

ROSS MANNING

DISSONANT RHYTHMS



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## UNDER THE RAINBOW

If what art must distract its viewers from—in order to function critically as art—is not just the cares and worries of the world but, increasingly, distraction (entertainment) itself, how to distract from distraction without simply reproducing it?

— Peter Osborne<sup>1</sup>

### SATURATION POINT

Ross Manning's work is sensuous. A typical Manning artwork is an environment that directly addresses the spectator's body with pulsing fields of prismatic coloured light and sound. In addition to the kaleidoscopic kinesis, Manning's formal arrangement of the space and its objects creates a dispersed field of view in which there is not one focal point or plane of perspective, but a fracturing of these into many possible viewing positions. There is, typically, at least one self-announcing, self-playing device—the mobiles of *Spectra* (2012–ongoing) and *Wave Opus III* (2017), the rolling scroll of *Pianola Loops* (2011), the feedback system in *Bricks and Blocks* (2016)—which the artist has customised to produce a particular environment.

The spectator is not usually supposed to touch or play with the devices; their job is simply to partake in the flow of different vibrations that the artist has organised to take place in time for the unique moment they are there in attendance. This is not to say that Manning makes individual works for individual spectators, but rather that his systems generate perceptually oriented environments predicated

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, *One Thing or Another* (London: Verso, 2013), 177–178.

on constant change and subtle difference, in a specifically ephemeral operation in which no two moments are exactly alike.

The sensuality at the core of Manning's work is what makes it seductive, and also what makes it critically ambiguous. This work is unapologetically aesthetic in its sculptural and kinetic forms, graphic rigour, and the self-enclosure of its systems, and there are none of the hallmarks of overtly contemporary practice today (social engagement, collaboration, interactivity, discursivity, etc.). As an artist, Manning remains resistant to trends and is unconcerned by fashions, preferring instead the pursuit of an esoteric artistic language of objects, environments, and affects. Over the last decade, Manning's practice has been remarkably consistent, returning repeatedly and across varied spatial interventions to key themes of energy and vibration, expressed as environments of light and sound. The allegiance of these affect-generating schemes seems to lie more with modernism than the questions of contemporary art today.

But it's been nearly ten years of the productive if frequently anxious debate over notions of 'the contemporary',<sup>2</sup> a period that is roughly contiguous with Manning's exhibition history as an artist. Ours has been an era of renewed discussion about the formats in which art (and criticism) actually occur, and consequently a period in which we have come to learn that the categories of what constitutes a contemporary artwork are more unstable, more porous, and more open to challenge than ever before. In other words, an artwork today seeming modernist is not necessarily an immediate disqualification from it also being contemporary.

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2 As articulated in *e-flux journal's* influential compendium *What Is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010); Terry Smith's book *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Giorgio Agamben's essay "What Is the Contemporary?" in Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Furthermore, if we now expect contemporary art to reflect its own present—to "manifest its own contemporaneity", as Boris Groys puts it<sup>3</sup>—then we are also now aware that this need not mean overt devotion to presentism. Rather, a certain untimeliness can in fact be a marker of the contemporary, following Giorgio Agamben's much-quoted thoughts, that 'contemporariness' can be considered a "relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it ... *through a disjunction and an anachronism*".<sup>4</sup> Agamben suggests that those who "are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust to its demands,... precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of *perceiving and grasping their own time*".<sup>5</sup>

Manning, chronically, makes environments generated by devices to effect direct perceptual registration with the spectator. The prevalence of the machines and Manning's meticulous approach to composition with them seem to invite consideration as sculpture and as expressions of technological wonder. But considered less as form and more as actions and effects, Manning's work can open onto questions that seem especially contemporary—questions about the role of art in larger flows of global capital, tastes and ideas, and the place of affect and experiential work to initiate those questions.

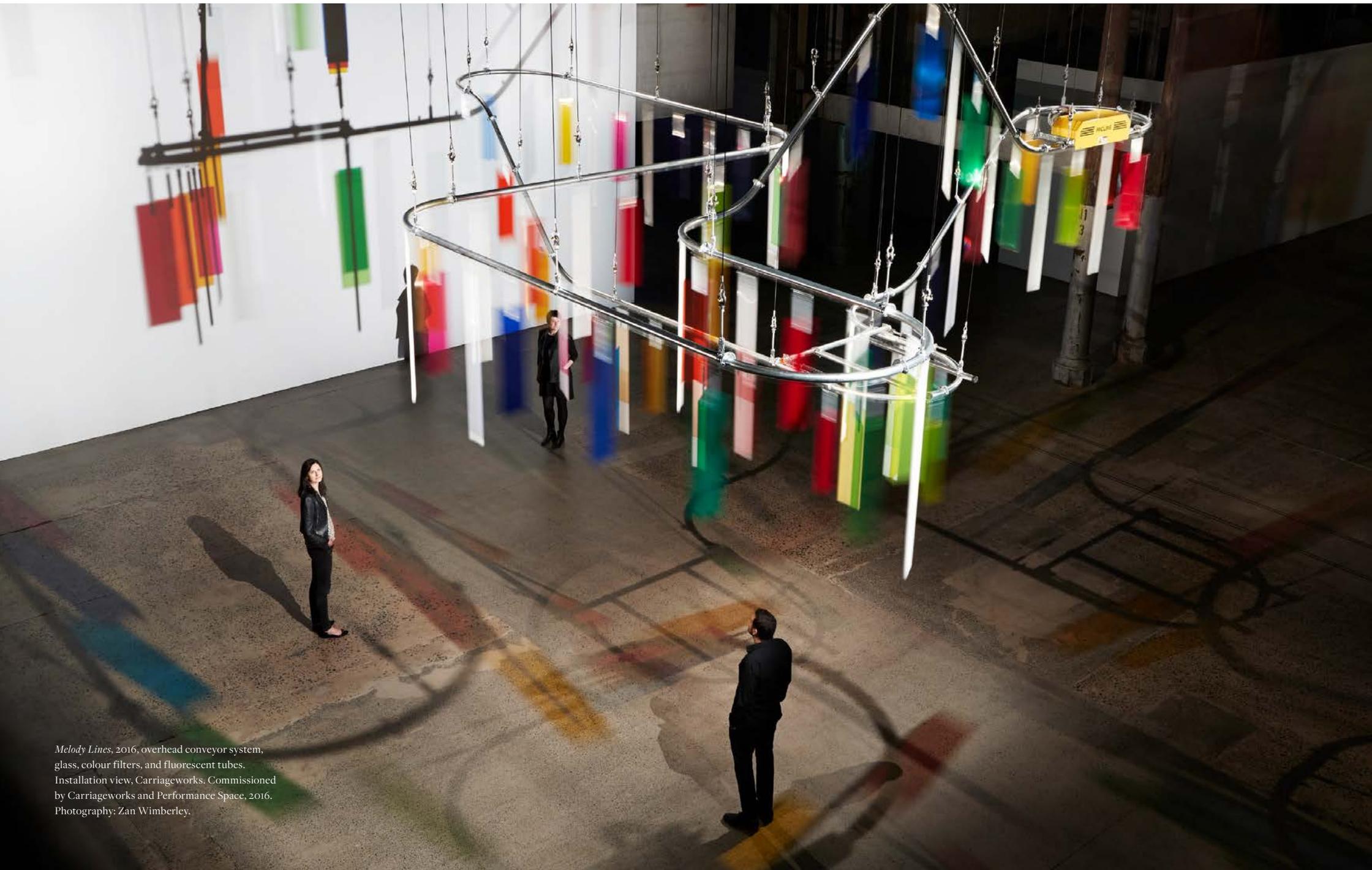
*Spectra, Six Short Films* (2016), and *Melody Lines* (2016–ongoing) are typical total environments created by Manning in which a humming overhead matrix suffuses the space with ever-changing multicoloured fields of light. In these, the spectator experiences a world of colours spreading, blooming, and fading, grading into and handing over to one another in ceaseless flow. Manning's *Pianola Loops* is a different

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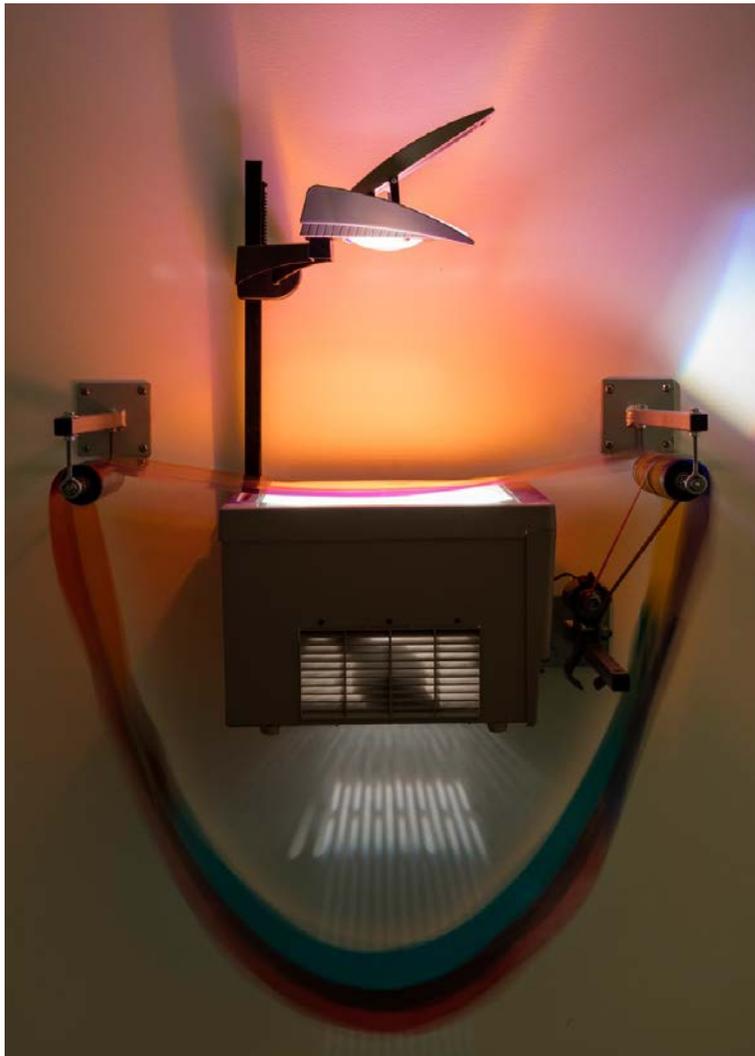
3 Boris Groys, "Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk", in *e-flux journal* 50, December 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>.

4 Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?", 41, emphasis in original.

5 Ibid, 40, emphasis added.



*Melody Lines*, 2016, overhead conveyor system,  
glass, colour filters, and fluorescent tubes.  
Installation view, Carriageworks. Commissioned  
by Carriageworks and Performance Space, 2016.  
Photography: Zan Wimberley.



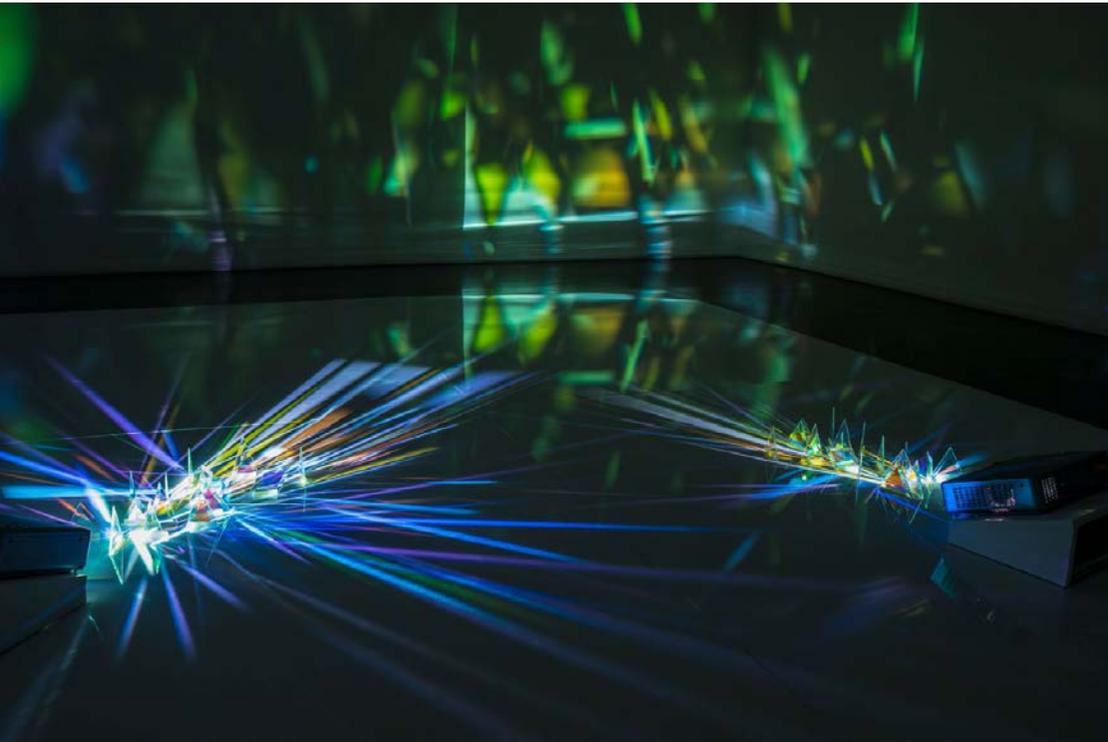
*Six Short Films*, 2016, overhead projectors, theatre gel, motors, interval timers, and rollers.  
Photography: Sam Hartnett. Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

type of coloured light environment, with a smaller body of light that is unable to radiate. Funnelled through small holes in a scroll of paper that cycles through like a mechanical belt, the beam can only escape intermittently, and then imperfectly, in jagged showers of tiny dots. The spectator is not so much bathed in coloured light as its absence, where, in the shroud of darkness, attention attunes to the shower of iridescent flecks, a flickering contingent on the dark. These are works built to solicit the spectator's perception in a somatic language of hue, intensity, and constant motion.

Unmuffled mechanical rhythms foreground the agency of devices in these coloured light environments. While every Ross Manning system makes machine music, sound is elevated to subject in the waveform chime structure of the newly-commissioned work *Wave Opus III*. This assemblage defines the space paradoxically: when performing, it is the centre, the vibrating source issuing the sound waves rippling through those present, caressing individual ears, creating a shared audience body in the sensual exchange of the encounter of listening. In its other, silent life, however, *Wave Opus III*'s imposing form dictates the space it inhabits with an assertive linearity that echoes the borders and barriers of material spatial control. *Wave Opus III* shows how Manning can use installation to operate multiple registers, from an immediate and phenomenological space of affect to a critical space of machines as metaphors.

As total environments of kinetic light and sound happening in time, Manning's works tend to operate as both sculpture and event: they are installations that are also performances. The decade over which Manning has been exhibiting his total environments is one in which the role of the museum has undergone a crucial shift; in Groy's words, it "has ceased to be a space for contemplating non-moving things" and instead has become "a place where things happen", a "stage for contemporary art events".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Groy's, "Entering the Flow".



*Dichroic Filter Piece (extended projection)*, 2012–2017, dichroic filters, cut glass, media players, and data projectors. Photography: Tony Nathan. Image courtesy Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Manning's works' constitutive eventfulness may be how they most clearly manifest contemporaneity, if we read his environments as Gesamtkunstwerks in the sense that Groys introduces: the formerly avant-garde form, initially proposed as a substitute for a traditional museum, is now an agent in a 'flow'. In such a context, they exist as projects in an art world supply-chain of endless new events whose purpose is to synchronise the institution with the larger flow of time by generating the material for the ever-expanding online archive of documentation through which they will be chiefly realised, consumed, and remembered. As lyrical environments full of motion, Manning's work is readily assimilable in the "action to make art fluid,

to synchronize it with the flow of time"<sup>7</sup> to become a stage for a contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk— contemporary, in other words, in its complicity.

#### FORCES WITHOUT CONTACT

The movement from one energy state to another, either within or between larger classes of energy (mechanics or electromagnetism), is called transduction. Audible sounds and other acoustical phenomena belong to mechanics: all sound is mechanical in this sense. Just as the wind blows across distinctions of naturally occurring and human-made, of nature and technology, so too does energy move across states as transduction. Energetic movement is in this way a continuation locatable at transformation, the position of transducers.

—Douglas Kahn<sup>8</sup>

Certain forces cannot be directly apprehended, but rather can only be witnessed as effects—think of the wind, the tides, magnetism, gravity. Douglas Kahn has coined the term 'aelectrosonic', meaning to tap into and listen to some of these ever-present electromagnetic flows in which we are perpetually, if invisibly, embedded. If their recruitability to the imperative for a constantly revolving, institutionally renewing flow of spectacle in the art system is what makes Manning's work complicit with that system, it is also what may provide opportunity for a critical reflection on the same system and its operations. Manning, 'hearing' aelectrosonically, creates systems of transformation for the location of energetic movements in order to render them, on some level, knowable. Transduction is not just enacted, but thematised: from our perspective in the cooled-down, self-reflective space of contemporary

<sup>7</sup> Groys, "Entering the Flow".

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound/Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 7.

art installation,<sup>9</sup> the constant exchange of energies from one state to another that characterises all of Manning's systems can be read as articulations of these forces at human scale, and how they and other invisible, intangible, and yet material forces may work, and work on us.

Suffusion is the word we use for the process by which one substance gradually spreads over, and gives an unusual quality to, another substance. Like infusion, suffusion's root *suffundere* is in *fundere*, to pour, and as with infusion, there is the sense of permeation and fusion. But suffusion goes further, perhaps deeper; filling becomes flushing, a spreading over and throughout, an overflowing, a pouring beneath. We speak of a room suffused with sunlight, how a blush suffuses the cheeks, that the sunset is suffusing the horizon. It is a fluid term, signalling incremental change at the level of moments, perceivable not as a singular state, only in states of becoming.

Manning's environments are suffused with light and sound, and the term seems to come closest to describing the feeling of being a spectator in his work. If the last decade or so of intense critical discussion in art have encouraged a shift to consider how artworks open onto the contemporary, even or especially because of their untimeliness, the centrality of the role of suffusion in Manning's work seems to point to a particular quality of action in our time.

In the idea of suffusion, the suffix *suff-* is a version of *sub-*, under; so suffusion is technically not just to pour, but rather 'to pour underneath'. While there is violent and abrupt change in our world, there is much more incremental change slowly happening at levels and in ways that make difficult the registration of discrete points of change in a way that is graspable. Much change does not happen instantaneously but in a slow, creeping attrition. The abstractions of global financial

capital, the inculcation and commodification of ideas, capital's engineering of desire and consciousness, the cultivation by algorithms of our daily and future activities are all operating subtly, minutely, significantly, but also unsupervised, soaked in, working away in the background, where they are just beyond our ability to perceive their action. Ross Manning's work exudes sound and light, but to be dazzled by its pouring radiant noise is to overlook the possibility that the artist's real work may be a kind of dramatisation of the action of those larger forces flowing stealthily beneath contemporary life.

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<sup>9</sup> Groy, "Entering the Flow".

*Ross Manning: Dissonant Rhythms*

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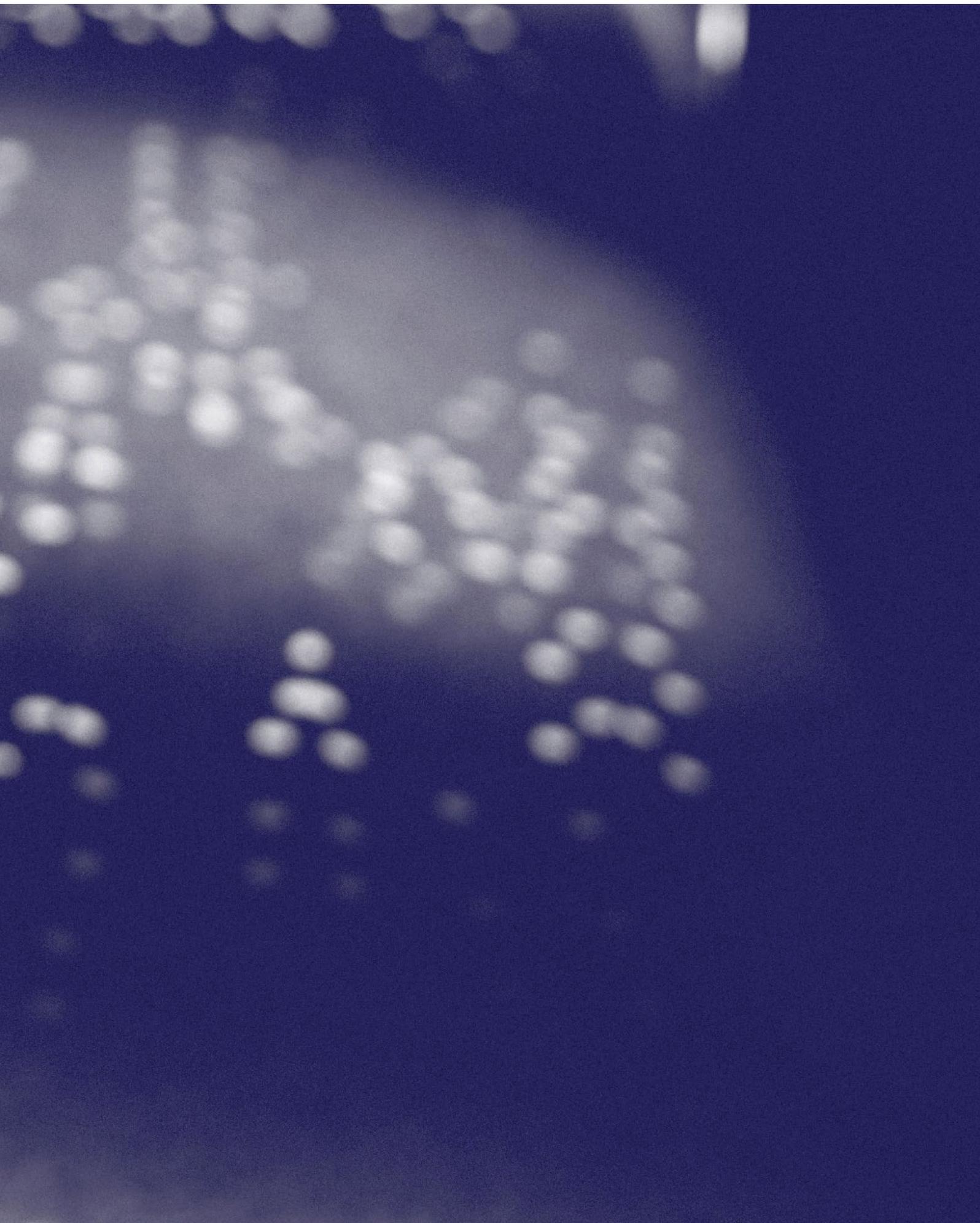
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