



WA FOCUS | REBECCA BAUMANN
ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Plastic Media: The work of Rebecca Baumann

Zara Stanhope

In the essay 'The Meaning of Art' (1931) art critic Herbert Read wrote that all art is in some sense plastic, in the way that it is manipulated and shaped by the artist. For Read, some art, in particular music, is more plastic than others in that it does not have to represent the visible world or be utilitarian but could be an abstract form created from the artist's own consciousness. Ultimately the aim of art, in its plasticity, is to create unity and a harmony of formal relations for the viewer's sense perceptions. Plasticity is also Read's definition of beauty.

The plastic arts is a term that dropped out of usage with the shift away from formalism and modernism. Yet contemporary cultural and art theorists such as Helen Grace have recently pointed out how plasticity can be associated with machinic production and an enfolding of technology into the intellect and nature.¹ She proposes the mechanisms and media of art are literally becoming plastic (the camera and photography in particular). Grace's interest is broader than sense perception; her line of thought is toward the possibility of the plasticity of art playing a role in the technical nature of being and the world. In a sense, Grace is proposing a role for art within the co-evolution of technology and nature. I interpret this as suggesting that art media, in its plasticity or technicity today, has become co-extensive with other aspects of the world.

These ideas are pertinent for thinking about the evolution of Rebecca Baumann's art and the works exhibited at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. The colourful and reflective materials Baumann uses have often led to her work being associated with positive emotions such as happiness and joy. Celebratory and sensual are terms often applied to works that have ranged from golden tinsel curtains (*Untitled Cascade*, 2010) to balloon releases (*Welcome to the Wonderful World of Emotion and Impact*, 2008). The full range of social experiences, from birthdays to funerals, is discussed in regard to the emotional hit that viewers find in

her works.² Fans and streamers blur memories of parties with shop floor demonstrations and mobile celebrations like floats and cruise ships. Banks of flip clocks with colour swatches (*Automated Colour Field*, 2011), and sliding doors covered with dichroic film (*Light Event*, 2015) create simple harmonies and durational experiences through the syntheses of different elements. This unity of parts leads to responses to Baumann's work as spectacular, charged with the dramatic moments of art history, or by others as elegant and dreamlike. Baumann shapes materials ranging from smoke to light using the polyester film of dichroic material in the recent *Light Work* (2016) resulting in works that slip between form and anti-form, and fulfil Herbert Read's desire for beauty. Nevertheless, most recent commentators on her work identify an ambiguity in the practice that holds the potential for anxiety, and a criticality that remains difficult to define.³

Baumann's use of the techniques of the spectacle have explicitly been associated with experiences of affect as they have been outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, that is as a direct impact on the body's nervous system that avoids psychological, ideological and linguistic structures.⁴ From this perspective her works independently implicate the viewer in a space between the work and the self, blurring the boundaries between the body and the animal state. These ideas counter other notions of immersive art experiences, such as Boris Groys' understanding of art installations operating to penetrate the viewer's subjectivity with realisations regarding constraints on public freedom due to the undemocratic behaviour of state institutions.⁵ In this regard, Baumann's materials cannot avoid, or they deliberately make present, the neoliberal market condition in the form of its mechanical and synthetic products.

1 Helen Grace, 'The Plasticity of the Image and the Secrecy of the Device' paper at Photography Ontology, University of Sydney, 2-3 June 2016.

2 Leigh Robb, 'Art & Australia/Credit Suisse Private Banking Contemporary Art Award: Rebecca Bauman', *Art & Australia*, vol 49, No. 3 Autumn 2012, p 528.

3 Graham Mathaway, 'Rebecca Baumann: Manoeuvres: Fremantle Art Centre, Sensible Perth', http://sensibleperth.blogspot.co.nz/2016_03_01_archive.html

4 Matthew Giles discusses Deleuze and Guattari's ideas from *What is Philosophy?* in relation to Baumann's work in, 'My Wonder, My Self: Sensation and Capitalism' in Rebecca Baumann, *Rounds*, exhibition catalogue, 2010, pp136-147.

5 Boris Groys, 'Politics of Installation', 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation/>.

On one level her works often emphasise the pressure on art museums today to be sites of spectatorship and entertainment aimed at increasing audience numbers, in contrast to the Enlightenment purpose of the institution as a place of edification. Whether by direct affect or through our subjectivity, Baumann imbricates the viewer in the relations lying between emotion and power.

This space of relations is suggestive in highlighting the borders that create it, whether they are the shine of the commodity world, the system of the art museum, the passage between the known and unknown or experience itself.⁶ And this is a key point about Baumann's practice. In her experimentation with form, with materiality (plasticity) her works also unsettle boundaries and potentially open structure to where the dark side lurks, where control is lost. Within the candy coating can lie a toxic swamp as much as a heavenly rainbow. The shimmering colour spectrum of *Light Work* denotes the affective as a critical statement on consumer society and the digital era as well as suggest the darkness that hides in the hades of our desires.

Looking across Baumann's practice suggests that she increasingly approaches her work with a research based approach. This speculation into science or knowledge was recognised by Bree Richards, who noted that *Mixed Feelings*, 2012 was informed by Baumann's investigations into the physics of falling paper. The unpredictable flight pattern of the paper, which fits the operation of 'low dimensional chaos', is a dynamic operation that has chance and change as two of its factors.⁷ Baumann trials the physics and relativity of matter to analyse the plasticity of forms and elements and their relation to the individual and the social body. Plasticity incorporates many components apart from materiality – information, time, light – all impacting on our neural networks. Any scientist will tell you that research resembles snakes and

ladders, directing speculations across different directions seeking the perfect outcome while trying to avoid the slide down to failure.

As many recent commentators remind us, including Deleuze and Guattari, there cannot be a return to pristine nature. Bauman's work manifests a contemporary state that cannot return to a base line of pre-plasticity. Environmentalists such as Bill McKibben and others have declared for some decades that we have reached the 'end of nature', and that it is romantic to believe that unadulterated nature can remain independent from humankind and be a guide for the future. Environmental philosophers discuss having entered a postnatural environment in which we inhabit a built world, one that is urban, synthetic and increasingly exists with new and multiple senses of time and space. Philosopher Steven Vogel, in his book *Thinking Like a Mall, Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* proposes that we can no longer distinguish between the natural and built worlds and to continue this dichotomy is harmful. His question for environmental philosophy is not 'how can we save nature?' but rather 'what environment should we inhabit, and what practices should we engage in to help build it?'⁸ Baumann's insertion of shimmering acrylics into the gallery in *Light Work*, 2016 on another level similarly questions the nature of art, media and the ecology. Forms of media were once well defined but even at the time that Read discussed the plastic arts the concept had reformed across the disciplines of visual art, architecture, poetry and music. The new plastic media are the web and the cloud. These postmedia are god-like in aiming to be the source of all information. And increasingly comprise our shopping malls.

Baumann's work is part of our postnatural state of automation, speed and immersion. Her practice absorbs us in a condition that teeters between the natural and artificial. Testing out materiality on networks of bodies and environments Baumann asks how we should engage with this ecology in which we are entwined?

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6 Andrew Varano, 'From Surface Tension to Form: The work of Rebecca Baumann and Alistair Rowe', *HERE&NOW*, exhibition catalogue, 2015, pp 7-15.

7 Bree Richards, 'Rebecca Baumann, Low dimensional chaos', *Contemporary Australia: Women*, Queensland Art Gallery Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012, pp 60-63.

8 Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall, Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2015.

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Catalogue of Works



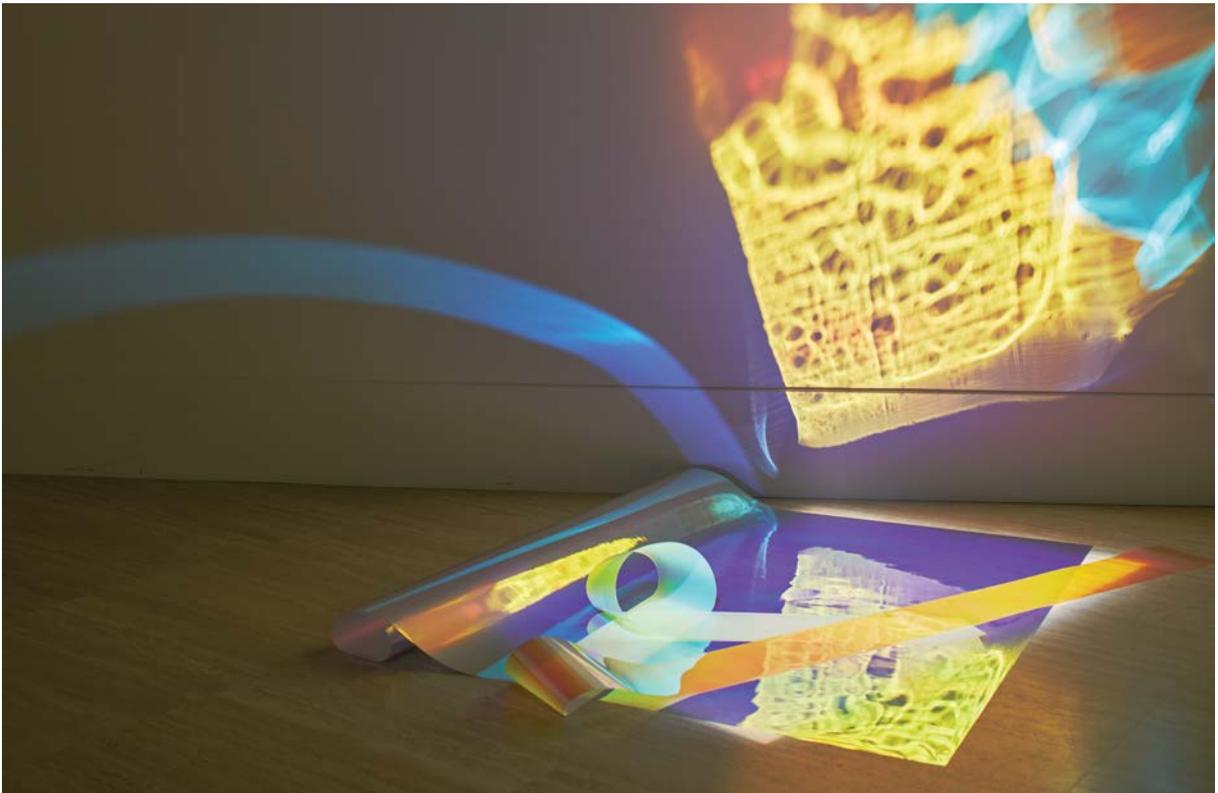
Automated Colour Field 2011



Moments in Movement 2016



Mixed Feelings 2012



Light Work 2016 (installation)



Light Work 2016 (installation)

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Manoeuvres

Graham Mathwin

A friend of mine recently put it to me that while she would go out of her way to see a show by Rebecca Baumann, she would probably not write about it. After beginning this piece, I realised that it was of great difficulty to say anything about Baumann's work that was worth saying. This is not because it is unworthy of attention, but that the difficulties within other works that make them seem necessary to speak about do not seem to arise in Baumann's creations. Her work's simplicity and ready accessibility spurn attempts to language it. In a way, it is already quite complete. The communication technologies that she misappropriates parallel the dilemma: if an artist goes so far as to remove the typically linguistic and figurative content of a tri-fold billboard so that the only content is the playing of light and colour, does it mean that the almost inevitable 'figuring' that occurs in analytic writing is a disservice to the art? The operations of Baumann's works are simple, and they require very little by the way of explication. She designs them to speak to us in a refined and immediate language, and it is perhaps better understood as an experience than converted into words.

Reading the criticism that is directed at Baumann's work it is overwhelmingly positive. There is frequent acknowledgment of the moment her work captures: between fleeting joy and inevitable melancholy. Yet perhaps we should be more inquisitive than this. Although accurate, it seems too obvious. Where, in Baumann's work, is the possibility of antagonism? Where is there any challenge? Is the reason I cannot write about it the fact that it is too meek? Is it, despite its flamboyant colours and occasional dramas, just too mild to whip up any resentment, bitterness, or even criticism? I enjoy it, but do I do more? What is at stake in it? The typical response to Baumann's work often seems limited to noting that it is both happy and sad, and in criticism, the theoretical and literary equivalent of this. A kind of catharsis pervades her creations, and how we *feel* about them, and people are happy to leave it at that. I would like to offer what I hope is a reading that may begin to challenge the more typical language of Baumann's critics. Baumann is clearly well rehearsed in contemporary artistic

creation, but does this disguise the absence of any friction in her work? Let us follow this train of thought:

There are moments in Baumann's work that appear somewhat resistive: moments of breakage, stoppage and failure. Yet the most common response to the less celebratory moments in Baumann's work seems to be melancholy. Yet perhaps, if we read the work more aggressively, the melancholy experience of Baumann's work could be understood as somewhat self-indulgent. Perhaps we can understand it as apathy – specifically the apathy of the unengaged consumer, an apathy borne of the fetishized products she employs in her works. In the vein of the assisted ready-made, Baumann uses the commercial and industrial products of our world to make her work, and it is perhaps these products themselves that are the origin of this apathetic response – experienced by ourselves and heightened through the program of the artist. The perfect example of this is OFF/ON, the streamer attached to the industrial fan that flies and ships in the air, until the fan turns off and the streamer falls on the floor. By turning off, or remaining idle, or through the workings of gravity, the immediate and pleasing appeal of her work is undone – until it starts again. The sadness we experience in the interval is like a sad peek into the heart of the fetish – that is then once more covered up. The space that it inhabits is perhaps at the edge of the happy and the sad – and in that of melancholy – but it has an equal relationship and investment in commercial and industrial production of spectacle, celebration and entertainment. Yet can Baumann's work present any sort of antagonism or investigation here? To this realm of the commercial and the industrial from which it draws its materials? The work seems easily recouped, focused as it is on emotional manipulation. Baumann's work does very little to the objects of commerce and industry, only removes their content. A party without people, a billboard without an advert: smoke without fire. Is the operation of her work only to absolve us of guilt? Is the purpose of her work to let us briefly under the fetish of the spectacle and yet only provide us with the soft-core emotional response of melancholy?

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Interlude:

Have you ever watched *Cube*?

It is a film where people get trapped by various strange machinations in a game that kills them – a game of cubes, inside a bigger cube. The game in the film is constituted of a system that is incredibly complex, involving moving rooms that rotate according to square roots of prime numbers or something. The end result is often gory and imaginative death. I didn't watch it until I wrote this, but I read about it, and its premise sticks in my mind. There is something about that sentiment, the inexplicability of this machine that someone has built, trapped people inside, and consigned them to death: but with a way out. There are various issues that make it interesting to consider, as a metaphoric circumstance it is of particular interest: unknown systems, moving beneath and around you. The ending, giving us no glimpse outside of the cube, offers us nothing outside its game plan. Though perhaps an oversight, it is the nature of games that outside them is less fun: Hence one of the character's decisions to stay in the cube, giving up on the exterior world.

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Position 1.

While there is an ostensible relationship to the emotional turmoil of both celebration and its aftermath in Baumann's work, there is a more complex and parallel relationship to the space of commerce, capitalism, entertainment industries, mass production, and spectacle. However, the materials she uses always seem reconciled to the inevitable apathy we experience in enjoying them. Yet perhaps it is the case that the apathy that Baumann presents in these works is not something one could criticise her work for. In a way, it is unjust to criticise Baumann for not

overthrowing the inevitable apathy of commercial enterprises and worldwide systems of capital; it is obviously a bit systemic and endemic for that – but this does not mean there is no capacity for resistance. Is it the case, then, that Baumann's response is something both moderate and nihilistic: Everything is Terrible, but that the Party must go on until it ends?

Position 2:

We should note that Baumann's work has developed and complicated itself. The works that she has recently been presenting, from *Automated Colour Field* through to *Manoeuvres*, are not so caught up in temporary failure, and that kind of apathetic or melancholic response. They fail sometimes, but they are more invested in repetition, in slow and subtle movement. They tick like clocks, but not a time bomb. Time is clearly implicit there then, moving slowly, trickling away. *Automated Colour Field*, a new arrangement every second, is a slowly grinding kind of delight. There is something austere here, like her conveyor belts and industrial fans. These objects are industrial – less commercial, less spectacle; they point to the probable place of creation of the materials she uses: in a factory somewhere, putting toxic coatings on party goods. Industry, time, and constant movement: perhaps the apathy we can see in Baumann's work now is understandable from the position of industrial production: as repetition causing a loss of meaningful exchange. It is not the fetish undone, but at its origin, where apathy is not our absence of care to the means of production, but our absence of care in production. Things happen, they go on happening, and here we are, still, growing less concerned. *Automated Colour Field* goes on without us, unlike *Confetti International*. *Manoeuvres* also presents this. In a way, *Manoeuvres* goes further: it plays us. We are trapped, like the people in the *Cube*, but this time in a seemingly benevolent orchestration, that none-the-less is counting down our lives.

Manoeuvres is part of Baumann's continued investigation into not only modes of presentation, but specific information presentation mechanisms – from the *Automated Colour Field* flip-boards

(replicating railway flip-boards in Europe) through *Once More with Feeling* (re-presented in this exhibition and based on tri-fold billboards) and into *Manoeuvres*, with the delicate flipping circles like those we find on the side of Transperth buses. As she has continued, the investigation has deepened, and the most recent iteration is not randomized, as *Automated Colour Field*, or as limited (even as it is refined) as *Once More with Feeling*. *Manoeuvres* is an intricate dance through space and time. It extends into an aural dimension in the strange tune the signs play, shimmering in the gallery. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the installation of this work is that it is not overwhelming or impressive in dimension; it is instead a work that is more about hiding. The installation across two corridors and a room and the multiple planes that it activates means it is impossible to see or know what might be going on at the other end of the work. Though a simple device the independent, and though cyclic, potentially random animation of the panels transforms the gallery into an active participant... and even a potentially malicious participant. Often, I felt as if the work was playing me, particularly in moments of surprise, when what I expected to happen from what I had seen was undone – when the program was interrupted. This was even more the case when it did not show me what I wanted. The panels are covered from behind, and so hide any possible vision of their content, and this manipulates movement even within the less dynamic spaces (the room as opposed to the corridor, spaces where one typically moves cyclically around the art on the walls before leaving). The panels also stand in space, often facing opposite directions, yet are being constantly played off each other.

I am reminded of one of my other encounters with Baumann's works – at *LUMINOUSFLUX: Light works* at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in 2013. While many of the other works in the show used light in a painterly fashion, seeming to sit more on the wall than in space, and denying the potentialities and legacy of the light and space movement, Baumann's work was fully involved in using the gallery. Her use of space there was much less complex, and more direct than in *Manoeuvres*. Yet in both, the same strength

– of acknowledgement and interest in space – is deployed, but has become more cohesive, powerful, and complex. The artwork does not sit, site-adapted or even site-responsive, rather, it is a truly active participant, engaged in the creation of a performance within the gallery. One becomes aware, in watching the work, of the logic of play, and the fact that our interactions with the work are guided by a system outside of our control, pre-ordained by the artist. The artwork thus becomes something more than pleasing, and begins toying with us, and our desire to see.

Position 3:

All of this is relevant as it provides the space of distinction from the media she uses: indeed, we begin to see that her operations are quite contrary to it. Advertising and information presentation is absolutely focused on convincing us that we can see everything, and all at once, and that everything we see, we can have. This notion of appearance is the central lie of Debord's concept of the spectacle: that of the movement from being to having, and having to only appearing. Perhaps, in its orchestration and hiddenness, Baumann's work reminds us, in ways that few other artworks do – artworks that often seem to be resolutely their own advertisements – that the world is not given, and not everything you see can be yours. The world is a place governed by those that have the power of the gaze, not only in a sexual sense, but economic and social sense too. We also live more and more without the possibility of seeing the person who controls. Control is exerted both invisibly and visibly, and invisibility can have as great a power as visibility ('unknown knowns' come to mind). Baumann's work, if we can read it like this, moves in the direction of challenging us to perceive even the most simple and physical of spaces in this manner, a synchronic circuit that operates beyond and without us; that we are part of it, and it is all around us.

However, what we do see remains pleasing – often entertaining. It causes no great dissonance. Though Baumann plays with our desire to see – particularly our desire to see everything at once – by hiding appearances, activating individual and minuscule pieces

of the installation, she simultaneously offers us visual riches. This visuality has long been at the heart of Baumann's practice – the appearance of colour, movement, and temporality, give us senses of animation, excitement, and pleasure.

The perceptivity of Baumann's work is not in being wholly damning of systems of control. The most insidious are those that seem benevolent at first. Her work picks up on the relationship present between the tragedy of celebration and the late capitalist world we inhabit. The consumer's dream has gone sour, and her work presents us with this very situation. Its success as a reflection of the economic and social world we inhabit in the world of global capital is the cause of its success as art. It is not the simple undoing of the dichotomy of happy and sad emotions that she exposes in her work; it is the apathetic cornucopia of the late capitalist world. Framing it like she does, the bright colours and delicate dances become hollow, removed, distilled, and distinct. They take on an air of coldness, some of the chill that we are not often invited to feel in places of entertainment. Baumann does not pass judgment, however. These works offer a means of misappropriation and a means of engagement that can only be a complicit resistance – working within the system. They only make sense in response to the technologies and materials they come from. They are bound up in a discourse of material and use that is subverted. Yet the subversion relies on the origin. Baumann's work, here in the art world, relies on the nature of entertainment and advertising industries and broader aesthetic developments, industrial materials, to exist. However we perceive the work, it is implicit in the discourses that it stands in ambivalent relation to. I say ambivalent as it is implicit in, and un-judging of, yet misuses and cannibalizes these discourses: and through this it produces in itself a seeming contradiction.

Position 4:

Ambivalence is not, however, a powerless position. Apathy and ambivalence are not necessarily the negative reactions or even actions they are often perceived to be. Apathy is certainly the

state that we inhabit upon passive consumption, and we maintain certain ambivalence in our criticism – DeBord's *Society of the Spectacle* is, after all, a commodity itself. Yet perhaps they are also a certain resistance. How far can you push them before they become not an absence of care, or of standpoints, but something more powerful and important? The apathetic and ambivalent could be the realms of disillusionment as well. From these places could arise the potential for antagonism and agonism. Not that I expect any extreme political action from a viewer of Baumann's work, but perhaps work like this can arm us against the constant presence of billboards and advertising and information delivery systems in our lives. We can imagine the pixels of our screens, the panels on the busses, ticking over, reflected in the saturated, pointless mirror of this work. There is a space opened up, a space opened up where we can look on and look over the delicate play, perhaps become more attuned to its machinations, and the potential materials of communication have to be blocked and misused. Perhaps the destruction of languages we are used to is the means to a renewal, a means of resistance, and a new means of relation to their activities. Is this subversion a simple transformation of what was 'evil' into something 'good'? If this is all it was, the work would be weak, and it would be interesting only so far as we all agreed on which was which. The potency of Baumann's work does not rest only in subversion, but in the ambiguous way it does this.

This absence of didacticism and prescription is the place I began my essay. It is perhaps what makes it worth it to think about Baumann's work: how we might come to terms with it, despite the often-deliberate opacity they have. Perhaps this argument requires some more compromise though: for it is not that these works do not speak, but how they speak, that makes them worth looking at. In *Manoeuvres*, it is the implementation of a complex set of operations within these transformed advertising and information delivery materials. The operations of a game: of hiding of the work, of its propensity to entice us across the room, only to leave us disappointed, or surprised. It is this

spatial and temporal engagement that is the cause of the work's immediate and sensorial success. This is as it has always been. The criticisms of Baumann's work are often so simple (though not unjust or unwarranted) because the elements of her works are so simple. The party materials, the kinetic elements, the industrial materials, they all speak to certain immediate responses. Yet it is always in the refinement of these simple elements in ambiguous operations and couplings of materials that Baumann finds something interesting and resistive. It has to do with the potential of the materials, but also has much to do with the very absence of any prescriptive or didactic content from the artworks – a shift particularly evident in her later works that literally remove information. The work is constantly eluding the grasp, as it cannot be pinned to any number of words, except perhaps those that share the work's difficulty in analysis; they resist reading, despite their simplicity.

Addendum:

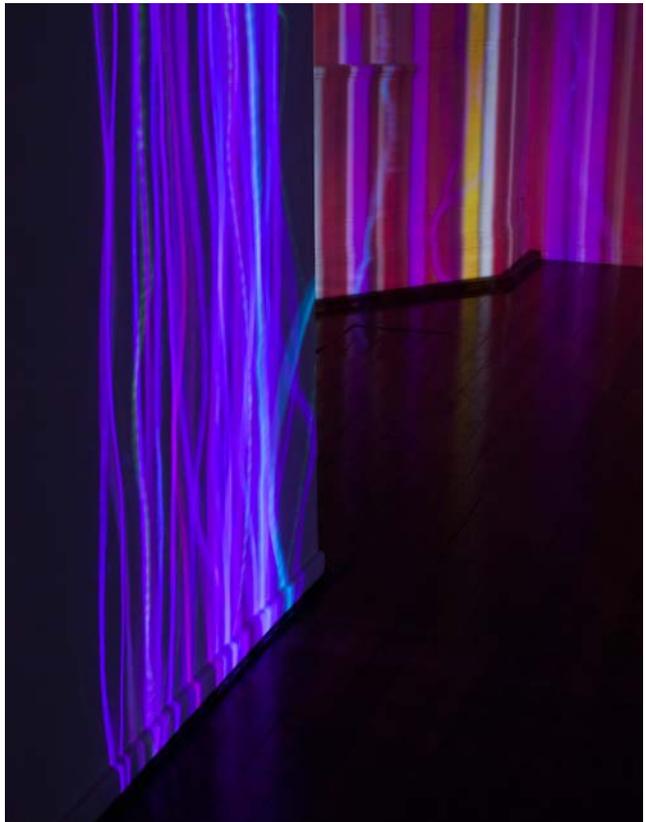
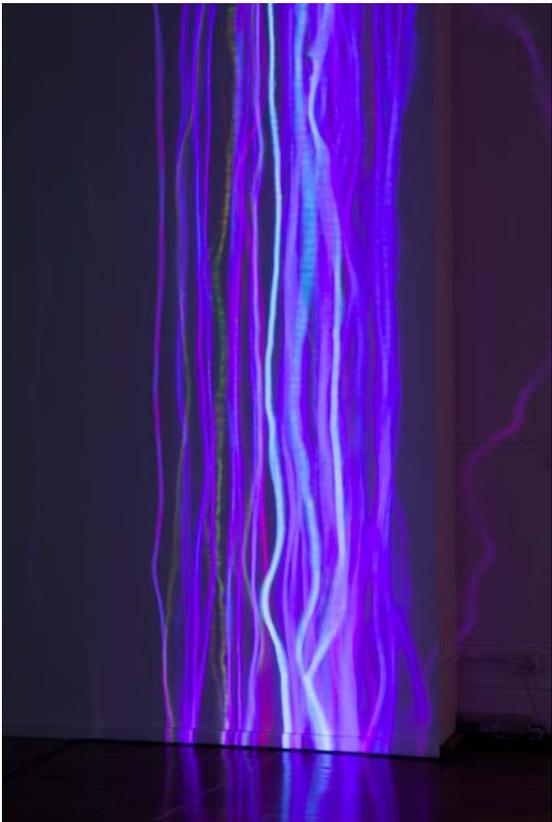
Yet there is something else worth mentioning: Baumann does not stand in any sort of antagonistic relationship to much of the art world, her work is favourable to gallery spaces, and is enticing to gallery goers. It is almost perfectly suited to the situation of the gallery, in fact. The apparent interest and inquiry it has into fetishized modes of viewing seems at odds with the easy acceptance of the gallery going mode of viewership. The mode of perception in the gallery space is, so far, upheld as one that can display to us something about – and perhaps an alteration of – the modes of perception we are engaged in outside the white walls.

Graham Mathwin's blog is *Sensible Perth* and he is exhibiting in Hatched, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, 2016

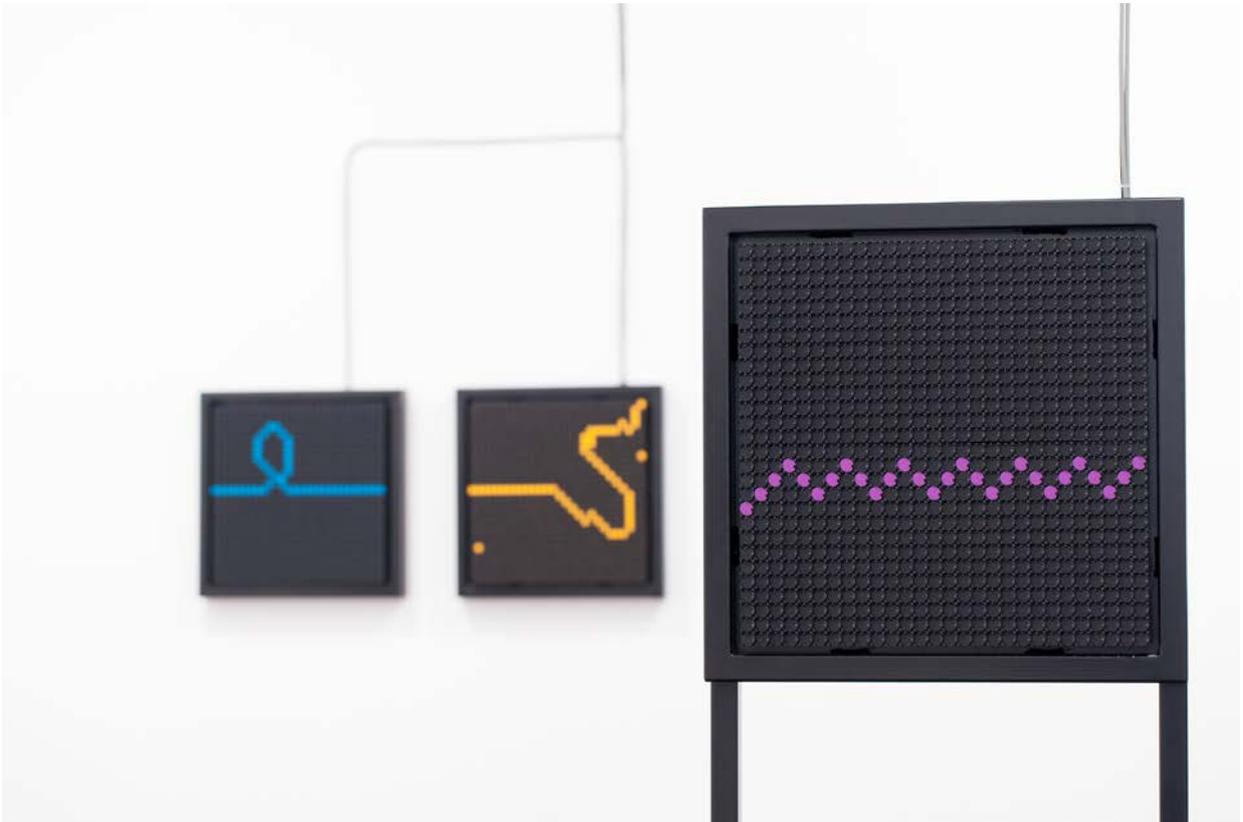
Guy Debord, *The society of the spectacle*. 1st paperback ed. New York: Zone Books, 1994.



Manoeuvres, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2015, installation view



Manoeuvres, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2015, installation view



Manoeuvres, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2015, installation view

WA FOCUS | REBECCA BAUMANN

28 May – 22 August 2016 | Art Gallery of Western Australia

Coordinating curator: Jenepher Duncan, Curator of Contemporary Australian Art

Rebecca Baumann

<http://rebeccabaumann.com/>

Automated Colour Field 2011

100 flip clocks, laser-cut paper,

duration 24 hours

130 x 360 x 9 cm

Purchased through the TomorrowFund,

Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, 2011

Originally commissioned by the

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art for NEW11

Moments in Movement 2016

water colour on paper

18 x 12.5 cm

© Rebecca Baumann 2016

Photography: Robert Frith, Acorn Photo

Mixed Feelings 2012

Paper, feed tray, Arduino microcontroller,

drive circuits/electronics, IR Receiver

Technology build and design: Cake Industries

Dimensions variable

© Rebecca Baumann 2016

Photography: Robert Frith, Acorn Photo

Light Work 2016

Theatre spotlights, dichroic film, acrylic

Dimensions variable

© Rebecca Baumann 2016

Photography: Robert Frith, Acorn Photo

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Once More With Feeling, 2014

Installation view, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2015

Photograph: Bo Wong

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Manoeuvres, 2015

Installation view, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2015

Photograph: Bo Wong

Measurements: height before width

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