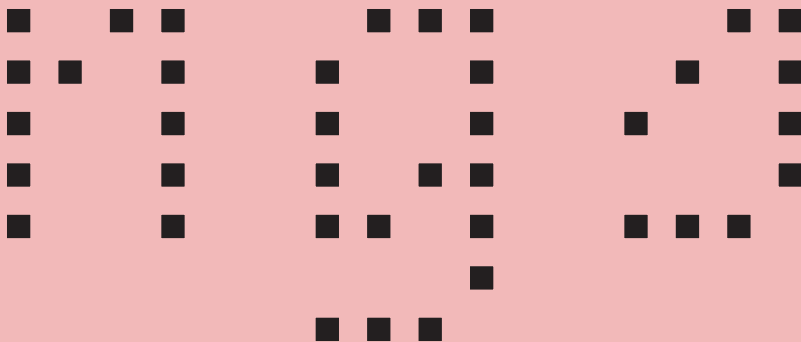
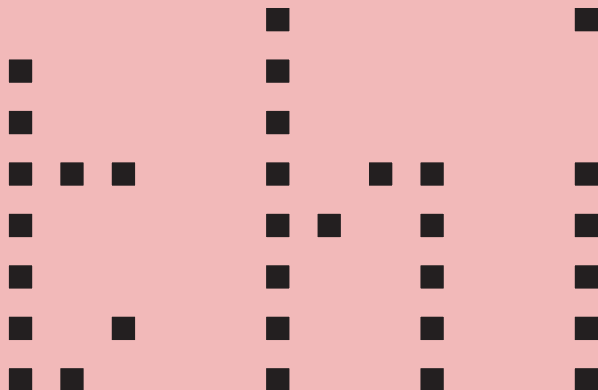


FORMS OF IMAGINING 10.03–23.04.11

PROJECT ARTS CENTRE



Ceal Floyer

Curated by Tessa Giblin

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Things

The gallery is filled with a collection of identical plinths – a wonderful white, endless sculpture. These structures are commonly used for the display of objects and items, things that demand our attention on top of their isolated, white pillars.

But Ceal Floyer's plinths stand empty, starkly white in a starkly white room, with the objects and items replaced by a beguilingly simple aural representation of their mass. By isolating one single item from a range of pop songs – the word thing – Floyer has assembled a multi-channel playback of dissonant edits that ping and chime all over the room. Speakers are embedded in the plinths and symmetrically aligned speaker cables run neatly along the floor creating a comedic relationship between the stiff-necked, monumental white orchestra and its more random, disharmonic musical production. *Things* (2009) is a mesmerising aesthetic experience and with longer exposure, one's idea of a landscape of art begins to shift into a topography of art. *Things* maps not only the form and aesthetics one encounters through the visual and aural landscape, it also reveals the underlying structure: the topography of the white cube, the intrinsically flawed protocol of presentation and the conventions of spectatorship.

Ceal Floyer's conceptual art practice is borne of a place of imagination and ideas yet is strongly invested in physical concerns: the object of art, the space of art and the display of art and its semantic representation. In the 1999 work *Monochrome Till Receipt [White]*, spectators encounter a common supermarket till receipt affixed to the wall, what at first glance appears a common list of purchases. But everything on this list is white: not called white, or labelled white, but actually white in colour – white items selected after a lot of unwelcome sampling and checking in shady aisle corners. Floyer creates an image in one's mind, an image by association. At the same time the practice of commerce and trade are aligned with principles of artistic reduction or minimalism, suggesting that any formal known, such as the manic colour confusion of today's hyper marketplaces, can be reduced to essential elements and thereby to a plane of conceptual abstraction. In this emptiness lies the potential for perceptual experience, triggered by the concepts and contexts of a list of words.

In a similar physical gesture to *Things*, images are also evacuated and then evoked in 2007's *Construction*, in which the visual stimuli were replaced by acoustic ones. Throughout the rooms of Kunstmuseum Krefeld, flat sound-boards were installed flush to the walls where one would normally encounter paintings. Filling the space of the empty rooms were commercially obtainable sound effects, such as hammering, drilling and sanding and the carefully placed speakers amplified the soundtrack of the exhibition's construction. Thus the emphasis of the exhibition spectacle was replaced by a reflection on the coming-into-being of the exhibition, the activity of constructing that resulted in its formal construction.

If reading text can be like looking at a window through Venetian blinds, then encountering a Ceal Floyer artwork is something similar to catching one's own reflection in a crowded shop window: looking through, reflected back, turning around to see whether it's you or someone else; pausing for a second to try to make sense of the real space of the shop, the reflected space of your street and the staged space of the mannequin; becoming distracted by the cacophony of visual noise inside and a fraction of a second later chilled by the glass and metal veneer that looms in a flat plane inches from your nose. These artworks are layered compounds, full of subtle references, comedic quips or poetic analogies and often reflected by the most commonplace or recognisable of daily objects.

Tessa Giblin



Ceal Floyer *Things*, 2009, exhibition view,
Project Arts Centre



Ceal Floyer's *Things* (2009)

‘In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things ...’ —Martin Heidegger¹

The gallery is filled with a gathering of identical white plinths, roughly four feet high. Contrary to their common function as mere props for the display of unique objects meriting close scrutiny, these plinths are bare, thereby instantly devolving the viewer's attention instead onto themselves, a collection of uniform and relatively nondescript objects. Called upon to consider their unexpected significance, we might also come to reflect on earlier disruptions, frustrations or embellishments of the conventional purpose of the plinth, from Constantin Brancusi to Piero Manzoni, or on the decisive import to the history of modern sculpture of artists such as David Smith and Anthony Caro dispensing with it altogether. Viewed from an alternative perspective, as sculptural objects in their own right, a different set of associations springs to mind, relating to the history of Minimalism, and each individual plinth begins to resemble something like, say, a monochrome Anne Truitt desublimated by a dash of 'Primary Structures'-era Robert Smithson. In this light, the array as a whole also appears to invoke, in somewhat different ways, the spirit of Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt.

That said, these are no ordinary plinths. Embedded in the top of each of them, flush with its surface but clearly visible, is a white speaker grille, while parallel lines of discreetly taped-down speaker cable emerging from each base cross the cement floor with unusual grace. Now and again, at irregular intervals and from unpredictable directions, a short snatch of audio erupts from one or other of the plinth-speakers. This raucous counterpoint to the work's visual quietude will initially be disconcerting for most viewers as they meander through this pristine stand of pillars. For some it will be momentarily frustrating in that, given its brevity, it is at first difficult to decipher the lone monosyllable, sung by different voices at different pitches, by which they are being tantalized. To those who have attended to the work's title, however, and especially to those familiar with the playful literalism of Floyer's work in general, it will be obvious that in every instance what they are hearing is the word 'thing'. It is virtually impossible to determine the original sources from which these thirty or so brief audio clips have been gleaned. However, the evidence of other sound works by Floyer over the years would tend to suggest origins in a

broad swath of pop music from her youth in the 1980s, with the possible addition of a song or two of more recent vintage. There are few things more evocative, more replete with associative potential, both personal and communal, than a pop song. Yet, by excising these song-fragments from their settings, Floyer effectively neutralizes this potential. Shorn of their status as accessible cultural phenomena, these orphaned words – with a nod to Donald Judd and in contradistinction to the generic objects from which they are physically emanating, it is tempting to term them 'specific non-objects' – become emblematic rather of some kind of unknowable, noumenal *Dinge an sich* (things-in-themselves).

‘A thing is a hole in a thing it is not.’ Carl Andre's gnomic gloss on his conception of sculpture as 'cuts in space' is given added resonance and a particular twist by Floyer's *Things*. The recent programme of the Project Arts Centre has been animated by questions regarding the incongruous status of the object, not to mention the role of the incongruous object, within modes of art-making otherwise indebted to the legacy of conceptual art. Complementary concerns with the politics of space and with systems of display have also been prominent, making *Things* a perfect fit. Prior to its presentation at Project Arts Centre in 2011 the work had been shown at several other venues internationally and was originally exhibited in 2009 as part of *Show*, a solo exhibition at the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art (KW) in Berlin. On that occasion, it occupied an arresting position in the large, sunken ground-floor gallery space, which is the first exhibition space encountered by visitors to KW. Floyer has joked that the work's genesis was partly influenced by a casual suggestion from the show's curator that, in spite of the artist's well-known penchant for minimal presentation, this difficult but crucial space might work best if it contained 'lots of things.'² Which indeed it did, only the things that could be seen and not heard were all the same, whereas the 'things' that could be heard and not seen were all different. As this distinction between material object and immaterial signifier – between *things* and '*things*' – may indicate, Floyer is one of contemporary art's most instinctive and astute – as well as its most entertaining – ordinary-language philosopher.

It has been observed that this room full of objects feels surprisingly empty.³ The pas-de-deux between the material and the immaterial, between object and space, constituted by *Things* may call to mind an argument in Martin Heidegger's essay 'The Thing' (*Das Ding*), first delivered as a lecture in 1950, which happens to chime with Andre's aperçu. In this essay, Heidegger focuses on the example of a handmade

ceramic jug in order to argue, however counter-intuitively, that the jug's 'thingness' resides not in its material construction but rather in the void in its interior, designed to hold the liquid with which it is intended to be filled: 'The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as a holding vessel.'⁴ Such provocative reversals of conventional perception and convolutions of everyday thinking have been the stuff of Floyer's art from the outset. The same year he delivered this lecture, Heidegger also reworked an earlier essay on 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in which he observes that, while all works of art have a thingly character, 'the art work is something over and above the thingly element', and it is precisely this 'something else in the work [that] constitutes its artistic nature.'⁵ Forty years after the greatly exaggerated 'dematerialization of the art object', and at a moment of resurgence in contemporary thought of object-oriented ontology, Floyer's succinct inducement to reflect once more on the distinction between a thing and a work is timely.⁶

Floyer is an English artist of Austro-Canadian extraction who has lived in Germany since the mid-1990s. Though it is unlikely to have coloured her thinking, the etymological history of the word 'thing' in the Germanic languages offers further food for reflection, as indeed it did for Heidegger. For instance, Old English *þing* originally meant 'meeting' or 'assembly' and only later developed the meaning of 'entity' or 'matter', such as might be discussed at just such a meeting. This earlier meaning persists today in the second element of the English word 'hustings', meaning a debate involving candidates for political office, and of Icelandic *Althing*, which designates that country's national parliament. Here again, this semantic shuttling between the collective and the individual, between a purposeful convocation and a matter worthy of discursive attention, seems oddly appropriate to Floyer's assembly of intermittently vocal pedestals.

While retaining something in common with certain of her British contemporaries who also came to prominence in the early 1990s, Floyer has always steered her own particular course. This might be crudely tracked somewhere between the punk pranksterism of a Martin Creed and the ludic bookishness of a Jonathan Monk. One of the things that distinguish this generation of artists from the earlier generation to which they are most beholden (i.e. the first wave of conceptual artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s) is their easy embrace of both humour and pop culture. A fascination with the philosophy of language in the wake of Wittgenstein and a desire to distance themselves from the indulgences of Pop Art no doubt contributed to the relative austerity of the early works

of artists like Joseph Kosuth and Mel Bochner, which nonetheless share with *Things* a concern with the non-transparency of language. Such work incidentally provides a sobering contrast to the irrepressible barrage of disparate sound-bites issuing from Floyer's installation which, for all its ostensive optical restraint, prefers to revel in what the Irish poet Louis MacNeice once described as 'the drunkenness of things being various.'

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith

April 2013

1 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, New York, p.26.

2 From a private conversation with the writer around the time of the KW exhibition.

3 Review of *Things* at Project Arts Centre by Davey Moor in *Paper Visual Art Journal*, <http://papervisualart.com/?p=4860>.

Last accessed 7 April 2013.

4 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p.169.

5 Ibid, p. 19.

6 Among the many complexities elided here is the crucial role played by the intermediary category between 'thing' and 'work' posited by Heidegger, that of 'equipment'.

List of Works

Things, 2009

CDs, CD-player, speakers, cables,
wood, dimensions variable



Biography

Ceal Floyer was born in 1968 and lives and works in Berlin. She has been the subject of many solo exhibitions, including in the years prior to 2011, Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (2010), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2009), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2009) and Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina, Naples (2008). She has been a recipient of the Paul Hamlyn Award, and was awarded the Nam June Paik Art Center Prize (2009) and Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art (2007). Ceal Floyer was concurrently exhibiting at DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal, and CCA, Tel Aviv, as well as participating in the Singapore Biennale 2011. She is represented by Lisson Gallery, London, Esther Schipper, Berlin and 303 Gallery, New York.

Things

Ceal Floyer

Published as an edition of *Forms of Imagining*, a series published by Project Press based on the exhibitions program of Project Arts Centre.

Dublin, May 2014

ISBN 978-1-872493-46-6

Editor: Tessa Giblin

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Text: Tessa Giblin,
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Graphic Design: Conor & David
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Things

Ceal Floyer

10 March – 23 April 2011

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

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Project Arts Centre is supported by The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon and Dublin City Council. With warm thanks to Ceal Floyer, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith and Lisson Gallery, London.



