

THE WORKINGS

SIMON LE RUEZ



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Testing Ground at **Yorkshire Artspace** is a residency programme providing intensive periods of creative experimentation for artists working in Sheffield. It aims to reveal the processes of making and thinking involved in creating artworks, offering a rare glimpse under the hood at the mechanics of artistic production.

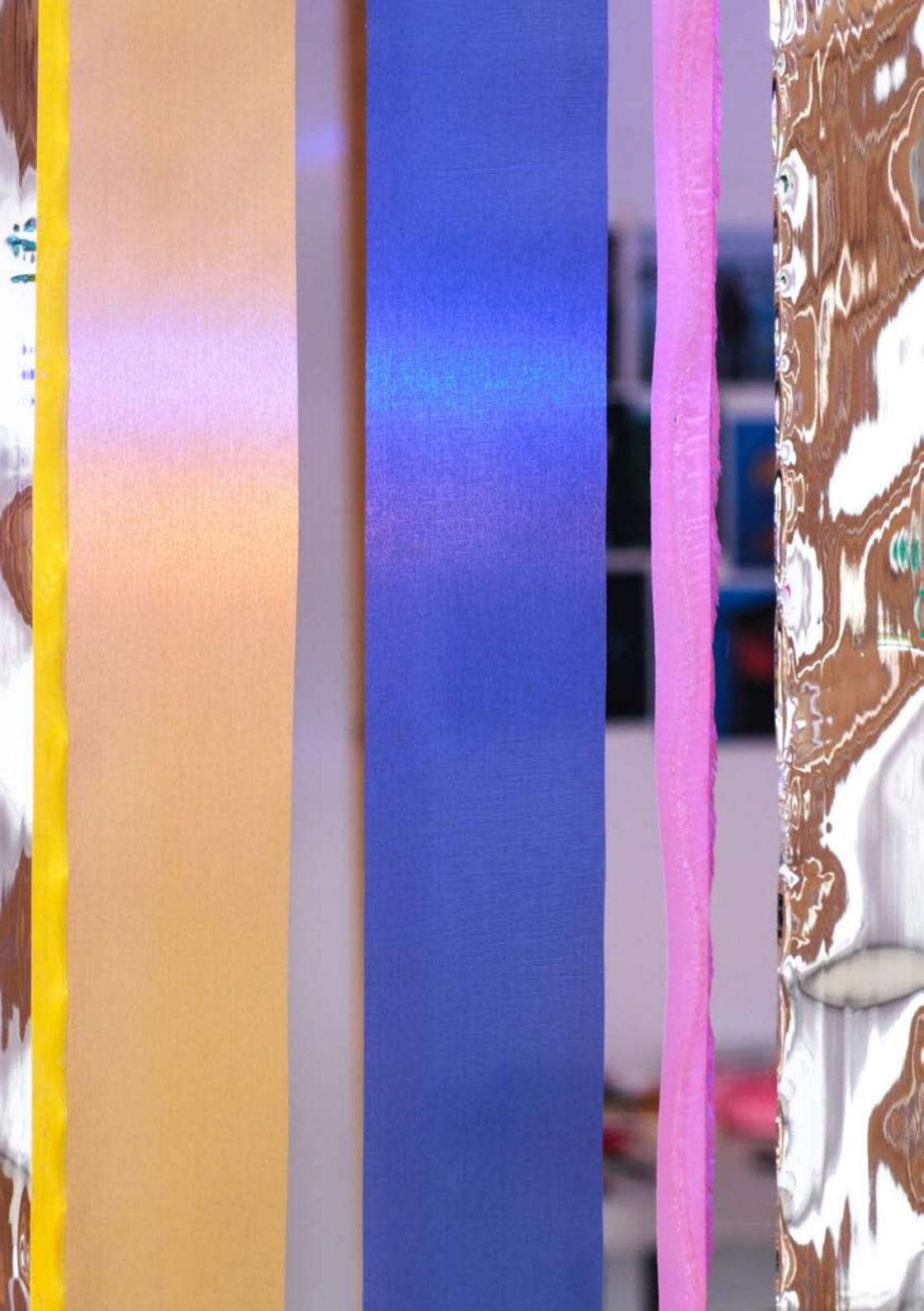
The Workings is an accompanying publication series that continues this effort, documenting and sharing each residency through photography, writing and notebook extracts.

This chapter looks at artist **Simon Le Ruez**, who used his residency in Sep/Oct 2024 to develop suspense and 'liveness' in his work. It features a commissioned text by **Derek Horton**, written after a studio visit and conversation with the artist during the residency.

Simon Le Ruez works mostly with sculpture and multimedia installations, often combining conflicting materials and colours to create friction. His work bends the concept of the norm and pushes against mainstream ideas of beauty.

www.artspace.org.uk
www.simonleruez.net







ARTIST'S NOTES

Drifting in and out of the building
The past but the new

A human space

Walking a tightrope

A suspension of disbelief

Elements of the outside in the inside

A sense of layering / filtering

Keep the eye moving

Glamorous, but not in a Hollywood kind of way

Holding your breath

Everything in the right place (perhaps)

Immersive / ~~immersion~~

Interactive in a sense that the work is asking for
a response

A sense of intimacy

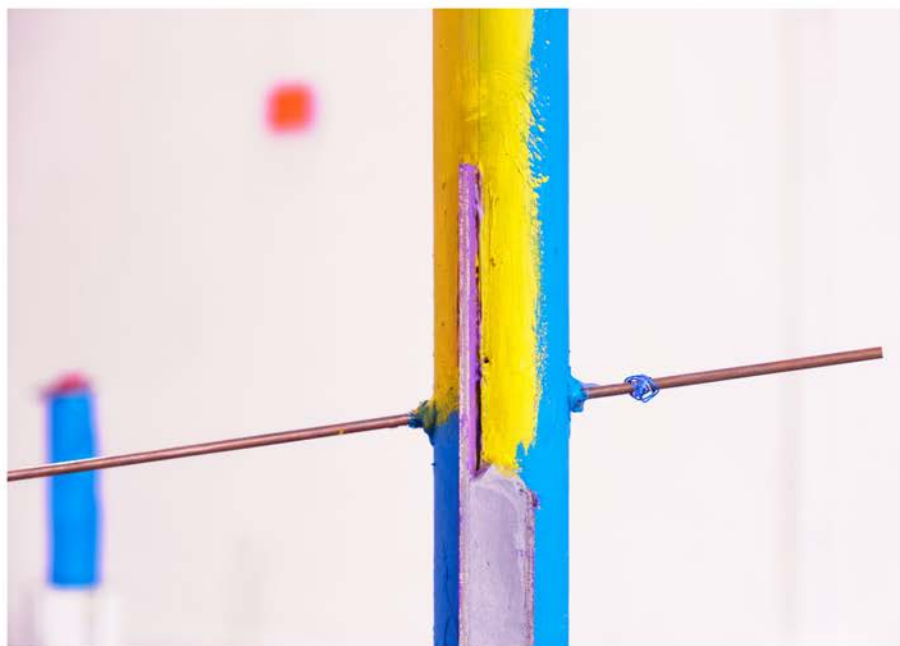
Making made visible

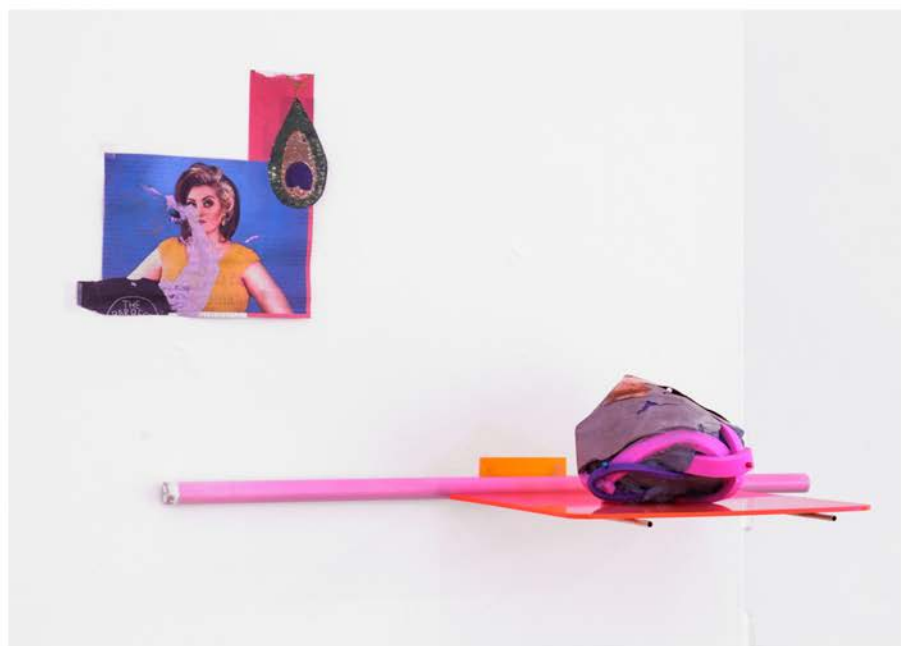
Masquerading / Showman

Provisional / Temporiness

Tension

Like a beverage (celebration) colours.







CLOSE ENCOUNTERS AND DISTANT VISTAS: SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS IN THE WORK OF SIMON LE RUEZ

WORDS BY **DEREK HORTON**

*"As an alternative to an aesthetic that isolated visual art from life and from the other arts, there emerged a new willingness to treat our whole culture as if it were art, [...] a move towards an anthropological view of our society [...] and the whole environment being regarded as art."*¹

Lawrence Alloway

Although he was writing in 1969, about the impact of Pop Art, several aspects of Alloway's description above could be applied now to Simon Le Ruez's art making. Le Ruez could not by any means be described as a 'pop artist', even if the term still had contemporary relevance. However, his approach is characterised by an anthropological perspective, engaging with the breadth of contemporary culture, and incorporating rather than isolating the external environment in the making and showing of his work.

This and the following observations and speculations resulted from a visit to see and discuss Le Ruez's work in progress during his residency at Sheffield's Exchange Place Studios, part of Yorkshire Artspace. The site of the residency is a ground floor space with high ceilings, and large windows, which overlook the street outside

whilst simultaneously allowing passers-by an uninterrupted view of the activity within. For the purposes of the residency, this creates a hybrid space that is neither gallery nor studio, or from another perspective, both. The normally isolated and private activities of thinking, researching, experimenting and making are revealed to anyone who cares to look in. Meanwhile, the ongoing 'exhibition' of the work resulting from this process is constantly in flux, as new elements are added and previous ones adapted, and the spatial relationships between them shift as they are moved and rearranged. The workspace becomes a stage-set around which the artist moves, conscious (or not) of his actions becoming a performance for an audience, who might merely cast a passing glance, or be sufficiently curious to enter and engage. Architecture, and relationships between interior and exterior space, the built and the natural world, the permanent and the temporary, are longstanding and pervasive interests for Le Ruez in his work, making this situation a particularly appropriate and productive one for further material exploration of these conceptual concerns.

The idea of making art as action or performance within an architectural space, and of viewing art as involving a navigation of that space, invites a consideration of choreography, which is essentially the melding of space and time through movement. Le Ruez is sensitive to the spatial relationship of individual components of his work to each other and to the whole

room, and has created simple structural interventions that disrupt or direct the flow of movement around and between the works. In the context of this space, he sets up an even more complex relationship to the world beyond, as seen through the window, and one senses a playfulness in how all these overlapping relationships are choreographed. Body, landscape, and architecture become mutually transmutable, equivalent elements in a performative animation of the space.

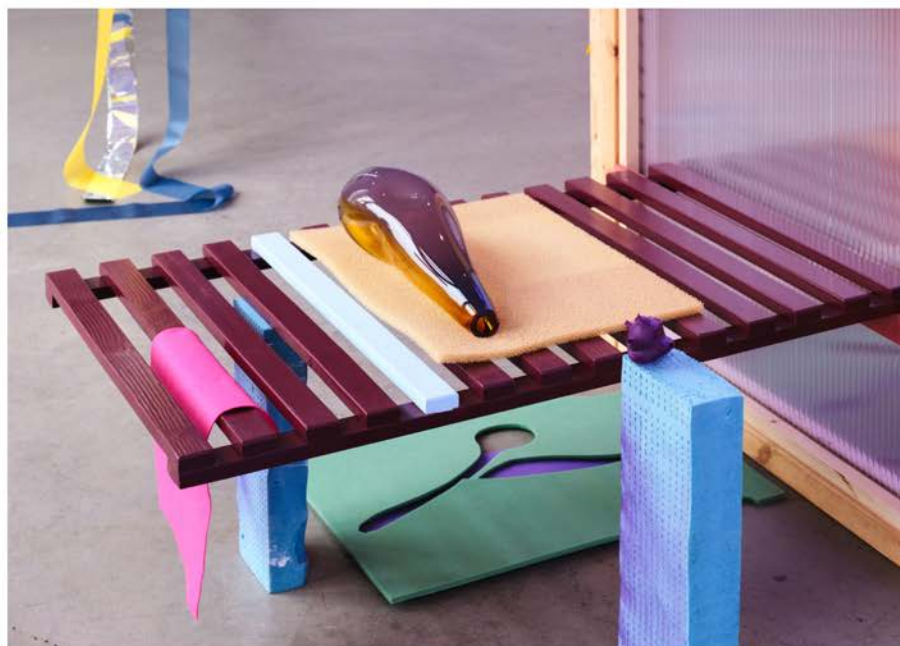
The multiplicity of possible viewpoints and the ways in which the perception of any one object is contextualised by the other objects or the empty space that surround it are important aspects of the overall visual impact of this work. Its qualities derive not so much from the things themselves, but from their relationship to the 'in-between' space that surrounds them. Especially because of the large windows, these surroundings extend beyond the finiteness of the room and into the infinity of the space beyond. Artwork, interior architecture, street, buildings, skyline, sky—all co-exist and shift in and out of focus as they contextualise each other in the totality of our experience. Le Ruez's awareness of this is evident in the way he is consciously staging the immediate surroundings of the artwork and choreographing our view of them within their wider setting. Making the works, it could be said, partly involves creating the surroundings within which they come into existence, materialising the dynamic tensions inherent in this relationship. As Max Kozloff proposed, albeit in a



different context, “art is a non-agreement of part with whole, a communion of dissimilarities and discords”.²

Redirecting our focus to the 70-or-so square meters of Le Ruez’s workspace for this residency, his placement of objects and structures at various stages of completion within the space draws attention to its volumetric dimensions. Several narrow columns are a feature of the existing architecture, acting as a bridge between floor and ceiling that is further emphasised by linear constructions the artist has rigged up using wool, string, and rope. Timber-framed screens, variously left open or filled in with opaque or semi-transparent plastic sheets, form moveable barriers and entry points that function as temporary enclosures and create rooms within rooms. Objects are fixed to walls or stand on a variety of horizontal surfaces that function as platforms, whilst others are scattered around the floor, propped against walls, or suspended at varying heights from the ceiling.

There is something approachable and seductive about the sculptural objects, painted surfaces, and photographs, that are presented here in ways that emphasise their inter-relationship. Often small, unassuming and intimate, close together but not touching, positioned within a wider fragmented architecture, they evoke intimacy, eroticism, and psychological tension. Despite a meticulous attention to detail in the making, there is a sense that everything here is in flux, that these are provisional works in a





provisional space, made with a sense of freedom, improvisation and playfulness. Any shape on a flat plane or in a three-dimensional space creates another shape around it, so the placing of objects can be seen as not so much the division of space as the creation of more shapes. The traditional sense of positive and negative space in a figure-ground relationship is thereby reconfigured as a relationship between 'active' and 'passive' shape, in which the 'passive' surrounding shape itself becomes an equally active element.

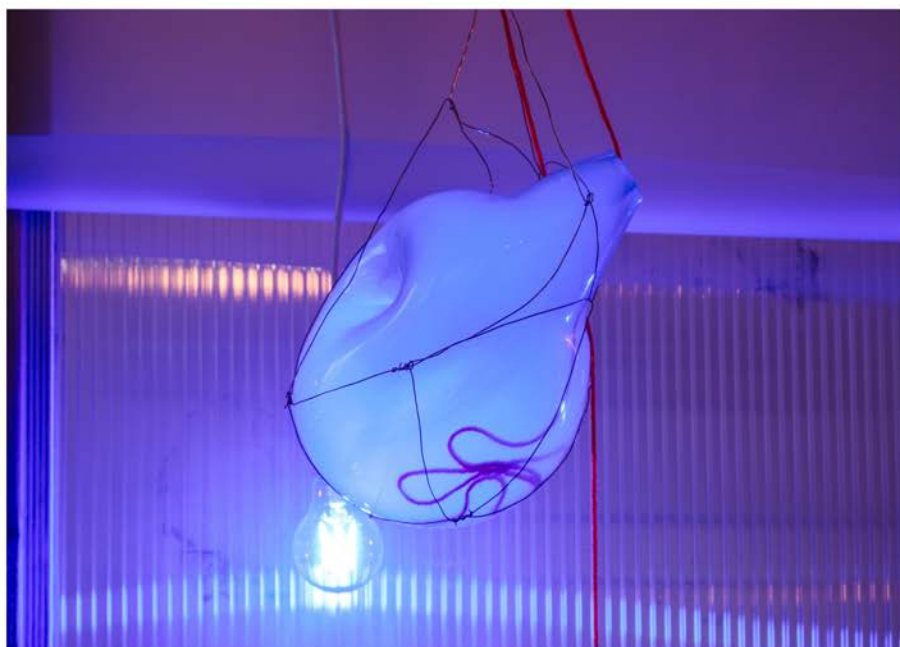
*"Instead of [a] universe of "signification" (psychological, social, functional), we must try to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures impose themselves. To describe things, in point of fact, requires that we place ourselves deliberately outside them. We must neither appropriate them to ourselves nor transfer anything to them."*³

Alain Robbe-Grillet

With the exception of a few photographs, film stills, and collaged images, the objects here are rigorously non-representational; distinctly solid, they undoubtedly impose themselves by their presence. Whether natural or industrial materials, found, reclaimed, or carefully made and skillfully crafted, from hand-blown glass to paper clips, they are assertively what they are; yet nonetheless they challenge Robbe-Grillet's injunction against signification and lead us perhaps to question the very 'abstractness' of abstraction.

They signify. They signify, despite themselves, and irrespective of the artist's intentions. We bring psychological, emotional, and social readings to them. Our personal reference points might be biology, architecture, sexuality, cinema, landscape, or whatever else, but our perception of the work is filtered through such individually determined engagement with it. The role of colour in this is an important one. Colour is intrinsic to, inseparable from these objects; the intense materiality of colour in the work simultaneously evoking emotional resonances and emphasising their sheer physical presence, their 'object-ness'.

Light is, of course, central to our perception of colour, and it also plays an important part in its own right in the work Le Ruez has developed during this residency. As well as the way objects are lit, both by artificial electric light and the natural light provided by the large windows, some of the sculptural forms serve as light sources themselves, or provide coloured filters altering the atmosphere of different areas of the space. This serves to emphasise the aspects already discussed here, of territory, transparency, and transition; the ambiguous interface between interior and exterior, private and public. These in-between spaces that surround us in both the natural and the built environment are recreated in Le Ruez's installations with their evocation of movement and change, and slippage between the permanent and the temporary, the fixed and the fragile.







The screen is another such interface, and Le Ruez has often acknowledged that cinema is a recurring inspiration and reference point within his work. Apart from a small number of film stills (from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*), some integrated into sculptural elements of the installation, others just pinned to the wall, this cinematic influence is not immediately apparent. Its real significance is a metaphorical one, revealed through the relationship of space and time. Movies, whatever their genre, are sequential compositions in which a series of incidents occur between a distinct beginning and end. Sometimes these occur in 'real time', whilst sometimes days, weeks or even decades are distilled into the film's actual duration of two hours or so. These separations of time are analogous to the ways in which the visual and sculptural elements of Le Ruez's installations are separated by space but form coherent parts of a whole scenario that is contained within a circumscribed overall space. Tension and suspense is created by the precisely spaced gaps between objects and shifts in their scale, or by the precariousness of their positioning. We are drawn into a web of sensations and possible meanings as we progress through this filmic flow of images; our imagination is provoked and ideas are generated that might transport us elsewhere whilst remaining located in the here and now.

This way of viewing Le Ruez's work echoes the playful and almost childlike inquisitiveness that characterises

his making of it. His is a process of material enquiry and experimentation informed by meticulous skill and an attention to detail that is knowingly undercut by a casual willingness for things to be unmade, unfixed and unfinished. His playfulness is grounded securely though, in a considered and informed sense of aesthetics, whilst intellectually wide-ranging interests and references are the source of his confidence to embrace risk and uncertainty, in a dialogue between objects that transcends space, time and scale in a celebration of colour, form and material.

1 Lawrence Alloway, *Popular Culture and Pop Art*, in *Artforum*, July-August 1969, Vol.178, No.913, p.18.

2 Max Kozloff, *The Inert and the Frenetic*, a lecture given at Bennington College, Vermont, on November 29, 1965.

3 Alain Robbe-Grillet, quoted from Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson Jr. [eds.] *The Modern Tradition*, 1965, Oxford University Press (p. 364).

DEREK HORTON (b.1956) is an artist, writer, teacher and curator. After working on adventure playgrounds and community arts projects in the 1970's, he spent many years teaching art in higher education. He co-founded the online magazines */seconds* and *Soanyway*, as well as &Model Gallery in Leeds (2013-2017).









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