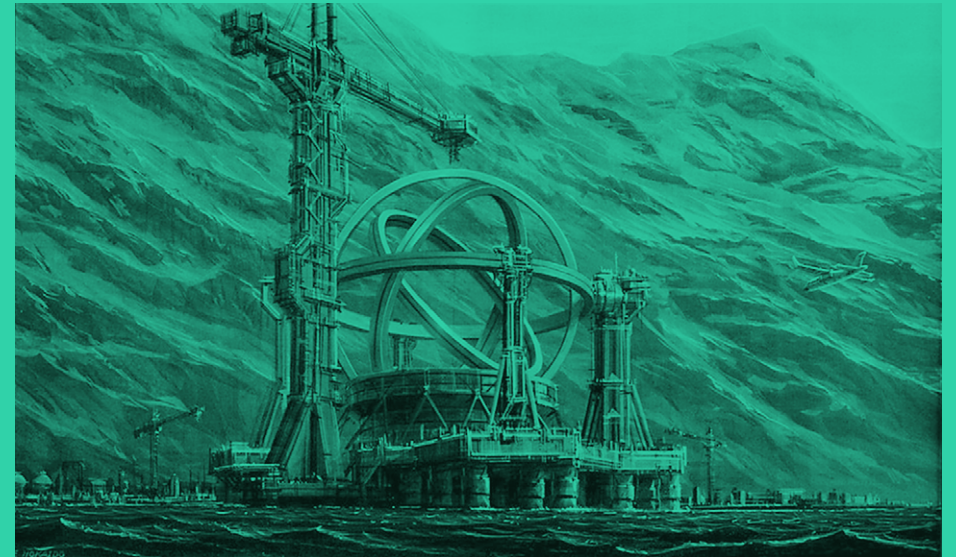


HOME WORLD



Wormhole 'ship' at Hokaidu, Contact (1997)

He sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed. He also used words like knot or tangle, or muddle, or 'gnommero', which in Roman dialect means skein...The opinion that we must 'reform within ourselves the meaning of the category of cause,' as handed down by the philosophers from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, and replace cause with causes was for him a central, persistent opinion, almost a fixation, which melted from his fleshy, but rather white lips, where the stub of a spent cigarette seemed, dangling from one corner, to accompany the somnolence of his gaze and the quasi-grin, half-bitter, half-skeptical, in which through 'old' habit he would fix the lower half of his face beneath that sleep of his forehead and eyelids and that pitchy black of his mop.¹

SYSTEMS

Carlo Emilio Gadda's novel about a murder in Rome, That Awful Mess on Via Merulana, published in 1946, flashed into my mind when I was trying to think through the complex range of systems and thoughts that inform the work of Isobel Thom and Kathy Barry. The detective story is a wholly modern genre, as Walter Benjamin argued: in the resolution of the mystery, it acts as panacea to the disappearance of the individual in

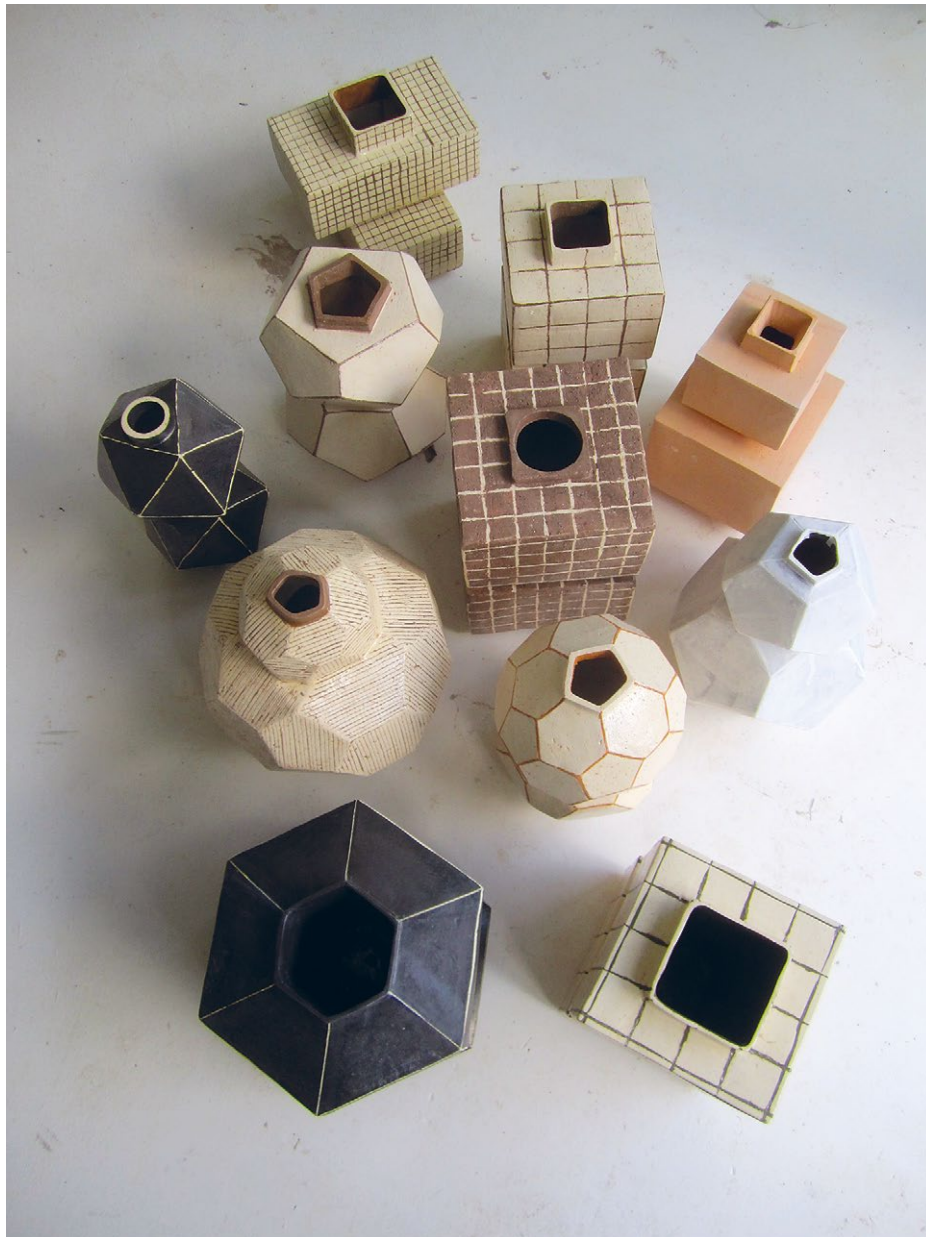
¹ Carlo Emilio Gadda, That Awful Mess on Via Merulana, (New York: New York Review of Books), 1965, p.5.

large, industrialised cities.² And yet, one might observe of Gadda's novel—published after the collapse of fascism, and with the aftershocks of war and of capture still audible—that this is a detective novel that unravels our desire for solving the crime. Gadda's detective, Don Ciccio, is the Milanese outsider who faces the messy organisation of Roman society without assuming that its intricate fabric can be unravelled. In its rambling philosophical thoughts that peter off into observations of everyday minutiae, That Awful Mess perfectly captures the complications of a world in which single sources or singular causes, or singular timeframes, or perceptible realities of the here and now, are mere fragmentary glimpses of a much larger and imperceptible whole...³

The artworks of Isobel and Kathy—Isobel makes ceramics and Kathy watercolours—are produced under very different conditions and influenced by quite distinct forces. For Isobel, observation of natural ecological systems, regenerative design and permaculture, and for Kathy, the accessing of alternative planes out of which connections between art and healing are forged, means that for both artists (one earthbound, the other astral) there is an appreciation of fragile ecologies and the interdependency of even the smallest atom on all other atoms. One of Kathy's antecedents in this sense is the Swedish artist and mystic, Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), whose diary entry declared, “I am an atom in the universe that has access to



- 2 Walter Benjamin notes that the rise of the detective genre in the 19th century corresponded with a period of accelerated mass industrialisation: “The original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual's traces in big-city crowd.” Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism (trans.) Harry Zohn, (Verso Books: London and New York, 1997), p.43.
- 3 See the introduction to Gadda's novel by Italo Calvino who quotes from diary notations found after Gadda's death, “Every element of a system contains within it another system; each individual system is linked in turn to a genealogy of systems. A change in any particular element results in a breakdown of the whole.” Calvino's Introduction, 1985, p.v.



infinite possibilities of development. These possibilities I want, gradually, to reveal.”⁴

An approach to such thinking could be made through Leibniz’s concept of the monad, which was also an important organising concept for Gadda. Monads are “the real atoms of nature,” Leibniz wrote, “in a word, the elements of things,”⁵ a simple, indivisible substance without parts or extension, with each one necessarily different from every other monad, and subject to continual change.” For there are never in nature two beings that are exactly alike, and in which it is not possible to find a difference either internal or based on an intrinsic property.”⁶ Thus, in Leibniz’s metaphysics, summarised here by Gilles Deleuze, it means that “every soul or subject (monad) is completely closed, windowless and doorless, and contains the whole world in its darkest depths, while also illuminating some little portion of the world, each monad a different portion.”⁷ As with us all, our artists’ perspectives are too fragmentary; too partial to be capable of discerning the world’s ultimate truths—only god-like creatures are in a position to determine the movement of the whole—but, from the more oblique position of the monad, in its indivisible singularity, we are offered a mirror to the universe: a single monad is a truth that holds the truth of all other truths.⁸

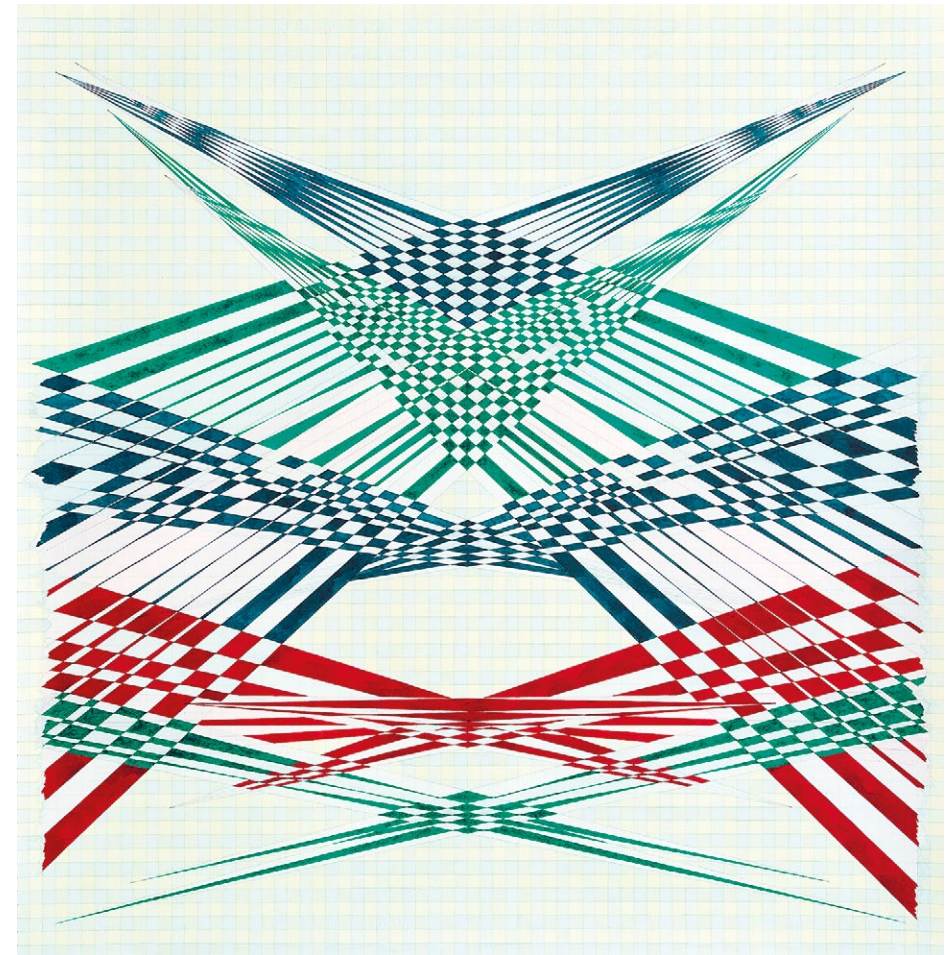
ETHOS

I’ve taken this rather extended introduction by way of Gadda and Leibniz to approach a particular ethico-political position

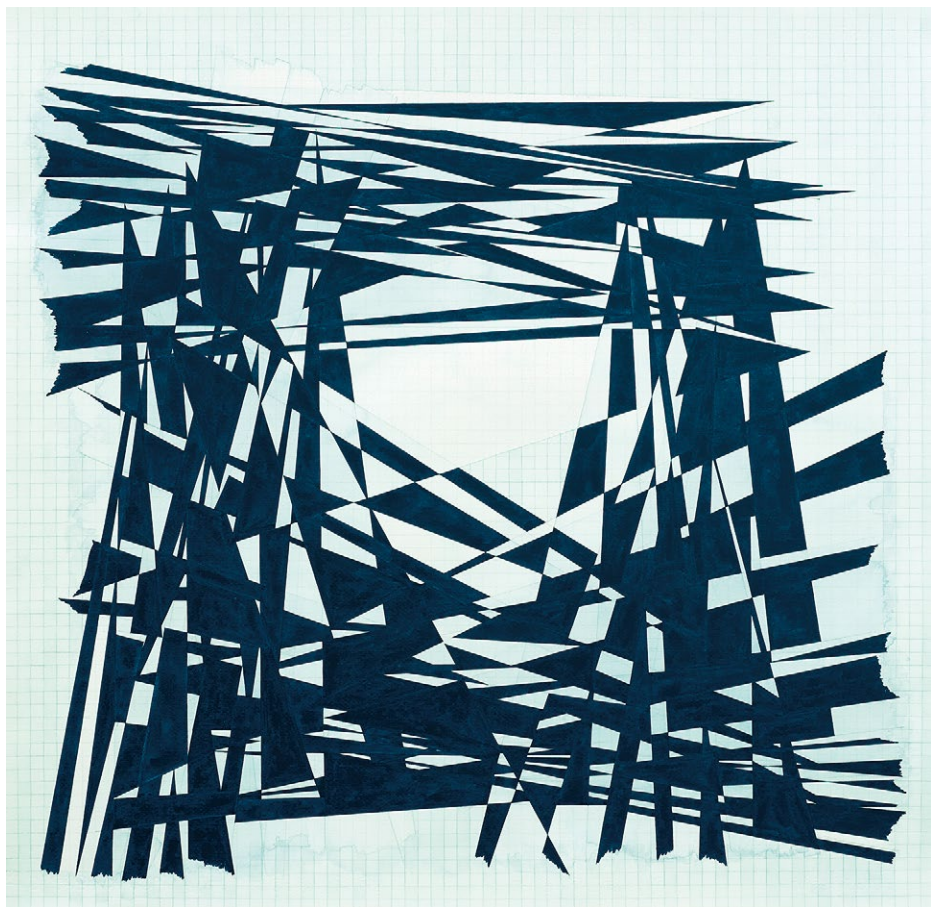
- 4 Quoted in Daniel Birnbaum, “Universal Pictures”, *Artforum International*, vol.1, issue 5, January 2013, p.181.
- 5 G.W. Leibniz, “The Principles of Philosophy, or, The Monadology” (1714), *G.W. Leibniz Philosophical Essays*, (eds. and trans.) Roger Ariew & Daniel Garber, (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company), 1989, p.213.
- 6 *Ibid*, 214.
- 7 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972–1990*, (trans.) Martin Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, p.157.
- 8 G.W. Leibniz, “Notes for Leibniz to Des Bosses, 5 February, 1712” *G.W. Leibniz Philosophical Essays*, p.199.

that appears to inform the practices of Isobel and Kathy. As with Leibniz, there is recognition of the unity of all matter as a fundamental belief, and whether the energies that connect matter are small and barely detectable or large and affecting, these energies move through all elements, bending and modifying them. Thus flows a responsibility to think of the effect of one's actions on the world in the widest possible sense, stretching well beyond a consideration of the isolated object, or the individual art career. In an interrelated system such as this, even the most resistant of practitioners who refuse to fold wholly to the demands of an art market will nonetheless be affected by it in some way or another. Kathy and Isobel work within such restraints—both ethical and practical—of a world of interconnecting and continually modifying matter.

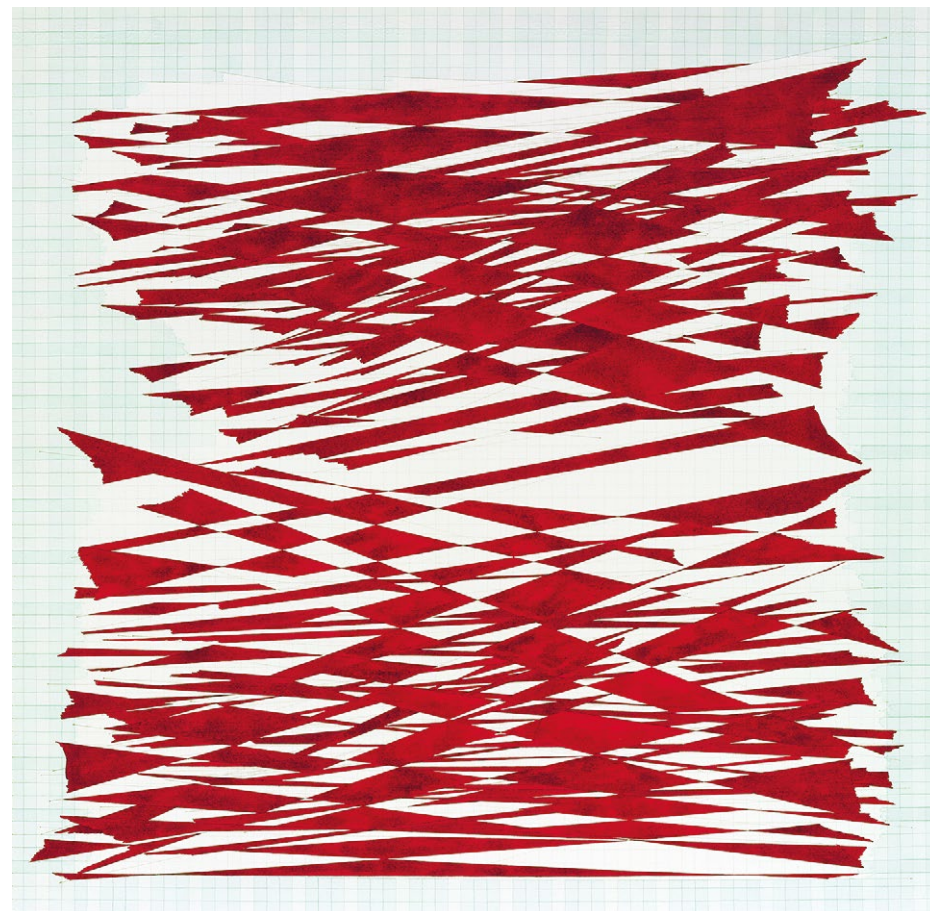
It is germane to question how such abstractions drill down into the particularity of these artists' practices. One approach taken by Isobel is the pushing of a thing's function as an exigency of its making, which is also inseparable from the precepts of permaculture design. And yet, this also carries a corresponding qualification that asks whether function is enough, since a thing's functionality is both relational and subjective (how is function to be evaluated, or even defined in ecological terms?). And yet, I mention this, not to insert an aporia at the heart of Isobel's project, but to claim that doubt itself has become an ethical imperative that lightens the work's impact on the world. Similarly, when Kathy equates energy with the intelligence that resides in all living matter, the authorial impact of her work is reduced in correspondence with the energy that helped create it. Opening out at the intersection of various forces of energy is the artist's essential humility that positions the work within a larger system of creative production.



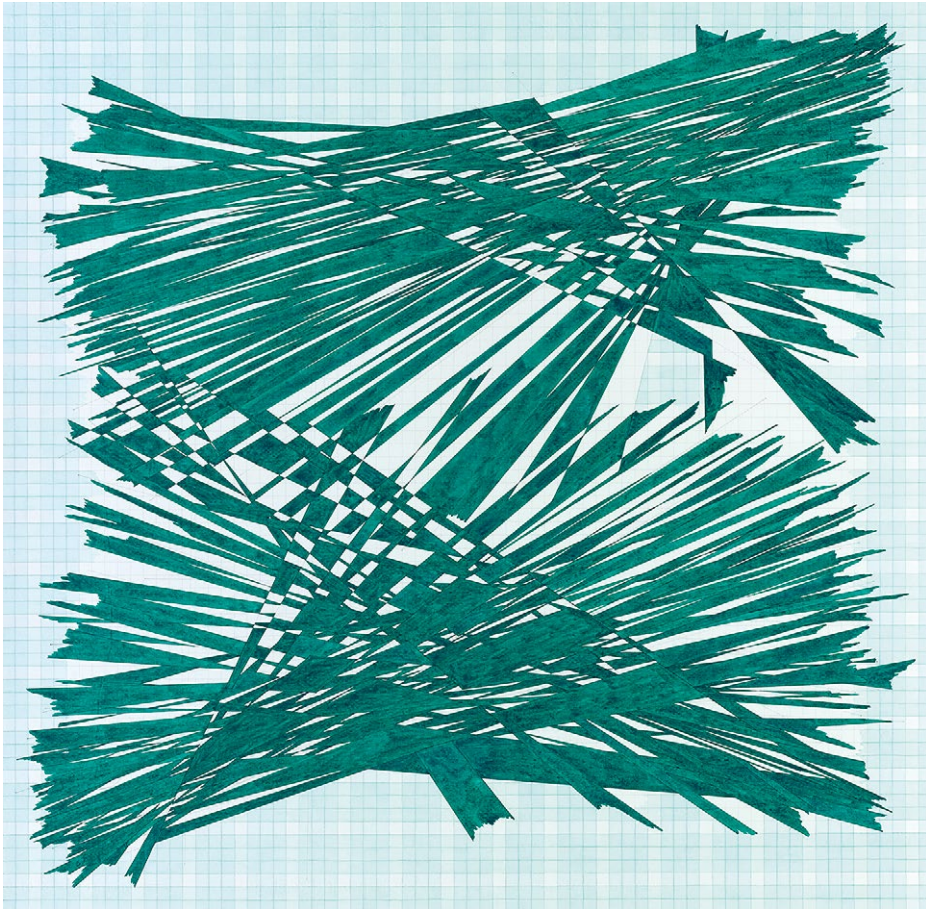
Watercolour and pencil on paper: 700 X 720 mm, 2014



Watercolour and pencil on paper: 700 X 720 mm, 2014



Watercolour and pencil on paper: 700 X 720 mm, 2014



Watercolour and pencil on paper: 700 X 720 mm, 2014

UTOPIAS

On Isobel's recommendation, I watched the film *Contact* (1997). The main characters, an astronomer, Dr Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster), and her superior, Dr David Drumlin (Tom Skeritt), are pitted in the film as two opposing figures. Drumlin is self-serving and ambitious, an instrumental type who first cuts off Arroway's funding and then, when he sees personal advantage, unashamedly takes over her research. Arroway is steadfastly focussed on finding other life forms in the universe and is posited as a figure of hope, sitting above all the messy distractions of personal gain and political posturing that characterises Drumlin. Lines between optimism and expediency are therefore clearly drawn in the film. On one side sits Drumlin and the politics of nationalism, conquest, and religion. And on the other, opposing such fragmentary, ideologically riven and ultimately parochial interests, is Arroway's curiosity for other worlds and a pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

One quality of science fiction that attracts Isobel is the way it 'looks'; and it is through this aesthetic encounter—one that presents the future as a possibility that can be lived today—that sci-fi disrupts the stultifying sameness that seems to cling to the earthly here and now. Thus, for Isobel, such design is also about a sense of hopefulness, despite such hope being tempered, as she notes, by an accompanying belief that earth is all we have, and even if other worlds did exist, would we not perish trying to reach them?⁹

Kathy approaches these ideas very differently and without qualification. Her investigations into string theory and quantum physics means that her work is governed by a belief in multiple dimensions and infinite worlds, each as complex as the other, and each containing varying realities and qualities. Underpinning these worlds is a unified trans-dimensional field

that comprises a continuum of frequencies—from the denser frequencies that govern our own worldly lives to the faster/higher frequencies that are imperceptible (and unintelligible) to our human-bound senses.¹⁰ When Arroway journeys to ‘outer-space’, but in our reality never leaves earth, she is subsumed by intense and indescribable sensations. As with Kathy’s own experiences, verifiable scientific method is wholly impotent, and Arroway’s unreserved belief in deductive reasoning collapses. To understand these feelings, in this moment of absolute immersion in sensate material, what Arroway calls out to is not science but poiesis.

POLITICS

We might observe that there are things that clearly separate the practices of Kathy and Isobel (particularly in the thinking that undergirds their differing working methods); and there are things that connect them (such as a shared belief in how to use and sustain our world’s resources). And yet, what first sparked them to think about collaborating on Homeworld was not a question of Weltanschauung, but something far less tangible. It was recognition of the way their separate and individuated artworks cohere aesthetically: the way geometric façades, purist forms, grid-bound surfaces, limited chromatics, and so on, come together in an effective concatenation.

Recently, Isobel has been applying grids to the surfaces of her objects: and the grid is both ground and guide for Kathy’s watercolours. Once a method for making images, the grid throughout art history was embedded invisibly as substructure for the picturing of the world. By the twentieth century, however, the grid, as non-representational form, pushed its way to the surface along with a pursuit for pure abstraction. This restructuring of the surface of the picture plane was reduced by many art





historians to a gesture that wholly internalised line within form. In her widely referenced essay, Rosalind Krauss wrote, “The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic.”¹¹ Formalist fundamentalism insisted throughout much of the twentieth century that art had no purpose external to itself, and no end other than the self-realisation of form.

In an exhibition curated in 2005, Catherine de Zegher set out to explicate a much broader set of concerns for modern abstractionists, those “who have approached non-objectivity and geometric abstraction not as a kind of formalism, but as a means of structuring philosophical, linguistic, scientific, and transcendental ideas.”¹² Included in the exhibition was the work of the Swedish artist and mystic, af Klint, and the Swiss artist and healer, Emma Kunz [1892–1963], whose practices are closely aligned with Kathy’s. Of her own method, Kathy explains: “the grid is envisioned as a latent energy field; a quantum unified field that is the intelligent universe. It is from this uniform field that modifications of energy materialise; joining with other frequencies and energies they merge and break apart, morphing into vortexes or portals to higher frequencies.”¹³ Aligned in colour fields, the images produce energy within and across the series.

The significance of the grid for Isobel is much closer, I think, to the way the aesthetic of science fiction ignites utopian ideas in her about the future. Early modernism had a similar expression of hope in its ‘program’ for a design-led future.¹⁴ But since we live on the other side of the twentieth century, such feelings of

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids”, *October* 9, Summer 1979, p.52

¹² Catherine de Zegher, “Abstract”, *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin*, p.12.

¹³ Interview with Kathy Barry, November 16, 2014.

¹⁴ For instance, Le Corbusier’s plan for *Voisin* (1925) that proposed, in the name of modern design, the near destruction of Paris from the Seine to Montmartre, or, in a push to establish a rational, modern, and hygienic housing system, *Existensminimum* presented by Walter Gropius at the 1929 Congress of International Modern Architects (CIAM) that reduced domestic housing to ‘minimum dwelling for existence’.

hope quickly dissolve into memories of totalitarianism, universal dictates, fascism, and so on.

Earlier I referred to the importance of function to Isobel's work, and yet her vases in Homeworld also exceed considerations of functionality. Vase Number 4 (2014) is formed by two, thirty-two-sided objects (one on top of the other), each constructed from a truncated icosahedron (20(6)·12(5)). What is thereby confounded in the construction of her objects is the modernist conceit that form must be inseparable from function. As with her work, which she considers is neither wholly art nor solely homewares, she will often be drawn to a space outside of categorisation, perhaps in the middle of a mess of contradiction that facilitates, in its dogged refusal to settle, other thoughts and other possibilities.

He touched me on the shoulder and said; 'It's a long road comrade but I think we're there'...¹⁵

In light of the apathetic-inducing condition of contemporary politics, I'm recalling this anecdote from the early 1970s, spoken at the recent memorial service for an ex-Prime Minister. This is not to rub salt into the wounds of our now dispersed selves—because we're plainly not even close to whatever this 'there' may have been, this 'there' that sits on the moving horizon of our personal utopias—but rather to identify, as Walter Benjamin had, the revolutionary potential held in a moment of hope as it flashes up from the past. Such flashes are monads for Benjamin, tools for the materialist in her shattering of mythical versions of history:

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a

historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework.¹⁶

Homeworld, its affective register, recalls very lightly the aesthetic of early European modernism, without crudely mimicking it. And thus, I invoke it here, not in the spirit of nostalgia (where the past is reduced to the retro and wholly commodified), but closer to Benjamin's monad. It is the spark that comes from the past replete with the kind of utopian expectations that first fashioned early modernism, ready to be remade under new conditions.

Jan Bryant
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Art Design & Architecture

¹⁵ Cited by the speechwriter, Graham Freudenberg at the time of the Australian ex-Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam's [1916–2014] memorial service, Sydney Town Hall, November 5, 2014.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Illuminations, (ed.) Harry Zohn, Schocken: New York, p.262–63.