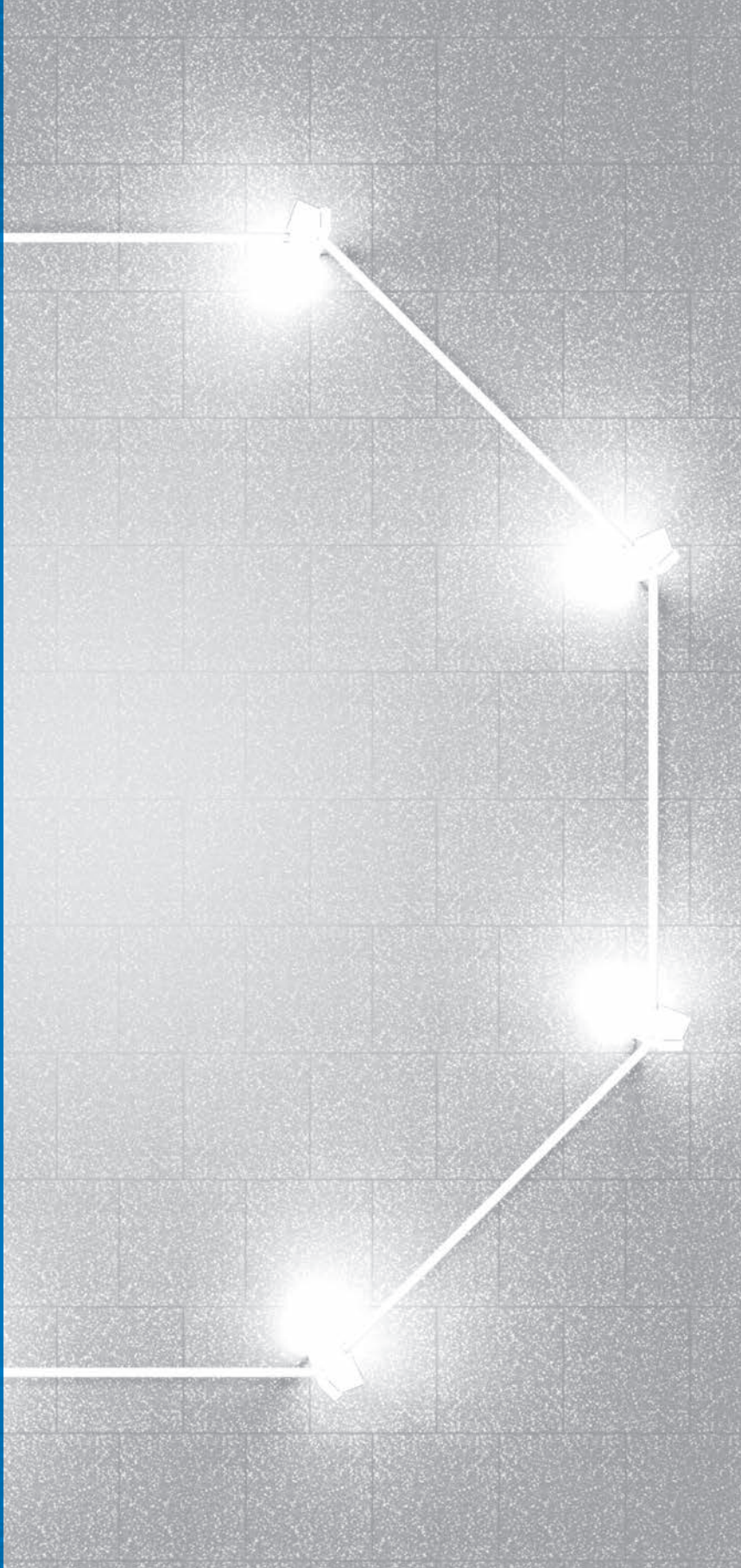


The Gus Fisher Gallery
NICA
University of Auckland

EDDIE CLEMENS TOTAL INTERNAL REFLECTION

2 November – 15 December 2012



TOTAL INTERNAL REFLECTION

Andrew Clifford

“It’s as though someone sent me a ticket for a time machine. Art is on time, for its time. The thing about time is: times change. At its best, it’s like wine. At its worst, it becomes rotten. Memory is also like that, but art is especially so.”¹

An important dimension of this exhibition arose from a chance meeting I had with Eddie Clemens in The Arts Centre in Christchurch a month before the February 2011 earthquake. We were in the University of Canterbury’s SOFA gallery, which at one time had been the Art Annex for the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, and part of Canterbury College before that. I was there to hang an exhibition of works by Canterbury alumnus Pat Hanly and Clemens had an exhibition planned for later in the year. We were both interested in previous occupants of the space.

The install team had been wondering how to handle inconveniently placed power points without interfering with the structure of a historic building. Clemens was sympathetic to the problem, having had a nearby studio in the Arts Centre on Montreal Street until the September 2010 earthquake. In 2008 he had held the Olivia Spencer Bower Residency, with a studio in the Arts Centre, where nothing can be fixed to the wall. It’s one of the challenges of living with history.

As a Canterbury University alumnus (BFA, 2000), and in lieu of his rented Montreal Street studio, Clemens had started using the University’s facilities on the basis that he would develop a solo exhibition for SOFA. He planned to develop fibre-optic hand-scrubbers for his project, which led to discussion of the mysterious circular scars in the wooden floorboards at the centre of the space. I explained that the marks are the residue of a chainsaw-and-neon Peter Roche performance I’d seen at the Symposium 2000 conference on performance and post-object art, organised by Christchurch Art Gallery as part of their Colloquium series. It’s hard to imagine such a hazardous performance being possible in such a risk-averse institutional setting. Were regulations looser then? Had Roche not fully explained what he would do, or did his performance not go quite as planned? Either way, one can imagine a certain kind of brinkmanship at play; a pushing of limitations that is often a feature of Roche’s performances, which in this case has caused him to become another ghost, as a story that haunts the building.

Canterbury’s severe February 2011 earthquake saw The Arts Centre closed, so Clemens’ project (along with all SOFA activity) was transferred to the School of Fine Arts Gallery on campus at Ilam, bringing with it his memories and ambitions for SOFA. Given the unplanned evacuation and limited subsequent access to SOFA, it is likely there are still small remnants of the Hanly show – picture hooks, or un-restored traces of where they were fixed, possibly even signage.² Although not always obvious to the untrained eye, a gallery seldom returns to tabula rasa after an exhibition, retaining various subtle traces of previous use, even if that is just the addition of a new layer of white paint in the places where pictures hung. During the Hanly show, coloured elements of the preceding exhibition by André Hemer were still visible (and a piece is preserved in a documentation photograph that now appears in the new *Hanly* publication, published this year by Ron Sang Publishing), and Roche’s markings will probably remain as long as the building still stands. For those who know where to look, the same is probably true of any gallery – at the Gus Fisher Gallery a small silver drawing by John Reynolds remains in an obscure corner that hasn’t been subsequently used since his 2007 exhibition there.

Clemens’ initial idea was to use his recently developed fibre-optic brooms and scrubbers to map the SOFA gallery space and rearticulate Roche’s gestures, partly to highlight the marks left by Roche’s mix of performance, sculpture and technology, and in a sense releasing the ghost in the space – essentially sweeping it out. Clemens’ second-generation fibre-optic brooms are equipped with GPS-like tracking technology (3-axis gyros and accelerometers, similar to the technology that measures tilt and motion in a smart phone or Wii controller), able to record the actions of a user and respond to their movement in specific locations. The ability to capture actions in one space and replay that data through colour and light in another space creates a sense of memory in the object – a trace of its activities at another time or place. Later, Clemens had hoped to gain access to the

abandoned SOFA space and stage a ritualistic ‘sweeping’ of the space (a poignant post-quake gesture), which could then be displayed at the Campus Gallery. But the difficulties of post-quake site access were insurmountable. What remains is the memory of the previous space, and how its former use has informed this project – an idea that has been transferred from one location to another as a virtual representation.

This earthquake-imposed transference of place and identity provides useful ways to consider the issues of temporality and representation that have emerged in Clemens’ recent works. The overlay of one space onto another brings with it an uncanny déjà vu, like visiting the home of someone who has just shifted house, and trying to assimilate the familiarity of the home (furniture, belongings, occupants etc.) with the unfamiliarity of the house and its location, imagining the previous context while viewing the new. For a period, both realities exist simultaneously, one transposed over another, until the new configuration supersedes the memory of the earlier situation. This is exactly what is happening on a much larger scale at present in Christchurch, as even the most constant aspects of the built civic environment, and their associated patterns of use, have been swept aside, causing occupants to reconsider their ideas and assumptions of place and unravelling social or architectural landmarks that previously defined the idea of Christchurch as a physical context. For arriving visitors, there is now an inevitable experience of disorientation as landmark destinations and activities have to be rediscovered, transposed over places that still have a geographical familiarity, even if the little physical evidence of that memory is being rapidly cleared to make room for a new city; a speculative place of the future, known primarily through virtual electronic simulations and projections that propose new ways to perform the city, redefining sites through new interactions.

The prolonged transition Christchurch finds itself in is a remarkable illustration of the idea of contemporaneity as a state of flux in which the performance of history attempts to create the future. As Boris Groys has described it, the present time opens the way to the future, smoothing the path from past to future.³ He says the present is a fleeting yet relentless state, linking the vast expanses of the past and the future. In this perpetual ‘now’, the past is constantly

written to establish our trajectory into the ever-expanding future⁴, which remains just out of reach.

In repurposing everyday objects, including tissue boxes, drying racks or memo cubes, Clemens prompts us to reconsider our assumptions and experience of places and things. With a nod to science fiction, he ruptures our expectations or memory of objects and spaces to suggest alternative narratives, including the presence of simultaneous realities and the rhizomatic nature of the future with its myriad alternatives. With slick, technologized presentation, his performative objects promise a new, utopian reality, often premised on the flawed systems of mass-produced consumer economies. Although Clemens’ latest project seems to deal with more philosophical issues than the cheap, small-scale dreams offered by consumer goods, it is the same capitalist ambition that often drives the development and intensification of city spaces, as demonstrated in environments such as Shanghai or Dubai as they take on the appearance of over-sized Lego sets while scaffolds rise and fall, and hyper-modern towers shoot up alongside historic sites, soon to be abandoned again as one dream is replaced with another.

Situated in the historic spaces of the Gus Fisher Gallery, this latest incarnation of Clemens’ project brings with it both data and anxieties from its Christchurch inception and presentation, and acquires new layers of memory, data and context. As a fellow university gallery, the Gus Fisher Gallery responded enthusiastically to SOFA’s post-quake proposal that we reciprocate the University of Canterbury’s hosting of the Pat Hanly exhibition by providing a venue for Clemens (he completed his MFA (Hons) at Elam School of Fine Arts in 2004). Along with the relocation of many Canterbury residents (including Clemens) to other parts of the country or the world, this exhibition is yet another indication of the many ways the Canterbury earthquakes have had an impact on the rest of New Zealand. Another is the nationwide auditing of public buildings to confirm their stability, including the Kenneth Myers Centre that houses the Gus Fisher Gallery.⁵

For his Campus Gallery exhibition, Clemens had a University of Canterbury cleaner perform with his broom to create the data that was then displayed. Similarly, cleaning staff from The University of Auckland have also used the broom, adding a further layer of electronic memory

to the work (*Human in the Loop*) that is displayed in the Gus Fisher Gallery’s main exhibition space (which was previously a studio for radio and television performances) and foyer. In the Auckland show there is also a new *Fibre-Optic Hand-Scrubber*, which maps its recorded performance in the space with a coloured grid. It starts at the meeting point of four floor tiles, as if calibrating itself to a crosshair target, and then scrolls through a pattern of 9 colours in response to its movement, as if the floor was being electronically retiled with a rainbow of RGB colours. Each performance of the brooms and scrubbers is also logged with details of the performer, date and location, which will scroll across the fibre-optic display as part of the title information to acknowledge the usually unseen labour and workers that are an important part of any institution, along with the colour-coded visuals that describe its movements in each performance.

Sweeping is one of those great levellers, a task that most people engage in at some stage. In the ‘De-building’ catalogue, Justin Paton notes that Clemens, like many artists, can often be found supplementing his income by working behind the scenes in a gallery; in his case, as a gallery technician, hired to “de-build and re-build gallery spaces”, presumably including regular bouts of sweeping up.⁶ It is a recurring feature of the sort of jobs people start out in, or take up between doing the things they’d rather be doing, one famous example being the janitor that features throughout and sweeps up at the end of the music video for Nirvana’s breakthrough song, ‘Smells like teen spirit’, who is said to represent lead singer Kurt Cobain’s former life as a cleaner prior to the band’s success. This is the ‘Human in the loop’ referred to in the title of Clemens’ exhibition at Campus Gallery. It is the performer who sets the pattern that the brooms replay, and provides the emotive association when we consider these objects and remember our own experience of them.

Clemens’ brooms and scrubbers are self-referential in the way they describe their own actions and tell their own stories. The clusters of fibre-optic bristles make up a series of pixels that form a screen, which can be programmed to display simple images and texts. The fibre-optic strands are a kind of tubular reflector that conducts light from its base, in this case being emitted by LED lights that play through the full colour spectrum made possible by an RGB

(red-green-blue) display, hence the exhibition title ‘Total Internal Reflection’. So each device also becomes its own wall label, scrolling through title and date information, or even an entire catalogue essay, and the documentation of a performance is not embodied in secondary material but remains embedded in the work, effectively ‘cleaning up’ the need for performance residue and detritus. The work, its documentation, and its description are all neatly rolled into one and reflected back on itself, much like the ‘From the Collection’ series by Billy Apple, whose practice has also explored cleaning activities.⁷

This virtual cleaning of the Gus Fisher Gallery floors, where the broom and scrubbers currently reside, and their previous activations, also reference the history of now-lost locations in Christchurch. While other parts of the exhibition further explore the opening up of virtual spaces as we anticipate and simulate the possibilities of new developments, scrubbing away the past with high-tech fictions for the future. Projected onto the wall inside the gallery and opposite the scrubbers is a view of the gallery foyer, as if the wall were not there at all, harking back to the time when there was a window here. But this view is not a real-time transmission from one space to the next, or even a real view of that space, but a 3D recreation of the foyer, stripped of its usual furniture and other signs of habitation – a sophisticated fiction, much like the simulations used to tell before-and-after stories of Christchurch’s development. What we are viewing is a portal into an alternative time-space, based on an earlier photograph and presented in the current exhibition to suggest something that hasn’t happened yet.

In the heart of this foyer simulation are eight first-generation brooms, the predecessor to the second-generation unit in the gallery that has the added capability of programmable displays, including text, rather than simple cycles of changing colour. This is an upgraded version (v2) of the first generation broom, previously shown at the Hocken Gallery,⁸ in that multiple brooms can be linked and synchronised together. They are depicted under the gallery’s famous coloured-glass dome, daisy-chained together in hexagonal formation, referencing the geometry of the interior of the gallery with its bevelled corners, as well as the hexagonal forms that recur in the building, including the foyer pillars, relief shapes on the outer doors, and the

hexagonal speakers visible in period photos of the studio in its radio days.

This simultaneous combination of past, present and future views is like the stalemate between past and future. To characterise a similar telescoping of time, Karl Chitham invokes H.G Wells' classic science fiction novella *The Time Machine* (1895) as an analogy for Judy Darragh's recycling of old science fiction movie posters, re-edited to create new possibilities.⁹ Clemens likewise suggests a sweeping up of the past, clearing the slate for new possibilities, which in turn may be a re-staging of earlier visions. In Darragh's work, most of the recognisable features of the posters are obliterated to create space for her own Futurist fantasy of hand-cut pixelations and stencilled star-bursts. Science fiction has also been a reference for Clemens, whose ruptured LED fences (*Delusional Architecture*, 2010–2012) mimic the mesh fence that becomes a time portal in the 1994 film *Terminator 2* – a now dated view of the future from the fiction of the past.

Like Darragh, Clemens reactivates everyday forms and activities, vesting them with the instant aura of becoming an artwork in a gallery. This is, perhaps, the first time such high technology has been applied to recognisably document (and display in such detail) something as commonplace as the patterns of sweeping. It is an endeavour that seems quite irrational in its demand and application of contemporary resources to explain an activity so familiar. In fact, it's just as much our familiarity with, and memory of the task that helps us understand its explanation, as it is the complex description. That description provides a new understanding of the process and re-inscribes it with a novelty and strangeness that needs to be decoded and translated back into actions and steps taken. Once the simple code is mastered, we can easily visualise the documented performance, shuffling back and forward or side to side as a ghost performance for our mind.

This contrast of old and new is similar to the way Nam June Paik redeployed recycled technology such as outmoded television sets to make contemporary work about the potential future of television. In this fashion, his objects are not only both material and content, essentially a representation of themselves, but also simultaneously embody past, present and future. Asserting the significance of temporality in visual art alongside the usual concerns of

spatial arrangement, Paik once said, “in nature colour is a function of time”, a statement that anticipates Clemens' use of colour to explain the movement of his brooms and scrubbers in space, although it is unlikely Paik could have imagined the transformation of a broom into a screen.¹⁰

The development of a city is also a function of time, usually moving forward over long periods, but sometimes stepping back, clearing the slate and reconsidering the options. It is an ongoing performance happening all around us and is most effective when it has both a clear view of the heritage that came before, both extant and erased, and a long view to the possibilities stretching out ahead. When developed into complex configurations where the past and future can coexist, they can synthesise into colourful spaces for dynamic interactions. It is this kind of looking both in and out that ‘Total Internal Reflection’ encourages.

1 Shingo Honda quoted in James Jack, ‘What Isn't Mono-ha?', *Art Asia Pacific*, Issue 80, September/October 2012, p.53.

2 At the time of writing, this exhibition was the last use of this space due to the February 2011 earthquake that took place on the day the exhibition was being unpacked, causing significant damage to several of the Arts Centre buildings, and putting the gallery in the off-limits ‘red zone’ of Christchurch's CBD.

3 Boris Groys, lecture, Shanghai Biennale, 2 October 2012.

4 This idea is similar to the Maori philosophy of walking backwards into the future, guided by one's ancestors and history.

5 This opens up another historical link to remind us that, when it opened in January 1935, the building was designed soon after the 1931 Hawkes Bay earthquake, and so was constructed in a period of post-quake safety consciousness with newly established standards.

6 Justin Paton, ‘Eddie Clemens’ in *De-building* (Christchurch: Christchurch Art Gallery, 2011), p.90. Clemens has worked as a technician at both Christchurch Art Gallery and Gus Fisher Gallery.

7 Leon Tan explores Apple's influence in his essay ‘Formal thought disorder’ for the catalogue from the School of Fine Arts Gallery exhibition, *Eddie Clemens: Human in the loop* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 2012).

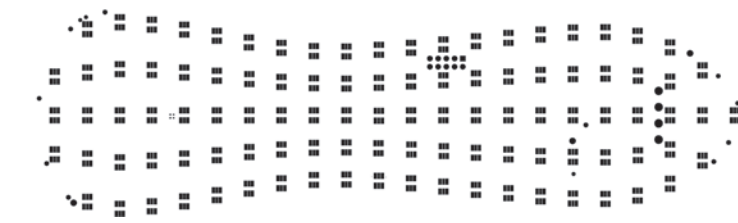
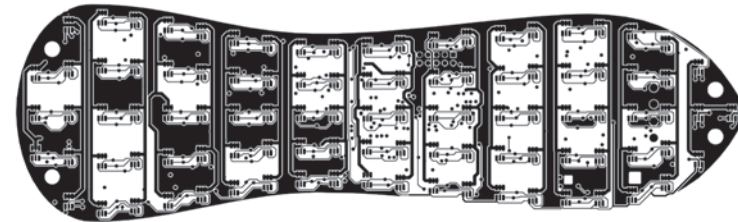
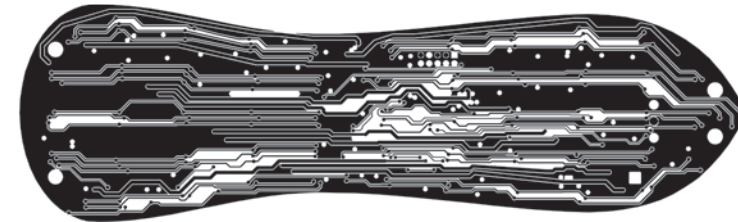
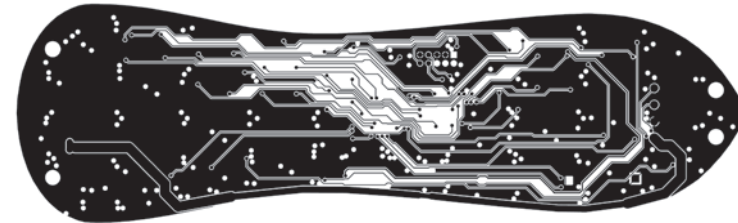
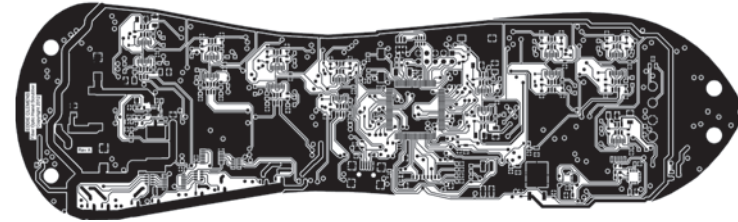
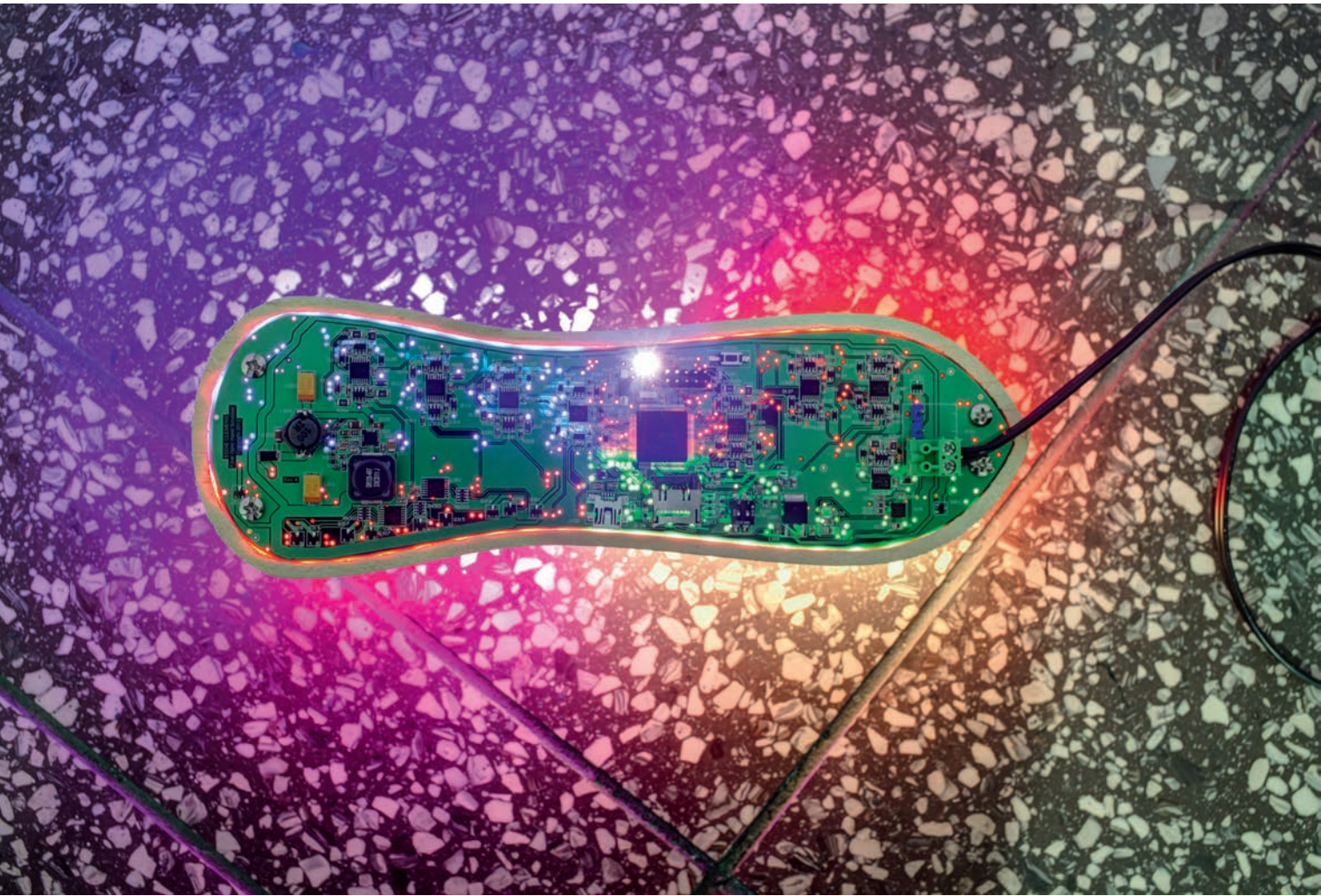
8 *Eddie Clemens: Delusional Architecture*, 27 February – 23 April 2010.

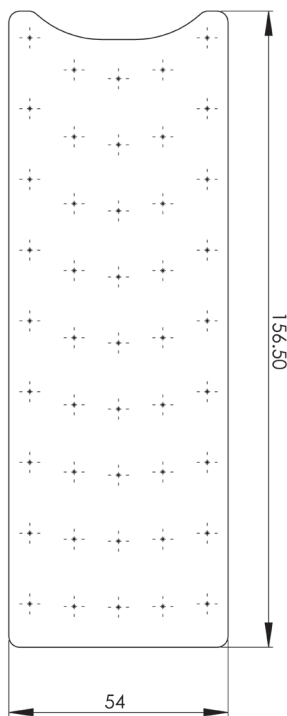
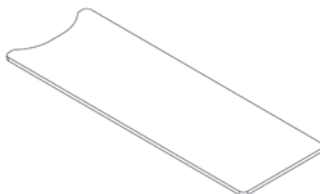
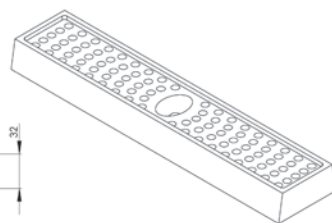
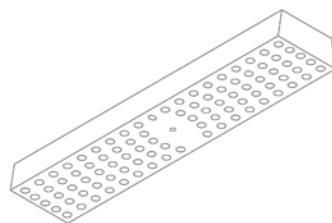
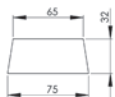
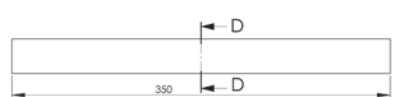
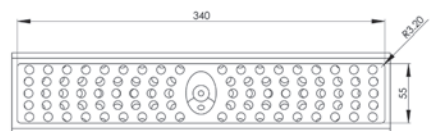
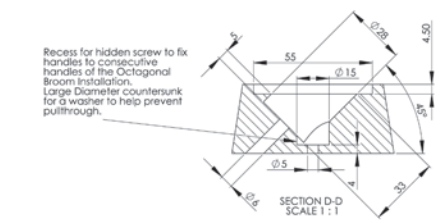
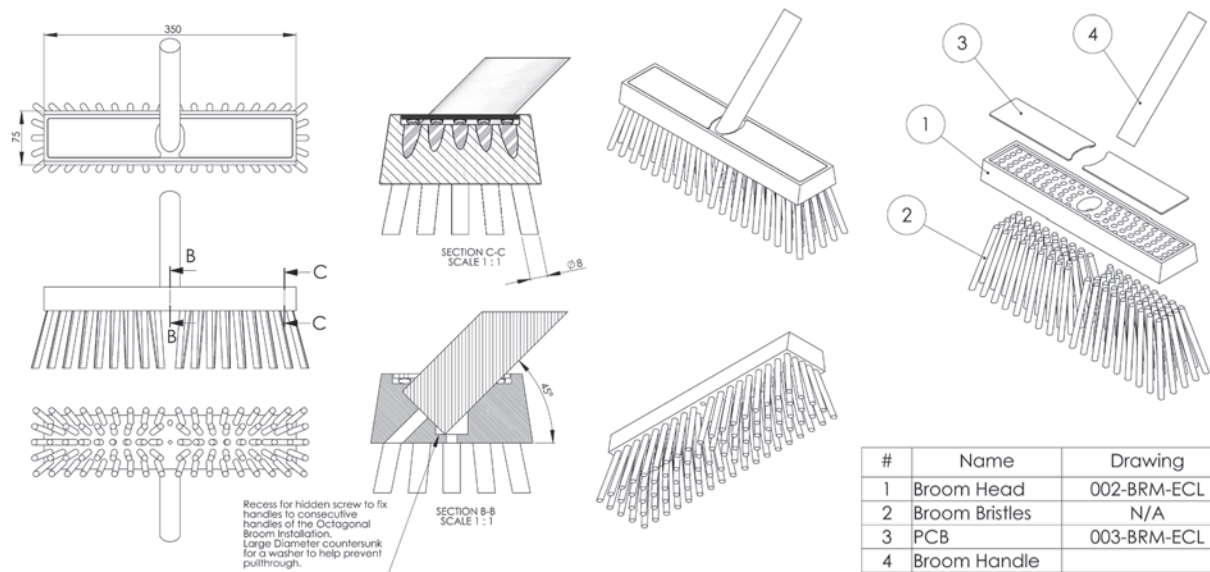
9 Karl Chitham, ‘Weird Science’ in *Judy Darragh: Sci Fi* (Hamilton: Waikato University, 2012), p.20.

10 Cited in Jamie Allen, ‘Traveling at the speed of Paik’ in *NJP Reader #2: Ecological Thinking* (Gyeonggi-do: Nam June Paik Art Centre, 2011), p.189.

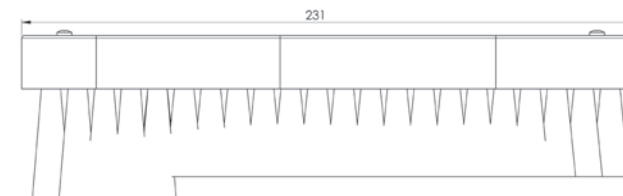
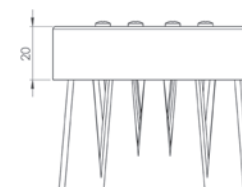
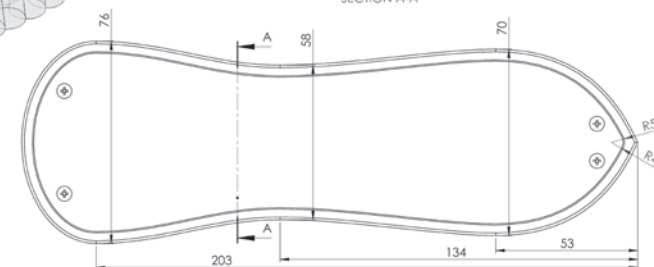
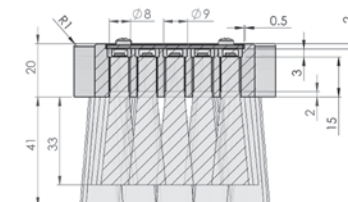
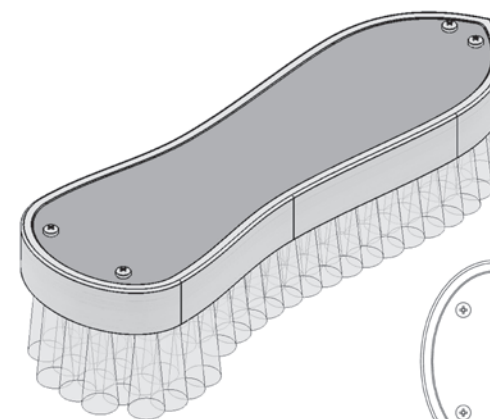
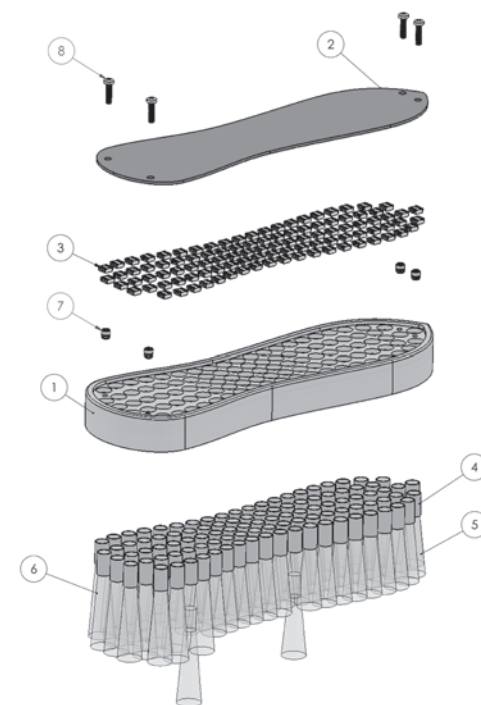
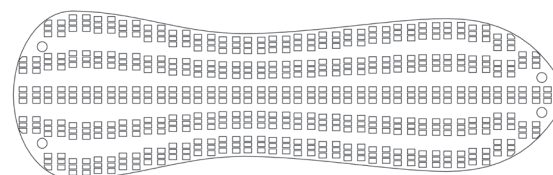








#	Name	QTY
1	Brush Handle	1
2	Broom PCB	1
3	LED - OVSTRGBBCR8	102
4	Brass Bristle Tube 5/16"	103
5	Bristle Fibre Optic - Short	83
6	Bristle Fibre Optic - Long	20
7	M3 Brass Insert	4
8	M3x12 Panhead	4



Born in 1977, Eddie Clemens grew up in Rotorua, New Zealand. After graduating from the Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury in 2000 with a BFA majoring in painting he went on to complete an MFA (Hons) in sculpture at the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. In 2006 Clemens won the Auckland City Public Library Light Commission with *The Pinball Lanterns*, launched in November of 2007. Clemens became the Olivia Spencer Bower artist-in-residence at the Christchurch Arts Centre in 2008 and the following year he was awarded the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship at the University of Otago. Recent exhibitions he has been part of include ‘The Obstinate Object’, City Gallery Wellington, ‘De-building’, Christchurch Art Gallery, ‘Ready to Roll’, City Gallery Wellington and ‘Modern Physics’, Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Manukau City.

Clemens is represented by Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland.
www.eddieclemens.com

Andrew Clifford is Curator at The University of Auckland’s Centre for Art Research, which manages the Gus Fisher Gallery. He has particular interests in new media, performance and documentation, and is currently completing an MFA focussing on the archives related to the performance group From Scratch.

Image credits

Back cover: Sam Hartnett

Colour photography: Sam Hartnett

Front Cover: 3d model of *First Generation Fibre Optic Broom (Version 2)*
– *Octagon configuration*, Gus Fisher foyer

Diagrams

First Generation Fibre Optic Broom (Version 2) – Octagon configuration

Fibre Optic Hand Scrubber

Fibre Optic Hand Scrubber printed circuit board layout

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