



90 SOFA

Ilam Campus Gallery  
School of Fine Arts  
University of Canterbury

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# EDDIE CLEMENS HUMAN IN THE LOOP

3–12 October 2012

# FORMAL THOUGHT DISORDER

*Leon Tan*

'Formal Thought Disorder' was to be held in the SOFA Gallery at the The Arts Centre, Christchurch, in April 2011. Following the closure of that gallery after the February 2011 earthquake, the exhibition relocated to Ilam Campus Gallery at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, with the new title 'Human in the Loop'. This essay indexes the artist's un-realised response to the history of a building.

'Formal Thought Disorder' (FTD) comes about through unusual circumstances. In September 2010, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake hit the Canterbury region in New Zealand, damaging many properties in Christchurch including the administration block of The Arts Centre (the Clocktower). As a result, staff were relocated to The Arts Centre's studio spaces at 301 Montreal Street, leaving Eddie Clemens and the other artists who had been renting spaces, without a working studio. Being an alumnus of the University of Canterbury, Clemens was able to set up shop on campus over the summer (2010–2011), agreeing to contribute a solo exhibition in exchange for the use of the school's facilities.

Created specifically for the SOFA Gallery located in The Arts Centre and relating directly to the site's material history, 'FTD' confronts its audience with a set of wooden-handled fiber-optic scrubbing brushes placed along their sides on the gallery floor, RGB LED bristles facing outwards. The vibrantly colored and lit brushes are intentionally positioned in close proximity to a circular series of marks scarring the otherwise intact and polished wooden floors; the marks are stubborn

residual matters of expression produced in a 2000 performance by Peter Roche, in which a circular arrangement of lit fluorescent tubes, together with the supporting wooden floorboards, received the attentions of a chainsaw wielded by the artist.<sup>1</sup>

The three hand scrubbers each possess a digital processor and a set of light bristles arranged in a 5x5 dot matrix format programmed via the inbuilt circuit boards. Linked by a power-over-ethernet cable, allowing for electricity and data transfer, the scrubbers are capable of scrolling text and animation and reprogrammable at a distance. Each scrubber is also equipped with a 3-axis accelerometer and 3-axis gyro, allowing the object to register motion and direction, and to utilise such data to modulate the display. They are put to use in an action (unseen by the public) prior to the exhibition opening, in which the artist gets on hands and knees to remove the marks left by Roche's spectacular, and some say, narcissistic, performance.

The light bristles are of course entirely unsuitable for any kind of actual cleaning or scrubbing work, meaning that Clemens does not *actually* scrub the floor; the bristles do not at any point come into contact with the floor, nor is there any cleaning

solution involved, as this would damage the electronic circuitry. Instead, he performs the motions of scrubbing the floor, with each brush recording the variations of simulated scrubbing and translating these directional movements into the manner in which the display image/text scrolls across the bristles. Never making contact with the marks, the scrubbers present the idea of the floor's restoration as a *simulation*.

The art-historically minded might at this point perceive in 'FTD' a sort of digital age homage to Joseph Beuys, whose *Ausfegen* (sweeping up) vitrine (1972/85) featured a red broom and the accumulated rubbish from Beuys sweeping up Karl-Marx-Platz (Berlin) following a May Day parade in 1972. There has certainly been no shortage of such homages post-1972, which is unsurprising given Beuys' international celebrity. 'FTD' however, actually extends a trajectory predating Beuys' seminal work, a line opened up by Billy Apple. After all, Apple could be found two years before Beuys, cleaning up New York City in his admittedly lesser-known *Manhattan Street Glass Accumulation* work (3–25 October 1970).

Additionally, Apple has undertaken a series of architectural interventions in galleries throughout New Zealand. His *Censure Realised* (1979) for example, featured as the first work in the 'De-building' exhibition series at the Christchurch Art Gallery, and involved the removal of 'offending items' from the Brooke Gifford Gallery. In 'FTD' Clemens goes

through all the motions of removing the 'offending' traces of previous activity, but graciously leaves the actual marks intact. The scars in the wood only serve as a point of departure for the artist, who is much more concerned with a kind of 'global composition' in which threads of a site's duration are interwoven with the creation of new sensations, a new combination of digital and analog percepts and affects.

It is also possible that the figure of the hand scrubber recalls the tradition of ready-mades inaugurated by Marcel Duchamp, whose *Fountain* (1917) resonates as an event to this day. Like a great many of Clemens' sculptures, the three scrubbers might possess the immediate sense of a ready-made, a factory-ready-made. These objects, however, reverse the Duchampian formula of using 'found' objects with minimal intervention (signing the object, placing it in a gallery). They involve an inordinate amount of labour, both material and immaterial, in the conceptualization and engineering of the object and its digital circuitry as well as in the simulated scrubbing of the floor.

'FTD' is no mere repetition of art history. It brings into play entirely different matters of expression, with the scrubbers activating a series of digital processes involving the circulation of information within the object and site. Whereas Apple's may be considered an eliminative aesthetics, at least concerning the *Censure Realised* work, Clemens' is characterised by a humorous denaturing of everyday objects. He

transforms ordinary objects of everyday use and sense-perception – pens, calculators, umbrellas, clothes-drying racks, brooms and in this case, scrubbers – liberating them from habitual human functions in order that they might become expressive. If we were to distinguish a signature in Clemens' oeuvre to date, it would consist of this manner of reconfiguring objects of routine use as well as our sensual-perceptual relations with them.

'FTD' denatures our affective relations with a commodity common to the average household and workplace, the hand-held scrubbing brush. As a title, it refers to the manner in which the motions of simulated scrubbing scramble the resulting display of text and animation for the viewer, disrupting in particular the dominant habit of reading from left to right, and top to bottom. Visitors to the exhibition will notice that the content of the fiber-optic display on each scrubber scrolls from left to right *and* right to left, top to bottom *and* bottom up. If formal thought is equated with logic and reason, it seems fitting that an artwork would consist of a disorder in, or at least disruption of, the logical operations of reason. This is achieved here through distortions and ruptures in habitual visual space and visual sequencing.

If what Mark B. N. Hansen argues is correct, that 'time has changed in the wake of the digital computational revolution', 'FTD' may be considered symptomatic of this transformation.<sup>2</sup> It is a work that

gives sense to what we might call a digital *contagion*, in which digitality permeates even the most humble and mundane of objects, the hand scrubber, here constructing a double encounter between digital and analog bodies, firstly with the artist's own physical interventions where the virtual scrubbing of the gallery floor programmes the displays, and secondly, with the scrambled signalling on the display-surfaces of the hand scrubbers and the sensual-perceptual fields of gallery visitors.

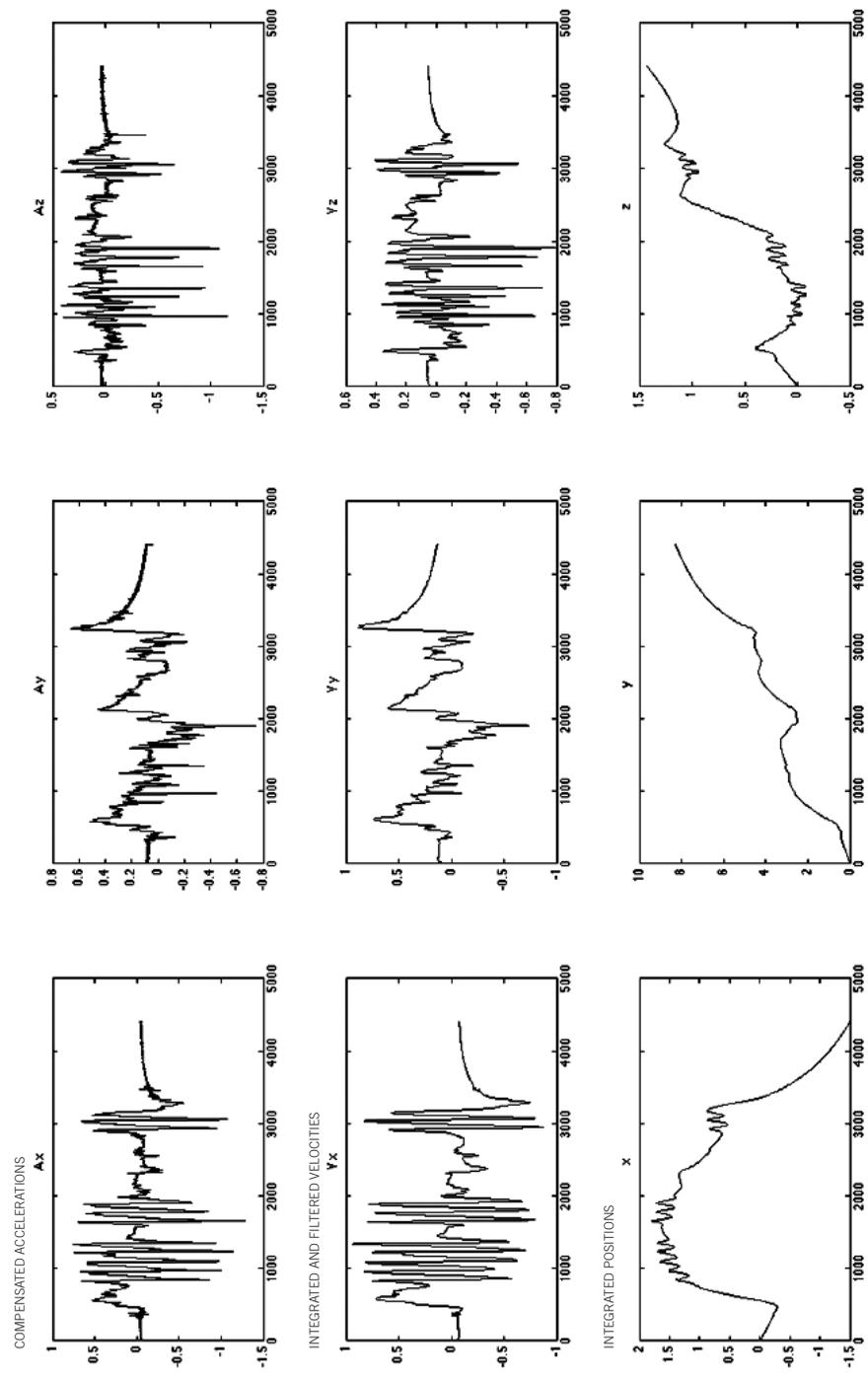
'FTD' is not another facile digital work leveraging the highly accessible expressive repertoires of the Internet's various social networks, but rather one that *problematizes* contemporary conjugations of digital and analog processes, digital pulses and habitual patterns of viewing, sensing and perceiving. It elegantly weaves together components of consumer electronics and everyday tools for domestic maintenance into a complex and subtle work, which in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes appears to propose a stoic pragmatism of cleaning up without too much fuss or fanfare.

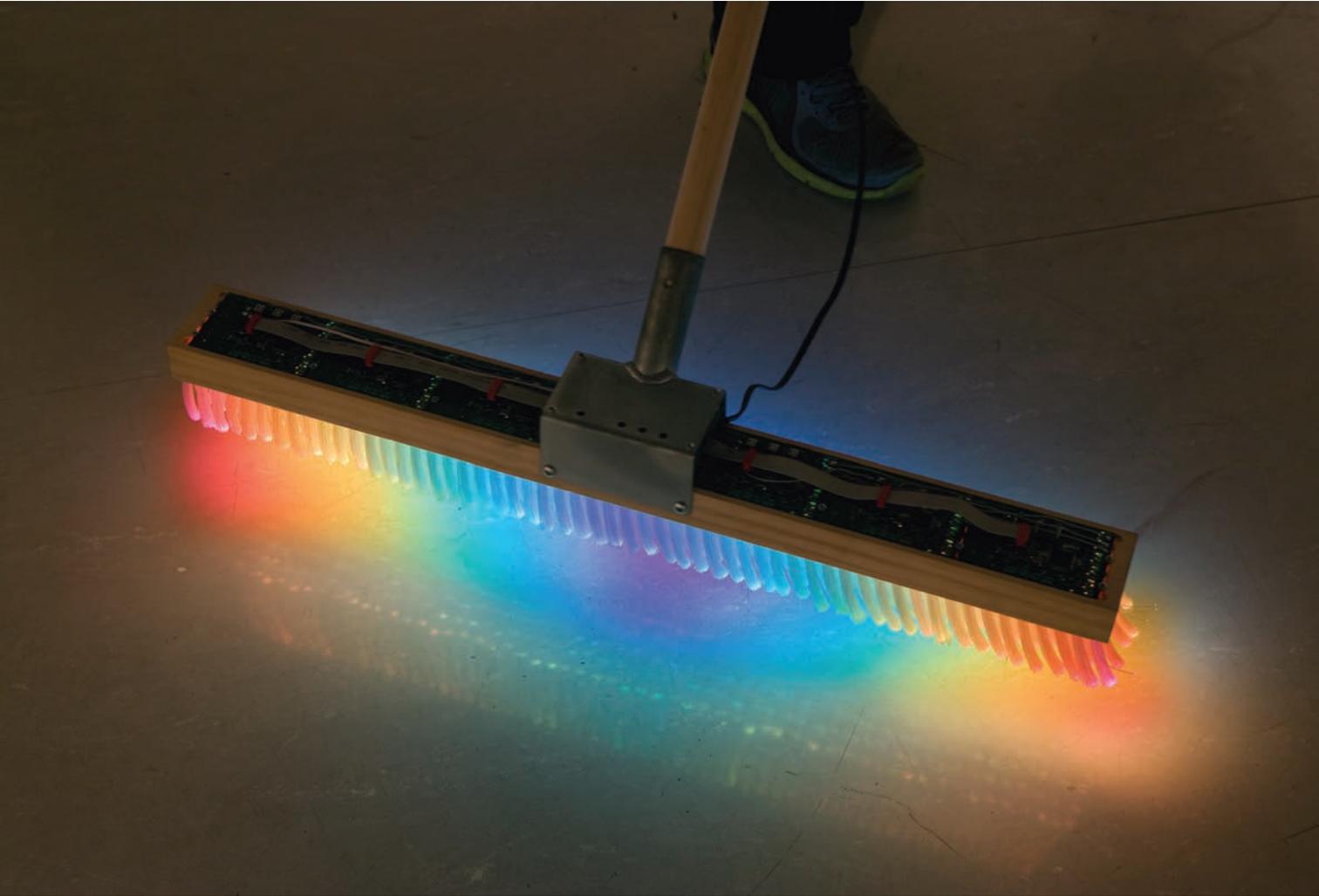
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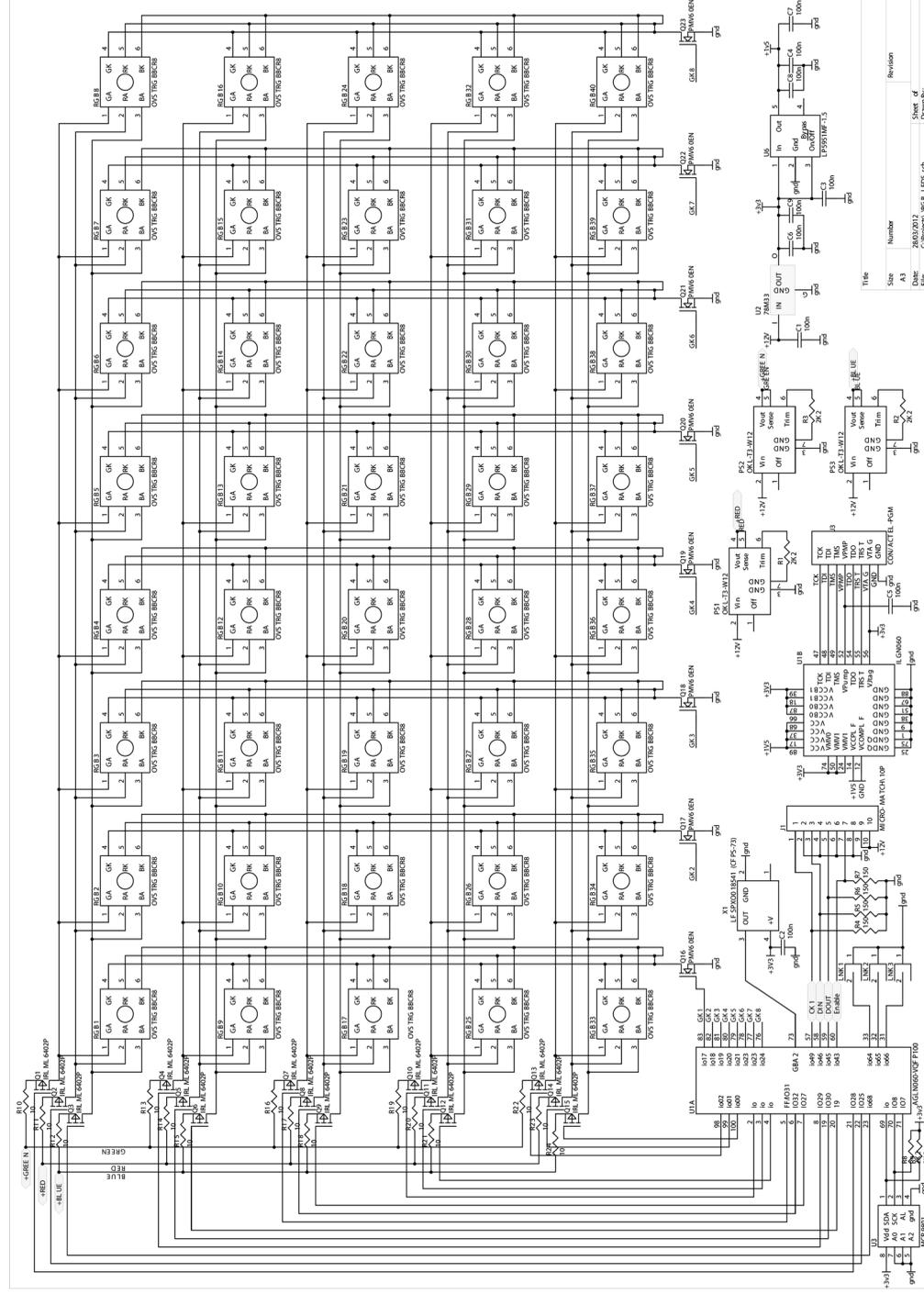
1 Roche's performance was a contribution to Symposium 2000: An International Conference on Post-Object Art.

2 Mark B. N. Hansen, 'Living with Technical Time: From media surrogacy to distributed cognition', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 26, nos 2 and 3, 2009, p. 295.

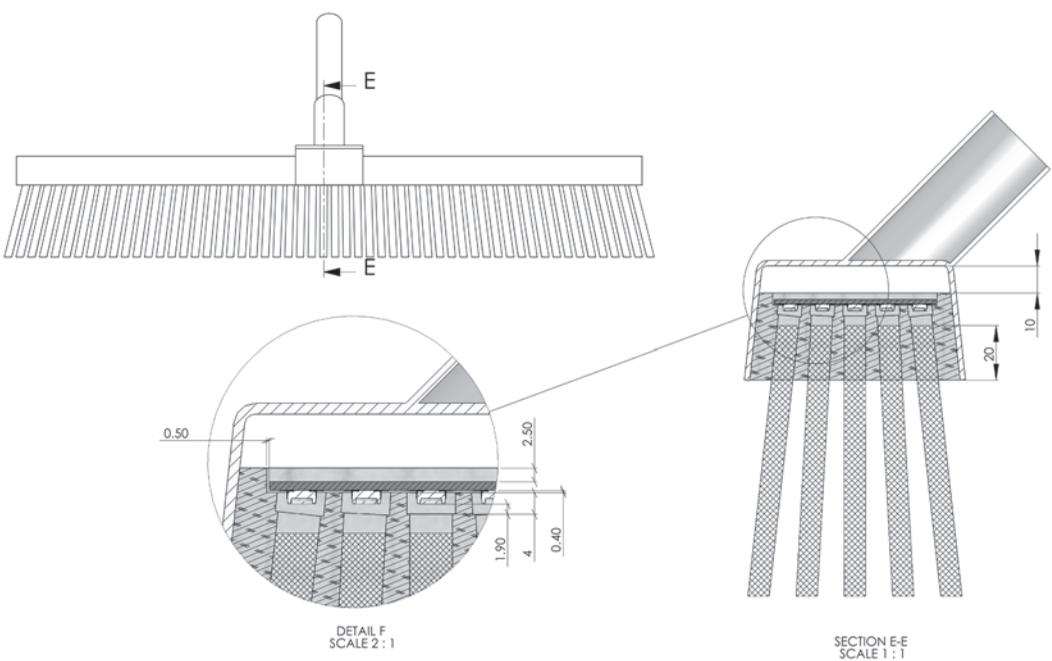
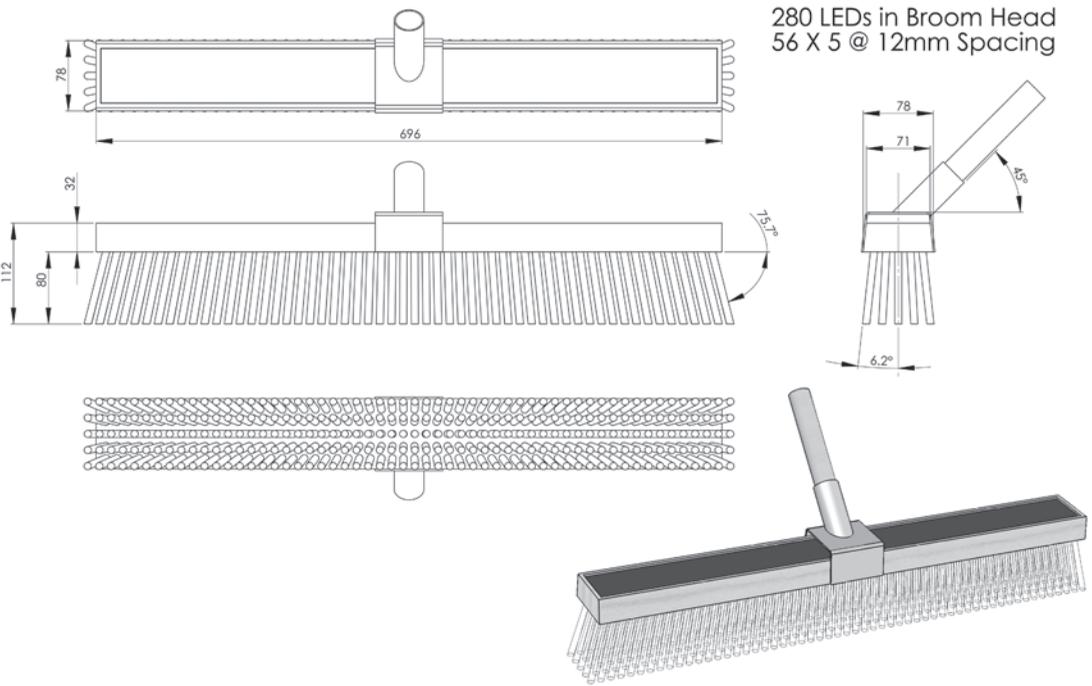
3-axis accelerometer and 3-axis gyro graphs showing an initial *Second Generation Fibre Optic Broom (Software V2.1)* sweeping motion test



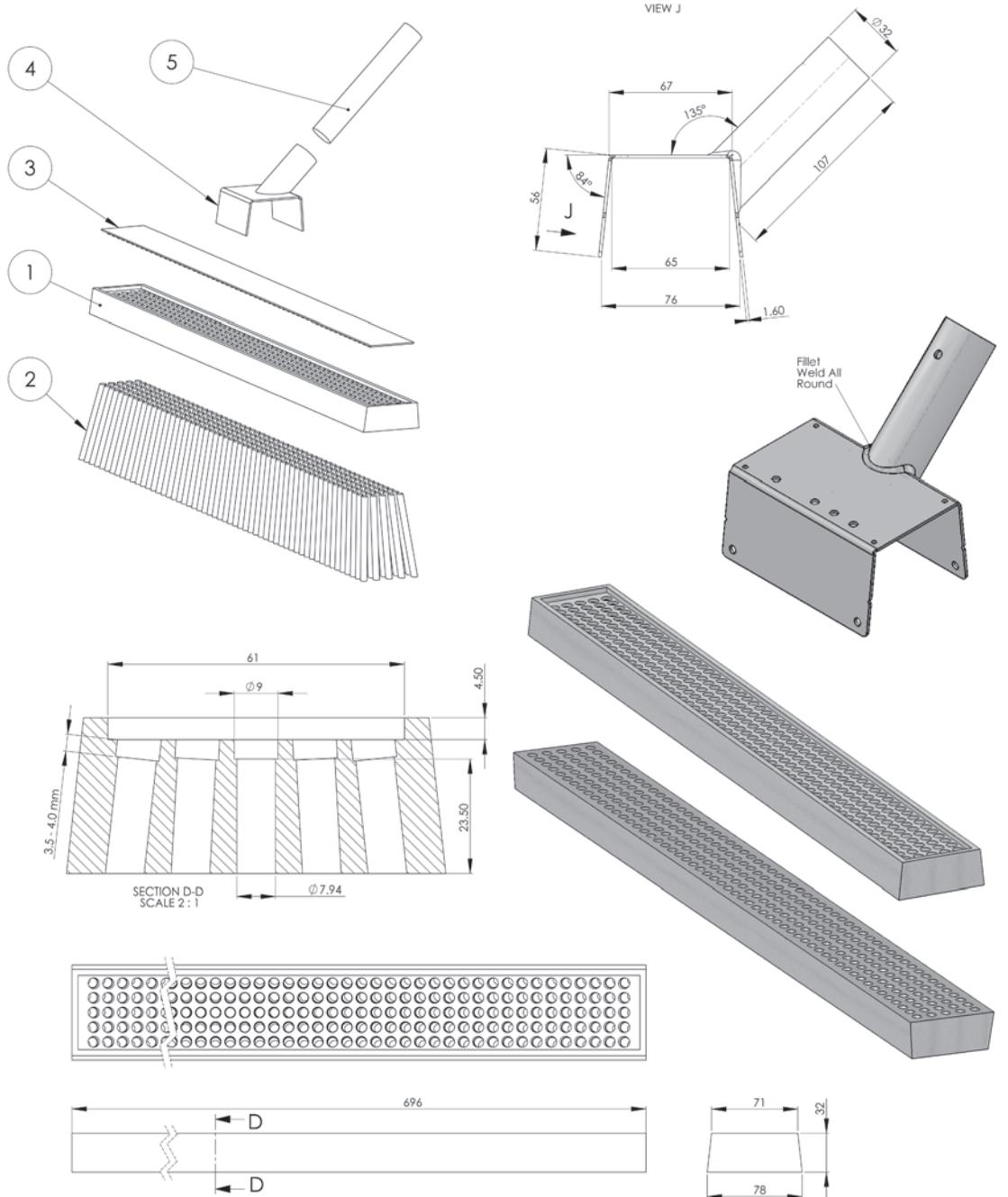




RGB led multiplexed array board schematic



#	Name	Drawing	QTY.
1	Broom Head	002-BRM-ECL	1
2	Broom Bristles	002-BRM-ECL	1
3	PCB Assembly	003-BRM-ECL	1
4	Broom Brace	004-BRM-ECL	1
5	Broom Handle	28mm Diameter	1



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.

Leon Tan (PhD) is a professor of art history, cultural theorist and occasional curator of interdisciplinary projects. He has published in journals including *CTheory: Theory, Technology and Culture*, *Museum, Management and Curatorship*, *Ephemera* and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and presented work at venues such as Digital Arts Week (Zurich), the International Society for Electronic Arts (Singapore), the Royal Institute of Art (Stockholm), Synapse – Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), KHOJ International Artists' Association (Delhi), the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (Delhi), and the 2012 Taipei Biennial. He is a specialist in new media, media art histories, digital culture, contemporary art, critical and cultural theory and media psychology.

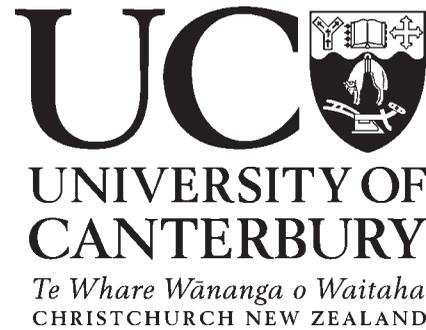
Photography of *Second Generation Fibre Optic Broom (Software V2.1)*: Mark Gore

Front cover image: Kate Whitley

Back cover image of SOFA Gallery,  
The Arts Centre: Eddie Clemens

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Ilam Campus Gallery is the University of Canterbury's public exhibition space, connecting staff and students with contemporary art communities internationally, nationally and locally.

