

Aesthetic Investigations

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Painting (in) the imperative form. An exploration of instruction painting.

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Abstract: Through my role as artist-curator I hope to have presented a public contemplation of how a painting might perform and instruct, to test the relationship between conceptual and painting practice, and collectively ask: what is imperative to painting?

Time Painting (1961): 'Make a painting in which the colour comes out only under a certain light at a certain time of the day. Make it a very short time'. Yoko Ono.¹

On the occasion of curating a group exhibition at A.P.T Gallery, I invited 13 artists to produce a new work which fulfilled Yoko Ono's instruction 'Time Painting'.² Originally published in 1964 as part of a collection of conceptual instructions in Ono's book *Grapefruit*, this particular instruction appeared to describe an act that it would be possible to realise, without dictating a specific method of production or detailing more than a transitory quality of the visual form of a painting. Subjecting myself to the same creative challenge I anticipated that the 14 new paintings would act as a collective interrogation of the original linguistic instruction, drawing out the apparent contradiction between de-materialised conceptual practice and the materially orientated and visual discipline of painting. In this analysis I intend to explore how far the linguistic instruction carried through into the resulting paintings and to question how the term 'conceptual' may be understood in relation to contemporary painting. As the common starting point for each of the

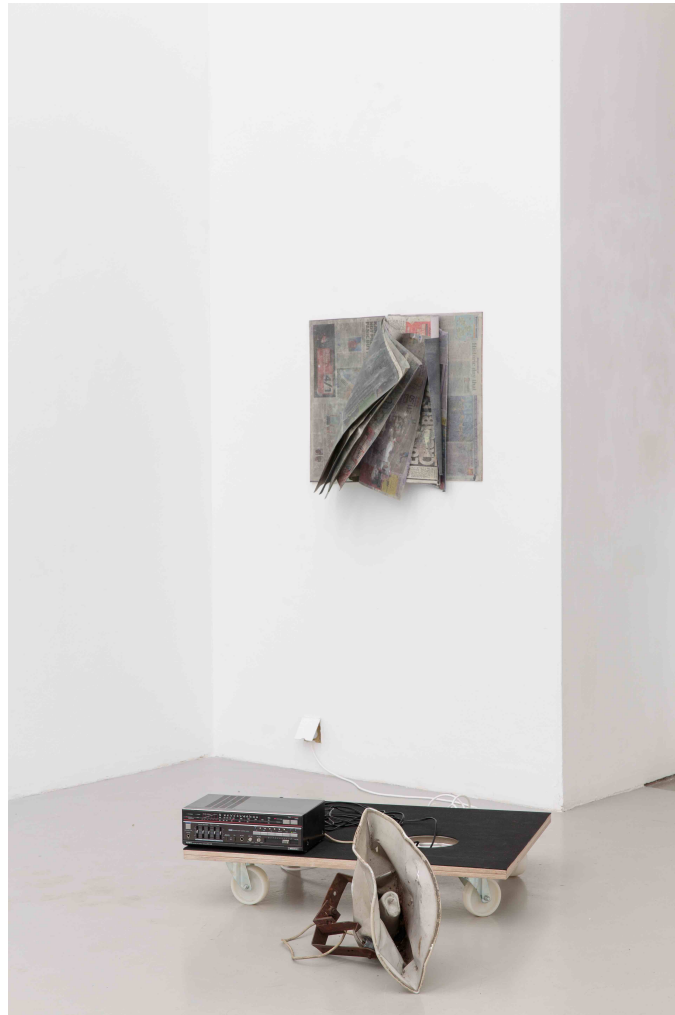


Figure 1: Robert Rivers, *Time Painting—paper*, 2016, Glow in the dark paint, paper, canvas, aluminium, 56 x 77cm. Exhibited alongside *Time Painting—sound*, 2016, Found speaker.

interpretations, does the Ono instruction come to define the ontology of these paintings? Could these apparently diverse and individual responses in fact be understood as the same painting?

In *Hiding Making Showing Creation*, Ann-Sophie Lehmann proposes that there is a persistent theoretical dichotomy between conceptual practice and material art production, which raises the question of how we approach a material artwork, such as a painting, produced according to a conceptual instruction.³ This apparent opposition originates with the emergence of Conceptualism in the 1960s-70s, as a range of experimental forms of art practice sought to resist the commodification of the art object and the definition of an artwork according to formalist medium-specific principles. In particular, the retinal nature of painting practice is challenged by the core proposition of



Figure 2: Damian Taylor, *Untitled (paw)*, 2016, Pigmented resin, glass fibre, honeycomb aluminium, 48 x 35cm. *Untitled (pour)*, 2016, Pigmented resin, glass fibre, honeycomb aluminium, 48 x 35cm.

Conceptualism, the assertion that art should not be judged primarily on its visual, sensory qualities but instead in terms of the concept that the material form expresses. Yet it can be argued, as Lucy Lippard demonstrated as early as 1968, that defining conceptual art through oppositional terms may situate Conceptualism within a trajectory of modernist painting. Lippard writes,

The idea that art can be experienced in order to extract an idea or underlying intellectual schema as well as to perceive its formal essence continues from the opposing formalist premise that painting and sculpture should be looked at as objects per se rather than as references to other images and representation.⁴

This observation highlights that to position conceptual practice and material art production as oppositional is over-simplistic, and encourages closer



Figure 3: Ben Jenner, *B[3F+1R] in landscape*, 2016, Pencil, gesso, acrylic paint on wood. 151 x 147.5cm.

attention to the various ways in which an attitude of self-reflexivity towards art production may be expressed: an orientation towards visual or non-visual language and the positioning of material as primary or secondary in the production of meaning.

As the Yoko Ono instruction ‘Time Painting’ demonstrates, by inviting us through written language to imagine or realise a visual form, this distinction is not straightforward or perhaps even stable, as the internal hierarchies of an artwork may shift depending on the particular circumstances of production and presentation. For instance, the work often cited as the earliest example of an artwork made according to instructions, Marcel Duchamp’s *Unhappy Readymade* (1919), acts as an example of how a linguistic proposition may be originally prioritised and perhaps historically undermined as it comes to serve as the contextual narrative for a visual art object.⁵ *Unhappy Readymade* was a wedding present from Marcel Duchamp to his sister Suzanne of a geometry text book, to be hung on the balcony in the wind to ‘choose its own



Figure 4: Sarah Pettitt, *Sunset*, 2016, Dust sheet, cotton, acrylic and chalk, 100 x 65cm.

problems'.⁶ This work is at once a conceptual gesture, and a material process which has been documented, creating a specific visual form for the artwork. Consequently it can be said to anticipate the use of linguistic proposition that comes to characterise Conceptualism as it emerged in the 1960s and yet it can still be situated within a tradition of representational art, as the outcome of the instruction has been documented through both photography and painting by Suzanne Duchamp.⁷ This representation of *Unhappy Readymade* extends the communicative potential of the instruction from a conceptual gesture to a form of dialogue between Marcel and Suzanne Duchamp, and this raises the question of whether Suzanne's response exists within the original conceptual gesture, or whether the visual form of the work exceeds the command of the instruction and exists as an artwork in its own right? This is perhaps answered by the way the photographic representation is presented within the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art.⁸ Labelled as 'Marcel Duchamp's *Unhappy Readymade*', and attributed to Suzanne Duchamp,



Figure 5: Kieran Drury, *Take the first left hand*, 2016, Acrylic and oil on paper, 90 x 67cm.

the description acknowledges both parties whilst maintaining a clear sense of hierarchy, which indicates that this photograph is to be understood as documentation of a conceptual artwork. The problem the *Unhappy Readymade* appears to have chosen is that the co-existence of the original instruction and later visual documentation may position the photograph (and later painting) as a form of illustration, whilst the linguistic instruction may also be reduced to a description of the particular circumstances which produced the visual form, arguably leaving little opportunity for the potential future viewer to engage imaginatively with the artwork.

In contrast, the more general mode of address and poetic tone of Yoko Ono's instruction pieces encourage a creative response, as one is invited to think through the possibility of how the instruction can be realised, 'like an invitation to follow a train of thinking'.⁹ In an interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist Ono has explained that her use of instructions to produce paintings, objects and events emerged from early musical training, in *Jiyu*



Figure 6: Dan Howard-Birt, *Ship of Fools (Robert MacBryde)*, 2016, Oil on printed fabric and wood 68cm diameter.

Gakuen, Japan, which taught her to listen to daily sounds and translate this into notation.¹⁰ Ono states that through this process she became aware of the limitation of the musical score to fully capture and communicate the complexity of sound, and recognised that each time the score was realised a degree of interpretation on the part of the performer was required. Her instruction-artworks are conceived of as a more creative form of score, which she describes as ‘unfinished’ accepting that the work will change each time it is realised, challenging the value of permanence in the material arts of painting and sculpture by accepting contingency,

I knew that no matter how much you wanted, the work never stayed the same. So as an artist, instead of trying to hold on to what was possible to hold on to, I wanted to make the ‘change’ into a positive move: let the work grow by asking people to participate and add their efforts.¹¹

Instruction painting can be engaged with and understood then as both proposition and process, the emphasis being placed not on what it is possible to realise but on the activation of the imagination, which is indicated by the disclaimer which opens her publication *Grapefruit*, ‘This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.’¹²



Figure 7: Jack Vickridge, *Untitled*, 2016, Concrete and pigment, 44.5 x 38.5 x 1cm.

The particular instruction ‘Time Painting’ which I selected for the A.P.T exhibition was realised originally by Ono for an exhibition in 1961 at AG Gallery as part of a series of ephemeral artworks.¹³ This leads me to propose that whilst the work endures in the conceptual proposition to fully follow the artist in her train of thinking it is permissible to attempt to realise the instruction: to think through making. It is hoped that by undertaking this challenge alongside 13 other invited artists the visual outcomes will not come to illustrate the Ono instruction, but instead exist as part of an incomplete series of responses, showing the multiplicity of possible interpretations and exploring the ways in which the Ono instruction may exist within new paintings.

Acknowledging that the responses to the ‘Time Painting’ instruction can be easily situated within the individual practice of each artist, I intend to approach these artworks as a collection of interpretations to draw out certain features of the original Ono work. Whilst an individual analysis of each painting is beyond the scope of this text I wish to briefly highlight certain strategies with which the participating artists sought to address the problematic relationship between the conceptual starting point and the tacit knowledge that underpins painting practice. As a provisional way to group these responses and locate points of correspondence between individual works I intend to consider the role of materials, visual analogy and use of instruction in these 14 paintings.



Figure 8: Jane Bustin, *Yellow patch (arrangement)*, 2016, Oil, acrylic, copper, wood. Triptych 30 x 40cm overall.

The phrasing of Ono's instruction makes a distinction between colour and light, perhaps leading us towards a consideration of both the material properties of the artwork and environmental conditions which may act upon it. Many of the paintings produced in response to the 'Time Painting' instruction for A.P.T Gallery express sensitivity towards the circumstances of exhibition through the material form of the work. For instance, the incorporation of 3-D elements in the works of Dan Howard-Birt and Jack Vickridge, allow the shadows created by the fluctuating natural light in the front gallery to animate the paintings as temporary visual details.¹⁴ This notion that a painting may perform through its material form, perhaps having an optimum moment of encounter, is explored in the paintings produced by Robert Rivers, Damian Taylor and Jo Volley, which use phosphorescent pigment activated in a low level light, to produce a painting that cannot be fully seen in the normal lighting conditions and opening hours of the exhibition.¹⁵ Sarah McNulty similarly approached the instruction through material experimentation, interpreting the phrase 'colour comes out' literally by working with light sensitive emulsion and fragile fabrics which could be bleached by the sun, producing gestural, abstract marks (figure 12). Jane Bustin's triptych (figure 8) makes use of a reflective copper surface, a colour cast, and a representation of a colour spill to produce an unstable composition which is only fully visible when daylight is at its strongest. The close attention to materiality that is expressed in each of these paintings appears to heighten a sense of the tem-



Figure 9: Jo McGonigal, *Lean (Yellow)*, 2016, wood, lycra, pigment. 58 x 11.5cm.

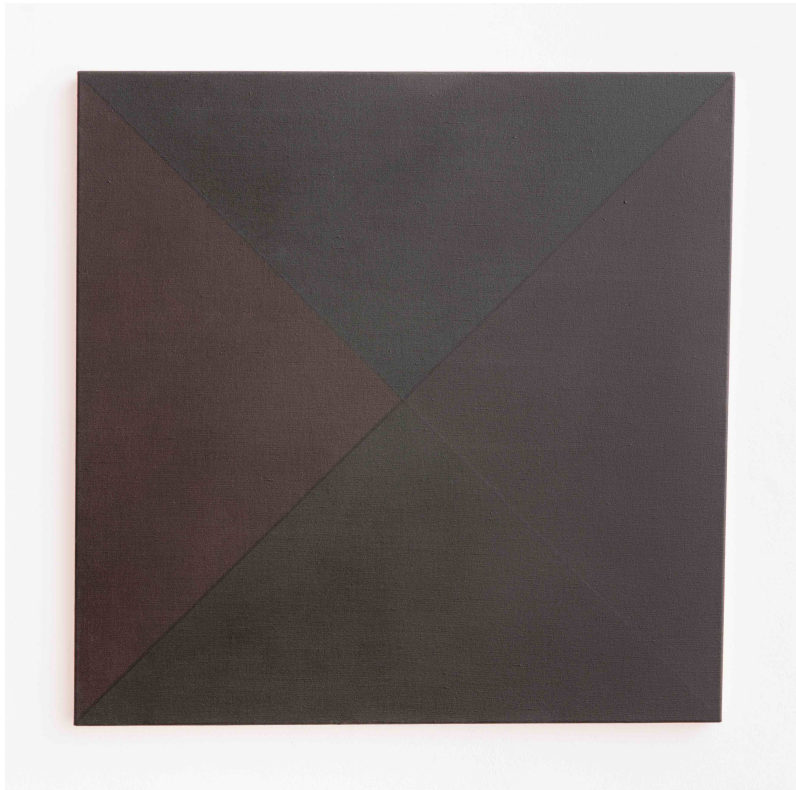


Figure 10: Katrina Blannin, *Black Madonna*, 2016, Acrylic on flax, 100 x 100cm.

porality of the works, proposing a duration for the viewing encounter which may confound one's expectations of the paintings presence.

The second strategy which is common to many of the responses is to approach the Ono instruction through analogy, or associative thought. Of the representational elements within these paintings it is possible to identify a blacked out window (Sarah Pettitt), a still life in the form of a sundial (Dan Howard-Brit), news articles and a sound system (Robert Rivers) and landscapes (Ben Jenner and Kieran Drury).¹⁶ In these representations we can observe a conceptual response, as each painter proposes an everyday form/object that acts in an equivalent way to the Ono instruction. For example, the angular graphic marks of Ben Jenner's painting indicate his initial study of a lighthouse lamp, an object which only produces colour (lightbeam) in a certain light (darkness) for a short time (warning). The image of the lighthouse lamp may only be visible through abstracted marks, but this specific starting point is suggested by the clearer landscape or seascape references that can be identified in the corners of this painting, forming a pictorial and conceptual frame for this work.

My invitation to each of the painters in the exhibition to produce a new work in response to the Ono instruction makes visible the particular quality of the imperative form of language, as each work positions itself on a scale be-



Figure 11: Sarah Kate Wilson, *Visors*, 2016. Coloured plastic, cord, clothing hangers, Dimensions variable.

tween realisation, interpretation and subversion, as the instruction is followed or resisted. As the offered instruction reflects my personal research activities and interests the success of this project rests on the generosity of each artist to try and locate the instruction within their own studio production. The difficulty of working to an external stimulus is particularly expressed in Katrina Blannin’s contribution to the exhibition of a painting and a text, written as a letter to Yoko Ono explaining it is not possible to produce a painting in response to an instruction.¹⁷ Blannin’s painting is almost monochromatic, divided into geometric sections which each emit a hint of colour from under the top layer of black paint. The text plaque (of the same proportions to the painting at a reduced scale of 10:1) which is shown next to the painting explains Blannin’s resistance to instruction painting and yet contains its own instruction directed to Ono, ‘My painting is many-layered and I want you to look into the abyss and for a moment, perhaps the time it takes to blink your eyes; I want you to see colour. Then I will present you with an instruction: “Say it once and then write down the colour that you see”’. Similarly, Sarah Kate Wilson (figure 11) incorporates the use of instruction into the presentation of her work, which is a set of coloured visors that visitors to the exhibition are encouraged to wear, proposing a concept of painting that relies on particular sensory experience, duration and that is activated through the body. Curiously both of these works appear to be highly influenced by the initial Ono starting point and yet assertive in their individual form and manner of



Figure 12: Sarah McNulty, *Gram (Noon)*, 2016, Sun-reactive paint on cotton, 100 x 200cm. *Shrink (Noon)*, 2016, Sun-reactive paint and ink on linen, 70 x 70cm.

presentation. Whilst the use of text encourages a reading of these paintings as instructive it is arguable that other works in this exhibition command the viewing subject through the specific nature of their form. For instance, the compressed form of Jo McGonigal's *Lean* painting (figure 9) could be said to instruct the viewer to adopt an awkward or unusual viewing position, pressing themselves against the wall in a way that mimics the painting and is arguably only sustainable for a brief period of time.

As a final observation, I would like to suggest that each response to Yoko Ono's instruction appears to bear a relationship to invisibility, fulfilling the remit to produce a painting in which 'the colour comes out only under a certain light at a certain time of the day' through the creation of a visual experience with a marked duration and quality of aesthetic resistance.¹⁸ As a collection of responses these paintings continue and enter into the original creative intention of the instruction, and the situation of encountering them within the A.P.T exhibition highlights the temporary nature of their asso-

ciation and offers a secondary meaning for the part of the phrase, ‘Make it a short time’.¹⁹ The personal interpretation by each artist and decision by many of the artists to create a new title for their work leads me to conclude that whilst the conceptual starting point has been incorporated into the form of these paintings it does not seem adequate to fully account for the specific nature of each work. Therefore, it is perhaps best to consider each painting as an independent and unique artwork which hosts the original Ono instruction, whilst being grounded more properly in the on-going studio production and professional activity of the individual artist. Through my role as artist-curator I hope to have presented a public contemplation of how a painting might perform and instruct, to test the relationship between conceptual and painting practice, and collectively ask: what is imperative to painting?

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NOTES

1. Published in Ono 1970.
2. *Ingredients, Method, Serving Suggestion*, 21 July-11 Sep 2016. As recipient of the 2016 A.P.T Curatorial Fellowship, I was invited to produce an exhibition and series of public events for A.P.T Gallery. The artists invited: Dan Howard-Birt, Katrina Blannin, Jane Bustin, Kieran Drury, Ben Jenner, Jo McGonigal, Sarah McNulty, Sarah Pettitt, Robert Rivers, Damian Taylor, Jack Vickridge, and Jo Volley.
3. Esner, Kisters, and Lehmann 2013.
4. Quoted by Colpitt 2004, 32.
5. For example, it is referenced in this context by art critic Bruce Altshuler in his essay ‘Art by Instruction and the Pre-History of Do-It’ published online: see URLs.
6. Marcel Duchamp, described how the wind should, ‘go through the book (and) choose its own problems’. Quoted by Altshuler, idem.
7. *Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Unhappy Readymade’*, 1920, Oil on Canvas, Suzanne Duchamp.
8. Listed in the collection database as ‘Marcel Duchamp’s Unhappy Readymade’, attributed to Suzanne Duchamp, 1919-1920, Gelatin Silver Print. See URLs.
9. Mike Sperlinger makes this observation about the speculative and open tone of Ono’s instruction pieces in Sperlinger 2005, 9.
10. The interview was published online, see URLs.
11. Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interview with Yoko Ono, see URLs.
12. Ono 1970.
13. *Paintings and Drawings of Yoko Ono*, AG Gallery, 925 Madison Avenue, New York. This was a gallery run by artist George Maciunas. See URLs.
14. See figures 6 (Dan Howard-Birt), 7 (Jack Vickridge).
15. See figures 1 (Robert Rivers), 2 (Damian Taylor). Also, Jo Volley, *Time Painting*, 2016, Phosphorescent green over gesso and fluorescent orange on MDF, 12" diameter. Archive no. JV/TP/16.
16. See figures 3 (Ben Jenner), 4 (Sarah Pettitt), and 5 (Kieran Drury).
17. See figure 10, and Katrina Blannin, *Dear Yoko*, 2016, Plastic, 10 x 10cm, edition of 5.
18. Ono 1970.
19. Ono 1970.

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URLS

- Bruce Altshuler: 'Art by Instruction and the Pre-History of Do-It':
<http://umintermediai501.blogspot.nl/2008/01/art-by-instruction-and-pre-history-of.html> (Accessed 24/08/2016 12:00) [copy the link whole to your browser]
- 'Marcel Duchamp's Unhappy Readymade', attributed to Suzanne Duchamp, 1919-1920, Gelatin Silver Print:
<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/138592.html?mulR=1849841240|1> (Accessed 29/08/2016).
- Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interview with Yoko Ono:
http://www.e-flux.com/projects/do_it/notes/notes.html (Accessed 25/08/2016)
- Paintings and Drawings of Yoko Ono*, AG Gallery, 925 Madison Avenue, New York:
<http://fluxusfoundation.com/archive/about-yoko-fluxus-foundation-archive/paintings-drawings-of-yoko-ono-at-ag-gallery-1961/>
 (Accessed 24/08/2016 14:40)