

THREE AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS—SUSAN NORRIE, DANIEL VON STURMER AND CALLUM MORTON—HAVE BEEN SELECTED TO REPRESENT AUSTRALIA AT THIS YEAR'S *VENICE BIENNALE*. THIS WILL BE THE FIRST TIME AUSTRALIA WILL BE OFFICIALLY REPRESENTED WITHIN THE NATIONAL PAVILION AND AT IMPORTANT EXTERNAL SITES IN VENICE. THE ARTISTS WERE CHOSEN BY A PANEL COMPRISING LESLEY ALWAY, CHAIR, AUSTRALIA COUNCIL VISUAL ARTS BOARD; JULIANA ENGBERG, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, MELBOURNE; RACHEL KENT, SENIOR CURATOR, MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY; AND AUSTRALIAN COMMISSIONER JOHN KALDOR. THE 2007 *VENICE BIENNALE* RUNS FROM 10 JUNE–21 NOVEMBER, PRECEDED BY THE VERNISSAGE 7–9 JUNE 2007.

SUSAN NORRIE, EXHIBITING AT FONDAZIONE LEVI, WILL PRESENT A VIDEO INSTALLATION THAT “EXPLORES PERVASIVE GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES OF A PLANET IN TURMOIL; THE WORK WILL BE EXPERIENTIAL, PHYSICALLY IMMERSING AUDIENCES AND TRANSPORTING THEM INTO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE”; DANIEL VON STURMER, THROUGH VIDEO INSTALLATIONS AND ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTIONS ESPECIALLY DESIGNED FOR THE AUSTRALIAN PAVILION WILL CONTINUE HIS “EXPERIMENTS WITH SPACE”; AND CALLUM MORTON IS PLANNING “A LARGE-SCALE, ARCHITECTURALLY-INSPIRED INSTALLATION” AT PALAZZO ZENOBIO.

ALSO EXHIBITING ARE PHOTOGRAPHER ROSEMARY LAING, VIDEO ARTIST SHAUN GLADWELL AND INSTALLATION ARTIST CHRISTIAN CAPURRO, CHOSEN BY *VENICE BIENNALE* ARTISTIC DIRECTOR ROBERT STORR, FOR HIS CURATED SECTION OF THIS PRESTIGIOUS INTERNATIONAL EVENT.

The Object of Things

DANIEL PALMER

One of the pleasures of visiting an artist's studio lies in the uncertainty of whether a work is finished. Visiting Daniel von Sturmer's Melbourne studio—a space alive with experimentation and sculptural possibility—one feels this acutely. Two months out from his participation in the world's oldest and most prestigious biennale, his partitioned factory space abounds with prototypes and rejects. Von Sturmer is known for transforming everyday objects and animating them in unexpected ways. But here in the testing zone, the boundary between a readymade fit for installation (or at least immortalisation on video), the residue of failed experimentation and mere rubbish is deliciously blurred. In von Sturmer's aesthetic universe every object is defamiliarised and even shredded white paper is invested with poetic potential.¹

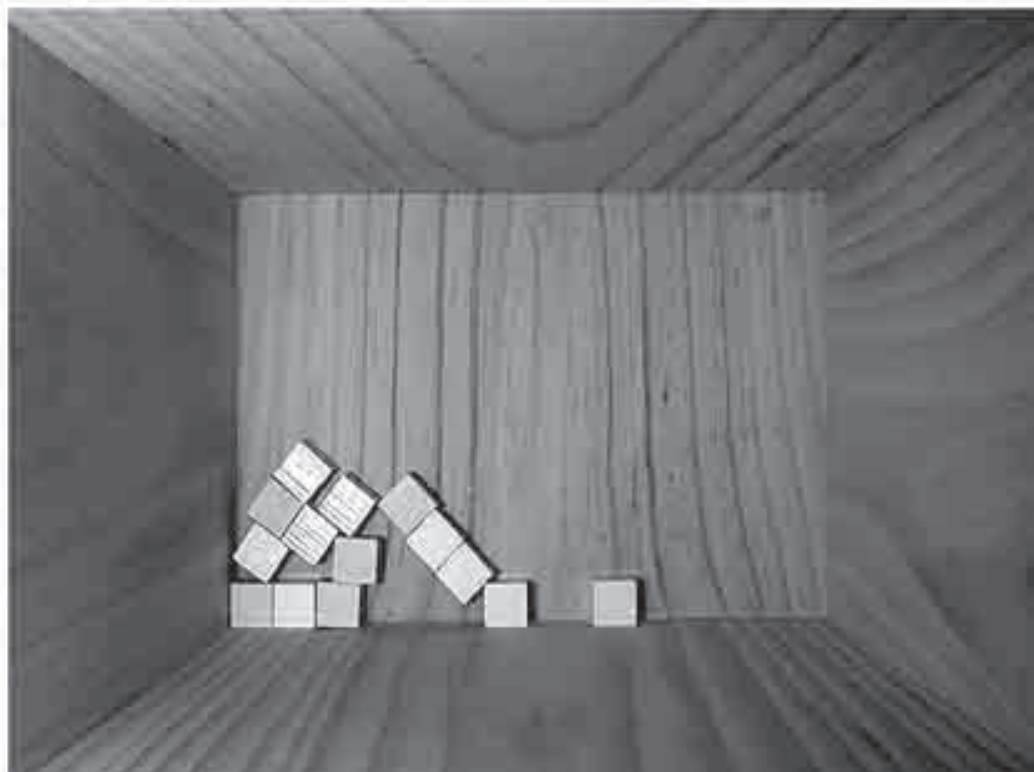
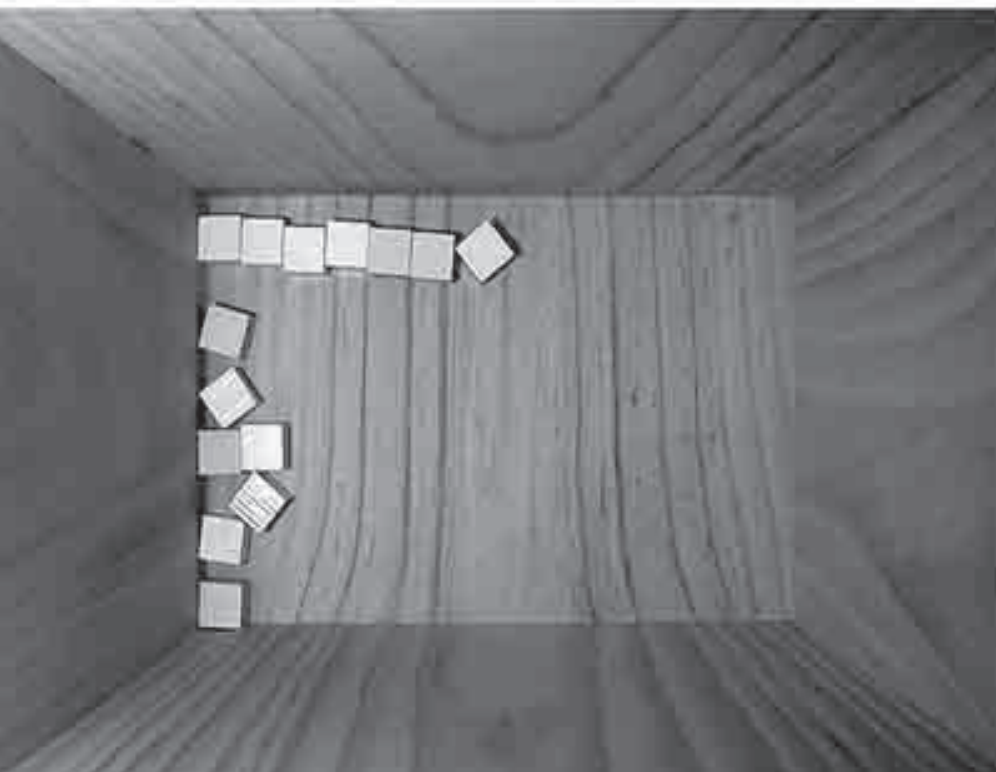
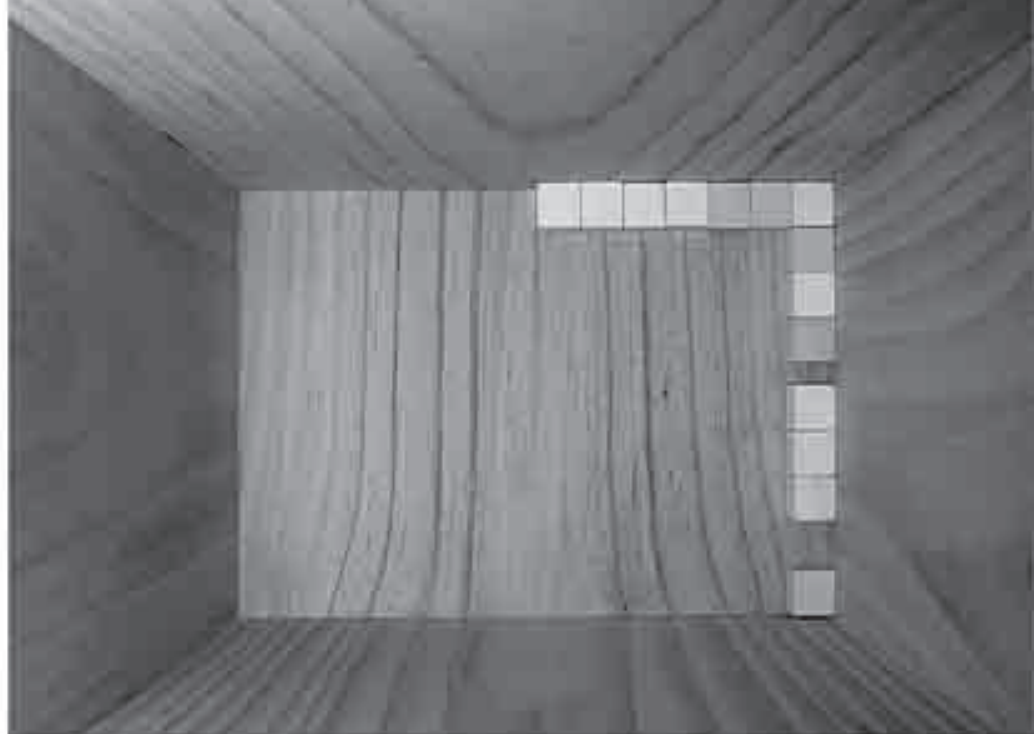
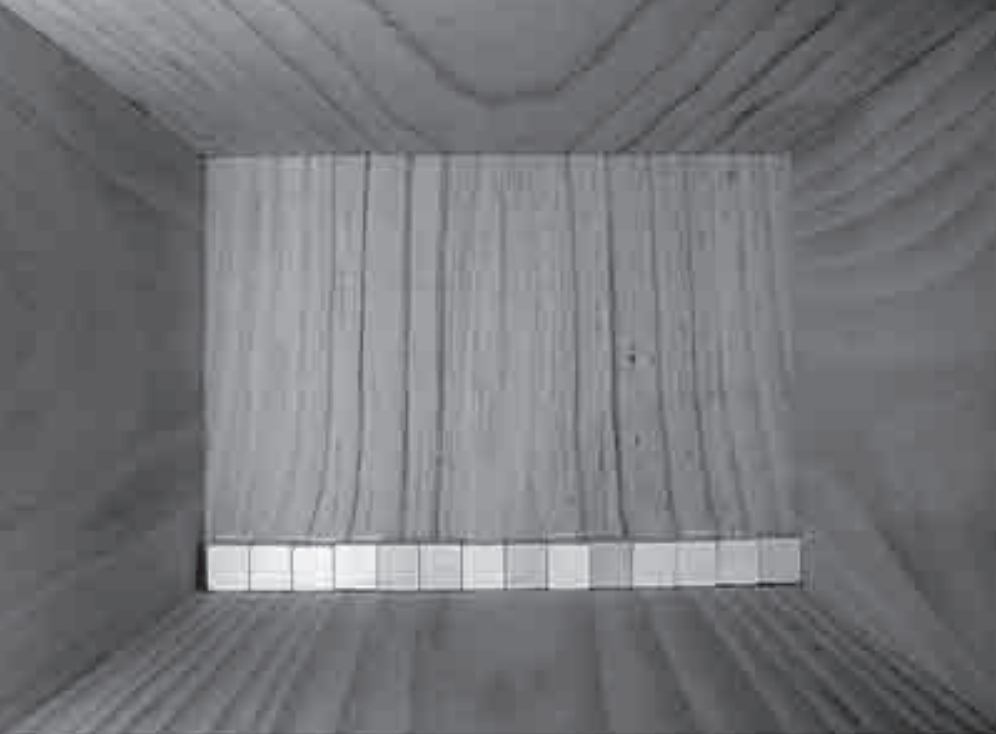
Von Sturmer's small video sculptures appear to be universally loved. *The Object of Things* (2007), his work for the 2007 *Venice Biennale*, will extend the trajectory established by *The Field Equation* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in 2006, where these videos are presented as part of an installation with sculptural objects.² Inside the Australian Pavilion at the Giardini della Biennale, the New Zealand-born artist will, the press material states, “continue his experiments with space”. Indeed, the venue is a significant agent for this spatial experimentation. Von Sturmer has often responded to exhibition spaces in his work—in *Plane* (2000) at First

Floor (gallery) he carved a glass doorway through a wall, and in *Material from Another Medium* (2001) at the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) he cut a window into a gallery wall to create a screen through which we could peer into a messy storeroom. Referring to the Australian Pavilion, with its beach house feel, von Sturmer tells me he is interested in the “internal logic of the space”. It's an abstract goal, but even by simply reopening the windows that have been closed for many years the whole space is set to become more open. Curatorial advisor Juliana Engberg suggests, in characteristically bodily terms, that von Sturmer's “play of the perceptible will unfold and punctuate the Pavilion's membrane”.³

The Australian Pavilion is a notoriously difficult space to exhibit contemporary art and von Sturmer is a clever choice for such a challenge (Australia's other representatives, Susan Norrie and Callum Morton, are exhibiting offsite). Philip Cox's prefabricated steel tubing now feels overbearing and the split-level is awkward and cramped.⁴ Yet Cox's original design was intended as a temporary structure when it was built (in less than a month) for Arthur Boyd's show in the Australian Bicentenary year of 1988. Australia was fortunate to be the last country granted a permanent pavilion space in the Giardini (there are only around thirty; New Zealand, Turkey, China, Ireland, Singapore, Taiwan and many others are scattered all around the city of Venice in temporary abodes). The Giardini, as anyone who has been there knows, is a kind of architectural museum, with the pavilions constructed in

distinct but extremely disparate architectural styles reflecting the status of colonial powers in the 1930s and into the Cold War. For the visitor, each building is encountered as both a national architectural event and an artwork. In fact, sometimes the building becomes the artwork; in 2005, Hans Schabus completely reconstructed the Austrian Pavilion into a huge artificial mountain with *The Last Land* and Daniel Knorr's ‘invisible’ work, *European Influenza* at the Romanian Pavilion was just that—an empty pavilion.

While Australian artists in recent years have darkened or otherwise neutralised the Australian Pavilion, von Sturmer will use the building as a medium. Seeking to bring out its hidden potential, he is creating a long, angular plywood table that will snake around the space, shifting height and direction as it goes. The site-specific structure—the artist refers to it as a ‘platform’—is an attempt to make sense of the upper and lower levels of the space. Unlike his landscape of plinths at ACCA in 2006, this constructivist-looking platform will wind its way from the entry level of the Australian Pavilion and then over a balcony and down to the lower level, tilting at precarious angles. The platform establishes a physical relationship with the body, akin to the tilted ramp in *The Truth Effect* (2003), and appears to literalise the path that a virtual camera might take if it were traversing through the building. Its trajectory ensures that there is no ideal or fixed point of view from which to take it all in. There are only what the artist calls “zones”.



Interspersed along the platform will be five data projectors and a series of small sculptural arrangements. The arrangement is sparse and characteristically for von Sturmer, the space will be brightly and evenly lit (emphasising the link to minimalist sculpture rather than cinematic scopophilia). Von Sturmer's use of plywood, that ubiquitous and fetishised architectural material, is both practical (it is flexible yet rigid and durable) and aesthetic (it is an engineered wood—a processed natural material).⁵ The array of possible objects on the platform include compressed pulped paper balls, a roll of wood veneer painted black inside, a white bent plastic frame, grey plasticine doughnut shapes, dried paint pools and a carved white polystyrene 'boulder' with faceted edges—lunar-like and apparently made from European-style polystyrene, which has larger balls (I also saw miniature Velcro-like black fibre sourced from an architectural supply store in Paris). They are all 'assisted readymades', crafted from carefully selected materials which are then "interrogated". Invoking an anthropological distinction, von Sturmer suggests that "some are more cooked than others".

It might be enough to exhibit these objects alone on this platform, fascinating as they are. But all of this is a mechanism for displaying and relating to what lies at the heart of von Sturmer's current practice—video. Using video he explores the interaction between pictorial space and real space, and between expectation and perception. The generative logic of these new video works is vintage von Sturmer—short loops of 'object action' within constructed miniature sets, shot with a stationary camera on a tripod. They represent playful illusions procured not through magic tricks—a connotation the artist wants to avoid—but through material experimentation. And like a scientist, the objects used for the sculptural events are discarded. The artist says that his videos "test how it is we see what we see", and indeed von Sturmer's practice has been called "an extended meditation on the relativity of perception".⁶ Fundamentally, such "small loops of time" exploit anticipation.⁷ Quietly absorbing (only two of the video projections have ambient sound of objects dropping into the frame), the videos transform objects and play with scale and gravity, giving a lightness to the whole exhibition. Viewing von Sturmer's video loops is about the pleasure to be found in the gap between the sensible and the intelligible.

At von Sturmer's studio, I previewed four of the five video works that will be mounted on the platform and displayed in the artist's customised small-screen projection style.⁸ In one, coloured wooden blocks slide around in an uncannily animated fashion within a 3D pine wood chamber. Another features a landscape-like blurred plywood horizon, into which drop variously-sized blocks of unidentified blue material. They appear rubbery, as they bounce when dropped into the space, but also sink like plasticine. Von Sturmer clearly enjoys destabilising our perception of what things are and says he selects his materials based on their particular resonance and potential to be read in a number of ways. In this aesthetic of material causality, the resistance of matter is part of the pleasure.

Such work recalls John Baldessari's performative photo-series *Throwing Four Balls In The Air To Get A Square (Best Of 36 Tries)* (1974). Although gravity is a universal fact, von Sturmer's experiments also seem to celebrate the contingent, the accidental, the whimsical. One thinks too of Peter Fischli and David Weiss's series of photographs, *Quiet Afternoon, Equilibrium* (1984–85), featuring

carefully balanced arrangements of cutlery and fresh produce. Amy Marjoram has recently described von Sturmer's 'photosculptural hybrids' in terms of the "photogenic readymade".⁹ An important point of origin for this activity is Brassai's *Sculptures Involontaire* (1933). Brassai placed individual objects such as a rolled ticket stub and a baguette on glass, and photographed them extremely close-up. As Mark Godfrey has written of such 'image structures', through Surrealist-inspired defamiliarisation Brassai's camera "obliterated the memory of the objects' tiny size—making everyday throwaway bits and pieces loom like strange forms from outer space"—and "fashioned futuristic sculpture from the wasted objects of the present".¹⁰

But because von Sturmer works with video and not still images, movement is one of their key elements. So we also need to speak of kinetic photogenia—often figured in relation to colour and the illusion of volume. Consider von Sturmer's new painting video, which follows those seen in *Into a Vacuum of Future Events* (2005). A video sequence depicts a sheet of ply onto which a flow of paint appears from the left side of the frame. A white blob slowly emerges, only to be overtaken by grey, then orange, blue and finally black, like a moving target. Von Sturmer trained as a painter and such work not only delightfully confuses the media of painting, sculpture, performance and video, it also deals with what Clement Greenberg viewed as the most important quality of modern painting—the characteristics of flatness. In a sense this is 'pure painting', 'pure opticality'—reminiscent of Frank Stella's desire "to keep the paint as good as it was in the can". Only here of course the paint never stays still. Another beautiful video sequence shows coloured squares thrown into a brightly lit white field. As they layer up on top of one another, it becomes clear that they are flat transparencies—coloured acetate—and not the 3D blocks they first appear. Like an experimental film or a compositional exercise in colour theory, light blue quickly gives way to yellow, green, red and their various combinations. We are reminded that colour is a matter of subjective perception.¹¹ And not for the first time in von Sturmer's practice, this work evokes the rotating coloured wheels of Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (1935).¹²

In von Sturmer's practice, video and sculpture have become almost inseparable, the one pushing the other. As Mark Godfrey has suggested of photography and sculpture, they "have entered a more complex phase of their relationship, folding over each other, reversing positions, flipping back and forth, the one becoming the other."¹³ Together with the platform and the objects, matter has not dematerialised into image, the image has not replaced the object, but our experience of space and time is enriched and sharpened. Moreover, beyond its primarily formal concerns, we can perhaps think of the exhibition as a kind of allegory for scientific modelling in general and our techno-topian present, in which time and space are technical rather than linked to biology or nature. "Science is born with the suspension of handling; it is a withdrawal of the hand", suggests Bernard Stiegler.¹⁴ And indeed, expressive human agency is absent in von Sturmer's new work (where previously his hands were sometimes visible in the frame). Aside from all the visual pleasure they bring, von Sturmer's *Object of Things* seems to propose that matter has its own destiny—a counterpart perhaps, to our own lightness of being under digital capitalism's perpetual transformation of time and space, present and future.

Page 79: Daniel von Sturmer, *The Object of Things (sequence 4)*, 2007
Opposite: Daniel von Sturmer, *The Object of Things (sequence 3)*, 2007
Photos courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Notes

¹ I spy balls of shredded white paper and a paper shredder, the machinic agent behind von Sturmer's spectacular public video projection at the Museum of Sydney during the 2004 *Biennale of Sydney*. But von Sturmer tells me that he has resorted to cutting the paper by hand, as no machine is able to shred the paper as finely as he'd like

² Daniel von Sturmer's work is documented on his website at www.danielvonsturmer.com

³ Juliana Engberg, 'Preview for Venice', <http://www.australiavenicebiennale.com.au/content/view/72/98/lang,en> (accessed 24 April 2007)

⁴ Even the architect of the Australian Pavilion wants the building to be replaced. In an article published in *The Age* a few years ago, Philip Cox declared that he was fed up with the snipes around it and would support tearing it down: "I would be very pleased if the Australia Council or the Australian Government replaced that building because it is a temporary structure," Cox told *The Age*. "I am completely behind putting a permanent building there." Responding to critics who bemoan that Australia doesn't have something of the order of the English or German buildings, Cox made the following points: "They forget the whole project was virtually gifted to the Australia Council. We donated our services and we got BHP to provide the steel and Transfield to also provide materials. And on the record and to be perfectly frank, it gives me the f---ing shits considering we all worked so hard for nothing to put it there." See Michael Hutak, 'Tear Down my Shack', *The Age*, August 11, 2003

⁵ Visitors to *Venice Biennale* in 2005 may recall that it was also a very woody affair, with Ricky Swallow, Guy Ben Ner, Hans Schabus and others. See Daniel Palmer, 'Venice Biennale: Wood and Other Media', *RealTime* 68, August–September 2005: 54

⁶ Robert Nelson, 'Daniel von Sturmer: The Field Equation', *The Age*, 13 September, 2006

⁷ Justin Paton (ed.), 'Daniel von Sturmer: Into a Vacuum of Future Events', Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2005

⁸ Von Sturmer suggests that the fifth video, in production at the time of writing, is "likely to be a kind of moving still-life (rotating in close up) with objects like foam, wooden geometric shapes and so on."

⁹ Amy Marjoram, 'Flattened Sculptures: The Photomediations of Daniel von Sturmer', *Eyeline* (forthcoming, 2007)

¹⁰ Mark Godfrey, 'Image Structures: Photography and Sculpture', *Artforum*, February 2005: 151

¹¹ On this topic see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion, 2000

¹² Having pioneered kinetic art with his *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics) (Rotative plaque de verre)* (1920)—unsuccessfully photographed by Man Ray—Duchamp then turned to these optical 'play toys' whereby he painted designs on flat cardboard circles and spun them on a turntable. In collaboration with Man Ray and Marc Allégret, Duchamp filmed early versions of the *Rotoreliefs* for the film *Anémic Cinéma* (1925–26)—abstract gyrating shapes which rise from and sink into the plane of the screen, interspersed with French sexual puns (unfortunately in black and white). Although Duchamp had lost interest in what he called 'retinal art', he retained a strong interest in visual phenomena and optical illusions in particular—because they visualise the process of interpretation which is normally unconscious

¹³ Godfrey, op cit: 149

¹⁴ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998: 266–267