Sources of the signal: a phenomenology of place within the performance of drawing.

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The collaborative residency *White Noise*, undertaken between Greig Burgoyne and Rossella Emanuele became, in time, an exhibition. This exhibition presented to the viewer the residue of a prior activity that had taken *place* – the time of the residency, 'recorded' in various ways as it took place within the walls of the Centre for Recent Drawing. Forming a close conceptual alignment of both time and space, the idea of place allows those of us who engage with the idea of drawing as a fundamentally temporal act, the opportunity to ask: what is drawing doing when we find it exhibited in the same space in which it was previously created?

We ask this question in relation to a wider concern: how the reception of drawing continues to signal the hope and expectation that the initial act of drawing contained. Whether that be the desire to represent what was visibly there, or draw out what was absent, drawing presents the opportunity to stand, as Klee said, "against all opportunities to fall"[1]. We might call this type of rumination a 'thought on the phenomenon' (*phenomeno-logy*) of place within the performance of drawing. Treating drawing as a form of becoming where drawing (noun) is understood to encourage an ongoing performance by the viewer, drawing *in* and drawing *out* a constantly modified interpretation of the prior act of drawing (verb) they see presented before them. Such a phenomenology would no doubt complement the idea of drawing understood to simply 're-present'.

The term 'becoming' is a philosopher's word, bringing with it a Heraclitean pedigree that is very tightly explored. Oft used (and oft misused) it outlines, in simple terms, the idea of ongoing change. Within this particular phenomenological context for discussing drawing however, the term is apt, for it refers to the open-endedness that the performance of drawing indicates. An indication whose origins spring from the implicit understanding that drawing is produced via a point that moves[2], producing what Catherine de Zegher refers to as:

> Drawing's stages of becoming – mark becoming line, line becoming contour, contour becoming image – the first mark not only structures the blank page as an open field but also defines it temporally, as the drawing's marks follow one another in time.[3]

On this account, drawing signals a series of changes which take place *in* time – the motivated, intentional change that is brought about by the act of drawing, considered over and above the question of what drawing 'is', or what it 'represents' in purely mimetic terms. The time the viewer was presented with in the exhibition space, in the form of mark making spread across video, twisted sheets of copy paper and coloured stationery, was a lived time of thinking and making and reflecting, effected via the kinetic movement of two bodies in space during the residency. In their activation of the space through the time taken to draw, Burgoyne and Emanuele were engaged in a re-enactment of the twentieth century's enduring concern with dance and drawing, continuing what Cornelia Butler describes as, "the arc of drawing… moving beyond the image or readable gesture… transcending bodily form or trace."[4] In looking to use this position to reinterpret the history of prior acts which the work before us presents, we ask: what else was transmitted across the span, from the collaborative act of production to our singular act of reception, beyond the readability of trace? We are interested in the phenomenological idea of place, using what Gaston Bachelard, that enigmatic philosopher of the spaces in which we dwell, called reverberation: the poetic image as the opposite of causality, containing within itself the "sonority of being"[5]. A step to the side of the idea of becoming, reverberation describes an almost wholly unexpected change taking place – the instant communicability of an unusual image between producer and receiver. The movement between those who draw, and those who find themselves suddenly drawn *in*.

To seek this unexpected image, or realisation, within the becoming of drawing is to look for it in relation to our experience of the work itself. This means we begin, not with the work, but with the title of the work: *White Noise*. Used colloquially, the term 'white noise' can indicate a meaningless noise or chatter – a metaphor on meaningless that draws its own meaning from the static 'rain' an analogue TV displays when the antenna is out of position, or the 'hiss' an FM radio produces when the needle is out of place on the dial. Yet, this description is itself deceptive, for in technical terms there is nothing meaningless about white noise. On the contrary, in signal processing white noise refers to a discrete signal with a constant power density: a series of independently random variables that together produce the invariant whiteness of sound and image.

This invariant is the 'essence' in phenomenological terms: that which is found to persist invariantly across the range of singular variations the spectrum provides. If we treat the variety of work that Burgoyne and Emanuele present as the spectrum, or the source of our sought-for signal, then we seek our invariant as the unexpected element that emerges from it to highlight their collaboration, beyond the iteration of gesture, mark or trace. To help us find this element we bracket, or place into abeyance, the assumption that drawing is *this*, or drawing is *that*, while we look to describe a selection of our encounters with the work as it appears.

Standing in the centre of the gallery space, viewers were presented with a number of small video screens hung at various, different heights upon all the walls. Lengths of twisted paper are dotted about beneath them, and both are interspersed with numbers written in black tape. Positioned horizontally these paper objects are themselves spotted along their length with coloured dots, like the kind one finds in office stationery stores. Looking down we see brightly coloured Post-it notes strewn across the floor. Our gaze takes in the small room and its odd assortment of protrusions and screens in one pass, but returns to alight upon the moving images in particular. Although small, the videos dominate the documentation of each performance: high-definition recordings that re-enact what appears to be the production of the work seen before us.

In front, a screen shows legs cut off above the waist, shuffling a long and twisted length of paper around. It's not clear how paper in that particular form has arrived – sprung from somewhere nearby perhaps, or sloughed off by something recently departed. As we watch it writhe about the floor the video cuts to Burgoyne sporting a pair of surgical latex gloves, assiduously twisting white A4 sheets of paper into lengths. We quickly realise that the long snake-like coil of paper is likely made up of these individually twisted sheets, similar to those stuck to the walls. Like a disused prop from a stop-frame animation, this 'super-coil' of twisted paper is evidently something he has decided to produce. Watching Burgoyne twist his paper sheets we notice he is facing the gallery window, standing almost flat against it. The position of the camera appears odd however – as if we the viewer are just outside the room, looking in. Standing in the gallery, we peer outside the window and notice there is no balcony, or rail. Only the railway station, and the people waiting on the platform for their trains.

Turning back to the video we see Burgoyne again, hunched forward slightly while he twists his paper, listening, beyond the windowpane. What is he listening to, the sound of trains? As we watch, we get the sense of being signalled. Something about the relationship between inside and outside, between the room and its view. We are afforded only a fleeting glimpse of the object of Burgoyne's attention from our perch however, whatever it might be. A vantage point that permits us no real hold, for it is the depth of a digital screen. Henri Lefebvre said, to grasp the fleeting object, which is not exactly an object, it is, "necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside. A balcony does the job admirably."[6] So perhaps there is a balcony of sorts here, a ledge the thickness of a camera lens. Sufficient for us to watch Burgoyne twist the world by his place at the window, one sheet at a time, into paper rolls that the artists call 'trains'.

Another video, and the cut-off legs appear to be waiting. Burgoyne is with Emanuele and they stand together beneath the gallery window, time stretching as they shuffle their feet. We imagine them looking at each other, or peering out at the people on the platform, offering those who wait a further act of waiting in return. For the lack of anything better to do at this juncture we also reflect upon the passing of their time… time we see as 'taken up', recorded and replayed as we stand within the here and now. The image on the screen indicates we share the space they

occupied, but we are separated by time and the position of the camera. Hearing noises, we turn around to see them calling out numbers from another screen while they stride around the room, barely glancing at each other as they do. Is this some sort of game for measuring the space? Or a magical incantation for stopping time perhaps. Deftly fixing it into position one sign at a time, within the surface of the wall.

Like the ticking hands of a clock, the twisting of paper, stamping of feet and calling of numbers gradually forms a background rhythm, sending us further into reverie. We look around the room at the rolled-up objects stuck to the walls, hiccupy lines of dots staggered along their length. We recall those same dots that indicated rhythm on sheet music in primary school and wonder if these objects can be played, like a kind of origami flute, or child's recorder? Except there is no music here, recorded or otherwise. Just the low roar of the city outside the window, and the *ssssttzzz*, *ssssttzzz*, *ssssttzzz* of paper being repeatedly twisted, over and over again.

We see yet another video. Burgoyne and Emanuele stand opposite facing each other, and the super-coil is being brought into being: twisted and cajoled into place, shorter sections already affixed to the wall. Catching only glimpses of their faces we appear to have jumped forward in time. Or maybe back. The hiss and crackle of the paper is loud here… louder than one would have thought possible for paper to produce. Yet the surface area of all those flat sheets being tightly twisted must be very large. While we watch we think of two images that the product 'A4 paper' suggests. In the first, the sheets are stacked to create a height that we perceive, looking down, as a depth. In the other, the sheets are placed alongside each other forming a vast array, and the depth becomes a breadth. The action of watching Burgoyne and Emanuele twist paper into a three-dimensional structure has alerted us to the idea of depth in relation to the body in space. The place where 'depth' means true depth – the depth of awareness between them as collaborators facing each other for example – rather than just a reconfigured breadth. We might say, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that we are speaking here of the motivation of depth: the body receiving back a signal from other bodies in relation to its position in space:

> For any given apparent size and convergence, there would appear somewhere in the brain a functional structure homologous with the organisation in depth. But this is in any case only a given depth, a factual depth, and we still have to become aware of it. To experience a structure is not to receive it into oneself passively: it is to live it, to take it up, assume it and discover its immanent significance.[7]

Is this closer to what Burgoyne and Emanuele are engaged in? Taking up the factual, organised depth that a pack of shrink-wrapped paper exhibits in order to experience it anew by disassembling it, one twisted sheet at a time? Like the stream of consciousness that we experience as unified both at a time and over time, the unity and continuity of twisting single sheets into a single roll reveals the flow of creativity that the functionality of white A4 paper enables – a latent desire within each sheet that bright colours barely disguise. Artists like Burgoyne and Emanuele draw from the reserve of innovation that stationery items contain – becoming performative through the Dotty Mask piece and the Post-it note dance. Placing them beyond their intended context, yet remaining within proximity to the body. A peculiar form of product placement to be sure, engaged in solely by those looking to generate the unexpected rather than fulfil the function of design.

We turn finally, to a video showing the image of a face. The face of Emanuele in fact, covered in the same brightly coloured dots we see on the twisted paper grafted to the walls. We share the same space as Emanuele but again, we are separated by time and the sense of the scene, if not the camera angle. Our lines of communication appear fuzzy if not entirely down, for the dots are plucked off in a manner that suggests a bizarre ritual, a rehearsal of some kind. Like Scrabble letters launched across the board from the losing player's side, they zoom away to be reused elsewhere, and otherwise. Is this a form of writing, a signal we can (finally) read? Perhaps these falling dots are revealing a type of pictogram: ideograms newly discovered by us, the viewer, here in this place where time and space collide.

We are reminded, briefly, of those signs that Henri Michaux sought to describe in later life, recalling his trip to China as a much younger man. An artist with a stubborn interest in unpicking the loose threads within our understanding of the trait, Michaux hoped to unravel the mystery of the Chinese ideogram: those markers of relation par excellence that circumnavigate the oldest-living language in the world. For many ages the Chinese had been subject to the charm of resemblance – to characters that resembled clearly at first, and then less clearly as time went on. Until finally, all obstacles had to be overcome and they freed themselves. The line became disentangled from the object it once represented, and the sign became abstracted, i.e. drew away from its original signification and its source.

> The sign in Chinese, today, which is no longer in any way mimetic, has the grace of its own impatience. It has drawn from nature its flight, its diversity, its inimitable way of knowing how to bend, rebound, redress itself. Like nature, the Chinese language does not draw any conclusions of its own, but lets itself be read… characters open onto several directions at once.[8]

We reflect on this sparse statement while we watch a lone dot stick firmly at first, then fly up from the tip of an eyelash, like a spark sent forth from a fire. We look for a signal emitted, a sign to tell us what exactly dots falling endlessly from a face caught up in a video stream are doing with their time. It seems to be the case, however, that they cannot tell us things we do not already know. They do not add to that which is already there, and for which the apparatus of translation is already possessed by us. They merely fall away to provide us with a space to reflect upon what it is that we do know, based upon what it is we can see. With this realisation we are prompted to ask: what might a phenomenology of language look like, here, in this place of twisted sheets and coloured signs? Could it emerge from behind a circular form, free of all but colour and with barely any physical depth? How many of these might we need before we can communicate properly, if at all?

Michaux tells us, "the destiny that awaited Chinese writing was utter weightlessness"[9] and we realise that, despite weighing almost nothing in physical terms, the depth of an idea as profound as writing or drawing must itself be found in the purposeful ambiguity of form such an idea demands – whether that be round and colourful, linear and gestural, or simply playful, like an eyelash that extends to indicate the orb of an eye. Forms that have multiple meanings, multiple points of entry and exit, must open onto several directions at once and wind up like the rhizome, floating freely in a zone that has only itself and others to face.

And so we realise we have been staring at the source of our signal all along. The performance of Emanuele drawing dots away from skin reveals the origin of the sign, the image within which meaning for us begins and remains circumscribed: the *human* face. The space of the face to be precise: the living pictogram, which signals the relation between its parts as a lived-through experience, yet whose singular history is continually connected with every glance to the varied history of others. A stream of reverberations, a series of unexpected instants that we nevertheless expect. As the indexicality of a weathervane commits it to face, each and every time, the direction of the wind, we find in the fluidly mobile form of the human face, 'the very processes of Nature in a language whose signs are visibly patterned by the primal energies of the elements'.[10]

Returning to view the expression of concentration on the face of Burgoyne as he silently twists his paper within another screen, our analysis of what essentially reverberates, or invariantly resonates, now springs forth from within the work. Rumination on the phenomenon of place within the performance of drawing reveals the site of collaboration itself – the home of those signals that passed between Burgoyne and Emanuele as they paced the floor. Behind each mark, twist, or swing of a limb was a mirror description: a tiny muscular contraction around the eyes and the mouth that delivered the act of drawing over time. In providing us the enlivened stage upon which the gesture of drawing was performed, those like us who stand to face it squarely are encouraged to keep that performance going. Drawing out our own meaning… one small sign at a time.

1. Paul Klee, *The Pedagogical Sketchbook*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p.9

2. Philip Rawson, *Drawing*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p.15

3. Catherine de Zegher and Cornelia Butler, *On Line: Drawing Through The Twentieth Century*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), p.23

4. ibid, p.140

5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p.2

6. Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.37

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1962), p.258

8. Henri Michaux, *Ideograms in China*. (New York: New Directions Books, 2002), p.29

9. ibid, p.29

10. ibid, p.45

Appearance which is no longer
based on an hypothesis, but
on itself, the thing no longer
separated by its intelligibility,
but in the midst of it, is
the idea, is the thing itself.

– Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, 1995

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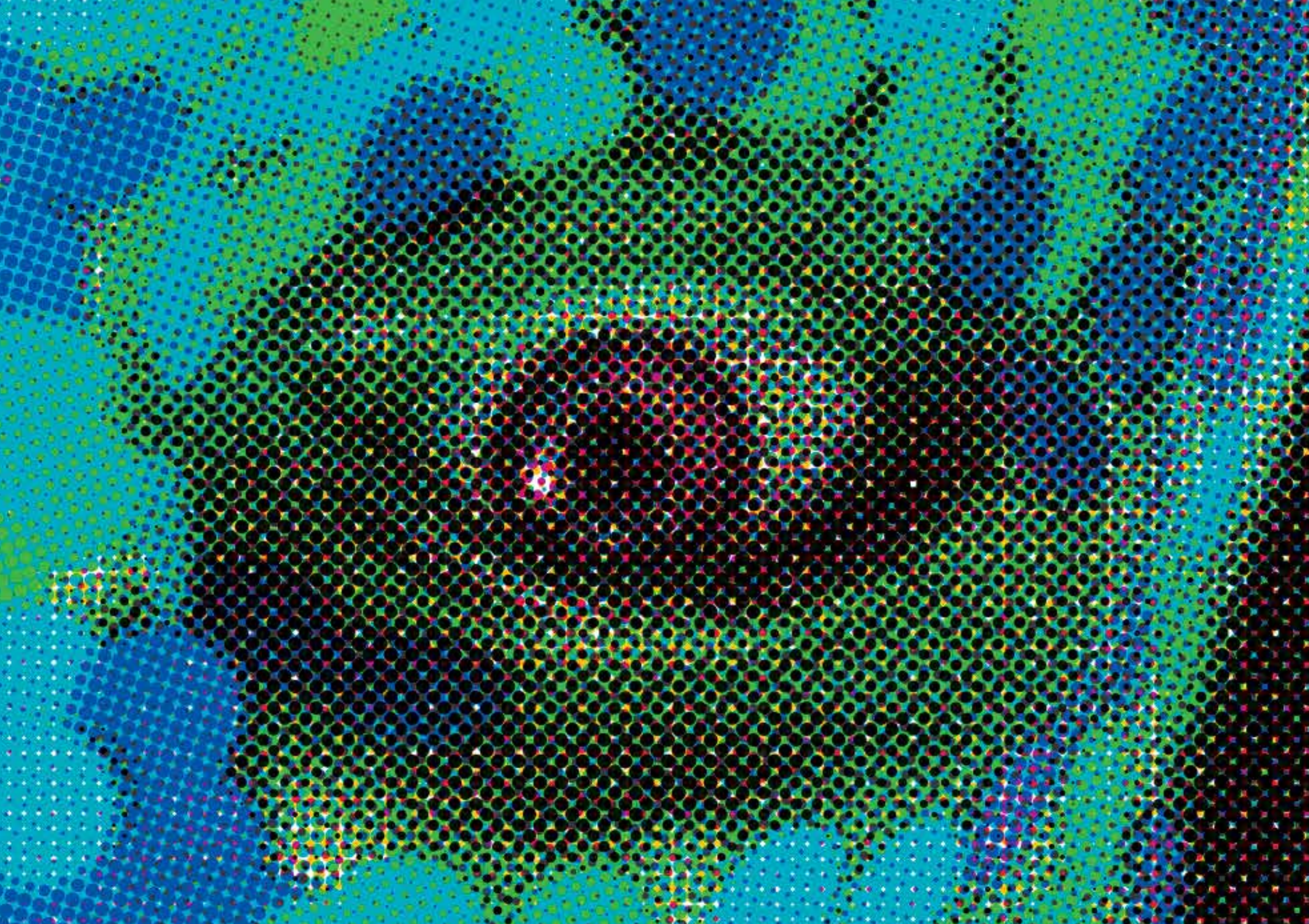
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