

MIC | Media and
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Arts Centre
TOI REREHIKO

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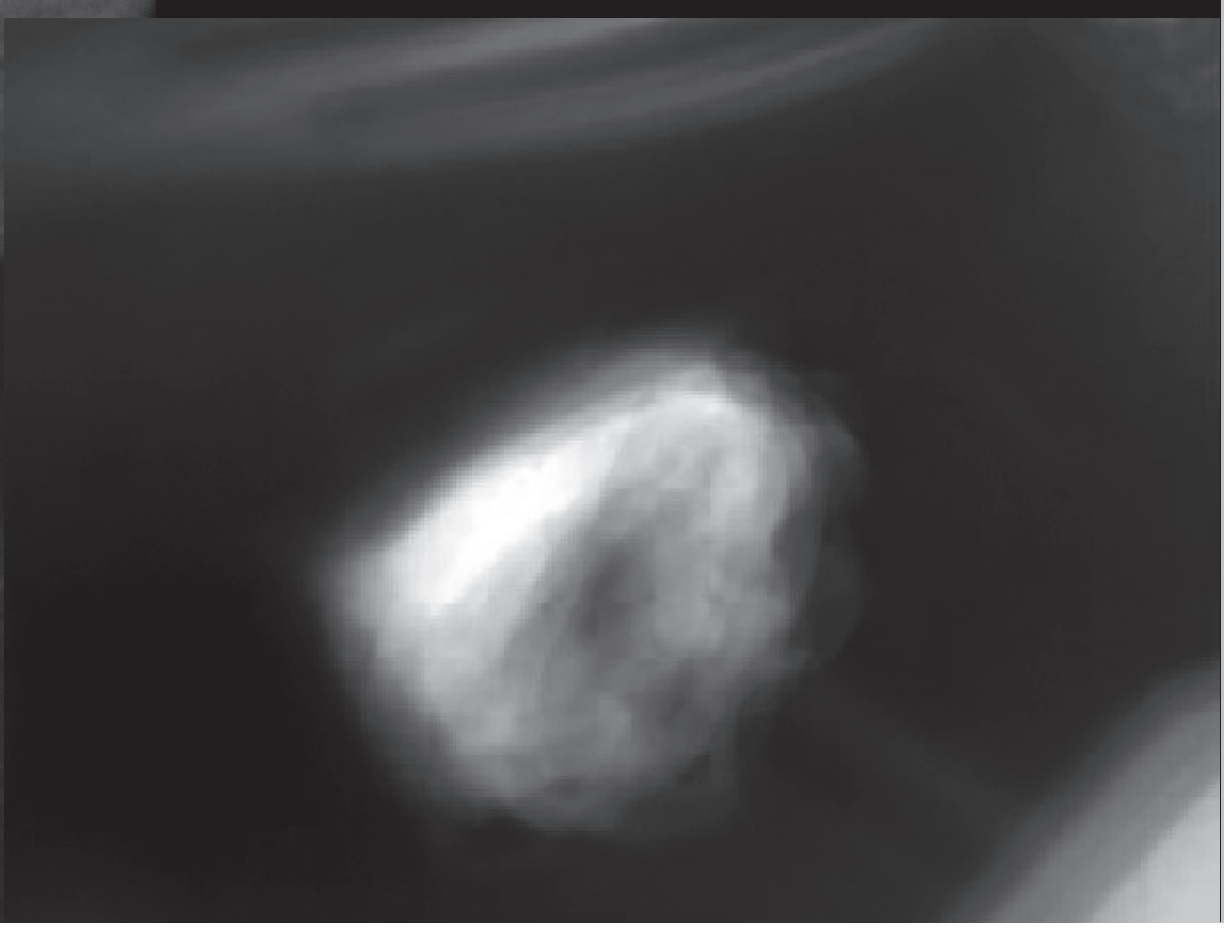
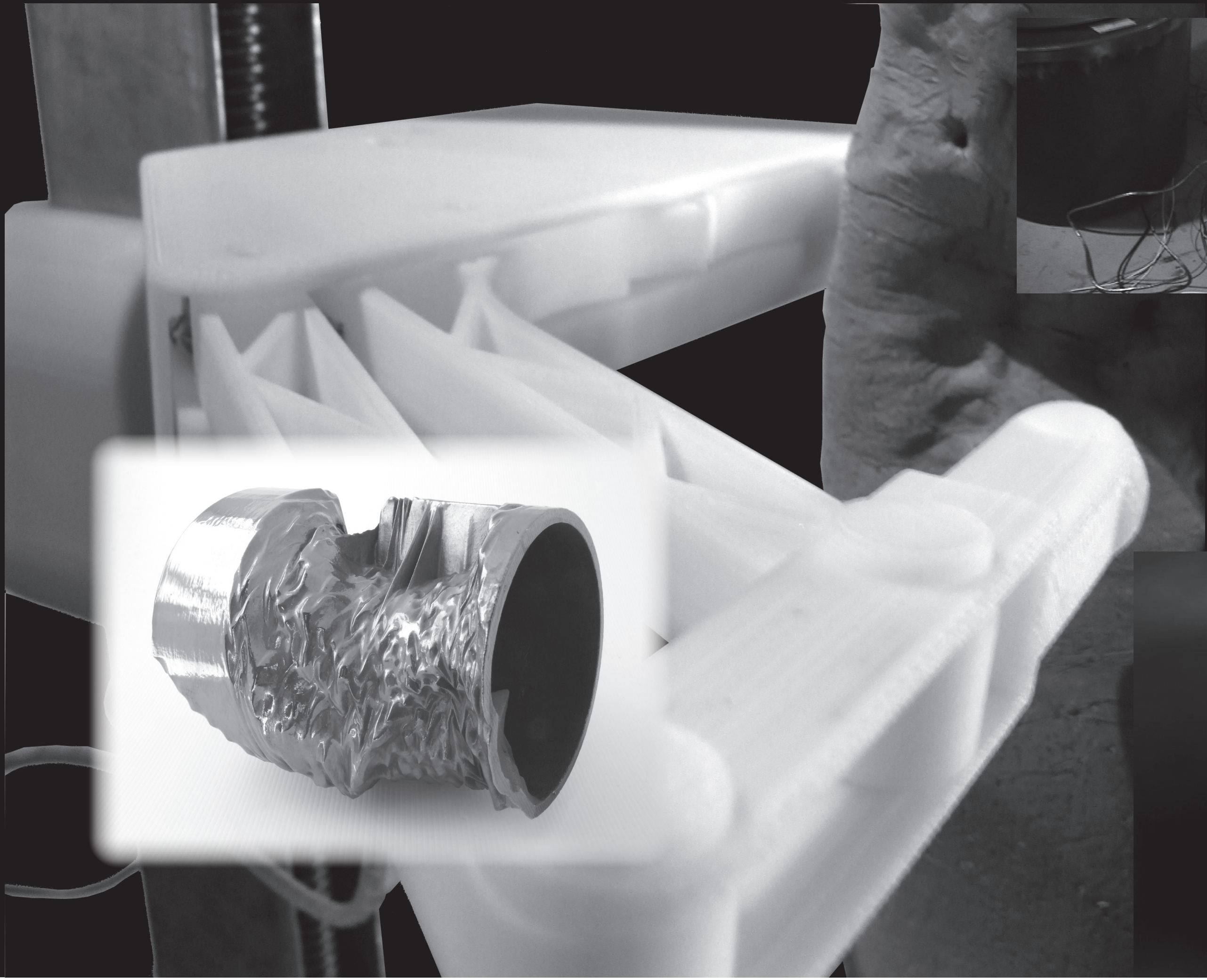
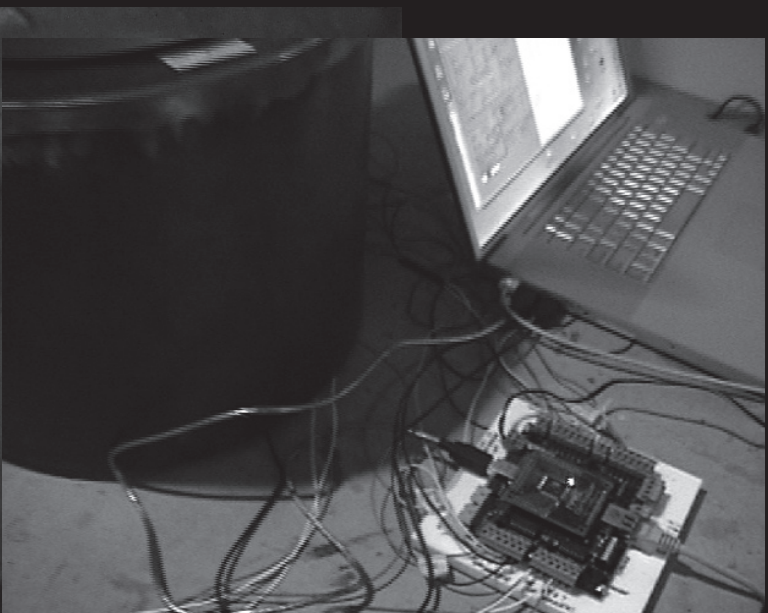
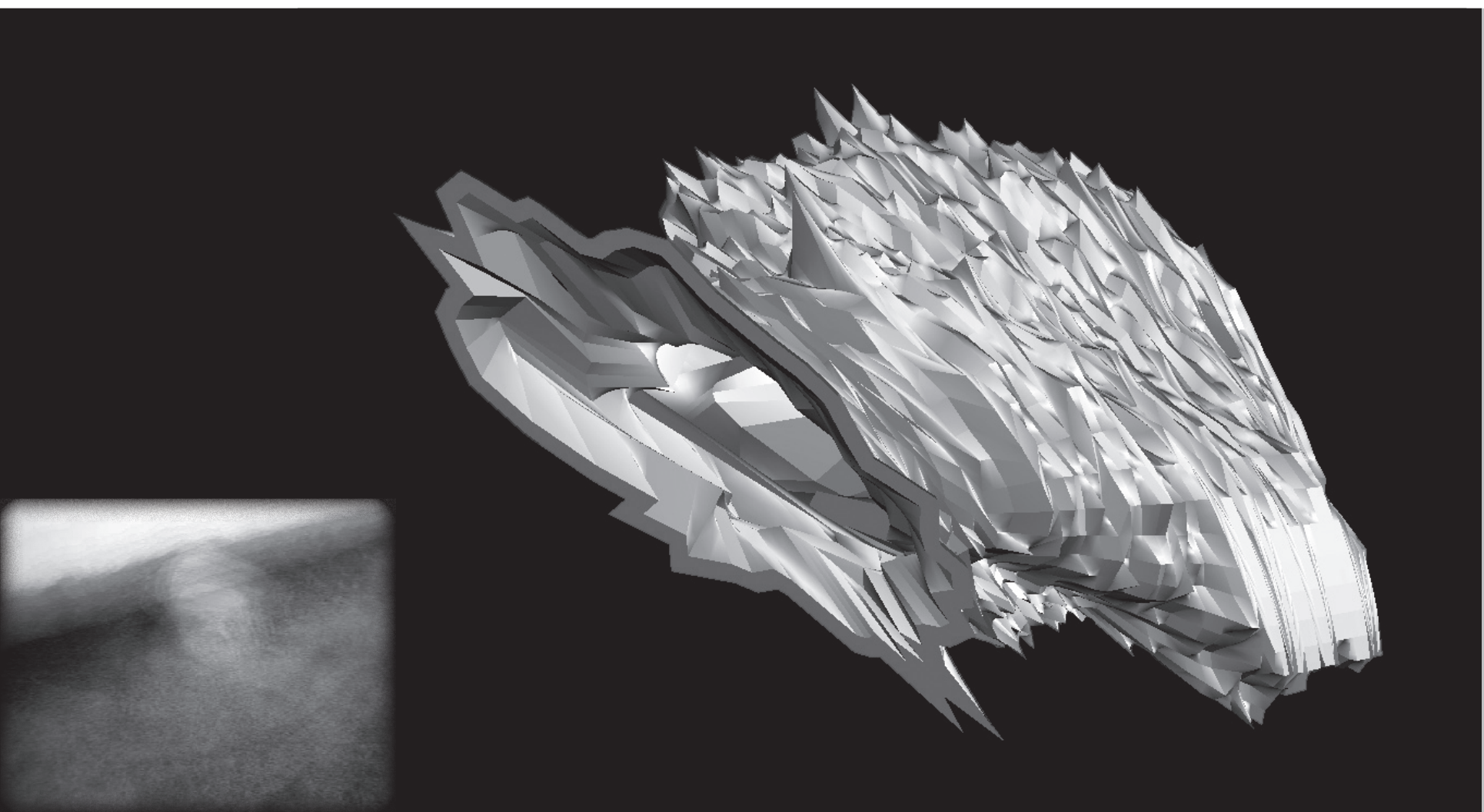
ARTS
COUNCIL OF AUCKLAND

dForm

James Charlton

Saturday 22 November- Saturday 20 December, 2008
Opening Friday 21 November - 6pm

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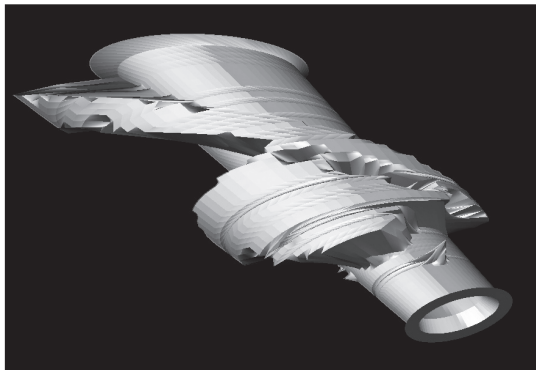
dForm

James Charlton

James Charlton's artistic practice engages a range of physical, digital and performative approaches in an exploration into the nature of the artefact as a field of activity in which the viewer is implicated. Current research projects with interactive digital object technologies centre on the integration of digital and physical content to question the definitions and inherent nature of time-based media.

A radical departure from traditional sculptural practice, **dForm** incorporates a mix of rapid prototyping, video, live data capturing through web cams and the interactive generation of sound.

dForm explores the construction and perception of time-based events by examining the ability of static objects to encapsulate temporal information. It aims to question our relationship with



physical objects by proposing new modalities for the representation of time-based events.

Interview between James Charlton and Deborah Lawler-Dormer
November 2008

Initially a sculptor and more recently a media and performance artist, this series of projects exhibited at MIC Toi Rerehiko sees you falling somewhere in between these practices with interesting reflections on all three artistic processes. How do these projects speak to your various roles?

One of the problems I have with making sculptural artefacts is their inadequacy to embody process. Artefacts are after the fact, and seem to be quite removed from the generation of meaning. (Obviously artefacts have a posthumous process too but those readings are very much the domain of art world discourses and often take on a life of their own.) I'm very self-indulgent around the process of making work. From recognising the act of 'making' as the key site for the work, it's a logical step to move into interactive media and action based work. I don't see myself so much as a performer rather as an activator of process.

Once you've made that connection then it's easy to extend that thinking to the audience. To find ways to make them active in the work. Installations I did as far back as the 80's worked in this way but not with digital technology. Digital technologies have made it easy to assimilate mechanical functionality and bypass practical problems around viewer interaction.

So to return to the question, the works in **dForm** straddle all these roles. In different ways all three works explore aspects of process around our understanding of images and form.

In Gallery One you are exhibiting the project **16: sec**, a series of 16 silver-plated forms fabricated on 3 dimensional rapid prototyping printers. These sculptural forms have been formed using time-based data sourced from your own short video clips, which then provide the spatial coordinates from which the forms are mapped. Can you explain about the process, the source videos, the software you have developed and your concerns with the physicality of these forms?

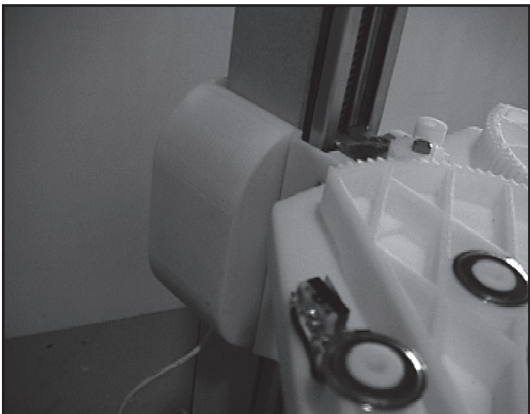
About four years ago I began to investigate the Open GL potential of MAX/MSP/Jitter. What I found interesting was the way I could take data of any sort and use it to define three-dimensional co-ordinates. In the case of **16: sec** the data I chose was video pixels. The easiest way to think about how they have been made is to imagine taking a flexible video screen and rolling it into a cylinder. Now the image is playing on a rounded plane. Then I take any given pixel colour and use a value to offset that from the plane of the cylinder. So red might move 20mm outwards and black 10mm back. That gives you a relief like image wrapped around a cylinder. But instead of using a single image I am accruing the average pixel value of each pixel over the duration of the video. So what you end up with is a form that is representative of all the frames in the video. Sort of like seeing every frame at one moment.

This interested me because it meant we had to see the resulting form as a document of time. Not just the before and after time of the object's life — i.e. what happened to this object before I saw it and what will happen to it next, but what is happening to it now. This takes us back to your previous question about process, interaction and performance.

But back to this question.

About the same time as I was trying to write the software to do this I became interested in the formal qualities of litter blowing around the streets. I began filming this — often on my cell phone or still camera — whatever was at hand. I ended up with a collection of images from all around the world — New York, London, Tonga, New Zealand. What came across in many of these short clips were the envelopes of space they described. It was a logical step to feed these into the software as data for the 3D forms.

These on-screen 3D models still conformed to the logic of screen based media —and were separate from the physical experience of the viewer in a sculptural sense. By developing the software a little further it was possible to save the forms I was generating as files that could be printed on stereo-lithography machines. Stereo-lithography or rapid prototyping is a 3D printing process — you can think of it as a computer controlled tube of toothpaste that builds up a form layer after layer. After several hours of squeezing the tube you end up with a physical version of what you had on screen. In the case of the objects in



lighting. As well as this quality, the patina silver gave me other reference points — back to the silver screen and historical modes of sculpture.

As you can see in this description, process informs decision making every step of the way.

These video forms confront us with our own preconceptions concerning the linearity of time-based events by presenting time to us in a sculptural form. In these alternative representations is a new modality of time. Can you elucidate your thinking in regards to this new modality? Why are these objects different from all the other objects in the world?

Let's go with the idea that these objects invite us to think about them in different ways. Obviously as physical entities they are subject to the same physical laws as other objects - they sit on a table in the same way that any object would and can be seen simply for what they are. But I don't believe we deal with objects in such simple terms.

Making the comparison between these forms and all forms is like comparing a photograph to a video. In a video we construct events from the relationships between frames. In a photograph we don't have that information — photography exploits what is not shown much more than video in which it is easy to surrender to the absoluteness of a sequence. In video the camera is made mobile and we are able to compare before and after as determined by the artist. **16: sec** collapses the before and after by presenting every frame of video simultaneously.

So rather than see objects as a still frame — a photograph - these forms put themselves forward as cumulative moments, all seen simultaneously but only partially. They are made partial by the three dimensionality of the objects. The viewer must move or move around the object as the camera might move around a scene. I'm interested in how this aspect of the work shares the camera between artist and audience and relocates the making of the work.

Through these works there is a different way to think about objects. These objects ask two things of the viewer. To see them the viewer must suspend the stasis of the 'object'. They must stay with the object through its 'duration'— allow it to be played out like a video, the duration of which is dictated by the presence and movement of the viewer.

In **dForm**, displayed in Gallery Two, three machines — robotic — like potters' wheels - respond to the movement of viewers in the gallery and laboriously squeeze/dform columns of clay in to lumpy records of the gallery patronage. By the end of the 60-day show there will be 60 forms created by the **dForm** machines stacked on the floor. In this work perhaps there is a complete reversal of the role of the artist as the artist is reliant on the viewer to form the

work. Can you enlarge on how the viewer is both the subject and creator of the work?

16: sec I used a plaster-based machine. These plaster forms were then electroplated in silver. I was looking for a surface that was as I described it to the electroplater "disembodied" — something that spoke back to the forms rendered on screen with that artificial texture and somewhat plastic

work. Can you enlarge on how the viewer is both the subject and creator of the work?

dForm establishes a set of rules. Software works like that. It takes a bit to get your head around thinking of it as a sculptural practice but it's like other sculptural media — governed by its own intrinsic material qualities. The rules for operating these machines are simple — don't do anything. Unless — someone in the space moves. Then use the location of that movement as a value in an equation that determines which machine responds and how.

So if no one comes to see the show nothing happens. Which is fine — the clay just stays as a column. What makes things more complex is that every viewer's movement affects all subsequent events on that day. The viewer is the subject in the sense that the work literally looks at them via a web cam. But when the viewer is looking at the work what do they look at? The clay forms are a result of their own and others' actions.

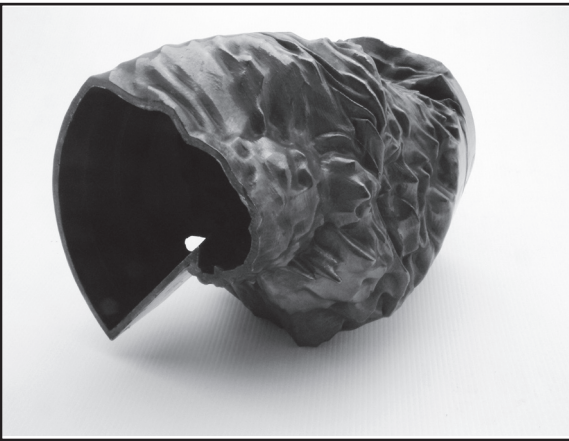
I don't think this is a complete reversal of the artist in the sense that it takes control away from the artist. A partnership is formed between the artist and the viewer within the conventions of the work. I'm still the artist but the work is a result of the discourse — the relation between me and the audience via the work. In handing over part of the process to the audience I don't relinquish authorship.

But let's not get too serious here — this is quite a playful absurd work. What we end up with is as you say 60 crudely created lumps!

In Gallery 3 **plus** is a projected collective drawing created both aurally and visually through the graphic processing of the accrued movements of multiple gallery visitors. This subtly changing live composition is formed from data fed from web cams and processed through a specially designed Max MSP and Jitter software application. Explain how these interactive compositions are being formed?

This work is more accessible and certainly provides more immediate gratification than the two other works, because it provides more immediate feedback.

Your movement in the space triggers a single frame of video to be added to the projected image. This is averaged with all previous movements so the impact may be relatively small if it is the end of a cycle. Gradually you start to make an image similar in nature to the video images in **16: sec**.



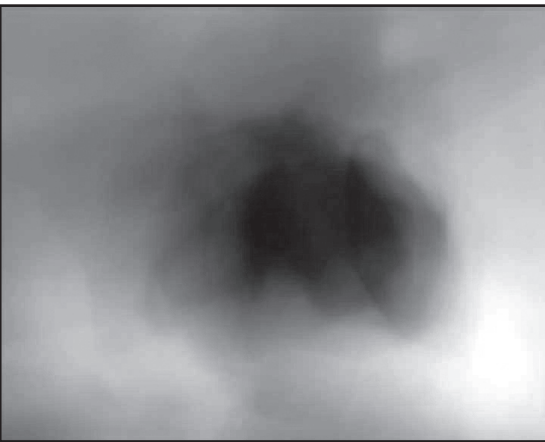
Your movement also controls the frequency and pitch of audio playback. Interestingly the sound functions in reverse to the sound in **16: sec**. Instead of drawing the viewer around the space, here the sound is played out by the viewers' movements.

Again the audience composites the work — makes the 'drawing'. But it's a

drawing made over time in a shared process.

In **dForm, plus** and **16: sec** the viewer is an integral component of the overall project. Without the complicit involvement of the viewer there is so to speak "no work", nothing happens and no one knows anything has happened. How do you see the role of the artist, the viewer and their interactions with the artwork in interactive installation practice?

In a complete reversal of roles the artist is totally reliant on the viewer to form the work — the viewer no longer comes empty handed to the gallery seeking fulfilment supplied by content from the artist. This is not the artist alone in the studio capturing a moment of genius in the autographic mark but a mechanised output, not just of a viewer, but the interaction of viewers with each other. The interaction then is not simply a reaction between system and spectator but an accumulative interaction between spectators. Spectators who may never see each other and are separated by minutes - maybe hours -contribute to the algorithm that determines the coordinates of the deformation.



The resultant form then is not like a brush mark on a canvas — a direct result of a single action — but a form defined by the relation between events. Each event influencing each and every other event to produce some strangely almost genetically encoded result.

Ultimately throughout your works you reveal a tension between process and product. How do you see this tension operating within your practice?

I doubt that I ever really understood the difference between art and non art objects. The process inherent in utility demands that we visualise the object in action: that we see the before and after held within the object.

James Charlton: Biography

Originally from the UK James Charlton immigrated to New Zealand 1973 and gained his BFA from Auckland University, Elam School of Fine Arts in 1982. As a Fulbright recipient he completed his MFA at the State University of New York at Albany in 1986. He has exhibited extensively in solo and group exhibitions throughout the USA, and was represented by Akin Gallery in Boston and John Gibson Gallery in New York.

During this time he lectured in sculpture at the University of New Hampshire, Monserrat College of Art, Boston and the State University of New York at Albany. Returning to New Zealand in 1991, Charlton was part of the team that established the Visual Arts degree at ASA School of Art and subsequently became Curriculum Leader for Sculpture at AUT. A position he held until last year when he took up the position of Programme Leader for Creative Technologies at Auckland University of Technology.