the time, such as construction vs. composition or the grid vs. gesture. Bick’s interest in the British successors of Constructivism, namely Construction and Systems Art, is not only mirrored in his works, but also in his activity as a curator. Curiously enough, the British Constructivist artists are not as acknowledged as their Russian, Swiss and Brazilian equivalents. Today, especially Brazilian Concretists and Neoconcretists such as Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape and Lygia Clark have gained widespread recognition. Whereas the influence of artists like Max Bill and Richard Lohse on these movements is well known and documented, British Constructivist artists have seldom exhibited alongside them. This essay will look at some convergences between historical Constructivism and more recent artistic productions, connecting these to British Construction and Systems Art and to Bick’s sustained interest in this field.

In the 1950s, the Neoconcrete movement in Brazil and the British Systems artists were distancing themselves

from historical Constructivism and Cubism; they criticised the movements for their “dangerous hypertrophy of rationalism”<sup>1</sup>. Rather than attempting to overcome these complications through Abstract Expressionism like many of their European and North American counterparts, the Neoconcretists found remedy in chance, a method that had already been discovered and applied by Dadaism. Whereas the principles of chance are highly rational and stochastic, its results can never be foreseen. One important landmark of this movement was the 1959 “Book-Poem” exhibition, in which works by Lygia Pape, Ferreira Gullar, Willys de Castro, Reynaldo Jardim and Theon Spanúdis were shown. On this occasion, Gullar, the author of the “Neoconcretist Manifesto” from the same year, introduced concrete poetry to Brazilian Constructivism. In the exhibition, he presented the results of his experiments with poems and their visual and syntactic order. The artists treated book pages as ready-mades and by relying on chance, new poems were created and subsequently integrated in their works, one important example of which are Willys de Castro’s “Cartazes-poemas” (Poster-Poems) from 1959.

At the time, Constructivists were also experimenting with mathematical systems. Starting from a set of rules, they allowed for coincidence to create new configurations that they would not have conceived themselves, and that were to be free of style and the artist’s personal handwriting.

<sup>1</sup> Ferreira Gullar (1959), *Neoconcretist Manifesto*, *October* 69 (Summer 1994), p.91–95.

As T.J. Demos has noted, “(...) while the grid indicates the logic of scientific rationality, the use of chance implies its total rejection.”<sup>2</sup> Both chance in concrete poetry and the reliance on mathematical formula were responses to the over-determined developments occurring in art at that point. The attempt to eliminate arbitrariness and subjectivity of artistic choices and aesthetic decisions was also a reaction to the hierarchical political systems of that time. British Construction artists such as Victor Pasmore, Kenneth and Mary Martin or Anthony Hill continued to use mathematical permutations in their work, which permitted them to avoid dependency and to originate new and unexpected outcomes. Or as British Systems artist Peter Lowe said about syntactic art in an interview from 2005, referring to a quote by William Blake: “I must create a system or be a slave to another man’s.”<sup>3</sup>

The system Andrew Bick developed for his painterly process takes its departure from his own recent work. He digitalises grids that consist of mainly triangular outlines from his paintings, and uses them as base for new works. While projecting the grid on the undercoat of a new painting, he copies the lines onto its surface. Subsequently, he paints over a number of them and creates new fields within the grid, some of which are translucent, others opaque. The rigid method of the grid configures a system that hence allows

<sup>2</sup> T.J. Demos (2005), *Zurich Dada: The Aesthetics of Exile*, in eds. Leah Dickerman & Matthew S. Witkovsky, *The Dada Seminars*, Washington: National Gallery of Art, p.22.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Lowe interviewed by Alan Fowler, PhD research student, Southampton University (2005). Retrieved from [www.peterlowe.plus.com/pages/page1.html](http://www.peterlowe.plus.com/pages/page1.html), 23 March 2013.

him to follow, perforate or play with it. While his research into Constructivism shows in his paintings, he breaks with the rules of both historical Constructivists and Systems artists. Rather than avoiding subjective aesthetic choices altogether, his method oscillates between the system and added gestural brushstrokes that subvert it. It is a practice that departs from certainty, yet simultaneously problematises and contradicts it. It may be for this reason that Bick has not exhibited his own work alongside British Systems artists in his practice as a curator, because they are ultimately concerned with different problems. Bick’s method thus dwells in Construction, yet comments on it from a metaperspective, and is in that sense also deliberately contradictory.

In Brazil, the Neoconcretist movement had a strong effect on subsequent artistic production, an effect that lasts until today, whereas equivalent British artists have neither received the same attention nor wielded the same influence. This has many reasons, one of which may have to do with the impact of Abstract Expressionism and the so-called Britart of the 1990s. However, it seems important to reconsider Constructivist and Systems Art today and to re-think their positioning within art history. For instance, one can draw an immediate connection between the beginnings of socially and politically engaged Russian and European Constructivism that aimed at merging art and life, to Neoconcrete and British Systems Art that forthrightly engage the viewer. This thought shall be further developed in the following passages of this text.

Both Brazilian Neoconcretists and British Constructivists considered art to be in a crisis during Modernism. Artists were increasingly exploring the possibilities of making art outside of traditional media and categories. Process art and the “Theory of the Non-Object” from Gullar<sup>4</sup> were influential during that time. As much as Neoconcretists relied on chance and concrete poetry to affect artistic production and to eliminate all personal handwriting, they were also aiming at activating the viewers by releasing them from their contemplative passive position. De Castro’s “Objetos ativos” (Active objects) are specifically interesting in this context: he addressed the problems of the two-dimensional surface and real depth by considering the edges of his paintings and making these usually neglected areas central elements of his work. The “Objetos ativos” were intended as a direct appeal to the viewer. A spectator could no longer stand before the artwork and only see it from the frontal plane, but had to move around it in order to experience it fully. Likewise, the relationship between painting, sculpture and architecture is vital for British Constructivists such as Hill or Systems artists such as Steele. As for Bick, he aims to create real space in his works rather than the illusion of depth. As a result, the three-dimensionality of his paintings is composed of actual space, of objects such as paint and material that are added onto the

4 Ferreira Gullar (2007), *Experiência neoconcreta: momento-limite da arte*, São Paulo: Cosac Naify. Gullar argued that by rejecting the frame in their works, artists such as Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian abandoned fictional space and entered into real space. Kurt Schwitter's “Merzbau” is another example of how the division between fictional, illusive space and real, everyday space was overcome.

surface, and which can be seen through the sometimes more, sometimes less translucent layers of material. For that reason, the timely dimension of experiencing art is pivotal for his work. The different layers of paint, marker pen and wax create a depth that can never be perceived simultaneously, but only in a timely successive progression, thus requiring a different agency on behalf of the spectator.

Departing from Construction, a connection can even be established to socially engaged art and practices that require the participation of the audience today. At the time of de Castro’s “Objetos ativos” and Gullar’s experiments with concrete poetry, Lygia Clark was developing her “Bichos” (Creatures). These moveable aluminium sculptures are the result of her research into the deconstruction of the elements of traditional painting. The “Bichos” consist only of the elements of line, plane and surface. The planes are connected through hinges and can be moved by the spectator, thus creating different shapes and constellations. Depth and the play between varying surfaces, at times covering a plane and at other times revealing it, function similarly to Bick’s multi-layered paintings. Most importantly, the research by Clark, Oiticica and Pape at the time was concerned with the active engagement of the audience, rather than contemplative reflection. Here again, the intersection between concrete art and Dada is striking. As George Maciunas writes in an essay from 1962, both movements were directed “(...) against the artificial

separation of a performer from [the] audience, or creator and spectator, of life and art (...).”<sup>5</sup>

Only five years later, Hélio Oiticica would introduce his concept of the “supra-sensorial” as “an attempt to generate creative exercises through increasingly open propositions, dispensing with even the object as it has come to be categorized. These are not painting-sculpture-poem fusions, palpable works, though they may exhibit this aspect; they are directed at the senses in order that, through them, through ‘total perception’, they may lead the individual to a ‘suprasensation’, to the expansion of his usual sensory capacities [...], linked to the quotidian.”<sup>6</sup> The ultimate goal was for spectators to be fully activated through art by involving all of their senses. The social dimension of integrating art and life, which historical Constructivists aimed

5 George Maciunas (1962), Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art, in eds. Charles Harrison & Paul J. Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2002, p. 729. Maciunas again describes the mathematical framework or method as crucial for creating concrete art: “Further departure from [the] artificial world of abstraction is affected by the concept of indeterminacy and improvisation. Since artificiality implies human pre-determination, contrivance, a truer concretist rejects pre-determination of final form in order to perceive the reality of nature, the course of which, like that of man himself is largely indeterminate and unpredictable. Thus an indeterminate composition approaches greater concretism by allowing nature [to] complete its form in its own course. This requires the composition to provide a kind of framework, an “automatic machine” within which or by which, nature (either in the form of an independent performer or indeterminate-chance compositional methods) can complete the artform, effectively and independently of the artist-composer. Thus the primary contribution of a truly concrete artist consists in creating a *concept* or a *method* by which form can be created independently of him, rather than the form or structure. Like a mathematical solution such a composition contains a beauty in the method alone.” George Maciunas (1962), Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art, in eds. Charles Harrison & Paul J. Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2002, p. 728–729.

6 Hélio Oiticica (1967), Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial, in eds. Guy Brett, Catherine David, Chris Dercon, Luciano Figueiredo and Lygia Pape, *Hélio Oiticica*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1993, p. 130.

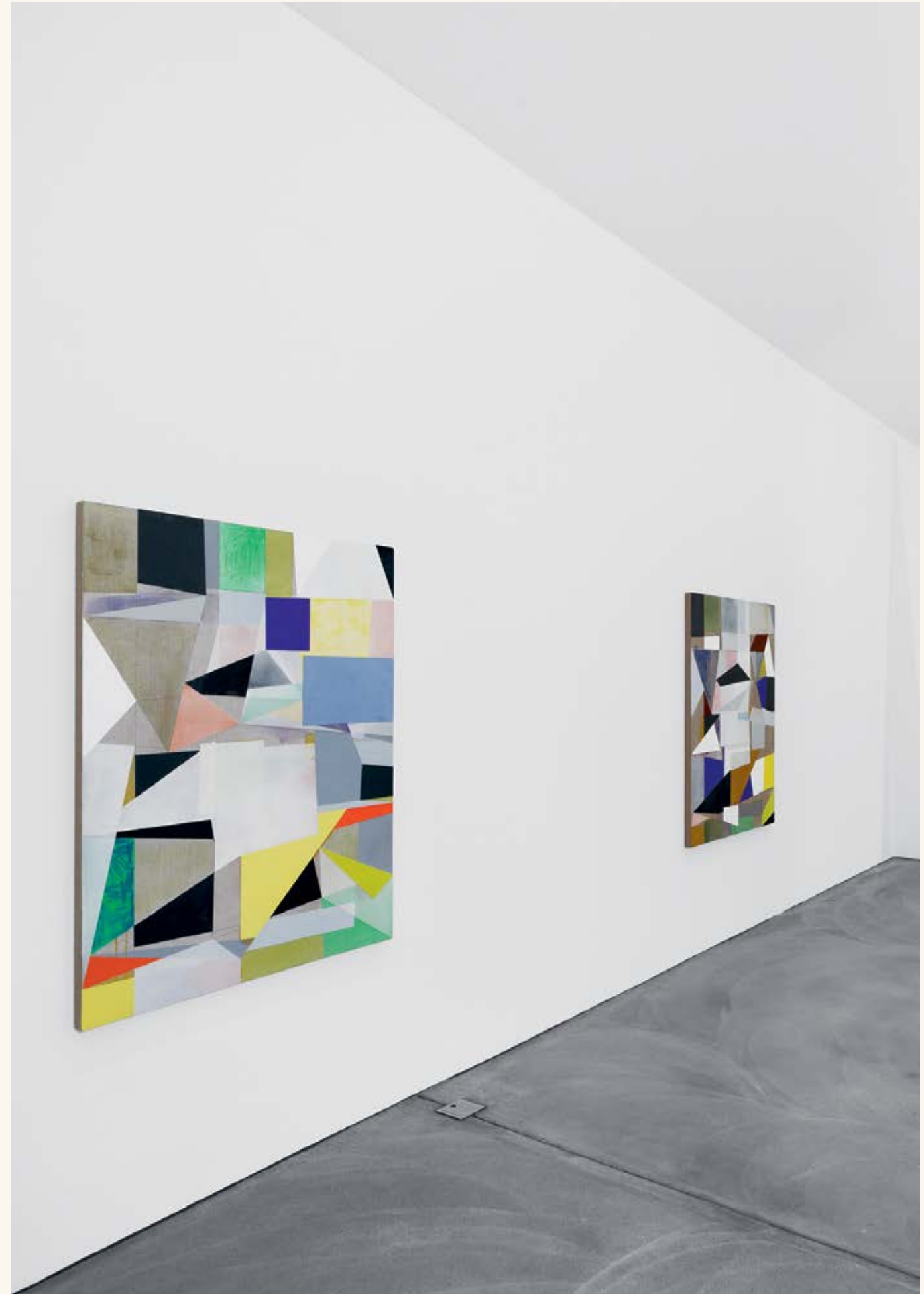
to accomplish, was still on the Neo-concretist agenda. Perhaps most strikingly, the relation between painting, sculpture and poetry that British Construction artists are interested in, and the dissolution of the object in process art, performance or contemporary relational art were already being addressed then.

As has been shown, besides the intersections of mathematical systems and chance in Neoconcrete, Construction and Systems Art, the spectatorial agency is a crucial connecting link between them. Andrew Bick’s work as an artist and as a curator brings these strands together. His work offers a contemporary meta-perspective, while he continues his research into the potentialities of constructive art. With that said, as active engagement of the audience remains a relevant aspect in contemporary art today, the historical correlations between Brazilian Constructivist and Neoconcrete art and the British Construction and Systems artists touched on in this text deserve genuine re-evaluation.

Stefanie Hessler is a curator and writer based in Germany and Sweden. She has curated exhibitions such as “Love Triangle” at the Goethe-Institut & Instituto Cervantes, Stockholm; “Thinking and Speaking” at Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm; “The Return of the Object” at Invaliden1, Berlin; “Performing Recalcitrance” at the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm; “Marjetica Potrč. Caracas: Dry Toilet” at Die Ecke Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago de Chile; and contributed to “Contaminaciones Contemporáneas” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago de Chile. Hessler holds a Master of Arts degree in Curating Art from Stockholm University, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Zeppelin University in Germany.

## New and Recent Works

von Bartha Garage, Basel  
2008

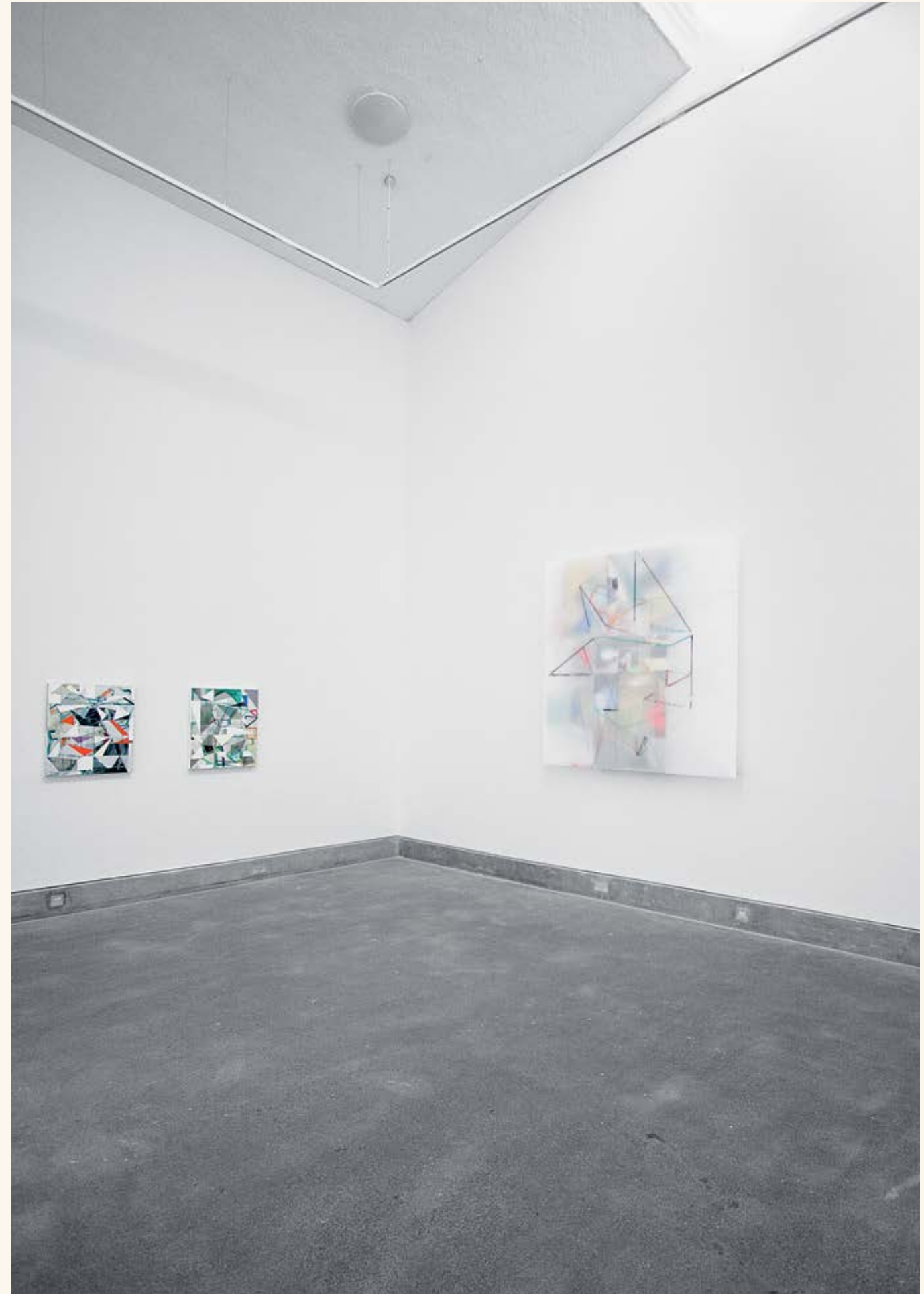






Slow Magic

The Bluecoat, Liverpool  
2009







Systems for Hesitation

Hales Gallery, London  
2009



School Studies:  
New Work and Selected Works,  
1993 onwards

von Bartha Garage, Basel  
2012









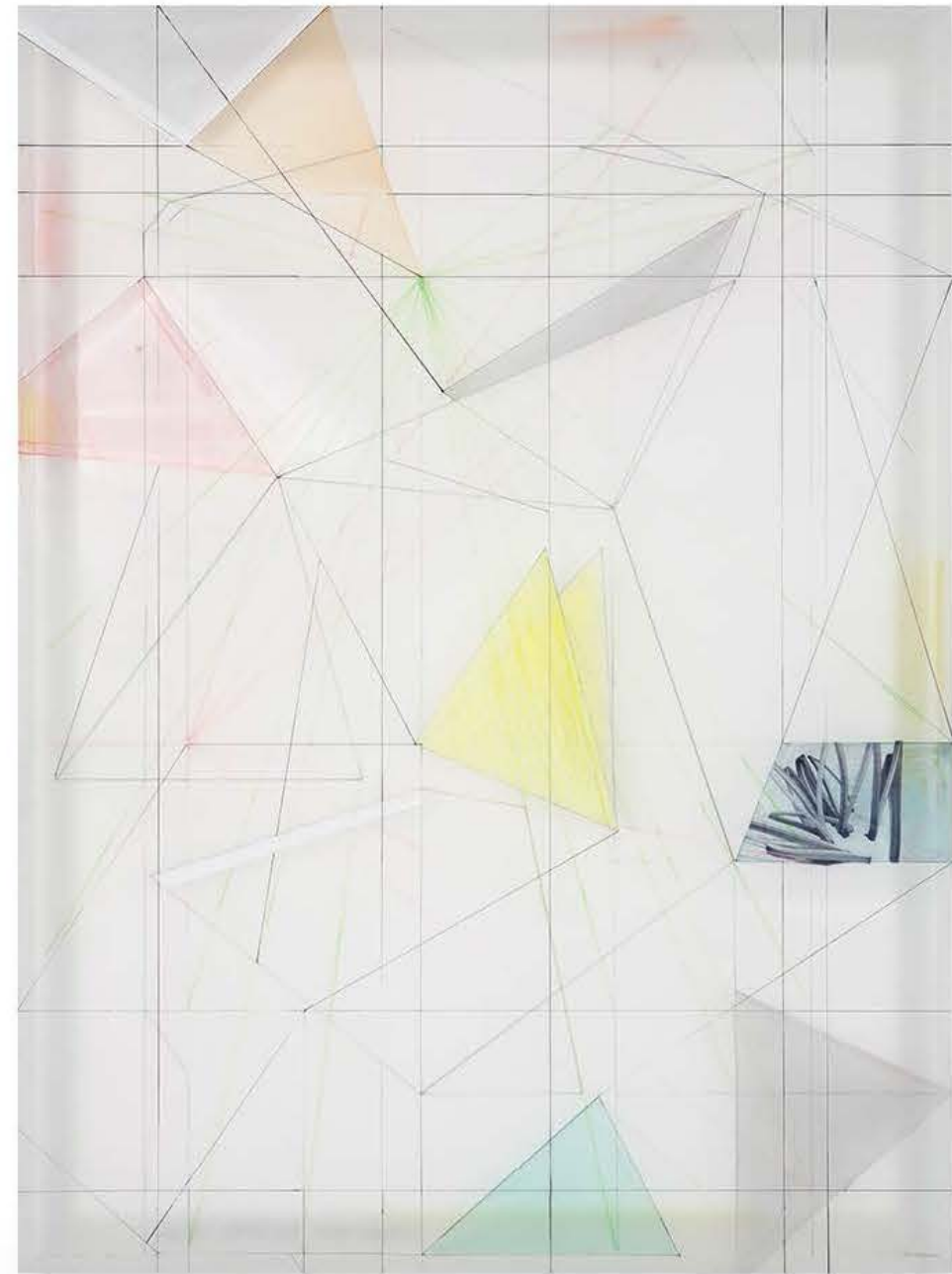


Trauser-Shirth [faded]



Variant t-s [linen] B







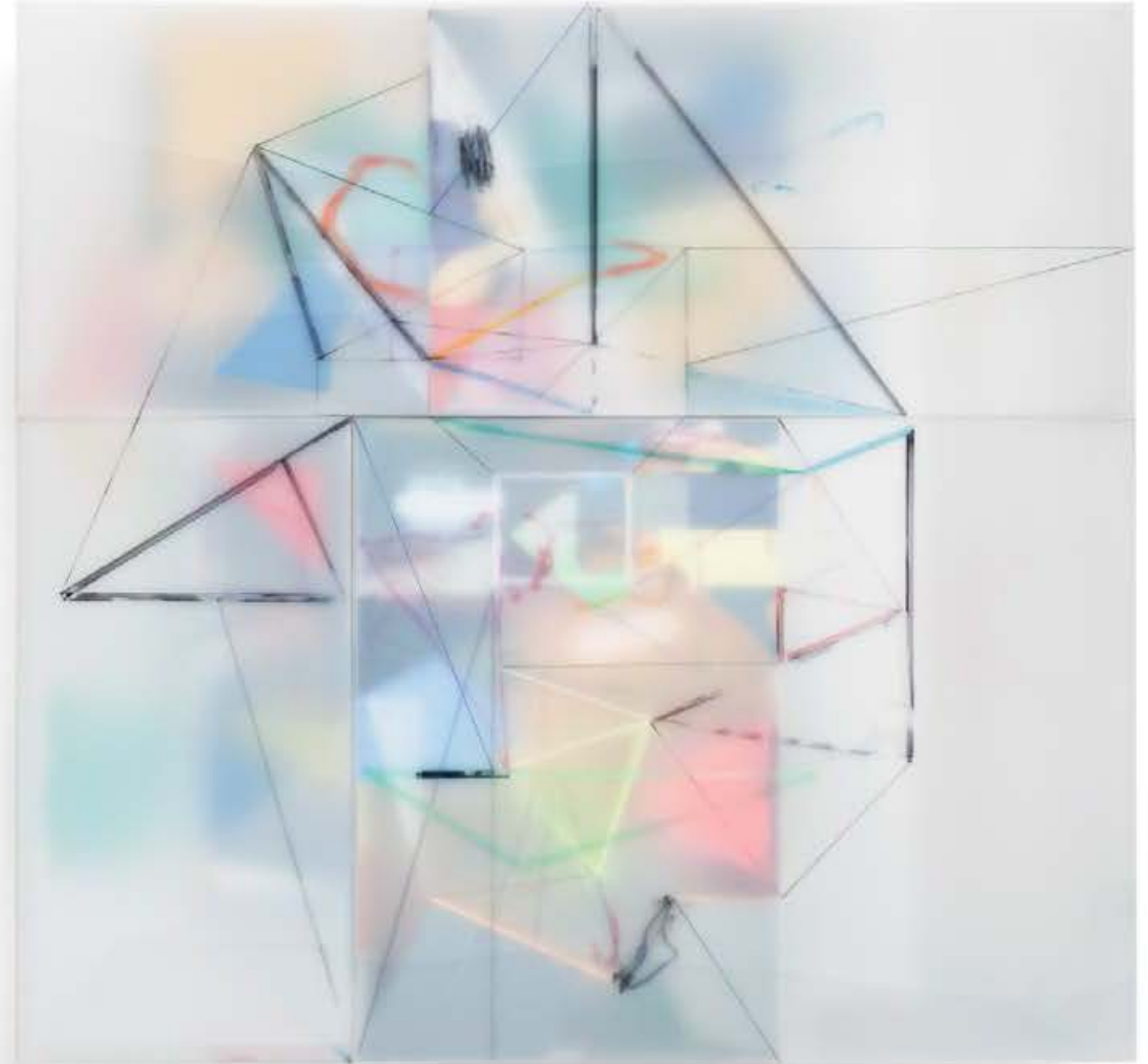


OGV [spider] B



OGV [spider] Dirty C





Memory Farm



Variant t-s [linen] F d-s



OGVDS-VAR [compendium] 1



OGVDS-VAR [compendium] 2



Variant t-s [linen] E









OGVDS [detail] C



OGVDS [detail] A



Variant t-s [linen] doubled



Exit Variant [tilted] A



OGVDS 75% [Ghost] #2



OGVDS 75% [Ghost] #3







Variant t-s [flat and tilted]

Index	OGVDS-VAR [compendium] #2 2011–2012 76×64×3cm acrylic, oil paint, pencil, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	Two Part Drawing, Balinskelligs/London 2006/2009 each 38×48cm acrylic, marker pen, pencil, watercolour on glassine and cut paper
Trauser-Shirth [faded] projected variant 2008 135×100×4cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on wood	Variant t-s [linen] E 2010 135×100×4cm acrylic, charcoal, marker pen, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	#12 2006/2011 31×41cm acrylic, marker pen, pencil, ink and water colour on cut paper
Variant t-s [linen] B 2008 135×100×4cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	Mirror Variant 2008–2012 two panels, each 135×100×4cm left: oil paint on CNC machined Perspex right: acrylic, oil paint, pencil and watercolour and wax on canvas	Variant t-s [flat and tilted] 135×100×4cm acrylic, oil paint, pencil, watercolour and wax on linen on wood
OGV [Memory] 2008 76×64×3cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	OGVDS [detail] C 2012 76×64×3cm acrylic, oil paint, pencil, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	
OGV [mirror-shift] 2008–2009 two panels, each 135×100×4cm left: marker pen on Perspex right: marker pen, pencil, oil paint and wax on linen on wood	OGVDS [detail] A 2012 76×64×3cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	
OGV [spider] B 2008–2009 76×64×3cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	Variant t-s [linen] doubled 2012 200×135×4cm acrylic, charcoal, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	
OGV [double spider] Dirty C 2008–2009 76.5×63.5×3cm marker pen, oil paint, pencil, watercolour and wax on canvas	Exit Variant [tilted] A 2012 138×122×4cm acrylic, charcoal, oil paint, pencil, watercolour and wax on linen on wood	
Memory Farm 2008–2009 189×200×16cm acrylic, marker pen, pencil and Perspex on wood	OGVDS 75% [Ghost] #2 2012 57×45×3cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on wood	
Variant t-s [linen] F d-s 2010–2012 135×100×4cm acrylic, charcoal, oil paint, pencil, marker pen, water-colour and wax on linen on wood	OGVDS 75% [Ghost] #3 2012 57×45×3cm acrylic, pencil, oil paint, watercolour and wax on wood	
OGVDS-VAR [compendium] #1 2011-12 76×64×3cm acrylic, oil paint, pencil, watercolour and wax on linen on wood		

School Studies:  
Ghosts, Arguments

Hales Gallery, London  
2012









School Studies:  
An Architectural Problem

von Bartha Chesa, S-chanf  
2013









Andrew Bick and David Thorp:  
studio conversations 2012–2013

David Thorp: It seems to me that the abstraction that you have developed has been to one side of the mainstream conversation on abstract art, that it has been following a slightly different trajectory. What do you think?

Andrew Bick: I think I've quite deliberately looked at certain things back to front. To start with, when I was first studying there was a moment when a lot of the old ideological hegemonies in British Art Schools started being dismantled. So at a point when I was graduating many people were saying abstraction was over. I was very aware people like myself had to find a new way to address it, on the basis that I felt strongly it was still worth doing. Also, as many of my teachers were Constructivists, I saw myself, when I graduated, as an artist making constructions. I was told by many people, after finishing my Masters two years later, that the territory between painting and sculpture that I occupied was a way of being indecisive, that I ought to make up my mind up to commit to one or the other ... so a lot of what was regarded by me as the automatic route to understanding what I was doing artistically was being swept aside in the 1980s. Then I went through early studio life in London at a point (1991–94) when people like Peter Doig were doing something incredibly new for many people, which also became incredibly popular, very, very quickly; as a result I had to take a hard look at myself, and reconsider what was essential to what I did.

DT: But you made this commitment to abstraction very early on,

AB: yes...

DT: ... right from the outset, and why to you think that was?

AB: Because, in terms of what fundamentally interests me, which is paying attention to a visual object in space, it seems to be the most viable way to deal with how that process worked. If something is going to have an object quality and sit on a wall then I felt abstraction was a little bit like the function of poetry within language. It was something where the syntax could be stripped right down and re-assembled. For me the commitment to that way of thinking has never gone away. I've always needed to evaluate, reconsider and renegotiate what that rootedness in object qualities meant for me, set against everything else that was going on.

DT: Well let's talk about the object nature of the paintings, because in your earlier works, (those ones we're looking at reproductions of here) which had pigmented wax layered on wood, they had a substantial physical bulk. They were things in a world of other things and that makes me think, of course, of Jasper Johns and the way in which he was using encaustic and the way in which he was making his two dimensional images into three dimensional things. I can still see something of his attention to surface in the way that you deal with surface. Do you think that's a fair observation, a fair question?

AB: I think the interesting thing about Jasper Johns is also for me what is interesting about Robert Ryman, which is that the attention to the surface of things is also about how those things (objects) interrogate themselves. So typically in Jasper Johns, where you might have something like a ruler that has been screwed down to the surface of the painting and swished through a quarter turn in order to make a smear in the still wet paint, he is creating something which works as a narrative of materials, it's not a narrative in the figurative tradition of generating images which tell a story. And yes I think that this interests me a great deal.

DT: But the paintings you are making now don't have that same sort of materiality that the ones you were making in the 90s do. These paintings we are looking at in the studio are all painted on canvas are they not?

AB: They're canvas over wood, but there are also some new paintings which are just plywood panels, so these would be the most like the earlier work you were talking about. The big difference is that I no longer make them as deep box sections and I no longer paint around the sides. So the attention has shifted completely to questioning the frontal address of a painting.

DT: OK, so, in which case then, (as I remember from the early paintings you would look into them, so that the surface would dissolve into other layers as you looked through them) with these we are looking at in the studio today the surface functions in a very different way, maybe, one might say, in a more

painterly way, where the forms are suggesting an illusion of space, so that they move back and forwards in relation to each other within the paintings, rather than the earlier works which sat solidly, more in real space than these do.

AB: Yes I think that is absolutely true. I think that what's happened is that in those earlier ones, with the building up of layers, there was always a sense that, like looking in to a frozen pond, details got more obscured the deeper through the layers your eye penetrated. I wanted to start to analyse what that visual process was. I subsequently found myself coming back to what could seem more like traditional painting or more like composition, where that element of visually piercing layers is stripped out, or partially blocked or sometimes completely obscured. More contradictions come in to play in these newer paintings, so that what would be optically the furthest part of the image in terms of its colour temperature or quasi-perspectival position is often, conversely, the nearest element physically, because it is thickest layer of the painting. Everything that was built up in the earlier work has been broken down and reassembled; in essence, the fact that they then look more like a conventional painting is a nice irony. But there are always caveats. There is a sense in which I enjoy the uncertainty, I enjoy the doubt, so that whereas in order to establish oneself as an artist one needs to say 'this is how I see it, this is how it is', I'm trying to take on board the instability of the process of realising work as part of how it is finished.

DT: So when I think about those things, I suppose it comes back to one's own background, one's own tastes and so on but thinking about the object nature of painting and the way in which surface works and the way in which illusion works in painting I'm always drawn back to Post Abstract Expressionist painters and the way they thought about their work. But it seems to me that although you're demonstrating an understanding and recognition of that in your work maybe you are right that you are more aligned with an understanding that comes out of the Constructivists and Mondrian in Europe. What do you think?

AB: I would agree, but I also think that of the American artists, the most important and interesting for me, from very early on, has been Ad Reinhardt. I also think Reinhardt is much misunderstood. He was contrary, he was supremely an intellectual in his approach to visual art and he understood that the value of contradiction is primarily as a means of sharpening thought. That places him outside the way most people understand the American development of abstraction as a whole. So that, for example, Reinhardt's idea of repeating the same painting over and over again is something that intrigues me a great deal. All of the work I have been making since around 2008 repeats two different compositional structures from earlier works. These paintings never will look anything like an Ad Reinhardt, but the position and the thinking, Reinhardt's almost theological approach to making abstraction (and of course one of his closest friends was the Catholic Monk Thomas Merton), intrigues me, as, of course, does the rela-

tionship between how he placed himself and the fractious contradictory nature of the development of constructivism within Europe. I have been doing quite a bit of research on the parallels between Dada and Constructivism and how they might have affected post-war Constructivism, particularly figures like Anthony Hill, in terms of British Art, who has a Dadaist alter ego, Achill Redo. Those paradigms, if you like, based on contradiction, based on a pendulum between positions or on holding multiple positions at the same time (some of which may be hidden) are very important to my work ... Here again I think Van Doesburg is a supreme example ... and all of this interests me because it gives something on which I can build a base I find both vital and viable, from which I feel I can continue to address the struggles that we deal with now.

DT: Which are?

AB: To do with attention, fundamentally. I think it's bigger than that, but the question as to why should anyone engage with this, with an art object, and why it might be worth the experience of extended looking, has then got to relate to the ambiguous status that any work of art has in the world. I am talking about the kind of age-old dynamics of the way some things are apparently available to all and some might only seem to serve a narrow elite.

DT: You were mentioning contradictions in relation to Reinhardt, is that what you see as the fundamental contradiction in making art, that is

around *how it is received by an audience* and who the audience for it might be. How important is that to you?

AB: I think it is very important.

DT: So in a way you're going back to the age-old thing that one of the reasons you are being an artist is that you want to communicate. Because people say art's all about communication and sometimes I wonder about how true that is?

AB: In a way that idea of communication in and of itself is utterly banal. I am involved in teaching, I give lectures, I curate, so in those terms I guess I communicate a lot. There are certain things, however, which can't be easily communicated, and certain things, which are too difficult to communicate. In a sense, that is where art has a role, to visually contain these uncommunicable elements. Self-evidently the most interesting artists of the past are usually struggling with something for a whole career, the fight for clarity, in those terms, isn't just about being a good communicator, it's about continually asking what communication is for. Something related to this I have just been re-reading was Jon Thompson's essay for 'Gravity and Grace'. That exhibition was important to me as a student, but I am also a huge admirer of Simone Weil, who the title was taken from. You can't get a more forceful and contradictory character in terms of twentieth century thought and philosophy than Simone Weil, but in the end I would agree with Jon Thompson that you have to respect and admire her tenacity in

tackling intractable problems, I see a very difficult human ambition in her writing.

DT: Being an abstract artist through the 90s, and in the last twenty years has not been a very easy position to be in. I would say that a lot of the time the attention has been elsewhere, with different kinds of art making. But now it seems to me that there has for a little while been a reappraisal of what it means to make abstract images of one kind or another. I think that your paintings are challenging paintings. When you talk about the contradictions between wide sensibility and elitism, that's not something (although I think about it) that really worries me very much, because I think that as I get older I become more selfish in my desire for what I get back from art and I want to look at art that is challenging and takes me to places I've not been to before. One thing that is interesting about your work, although it's using a language with which one is familiar, nevertheless it does something with that which seems to take abstract painting/abstract object making in to a new realm. As I am looking at these paintings now I am just trying to put my finger on what that is and it's partly the way one responds to their aesthetic presence.

AB: I suppose two things came into my mind as you were saying that; one is the idea which a lot of the older Construction and Systems artists I have been talking to think of a lot, which is facture, touch, and the other is what Jeffrey Steel talks about in particular as material syntax, a syntactical art.

Now within a systematic Modernist approach these ideas are clearly aligned to how such a system operates in determining the work's final outcome, but coming from the generation I come from and aware of the difficulties that my generation encounters, there is always a sense of knowing what the caveats are, having to deal with checks and balances. From my point of view, when I am paying close attention to what I am doing, it is as selfish as the way you describe your process of viewing. This form of attention is something that I respect, in that if I am going into a museum or any kind of exhibition, even an art fair, there are certain visual qualities I am looking for which I can't quite define until I see them, but yet indicate something of the mind of the artist, perhaps an alertness to the problematic nature of projecting a new object into the world ... And these are qualities which require a process of endless correction; 'no, not this' ... 'no, not that', 'that will need revising' ... 'that will need adjusting' ... In a sense, for me this connects to the obsession with taking materials in a very wide scope and trying to put them together within a complex material syntax. This is probably the way into what I am thinking about, the way into what I am trying to do with this work... Once that making process starts to gel, the paintings can be very accessible, very seductive pieces of work, but there will always be a sense in which there is a problem interwoven within them, because that is how they were thought of and how they emerged. So quite frequently I will have works in their early stages in the studio and someone might say to me 'don't deal

with the grid' and then I absolutely have to deal with the grid. Or someone might see a work when it is simply a layer of watercolour and say, 'don't do any more to that, it's fantastic like that' and then I absolutely have to do something to it ...

DT: So you are contrary then by nature and that contrariness takes you to places where you are unsure of the outcome.

AB: Yes, that would be my resistance to working within a system. I have never been a systematic artist myself but I could also never completely be a gestural or intuitive painter because I would be frustrated with the ease of it either way, once I had got in to the flow of that way of working.

DT: Well let's talk a little bit about intuition then and the place that has in your painting. Looking at this painting on the wall at the moment, which has a lot of different colours in it, tell me a little bit about how you arrive at those colours?

AB: There is a counterpoint going on of 'not quite complementary colour'. There's also sense in which I am quoting with colour, and at that point I am thinking about some of the more crazy beliefs that Mondrian had, for example his belief that he couldn't use pure colour in Neoplasticism, he had to cut it with white, because pure colour would somehow blow people's minds, that when they looked at the paintings it would be too much. In a way, I am against setting up easy binaries, but I am quite happy to put together set-ups

of complementary colours, which then have to be adjusted so that they are not quite right.

DT: So when you adjust them and they are then 'not quite right', what is it about them that is not quite right, that needs adjusting?

AB: I suppose I am talking about a kind of imbalance, which is nevertheless precise. That's the best way I can define it. If a painting is working it needs to have some sort of node or hinge or point or maybe two points, which hold the whole thing together, but only just ... And this painting has/is being re-worked ... It was shown in ART Basel in 2010 and I asked for it back because I wasn't pleased with it and I guess I am often happier when I am attacking an old painting that I wasn't convinced by ... It's at a point now where it has almost come to a new sense of poise, but as I am working on it I start to remember more and more things that I did before in other works, more and more solutions that emerged before ... and those solutions get quoted or even corrected and adjusted. So by then, if it is an intuitive process, it's a very composite form of intuition, which gives me the question in my own mind, how many times can you revise an intuition before it doesn't become intuitive but systematic?

DT: So if that would be the case and it then became systematic, would that be a problem, would that worry you?

AB: It wouldn't worry me at all at that point, because of its roots in a method.

The approach to the painting would by then have been defined by the idea of adjustment.

DT: The other thing, of course, is that I would describe these as formal paintings. A formal painting, when you look at it, comes together as a unified whole and then we say 'oh this painting works', when we look at it, because it is functioning formally. What interests me about these is that they do work on a formal level for me but I wouldn't put them in the formalist camp. I wouldn't categorise them as formalist paintings and as I am looking at them I am wondering to myself why exactly that is, because they are not Modernist paintings and yet they contain a lot of the conditions or conventions that one might apply to Modernism. What I am trying to ask myself as I look at them is what it is about them that makes them Postmodernist rather than Modernist and I can't quite put my finger on it ... it's something to do with the way they look.

AB: I think it is a number of things, but to start with there are an awful lot of abstract painters around now who are doing things with triangles, so there is a lot of making paintings out of facets, and I think that comes from various sources ... With the increasing sophistication of computer programming you can take any almost any form and turn it in to a faceted structure rather like something that Buckminster Fuller might have taken months and months to work out how to do. And then there is a sense in which when notions of faceted space don't quite work, or when they are done in a very crude way,



as in some early Russian Constructivist painting and drawing, they are special for some other reason. I am interested in all those sources, but not so much because I want to follow them, the attraction is to highlight the problems with them for contemporary perception. There is always a self conscious desire in my work seize on the problem something might generate, but cheerfully, with a sense that it is actually fun, that there is pleasure in something which upsets its own solemnity, which can enjoy the ridiculous. That makes me think that someone like Rene Daniels, with his spatial configuration based on a bowtie, is as interesting as Van Doesburg, but people who like one don't necessarily put him in the same context as the other. Rene Daniels' importance was to do with the new figuration that was emerging in the early 1980s, I am more interested in how he liberated an older artist such as Raoul De Keyser ... but then I start to think back to the whole root of Dutch painting and to Van Doesburg and Mondrain's place in that ... I suppose what might make these paintings of mine Postmodern more than anything is the way that my mind is spinning around references and ideas in the way that this answer implies. Multi-layered thinking somehow manifests itself in the way the paintings are.

DT: And I suppose another thing is that you are not reducing down, you are building up and so they become more complex as ... but then that one over there, is that finished at the back?

AB: Yes I have finished with that painting, it's very new but...

DT: Yes the difference with the one we spoke of earlier that you have been reworking and this new work seems to be in the way you have considered the surface of these two paintings, and it is largely to do with the way in which you have attended to the surface on this new one ... it's a really lovely painting now I am looking closely at it...

AB: Great!

DT: But it's far simpler in its appearance than any other painting in this studio now, but it seems to me that you're leaving quite a lot of things behind, which are to do with a very concrete sense of the object nature of painting. This one would seem me to be a less concrete statement, in terms of its physical substance than any other painting here and its aesthetic dimension is perhaps heightened as a result. Would you agree with that?

AB: I would agree with everything you have seen in this painting but only add one thing, and that is that its complexity is offstage...

DT: No that's right...

AB: ...and that is very, very deliberate.

DT: Agreed, so its complexity is offstage and so are you returning to a Modernist frame of mind, where what appears is a reductive essence of what is internalised, what is within, and even if you were, does it matter these days, whether we are concerned with these Modernist, Postmodernist, Post-postmodernist categories at all?

AB: I would say it really is not a worry for me. More than that it is something to play with, to savour. And with this work in we have been discussing in particular and with the two unfinished ones to its right, which are obviously much rougher looking and much more...

DT: ...and closer to what I think of as your work...

AB: Yes, but with all three, they are details, zoomed in sections of the same grid structure that has been used on all the paintings of this size. The difference between this approach and a reductive work is that the perverse system that I am using to make these gives me permission to focus at will on sections or details, as a result of which each is not a distillation or essence but a section. I am interested in extracting elements from my work at particular moments, as in the way that particular painting is, because I have won myself the freedom to do that out of everything else that is in my work. So the two aspects of complexity and reduction or detail are inseparable. There can be no concern with becoming gradually 'purer' or 'clearer', but always, however, a need to ask myself the sharpest questions I can about why something is the way it is. What relates to that, too, is that works get re-worked because they seem to need it, out of a sort of dissatisfaction more than faith in intuition.

DT: What does that mean though?

AB: What it means is that initially they lacked either a clear set of problems

or a clear set of contradictions, or within themselves a sense of having achieved an ability to elbow those things aside and have the ability to just be what they are.

DT: Well let's think about that a little bit then. So if they're not succeeding they lack a clear set of problems, they lack a clear set of contradictions that would enable them to be what they are. That's what you said more or less? OK the first two points I understand, but this business of them being what they are, I don't fully understand what you mean by that. Do you mean that in the old formalist sense that they would just exude their presence as a thing in the world whether we were here to look at it or not?

AB: Yes I think that is right, in an old formalist sense that is something that I would subscribe to absolutely. I think, however, it's always cut through or layered with doubt for me.





DT: I'd like to ask you more about your role as a curator. Because one of the things I have noticed about when artists curate exhibitions is that they almost always follow the model of the 'cabinet of curiosities', a mix and match of objects and ideas and so on. It's very unusual, in my experience for an artist to curate a solo exhibition of another artist but you have done that with your recent exhibition of Norman Dilworth. What I found interesting about that and the ideas that you talked about with your exhibition 'The North Sea' is that not only is it unusual for an artist to have this approach but that also you are using it to explore your ideas about Constructivism and that whole area of art practice.

AB: Yes I do think so, for me to work as a curator is about trying to set an agenda. What you describe as a cabinet of curiosities, which I would also describe as an artist trying to be a good host, like if they were throwing a party and demonstrating their excellent taste in music by doing a turn as a DJ (or its equivalent in art) ... rather than doing that, I have tried to make exhibitions which follow through an argument. The first public scale one I made was about abstraction and was at the invitation of GoMA Glasgow, who had bought a work of mine for their collection and started the conversation along the lines of "Well nobody is doing much in the way of exhibitions of abstract art at the moment. We like your work and want you to make an exhibition which will somehow put it into a context." That was in 2002. I then didn't do another project of that kind until 2006, which was a bit more like the

'cabinet...' idea in that it involved a range of artists from Annelies Štrba to Tal R, to Philip Akkerman to AK Dolven and myself. So again I was putting myself into the exhibition, but in 2009 with 'The North Sea' and 2010 with 'Construction & its Shadow' at Leeds Art Gallery I was very specifically narrowing down an area to do with my own roots in the constructive tradition and how they might make sense in a current context. In both exhibitions there was no need to include my own work. Going back to a comment I made earlier about how one looks at art and what it is one is looking for in art, the idea of identifying affinities in a range of artists' work and joining these through the exhibition format is also something I see as political ... politics, in this sense, being about interpreting the contemporary situation in relation to a new understanding of its historical context and precedents.

DT: OK, so let's talk a little bit more about these ideas you have around contradiction. You talked about Reinhardt when we met before and at that point you were discussing him repeating the same painting again and again and how interesting you saw that to be as part of a wider practice, his politics etc., and later on you referred to Simone Weil and her thought and philosophy. It seems to me there are contradictions thrown up by these two people, by Dada-Constructivism, the formal and the spontaneous, the considered and the immediate and I wonder what kind of bearing all this has on your work. Some of these things must connect to Simone Weil's thought around ideas of aestheticism

in relation to the political and of course mysticism, but within your own work, these kinds of influences, this kind of dichotomy that exists between the spontaneous and the strategic, how do you think these elements gel and would you say that the absurd manifests itself in anything that you do?

AB: I think it does, but I am producing a body of work that is largely integrated despite being a restless person. I produce work that has a component that I would describe as contemplative, but which is informed by impatience. So on one hand there is this widening out into a lot of other activities in terms of curating, writing, teaching, lecturing, but on the other there is this need for silence, and for an art activity which is very intense and direct and focused on the making of material objects. When I started to think, as an undergraduate, about what might be left of Modernism it seemed that if I could find the perfect combination of both gesture and grid, the spontaneous and disciplined, that then I would have a way forward. It became clear that that was an incredibly naïve approach, and I think what has come about subsequently in my work is an awareness that those positions do not make an obvious binary that can always operate, instead the elements of the disciplined and spontaneous end up switching around, so gesture can be incredibly strategic and a grid spontaneous and so on ... But what is interesting for me is the continual activity of shifting positions or creating a position that is at variance with itself. It is art that simply has to keep moving, has to keep adjusting.

DT: So to wind up, I have written a trajectory of artists here, Van Doesburg, Mondrian, Kenneth and Mary Martin, Anthony Hill, Raoul De Keyser, Rene Daniels ... as artists who, amongst others, you have cited as being interesting to you, important to you and I have written a note to myself here, 'what does this tell us about AB' and I wondered if you might find a way to sum this interview up by reflecting on that ... it's a very interesting line up of artists I think.

AB. There are other people I would mention that you haven't put in there, I would also add Helmut Federle, but just in terms of making a balanced group the logical people to add would be Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Mary Heilmann.

DT: Oh right, Mary Heilmann, yes ...

AB: But as a line of artists, this for me reflects something important because each one could be seen, at certain moments in their work, to be more recent or contemporary in development than any of the others. That suggests a kind of a historical phenomena within abstraction, which, in my position as artist, proposes porous relationships and progressions between the Modern, Postmodern and Post-postmodern. I also think that ideas of endlessly correcting things are at the core of it. None of these artists are straightforward ...

DT: ... they all have their dichotomies and contradictions. Some of them I know better than others but they all operate on more than one front ...

AB: ... yes, for me the echo of these artists in my work comes from my interest in extracting and analysing elements of my practice at particular moments, because I have won myself the freedom to do that out of everything else that I work on including curating. So the two aspects of complexity and reduction or detail are inseparable. In this practice there is no concern, there can be no concern, with becoming gradually 'purer' or 'clearer'. Contradiction is the best way to explain my alternative to the urge to reduce or find the essence of something. There is always, however, a need to ask myself the sharpest questions I can about why work is the way it is.

David Thorp is an independent curator and founder of The Performance Studio. Recently he has worked as Interim Director at Modern Art Oxford and before that at London's Institute of Contemporary Art. He was formerly Curator of GSK Contemporary at the Royal Academy, Curator of Contemporary Projects at the Henry Moore Foundation, and Director of the South London Gallery. He was a member of the Turner Prize jury in 2004.



Artist Biography

Solo exhibitions since 2008	Selected Group Exhibitions since 2008		Curated Exhibitions & Projects
2012–2013 <i>School Studies: An Architectural Problem</i> von Bartha Chesa, S-chanf, Switzerland	2013 <i>·system ·painting ·construction ·archive</i> Lion+Lamb Gallery, London Artists: Andrew Bick, Cullinan Richards, Stuart Eliot, Robert Holyhead, Clare Kenney, Maria Lalic, Karim Noureldin, David Rhodes, Brandon Taylor	<i>A Sort of Night to the Mind A Kind of Night for our Thoughts, Illusion and Materiality in Contemporary Painting</i> Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury	2012 <i>Exchanges around Construction</i> 43 Whitfield St, London for Derwent London
2012 <i>School Studies: An Architectural Problem</i> INDEX Gallery, Stroud		<i>Slow Magic</i> The Bluecoat, Liverpool Artists: Andrew Bick, Rafal Bujnowski, Tomory Dodge, Vincent Falsetta, Henriette Grahmert, Alicia Paz	2011 <i>The Conversation</i> Galerie Von Bartha, Basel Artists: Anthony Hill, Peter Lowe, Jeffrey Steele, Gillian Wise
<i>School Studies: Ghosts, Arguments</i> Hales Gallery, London	<i>Drawing Biennial 2013</i> Drawing Room, London		<i>Norman Dilworth</i> Turnpike Gallery, Leigh, Greater Manchester, Huddersfield Art Gallery
<i>School Studies: Recent Work and Selected Work since 1993</i> von Bartha, Basel	2012 <i>Off the Beaten Track</i> von Bartha Garage, Basel	<i>On the Fractured Stage of the Book</i> Eagle Gallery, London	
	<i>Ha Ha What Does This Represent</i> Standpoint Gallery, London Curators: Katrina Blannin, Francesca Simon Artists: Andrew Bick, Matthew Collings and Emma Biggs, Katrina Blannin, Hazel Chalk, Ben Cove, Stewart Geddes, Dan Hays, Vanessa Jackson, Roger Kelly, Caroline List, Gina Medcalf, Alex Gene Morrison, Carol Robertson, James Ryan, Francesca Simon, Daniel Sturgis and Trevor Sutton	<i>Drawing Biennial 2009</i> Drawing Room, London	2010–2011 <i>Construction &amp; its Shadow</i> Leeds Art Gallery [as part of Henry Moore Institute research fellowship]
2010 <i>Anthony Hill, Peter Lowe, Jeffrey Steele, Gillian Wise</i> Savage School Window Gallery Vyner St, London		2008 <i>Refractions/Shadows</i> Lemon St Gallery, Truro Curator: Mel Gooding Artists: Grechten Albrecht, Andrew Bick, Sian Bowen, Stuart Burns, Susan Derges, Iraida Icazia, James Ross	2009 <i>The North Sea [reconsidering Pier+Ocean]</i> Laurent Delaye Gallery London
2009 <i>Systems for Hesitation</i> Hales Gallery, London			2006 <i>The Kingston Turnpike</i> Turnpike Gallery, Leigh, Greater Manchester, Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University
2008 <i>New and Recent Works</i> von Bartha Garage, Basel			
2008 <i>Andrew Bick</i> Rubicon Gallery, Dublin		2011 <i>Drawing Biennial 2011</i> Drawing Room, London	
	2010 <i>Zig Zag</i> Charlie Dutton Gallery, London		2002–2003 <i>Sight Mapping</i> Konsthallen Bohuslans Museum, Uddevalla, Sweden GoMA, Glasgow Sala Rekalde, Bilbao
	<i>Between the Possible And the Real</i> Kusseneers Gallery, Antwerp Artists: Jon Thompson, Ben Ravenscroft, Andrew Graves, Andrew Bick		
	<i>Gallery Artists</i> von Bartha Garage, Basel Artists: Andrew Bick, Daniel Robert Hunziker, Karim Noureldin, Magnus Thierfelder, Jens Wolf, Beat Zoderer		
	2009 <i>Supersurface</i> Galerie Hollenbach, Stuttgart Artists: Andrew Bick, Jane Harris, Alexis Harding, Michael Stubbs		

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Standpoint 2012  
Foreword: Katrina Blannin & Francesca Simon  
Text: David Ryan

*The Source of Inspiration – The Influence of Anxiety*  
Edition von Bartha, 2009  
Sherman Sam

*Refractions & Shadows, Seven Artists*  
Lemon St Gallery, 2008  
Mel Gooding

*Optical Polatic*  
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Jennifer Thatcher

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JJ Charlesworth

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*Gloom*  
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Sherman Sam, Rolf Bier

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The Irish Times  
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*Artists discussion with Norman Dilworth*  
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exhibition introduction  
17 September 2011

*Construction & its Shadow*  
convener and keynote intro-  
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*Construction & its Shadow, Double agents and split identities in the world of Abstraction*  
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Theo Van Doesburg  
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*Kenneth and Mary Martin*  
exhibition introduction with  
Caroline Douglas  
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Colección Ernesto Ventós  
Omedes

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Fidelity Investments

Gallery of Modern Art Glasgow

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Unilever

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Yale Center for British Art



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