

Satellites Programme

Thomas Aitchison

Drag a File Here

25.04.15 – 14.06.15

Collective is delighted to present *Drag a File Here*, a new exhibition by Edinburgh based artist Thomas Aitchison, developed as part of Satellites Programme 2015.

Thomas' work often takes the form of painting, digital animation and installation, playing with the conventions of exhibition display and decoration. *Drag a File Here* consists of a new series of paintings and an installation specifically developed for Collective. The small scale, delicately painted works draw on a host of imagery including landscape, home appliances and corporate insignia. These images have been processed using photo-editing software, a technique often employed for screen printing but used here to break down the legibility of the images which are then rendered meticulously by hand. Thomas uses a vibrant colour palette that further disrupts our reading of the original image and deliberately complicates the associations held to a recognisable object or a historically significant landscape.

The title of the exhibition *Drag a File Here* is suggestive of the artist's own process and the way in which images are regularly encountered and consumed digitally by us all – scanned, downloaded, dragged and dropped for viewing. Operating both as objects and images, the paintings in *Drag a File Here* are staged on and against gallery walls that are clad with reflective panelling. This shiny surface casts the visitor as another material within the exhibition and transforms the gallery into a space that appears in the process of

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construction. Through the use of materials such as reflective vapour resistant board, old decorators' dustsheets, and mirror plates, Thomas brings together the conventionally distinct fields of art practice, exhibition display and the decorating trade. His work explores the idea of the 'backstage', bringing to the fore the behind-the-scenes labour and materials that support the production of exhibitions, unravelling the common separation of his own practice as an artist and as a joiner.

Thomas Aitchison is an artist based in Edinburgh. He studied at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) and at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. Recent exhibitions include: *Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2013*, Spike Island, Bristol, and ICA, London, 2013; and *Squirt*, Edinburgh, 2013. Thomas received the *Barns-Graham Travel to Italy Award* from ECA in 2014.



Invisible labour, material data

Georgia Horgan

The European Union has made a subtle semantic shift in the language used in policy making since the end of the last decade,¹ where work is increasingly referred to as 'occupation' as opposed to employment or labour. The difference is inconspicuous yet ideologically distinct: 'labour' implies production, an outcome, or a tangible form of remuneration; 'occupation', however, implies no such beginning or end, but a constant state of activity, whether gainful or not. Occupation is not simply about earning, but also spending, consuming and distracting.²

Increasingly, the most desirable employee is freelance. Flexible and isolated, and without the contractual obligations and financial nuisances associated with sick pay or maternity leave, the freelancer is available for all types of occupation at all times, free to work, spend, consume, and engage twenty four hours a day. In a post-Fordist economy where nothing is made and all that is produced and reproduced is capital, we find ourselves in what can be referred to as the info-economy, where the currency is attention.³ As labour time vanishes into consumption time, what is manufactured, bought and sold are info-products, vast streams of visual and aural content that demand our engagement in order to produce value.

The artist occupies a peculiar position in regard to capitalism's newfound preference for the precarious, self-employed worker. Once idealised as

an occupation that offered complete flexibility and freedom, an alternative lifestyle that disavowed the nine-to-five grind, the artist is now capitalism's model employee. As issues surrounding zero-hour and flexi-time contracts enter into mainstream political consciousness, it becomes clear that the isolated, precarious, ad-hoc conditions traditionally reserved for cultural workers have become the preferred status for all.

Particularly within the canon of postmodern painting, the artist also becomes the perfect conduit for the stream of the info-economy. The painter is always already at his or her leisure to receive, digest, regurgitate and rehash the flow of visual culture emanating from the lights and sounds of late capitalism. This tendency is best articulated through the work of eighties postmodern assemblage painters such as David Salle or Alexis Smith;⁴ what is manifested is a pastiche of high-octane simulation, arguably aiding in the proliferation of capital through images in the form of highly reified info-products.

Thomas Aitchison's work both embodies and interrogates the structures within which painting functions in a late capitalist landscape. Representational in essence, the paintings draw together a series of unrelated images, harvested from search engines and processed into bitmap format ready to be reproduced as fragmented data. These images refract and reproduce themselves across the iridescent foil of moisture resistant vapour board sheets,

maintaining their viral trajectory into the physical world.

However, this use of the space-age surface of vapour board is where occupation, art and labour intersect in Thomas's practice. Trained as a joiner, his work continually references materials used in the trade: dust sheets, mirror plates, decorator's pyramids. The contrast of the meticulously reproduced digital images against the contingent marks on the dustsheet draw an aesthetic comparison between the tangible labour associated with traditional trade and the sanitised environs of the info-product. The use of joinery paraphernalia also serves to examine the value of different types of making. Painting, arguably the most reified of mediums, contributes content to the image-capital matrix; however, when iterated on the humble dust sheet, with its mirror plates unpainted, the work espouses a kind of nakedness in its making, or a revealed framework.

All of these references, from the arbitrary jpegs to the splatters on dust sheets, represent what is perhaps an overall diminished agency of the worker within the context of contemporary production: the brush strokes are drag and drop, keeping us occupied; the accidental but palpable imprint of labour attributes no surplus value.

Footnotes

¹The Carrot Workers' Collective, 'On Free Labour', URL: <https://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/on-free-labour/> (13/04/2015)

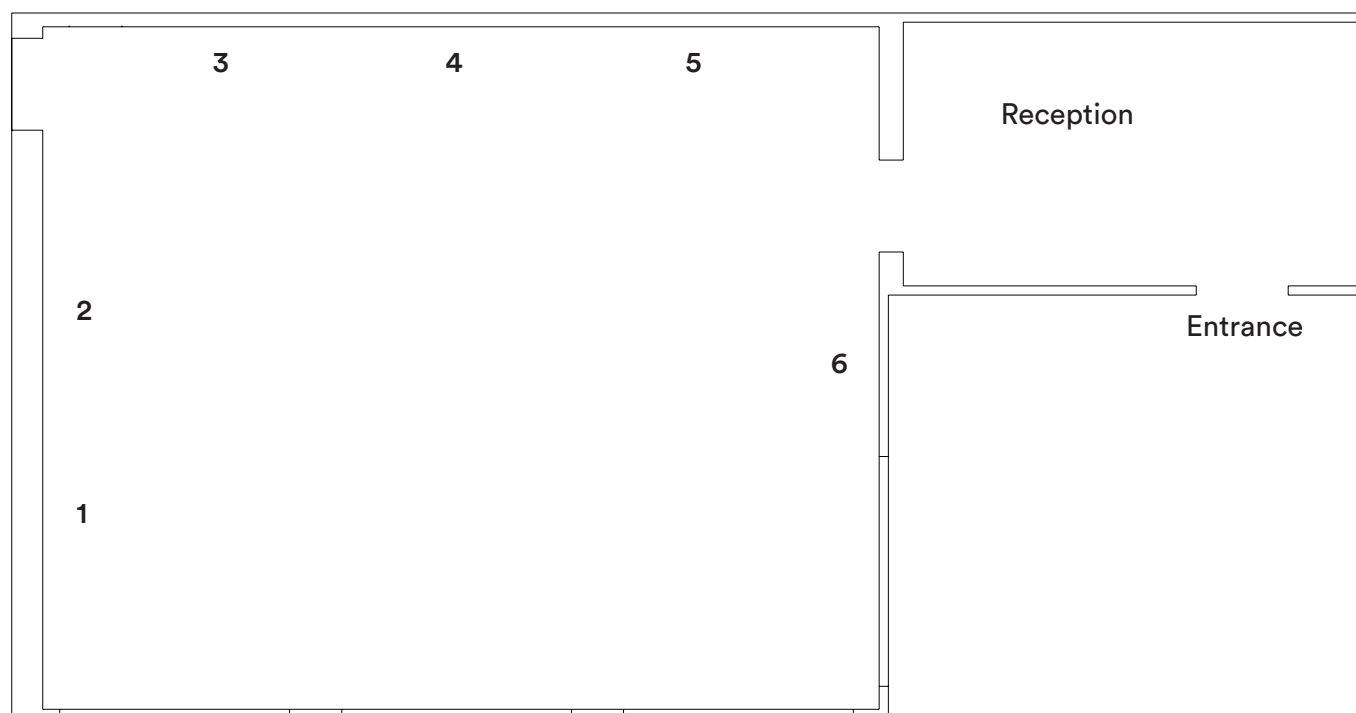
²An expanded discussion of the relationship between occupation and labour can be found in Hito Steyerl, 'Art as Occupation', URL: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life-12/> (08/04/2015)

³"The best consumer is the self-employee who is available enough to invest maximal quantities of attention to the info-products that ceaselessly demand our attention" - John Kelsey, 'Self-Employment Rate' in *Rich Texts, Selected Writing for Art*, p.181

⁴Their work is discussed in relation to the somewhat hazy definition of what postmodern painting is in Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting' in *Theories of Contemporary Art*, ed. Richard Hertz.

Georgia Horgan lives and works in Glasgow and graduated from her BA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2013. Recent exhibitions include: *Early Modern Administrative Machine*, a solo exhibition at WASPS Studios, Dundee in 2014 and *Fold Up Snap On*, a group show at The Pipe Factory, Glasgow, as part of Glasgow International 2014. Her writing has been included in Undercurrents journal and in 2013 she participated in *Generator Printhouse: Anyone Incapable of Taking Sides Should Say Nothing*, at Generator Projects, Dundee. Georgia is an Associate Producer at Collective, and develops texts for each of the solo presentations as part of Satellites Programme 2015.

Floor Plan



Drag a File Here, vapour panels, oil paintings, 730×590×240cm, 2015.

1. *Washing Machine*, oil painting on old decorator's dust sheet, mirror plates, 66×46×2cm 2015.
2. *Pictish Stone*, oil painting on old decorator's dust sheet, mirror plates, 56×30×2cm, 2015.
3. *Tower of Pisa*, oil painting on old decorator's dust sheet, mirror plates, 71×36×2cm, 2015.
4. *Banana Hanger*, oil painting on old decorator's dust sheet, mirror plates, 51×40×2cm, 2015.
5. *Patio Heater*, oil painting on old decorator's dust sheet, mirror plates, 51×46×2cm, 2015.
6. *Lottery Sign*, oil painting on old decorator's dust sheet, mirror plates, decorator's pyramids, 66×41×10cm, 2015.

Drag a File Here is part of Satellites Programme, Collective's development programme for emergent artists based in Scotland. Satellites Programme includes four solo presentations by selected Scotland based artists and one project presented by an Associate Producer. The programme is specifically developed to facilitate artists at this pivotal point in their career through peer review, professional development, mentoring, exhibitions and events.

Collective is a contemporary, visual art organisation established in 1984. Collective delivers an exciting and ambitious programme of exhibitions, new commissions, events and off-site projects. Collective produces major new work by Scotland based and international artists who are at a pivotal stage in their development.