

## DOMOBAAL

### 'Notes for a consequence of – without stilling'

*without stilling* presents a bristling façade, a climbing, open-sided ellipse that stands over head height at its highest point. Made from individual slats of pale birch ply as fine as card, it is almost bafflingly complex in its construction. Each element has been bent into a tensioned loop and scored with a pattern of incisions so that slim ribbons of wood spring free from each flexure. Additional slim lengths, which Cotter calls extensions, flow from straps of birch attached to the side of each element, and finish as strips following the form as its turns. The ends of these extensions have been cut at a sharp angle, these chamfered slats then cross and interlace and hang loose at haphazard angles. Viewed from a distance this brier-y surface has the effect of blurring the edges of the curved structure, imparting a sense of immanent dynamism - it is a spinning form, gathering speed, disintegrating at the edges. The curve is open, inviting us to walk inside and examine the intricacy of its facture which, for all its density, appears unexpectedly light as if hovering inches above the floor.

Meanwhile, in another part of the Limerick City Gallery of Art hang a series of wall mounted assemblages of an entirely different character to *without stilling's* structural complexity. The eleven works that comprise *watery life & rock* are radically, breathtakingly reduced - each consists of an elongated black bracket or loop that bends out from the gallery wall at 90°. To each bracket has been appended, or fixed, or in some cases simply balanced, a piece of ordinary stuff - some nylon cord, a long tube of packing foam, an off cut of mirrored foil. Arranged in a loose constellation, this series presents for our consideration fragments of mundane, disposable, mass-produced things. Longer attention however reveals careful formal calculations and balances; the eye is drawn to densities of opacity and translucency, to the tensions of various lines cutting through space or succumbing to gravity. The scattered installation of the series invites us to appreciate the formal qualities of each component and its relationship to the others, like words and sentences in a poem.

How should we best understand such apparently divergent approaches to sculpture? Although alike in their resolute abstraction, the facture of these pieces veers from the intricate and complex to the acutely spare; from imposing, expansive structures, to delicately scaled assemblages, from carefully engineered networks of materials fastidiously worked, to minimally altered odds and ends of stuff. What conceptual or historical framework best accommodates Cotter's address to space? Within what constellation of meanings, relations and trajectories can we place these objects?

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*a consequence of – without stilling* continues a train of thought Cotter has been pursuing for almost five years - indeed *without stilling* takes its title from Ed Krčma's catalogue essay for her 2016 *Matter of Fact* exhibition, in a kind of relay or responsive exchange of ideas. The origins of this body of work start with the eponymous work *matter of fact* (2016) which was first shown in the domobaal gallery in London, itself in turn, a development of a series of large scale, emphatically linear works made for the MAC in Belfast in 2013. *matter of fact* consists of a complex radial framework which forms a drum of concentric circles, holding within it a cylindrical structure of layered, honeycomb card. These are materials and processes that Cotter has been using since the late 1990s; 6mm mild steel rods and ribbons of cardboard layered into hollow volumes, held or balanced within slim, linear frames. These materials are non-imposing in and of themselves but set up complex optical effects of opacity and transparency. The form is a loose riff on an air filter, and although resolutely abstract, the human body is doubly inscribed in its structure. The mild steel armature is so fine as to be physically responsive to the presence of the viewer, almost quivering when one walks around it. Meanwhile, each arc of the steel was formed by hand, or more precisely, bent around the artist's knee, so that it holds and retains the trace of her gesture. Monumental but light, substantial but airy, her work calls attention to and dramatises the space between body and object.

Positioned within the trajectory of her practice then, *a consequence of – without stilling* represents the progression of a body of work developed over five years, but in a larger sense it is a continuation of an avenue of investigation that is threaded throughout her career. Since the 1980s, Cotter has explored the formal and conceptual potential of translucent sculptural materials, matter that 'transmits' light beyond its physical bounds, following this aesthetic engagement through stained glass to wax, plastic, rubber sheeting and porous card. Through her materials, structures and spaces, her work evokes boundaries that are at once tractable and reversible, spaces that are replete with air and light, and bodies that are at once fragile, porous and tenacious. Connections can be made for example between *without stilling* and *In Absence* from 1998, a free-standing wall made from stacked ribbons of tri-wall corrugated card which divided the Rubicon Gallery in two - both are honeycomb structures that play with closure and control, openness and extension. We can also draw links between *matter of fact* and *Cage* exhibited in Economist Plaza in 1996, or example - a temporary outdoor work made while living in London, and an important early step in her investigations of the 'experience and conditions of the body in the city.'<sup>1</sup> Two tall, slim cylindrical cages, one surrounding a spill of black latex, a little like a folded umbrella, the other topped with a billowing hood of clear PVC. The documentary photographs show how the

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work was effectively animated by its outdoor position – one can clearly see how the PVC veil would flap and swell with each passing breeze, and so chaotically, or at least unpredictably spill beyond its confines. The inflation and deflation of the plastic hood expressed something ‘filmic’ for the artist, a sense of connection and dispersal that remains a core concern of her project.

In his essay for *Matter of Fact*, Ed Krčma described the works as ‘diagrammatic’, and probed the relationship between Cotter’s ‘lexicon of forms’ and their ‘language-like or thought-like’ qualities.<sup>ii</sup> The word diagram stems from the Greek *diagraphein* meaning ‘to mark out by lines’. As a classificatory system, it summons specific ways of thinking, both corralling information into an easily understood graphic, but also a way of making connections between disparate concepts, creating rhizomatic schematisations of ideas and philosophies. Cotter has been influenced at different points by the thinking of Joseph Beuys, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich, and the recent turn in the humanities towards New Materialism as articulated by Jane Bennett - all of whom have put forth different systems of understanding the material world or explaining our experience of being in and among the ‘stuff’ of the world. Cotter’s sculptures do not function as or take the form of diagrams, but her linear armatures and frame-like structures function as ways for her to process or ‘digest’ what Vilém Flusser described as the ‘amorphous stew’ which surrounds us.<sup>iii</sup>

Arguably, the common element linking the works in a consequence of – *without stalling* is less wood or plastic or metal but line: line extended into three dimensions, line in the form of minimally thin sheets of ply spliced into ribbon and woven into structure; line in the form of bundles of nylon or cord or foam suspended from whip thin metal frames. The work in this exhibition furthers Cotter’s investigation into the potential of line extended in space and an engagement with materials and structures that are porous, slight, precarious and reactive. In this sense, Cotter’s practice is in dialogue with a post minimalist, post medium moment where the boundaries between sculpture and drawing have been productively abraded and complicated, a mode of enquiry which has been vital since Picasso and Julio Gonzalez in the 1920s. Her sculptures and assemblages, to paraphrase art historian Anna Lovatt, ‘demarcate space without filling it, sculpting volume without mass’, while her tenuous, unravelling and often wall mounted works recall the work of Eva Hesse and Richard Tuttle.<sup>iv</sup> In order to approach the specificity of this new body of work however, it is necessary to move beyond the now familiar trope of ‘drawing in space’ which has been used to describe the work of artists as varied as Gordon Matta Clark and Fred Sandback to the more recent installation work of Sarah Sze or Monika Grzymala. Cotter’s

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project is determinedly different - concerned neither with describing figures or objects as per Picasso or Gonzalez, but neither interested in non-referentiality in the manner of Sandback or Hesse. Lovatt offers some productive alternative points of contact between the practices of sculpture and drawing; the most relevant to Cotter's practice being the quality of slightness which applies to the delicate, intricate structure of *matter of fact* or *without stilling* as equally as to the speculative, unobtrusive qualities of *watery life & rock* or *a dappled world*. Slightness, Lovatt proposes, puts forth an alternative to the bombastic or spectacular strain in twentieth and twenty first century sculpture.<sup>v</sup> Given that Cotter trained in the Crawford School of Art under John Burke, arguably Ireland's most important proponent of large scale Modernist steel sculpture, whose influence can be seen in the work of Cotter's contemporaries Eilish O'Connell and Vivienne Roche - this strategy of refusal or opposition holds weight. Each cribriform structure or loose-knit grouping offers a model of sculpture that implicitly challenges the medium's claims to discreteness and autonomy. Importantly though, Cotter's interest in responsive materials and in porous structures are an address to space that rebuffs the common tendency to read slightness or susceptibility as feminine. Instead, her works are in sympathy with the outlines of Merleau-Ponty's description of the intending consciousness, articulated by art historian Norman Bryson as 'always already in the world, in the thick of material existence, and not as standing apart from matter in some transcendental vacuum'.<sup>vi</sup> Her sculptures and drawings figure a mode of experience that is emphatically not about heroic individualism but offers instead an understanding of the world in which we are not separated from our materials but are rather impenetrably integrated.

This approach to spatiality is made visible in her drawings, several which are exhibited in *a consequence of – without stilling*. The turn towards drawing in critical and academic writing, particularly in relation to twentieth and twenty first century sculptures, further emphasises the fact that drawing can no longer be regarded as merely preliminary, but is in fact central to the conception of, and importantly the process of making - as art historian Jo Applin describes it: drawing understood as material, as matter and *mattering*.<sup>vii</sup> Therefore an examination of Cotter's drawings offers an insight into her approach to and understanding of space. *other drawings*; a series of works in pencil and white gouache on dark grey paper; turns around ideas of suspension and draping. Take *other drawings* | *five* for example: the mass on the right of swift, glancing elliptical marks describing a slightly squashed orb; on the left a tighter pattern of loops or discs quickly washed with white outlines a spinning helix. These loose skeins of lines are determinedly open, not so much delimiting structure than describing the fall or movement of light. *desk drawings* | *one* contains loose evocations of works for the show; recognisable in the foreground is

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an abbreviated sketch of *falling into many pieces* | *two*. The surface is washed with primer, an almost opaque off-white over the darker linen surface so that the sketched structures seem to inhabit a thick, almost murky medium. Space to Cotter is not a neutral, empty container for objects, but is itself teeming and dense with air and light and shade, communicating what architect Juhani Pallasmaa has described as, 'a strengthened sense of the materiality and hapticity, texture and weight, density of space and materialised light.'<sup>viii</sup> Both of these drawings describe a certain phenomenological attention; that which reminds us that we are 'caught up in things' and that the 'body is a thing among things'.<sup>ix</sup>

In order to explore this heightened apprehension of networked openness, Cotter presents us with a series of material and processual experiments of increasing complexity. The three works entitled *falling into many pieces* | *one*, *two* and *three* for example all riff on the idea of a wall mounted loop that holds a circle draped, hung or overlaid with amorphous material - warty bubbling plaster; a yellowing frill of latex stretched tight across a hoop, a loose spill of net. The tension or formal interest arises from the play between the elegant, minimal geometry of the steel frame, and the chaotic spill or accretion of matter. *a dappled world* similarly plays on the process of bundling: a series of three wall mounted assemblages, light and loose clusters of found banal materials - curls of plastic tubing, a wedge of insulation foam, some string - are assembled with a disarming lightness of touch. Collectively, the group presents an investigation into the tension between degrees of softness and hardness, of the interplay between mesh or crystalline or solid surfaces, or between densities of line and shadow. Each pale cluster is linked by a line drawn in pencil on the gallery wall, thus enacting a drama between two and three dimensions, creating an interplay between lines drawn, shaped and shadowed. Both series occupy space in a distinctive way: deploying light, translucent materials and cast shadows to blur discrete contours. Infra thin sheets of latex, or loose skeins of cord or net negate the distinction between interior and exterior, while each wall mounted arrangement is carefully lit so as to emphasise the collaboration between material and shadow. Such strategies enact a defiant, yet subtle territory grab, making work that takes up more space by seeming to leach out into it, either dissolving its edges or casting dense patterns of shadow that appear even more substantial than the sculptural object. Translucency allows her works to take up space without being territorial.

This subversive approach to spatiality is all the more compelling given Cotter's interest in, and frequent collaboration with architects and architecture: *without stilling* for example, stemmed from a conversation with Clancy Moore Architects. However, her references to architecture are less

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inclined towards the heroic, monumental or stable than the provisional and aleatory. Returning to *without stilling's* interior curve, we are faced by straight edged fins, each element carefully marked in pencil with a code relating to its place in the larger structure. This Euclidean core, orderly and rational, spins out into an increasingly ragged and chaotic fringe. *& bone* is described by Cotter as a both a 'requiem for architecture' and 'a spent architectural drawing'; it presents us with structure like an improvised crane anchored by a fluted plaster element that references a Corinthian column and balances a large hoop which in turn holds a limp greyish yellow latex fringe, like a burst balloon. If architecture, as Juhani Pallasmaa describes it, is our primary instrument in relating us to space and time, and to giving these a human measure, it is also widely recognised as having been instrumentalised 'to transmit and reinforce the power of the strong over the weak.'<sup>x xi</sup> To think about the death of architecture then means to think about a meltdown of the ways in which we order the world. However, these works are not in any sense pessimistic, but address a sense of slippage - the moment when familiar systems or patterns of thought are re-oriented. Cotter's research for this exhibition centred on ideas about the mutability of concepts once regarded with certainty. *a dappled world* refers to Nancy Cartwright's book of the same name which questions the limits of the mathematical sciences and proposes that principles of order in nature are much more entangled, emergent and piecemeal rather than any kind of closed, causal system. *the moon is falling* - a low, spreading pool of alternately transparent or blue plastic tape, over which hovers a group of blistered plaster discs like an orrery of flattened planets - refers to changing apprehensions of the laws of gravity.

These sculptures, poised between dissolution and cohesion, refer to intangible, abstract concepts. However, each work is realised through an intimate engagement with matter informed by familiar objects, often containers of various types such as cups or wastebaskets. *without stilling* makes reference to an aspect of vernacular material culture: the woven, open sided cylinder, made without adhesives, references an archaic, Irish drinking vessel, known as a noggin. Claudia Kinmonth, the Irish furniture historian, describes the vessel as, '... most impressively complex and intricate [...] made with no metal or glue, by a specialist known in nineteenth-century Ireland as 'a "noggin weaver" because of the artistic finish of the wooden hooping. The wooden hoop was a broad band, the full depth of the vessel and cleverly woven together at the junction'.<sup>xii</sup> However, it is less the structure or mode of facture of the vessel that is important to Cotter, than an intensity of engagement with material that comes from making by hand. *without stilling* is the accumulation of a repeated gesture, amassed over months by Cotter and her small team of assistants, movements of restraint and release that have built to a point of tension so that the

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meticulously planned composition of each individual piece gives way to a cumulative effect of unravelling. The work enacts a drama between the submission to and the agency of material.

The works that comprise *a consequence of – without stilling* therefore are arrived at through 'a conversation' with materials rather than an interrogation, and a sensitivity to the capacities, or the structural possibilities of materials and found objects. This is particularly apparent in *watery life & rock*, where for example, a rubber ring like a large flat washer is threaded onto the steel, or a single length of grey latex draped across the lip of the loop, or a slightly dingy wad of green upholstery foam stuffed through the bracket. The elements that Cotter deploys in these works are less everyday industrially manufactured materials but bits and pieces of discarded or leftover scraps. Nevertheless, the spare arrangements elicit from the most unprepossessing of materials rich visual incident, distilling from an unordered mess of detritus works of perfectly phrased formality.

The assemblages are reminiscent of Richard Wentworth's *Making Do and Getting By* series, an archive of photographs of 'happy accidents' which registers his chance encounters with unexpected structural improvisation; incidents where objects have been hijacked from their original function and pressed into unintended service. These range from the prosaic - a wooden hanger keeping a window open or a bottle top as an ashtray, to the more abstruse; a piece of carpet used as a car fender, or a bucket jammed onto the side of a dented car so that the headlight will still operate. Cotter's sculptures however, although similarly attuned to the links between the poetic and the mundane, reverse the emphasis by focusing on the formal liveliness inherent in unexpected materials. These are abstract arrangements that can't be fully abstracted - the chunk of upholstery foam remains recognisably a chunk of upholstery foam. These ordinary, prosaic fragments of stuff are not rendered extra-ordinary or spectacular, but worthy nonetheless of sustained aesthetic attention. The series presents us with, to paraphrase critical theorist Bill Brown, 'bits of quotidian stuff, displaced from quotidian routine, provoke[ing] a kind of intimate inspection as form and as matter, as a mystery of matter reformed, restaged.'<sup>xiii</sup> These rogue and raggy accumulations have an inherent coherence despite their seeming precarity or the sense that these casual agglomerations of films and tubes and strings are on the verge of falling apart. What Cotter points to is a condition of things ordering themselves - the weight of a material drooping, of one element falling against another, the pressure of gravity and the fall of light. Rather than celebrating human ingenuity, her work is alive to the fact that we are entwined in matter, and that humans and objects form networks or assemblages across which agency is distributed.

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Cotter's sculptures articulate a model of thinking - an attitude towards the open and susceptible condition of being in and making space in the world, and a sculptor's awareness of the consequences of submission to and engagement with the agency of matter. This manner of thinking chimes with the recent turn towards what had been termed 'Vibrant Materialism' in the humanities. The 'vibrancy' of matter is a concept put forth by political philosopher Jane Bennett, who explains this 'vitality' as, 'the capacity of things - edibles, commodities, storms, metals - not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own.'<sup>xiv</sup> The upsurge in interest in 'new materialism' (as opposed to 'old materialist' Marxist questions about the uneven inscription of labour), provides a different vocabulary for thinking about matter, broadly articulated as more amorphous than discrete objects.<sup>xv</sup> As art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson has recently suggested, by taking seriously the idea that we are comprised of the stuff around us, we might be moved to creatively envision a more ethical relationship to the world around us.<sup>xvi</sup> Bennett similarly argues that an 'enhance[d] receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds us and infuses us, [will] generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies.'<sup>xvii</sup> In our present moment of rapidly advancing technological and scientific potential, such attention might encourage a new way of thinking about our place in the world, not as the apex of a pyramid but rather interwoven in a lattice. What Cotter seeks to register is a shift in values between the natural and the material worlds - that we have things wrongly categorised. As Bennett argues, 'a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers [...] can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.'<sup>xviii</sup>

*anatomy* is a small work, housed under a mouth blown glass dome. Two steel rods topped with a tilted circular plate are decisively bolted together with a trio of fletched fixings and stood on an upturned plastic funnel. A short strip of silver tape unevenly ripped at its top margin and flecked with blue at its base adheres to the rim of the glass, echoing the vertical of the steel. The reflective tape sharpens our awareness of the transparency of the glass, while the fasteners' bulk contrasts with the fineness of the steel bars. An oddly affecting arrangement of prosaic elements, the piece enacts a drama of balance, creating an encounter that looms large without being monumental. In many ways the vertical arrangement of *anatomy* distils Cotter's project in *a consequence of – without stilling*: sculptural presence is built through moments of excess and restraint to arrive at a breathing moment, poised between dissipation and compression.



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by

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Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*, (I.B. Taurus: London, 2005), 25

<sup>ii</sup> Ed Krčma, 'To Diagram without Stilling/On Maud Cotter's Sculpture', *Maud Cotter: Matter of Fact* (domobaal: London, 2016), unpaginated

<sup>iii</sup> Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (Reaktion: London, 1999), 24

<sup>iv</sup> Anna Lovatt, 'Drawing Across and Between Media' *Drawing : Sculpture* (London: Drawing Room and Leeds Art Gallery, 2012), 6

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>vi</sup> Norman Bryson, 'A Walk for a Walk's Sake' in Catherine de Zegher (ed.) *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, (The Drawing Centre: London & New York, 2003), 154

<sup>vii</sup> Jo Applin, 'Eva Hesse Sculpture by Elizabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman (ed), and Eva Hesse Drawing by Catherine de Zegher (ed) Review', *Art Book*, Vol. 14:4, 2007, 31-32, 31

<sup>viii</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Wiley Academy: Chichester West Sussex, 2005), 37

<sup>xi</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'Eye and Mind', trans Carleton Dallery, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans James E. Edie et al (Evanston: Illinois, 1964), 163

<sup>x</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Wiley Academy: Sussex, 2005), 17

<sup>xi</sup> Leslie Sklair and Laura Gherardi, 'Iconic Architecture as a Hegemonic Projects of the Transnational Capitalist Class', *City*, Vol. 16, 2012, 57-73, 57

<sup>xii</sup> Claudia Kinmonth, 'Knowing our Noggins: Rare Irish Drinking Vessels Rediscovered', *Folk Life: Journal of Ethnological Studies*, 55:1 (2017), 46-52, 48

<sup>xiii</sup> Bill Brown, 'A Questionnaire on Materialisms', *October* 115, Winter 2016, 11-13, 11

<sup>xiv</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2010), vii

<sup>xv</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'A Questionnaire on Materialisms', *October* 115, Winter 2016, 16-18, 16

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xvii</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2010), 11

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid*, 13