

26 September – 6 November 2019

Weston Studio
Royal Academy of Arts, London

Graham Ellard & Stephen Johnstone

FOSSIL

FOSSIL focuses on the Royal Academy's collection of historic architectural casts, copies of antique columns, capitals and friezes. They were once used as teaching aides at the RA Schools. But, since the Architecture School closed in the 1960s, these casts were hidden behind temporary studio walls.

The central section of the film records the revealing of the casts and their demounting. Because of the ungainliness and fragility of the casts, their removal was undertaken by hand, using webbing, ropes, pulleys and physical strength, in much the same way that they were installed in the mid-nineteenth century. Using in-camera editing techniques to emphasise the precariousness and drama of this event, the film records the struggle to remove the casts.

Although the entire film was shot in black and white, the action is interrupted by richly coloured sequences in which optically printed negative film is vividly tinted by colour gels that move back and forth in front of the projector on a handmade motorised mechanism. In these sequences of intense, close-up images the casts are reimagined as the subject of one of Jean Painlevé's eerie underwater films of crustaceans, molluscs and seahorses, or as the encrusted shipwrecks in Jacques Cousteau's early film, *Silent World*. Or even, as ancient life forms, now fossilised, that have in some way been slowly secreted from the walls of the RA Schools studios.

Exploiting the simple act of changing the orientation of an object, the installation also includes a number of un-refurbished early-nineteenth-century casts from the RA Collection, laid on their backs and placed on felt blankets and simple wooden transportation pallets. We usually see architectural casts from a distance, elevated high up on a wall, or at the summit of a column, here the casts can be seen in close up, their weight,

roughness and organic qualities emphasised by the awkwardness and vulnerability with which they seem to lie prone on the ground.

At the heart of the installation is a concern with the copy. The casts, of course, are plaster copies, but they sit at the centre of a spiral of more and more copies. A set of photographic reprints of the young German artist Blinky Palermo atop an impossibly high ladder painting the cornice in the cast gallery at Edinburgh College of Art in 1971; a painter's facsimile of a watercolour made for a lecture by Sir John Soane at the Royal Academy in 1801, which depicts another young man up an impossibly high ladder, this time surveying the Temple of Jupiter Stator at Rome; and the film print itself. The 16mm film print echoes the negative to positive relationship between mould and cast, a relationship complicated here by using an optical printer to copy the original negative as a positive, so that it can be printed to a 16mm exhibition print for projection as a negative.

Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone have worked collaboratively since 1993. Their work revolves around the craft and skill of 16mm filmmaking and emphasises the material particularity of film - its 'slowness', its unique colour palette and extraordinary subtlety of tonal range.

At the centre of their films is a concern with atmosphere and architectural detail, often employing a durational and meditational approach to a site, filming for extended periods over a number of visits. They use

the camera to feel their way into architectural space, and through a very particular aesthetic of natural light effects, heightened colour, and close-up detail, immerse the viewer in a poetic and abstracted visual world.

Since 1993 their work has been shown internationally, including group exhibitions at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Tramway, Glasgow; MoMA, Sydney; Tate Liverpool; Setouchi Triennale, Japan; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London; Stroom Den Haag. Solo exhibitions include: Site Gallery, Sheffield; De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill; Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London; Satellite Gallery, Nagoya, Japan. Recent screenings include: Anthology Film Archives, New York; Close Up, London; Image Forum, Tokyo; Guggenheim Museum, New York; London Film Festival; Tate Britain, London; Keio University Art Centre, Tokyo; Kunsthalle Mainz, Germany.

Ellard and Johnstone also write together, their book 'Anthony McCall; notebooks and conversations' was published by Lund Humphries in association with Kunstmuseum St Gallen, Switzerland, in 2015.

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16mm film still
FOSSIL, 2019
Graham Ellard &
Stephen Johnstone

The Plaster Cast as Teaching Machine

In this conversation Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone talk to Helen Valentine, Senior Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, about the history of the Royal Academy's Cast Collection and the fundamental role of plaster casts in traditional models of architectural education.

GE: Why is there a collection of architectural casts at the Royal Academy?

HV: In the Royal Academy Schools there were casts of capitals, architraves, cornices and other fragments from the architectural monuments of Ancient Rome which were available for students to draw from or to inspire their competition drawings. They came to the RA primarily through Sir John Sander. Sander had studied architecture at the RA Schools and in fact, was John Soane's first architectural student. He set up his own practise in 1790, but retired early to travel the continent from 1817 to 1819 and with two young architects, G.L. Taylor and Edward Cresy, spent his time drawing and measuring the antiquities in Italy. His passion for classical architecture was such that with his fellow architects he organised plaster casts to be made direct from various monuments of Rome. Other casts were probably added to his collection from the many plaster workshops in Rome. The society portrait painter Sir Thomas Lawrence bought his collection of plaster casts of architectural details, but the collection proved a challenge for Lawrence to display such was the scale and extent of the casts. On Lawrence's death in 1830 the collection was bought by the Royal Academy of Arts.

SJ: And the casts were purchased so that the architecture students could draw them?

HV: The decision to buy Lawrence's collection was made because there were only 19 architectural casts in the RA collection in 1810. This paucity became a problem from 1814 onwards when there was a new requirement for probationer architectural students to make 'a Drawing from one of the Antique Figures, or some portion of Ornamental Sculpture'. As well as the RA buying Lawrence's collection, other casts were purchased from the British Museum, which had its own plaster cast workshop, or were given.

SJ: Could you say something about the Architecture School at the RA?

When the RA was founded in 1768 one of its main purposes was to set up the RA Schools which taught painting, sculpture and architecture. Today the RA Schools continues as an independent postgraduate art school. For budding architects the RA provided a great opportunity as it was in fact

section or transection of large and complicated capitals. In some instances, it will be a cast of a few acanthus leaves from the lowest level of a capital. In other cases, the cast will take a small section from top to bottom of a capital but will only be an eighth of the whole capital or just half of one side. But, this small section of the capital gives all the information needed about the capital, the decorative motifs, the proportions of each of the motifs in relation to one another and the overall scale. It has the added advantage that the cast can be displayed on a wall in the studio. Having smaller sections instead of the whole capitals also meant it was possible to display many different sections of capitals, which the architectural student could then compare.

SJ: The idea that all of the information you might need to draw an entire building to the correct proportions is held in a plaster fragment of a capital is something we hadn't really comprehended, until we looked at some of the books in the RA Library, such as James Gibbs's *Rules for drawing the several parts of architecture, in a more exact and easy manner than has been heretofore practised, by which all fractions, in dividing the principle members and their parts, are avoided*, from 1738.

The plaster cast fragment acts as a kind of machine for understanding the language of classical architectural. The circumference of a volute, or the height of an acanthus leaf scroll is necessarily proportional to the diameter of a column, as is the height of a modillion to the height of an entablature, and so on. It's a fantastic circle of dependencies. A short extract from Gibbs's text gives a really good sense of the exactitude of the orders:

The modillions are 1/6 of the diameter of the Column, and their distance two sixths and a half. Half a diameter is here divided on the cornice into six parts, of which the breadth of the modillion is two, and the length of it is four; the cap projects 1/3 of those parts; and the distance betwixt the modillions is five. By this rule the exact distance betwixt middle and middle of the modillions is 7/12 of the diameter.

As John Summerson says in his lectures, published as *The Classical Language of Architecture*, the discipline of the orders is a dictatorship! He talks of one example, of a drawing of a sixteenth-century arch by Vignola, as being "as tight as a knot".

GE: What the casts do is provide the subject of study, they are the objects at which you look and copy, and in a very directed and deliberate way, via drawing. And, if you do it properly you will be inducted into the logic and complex interrelationships of 'the order'. These artefacts were, of course,



GE: Here it might be useful to go back a number of steps and think about the casts themselves. How were the moulds produced? We've read that the moulds were made by using sodden tissue paper held in a wooden box-like structure?

HV: It is difficult to know exactly what materials were used to make the moulds, but they were made direct from the buildings, we know that Sander used specially commissioned scaffolding to get access to the capitals and friezes. The casts have piece mould lines so whatever material was used to make the moulds they were laboriously cast in many small sections, which allowed all the detail and complicated undercutting of the original to be preserved. They could have used tissue paper, but I wonder if they used clay, or plaster, as this would be more robust and it would be possible to make a number of casts from the moulds. In the nineteenth century moulds made from gelatine were used. In each case though these were highly skilled processes.

SJ: The publicity for the current display of casts in the Clore Architecture Court at the RA suggests: "In some cases they now include more detail than the buildings themselves, which have been damaged by weather,



the first School of Architecture in Britain. Painters and sculptors had been able to attend earlier academies. Only a few architectural students were admitted each year and nearly all of them worked in an architects' office in the daytime and only attended the RA Schools in the evenings. After the Second World War it became increasingly difficult to provide adequate training for students and the Architecture School closed by the early 1960s.

GE: When were the casts first hung in the RA studios?

HV: The casts would have been hung when additional studios were built by Norman Shaw in c.1882. We have a photograph from 1953 that shows the way the casts were hung on the wall. Great care was taken in the display of these casts, which often emphasised a symmetrical arrangement rather than one which reflected the source or context of the casts.

SJ: Could you say more?

HV: It would be challenging to display casts chronologically. There are so many classical casts that it would need an archaeological expert to set these out by building or date and the purpose of these casts was not to be a museum, but rather to give students the examples of architectural motifs of the finest classical buildings. It's worth noting that in a set of photographs of the studios taken in 1876 by Bedford Lemere & Co, a firm that specialised in architectural photography, the symmetry is particularly emphasised. In fact, casts were moved and arranged specifically for these photographs, although some of the larger ones had to be photographed on the wall.

GE: The idea of dating is interesting, because it also depends which chronological sequence you are using as an organisational principle. Would you use the historical sequence of the original buildings from which the casts are taken, that is, a sequence that follows the dates when buildings and arches in Rome are believed to have been constructed? Or, would you follow a historical sequence that reflects the manufacture of the casts in the various plaster workshops in Rome or London from the 1790s to the early 1900s?

SJ: In something you previously wrote about the cast collection you pointed out that "often, there's a quarter capital, whose transection gives you all you need to know about the design of the entire piece". Could you say something about the way an entire order is held in a plaster fragment?

HV: Many of the architectural casts in the RA Collection are a cross



'Student Surveying the Temple of Jupiter Stator at Rome', 1801, watercolour by Henry Parke. © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

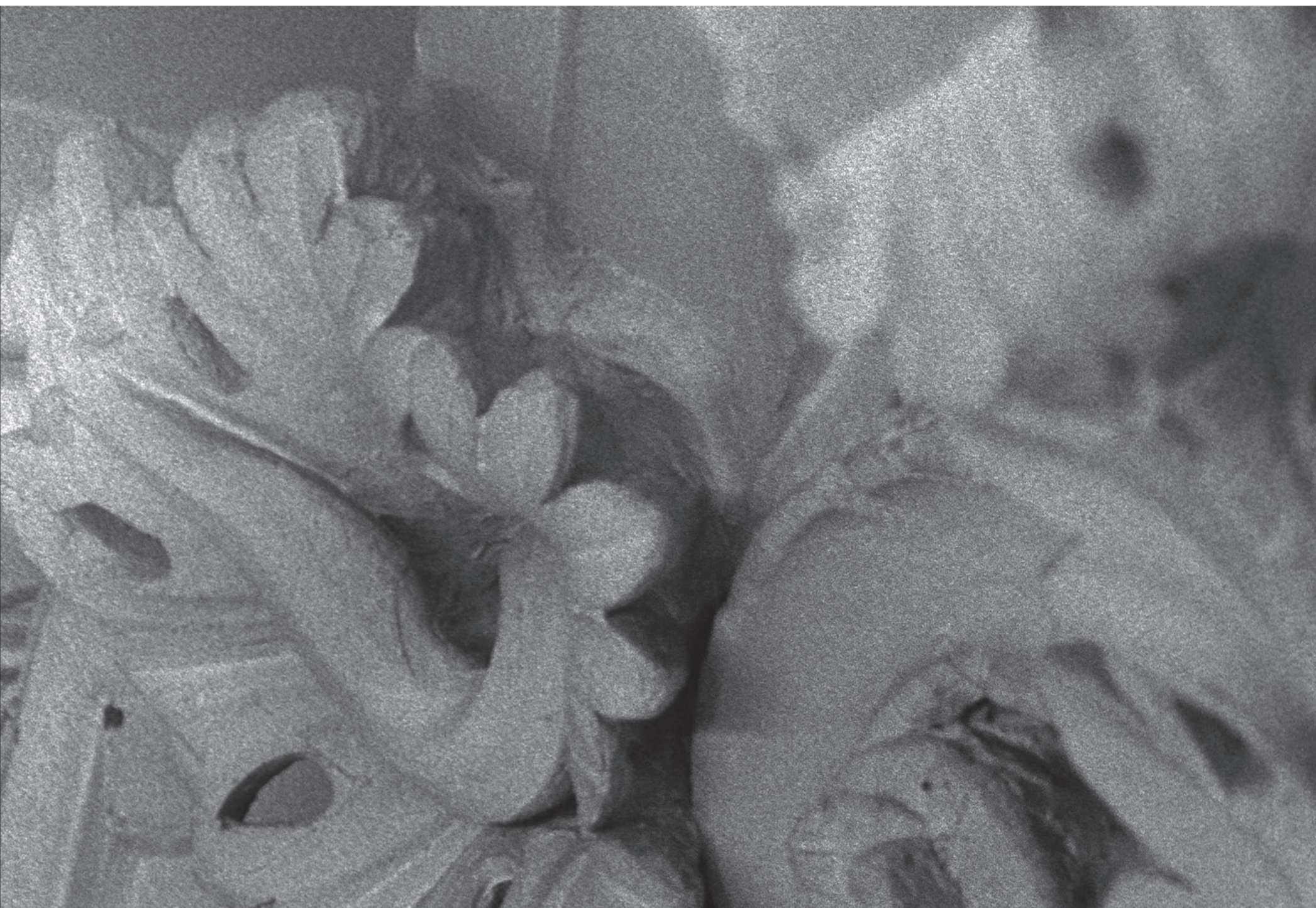


pollution, vandalism and overzealous 19th-century restorations". Is this one important way in which architectural casts are currently being reassessed?

HV: I think it shows that they are really important historical documents over and above their history in the teaching of the Schools. It gives them a cultural value that elevates the casts from being mere copies. It records a moment in time when the casts were made, forever showing what they buildings looked like at that time.

GE: And yet as objects they have so many features that are in some way excessive or surplus to their function as absolute teaching models – the patina of wear and time, the mould lines, the distortions created by viewing them at close quarters. Or, in isolation. When looking at the casts close-up through the camera, they seem to hover, or oscillate, between being what they are and being something else, between being where they are and also being somewhere else, while remaining, in principle at least, resolutely locked into the clearest and most exacting of design regimes.

SJ: I think this why we found the casts so fascinating and strange when we first saw them poking out behind the walls in the studios. They seemed



representative of a historically and geographically distant culture, but it was measuring and drawing that was seen to be the means to retrieve and absorb the message – that is, the 'best rules of ancient architecture' - that they held within them. It's equally fascinating to think how simple and uncomplicated this was seen to be, and how such a thing just wouldn't and couldn't be proposed today.

SJ: Presumably, as a probationer architectural student in the early nineteenth century there is only one way of doing things; you look, you measure, you copy. And, as you do so, you follow and apply the established geometrical principles. There's no place for quirkiness, invention, or play; there's no ambiguity, or individual choice; certainly no "what if" type thinking – which, of course, is precisely the way we've been looking at the casts through the camera. There's a great story that demonstrates how a group of students in the 1960s got the full message of the plaster cast; apparently in May 1968, one of the first things the occupying students at The École des Beaux-Arts did was to take a hammer to the sculptural and architectural casts in the cast court. And, in a way it worked! The casts were never replaced and in the year after the occupation a review of French art and architectural education withdrew drawing from casts from the curriculum.



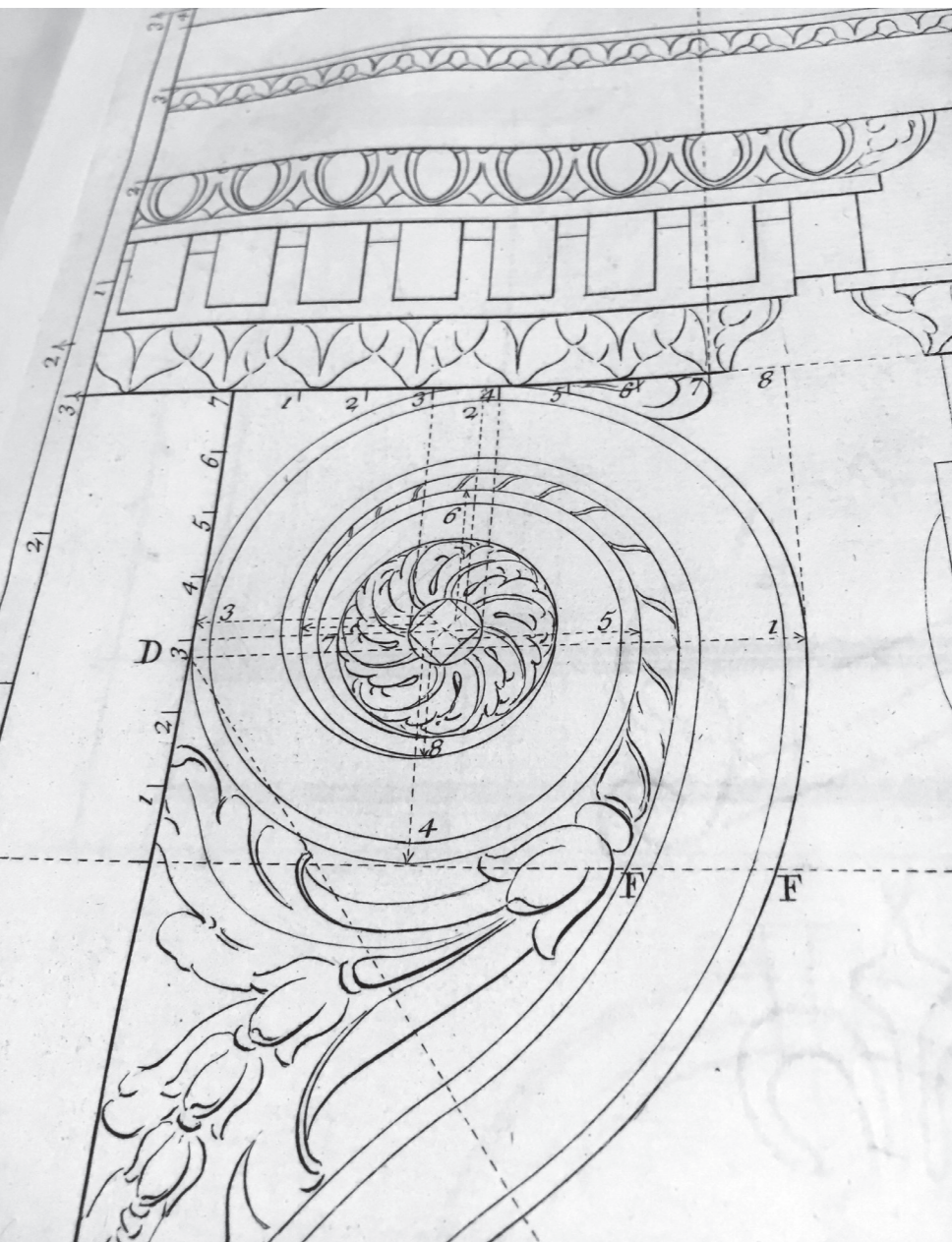
Blinky Palermo making the work 'Blue/Yellow/White/Red' for the exhibition 'Strategy: Get Arts (contemporary art from Düsseldorf)' at Edinburgh College of Art, 1970, curated by Richard Demarco. Photographs by George Oliver. Courtesy of Demarco European Art Foundation & Demarco Digital Archive, University of Dundee



to hold a tremendous kind of energy, something Luigi Moretti talks about in his fabulous account of mouldings and cornices bursting from the space between the wall and the ceiling, or a column and a frieze. Actually, a Moretti quote from his essay *The Value of Moldings* would be a great way to end this conversation:

Cornices condense the sense of existence because they impose themselves on our vision with their neat, rapid, cutting sequences of distinctive frequencies and differences. Their spaces are vivid and dense with signs, and they engage our attention to the utmost. The cornices explode where wall material or structure seems most compressed, or make the direction of its forces mute, the way the sea breaks and fragments against rocks or exhausts itself at last on the shore.'

1. Luigi Moretti 'The Value of Moldings', originally published as 'Valori della Modanatura' in Spazio III no 6, December 1961 – April 1962. Translation published in Luigi Moretti: Works and Writings by Luigi Moretti, Federico Bucoi, Marco Mulazzani (New York: Princeton Architectural Press) 2002 pp 173–174.



Detail from *Rules for drawing the several parts of architecture, in a more exact and easy manner than has been heretofore practised, by which all fractions, in dividing the principle members and their parts, are avoided* by James Gibbs, London, 1738.

FOSSIL

Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone, 2019.

Installation

16mm film, black & white, with coloured sections, silent, 14.00.

With casts from the Royal Academy Cast collection selected by the artists

Plaster cast, half-ionic column capital with ornate necking and missing left volute.

Plaster cast of frieze with acanthus scrolls and flowers.

Plaster cast, one-quarter of Corinthian capital.

Plaster cast of leaves of a Corinthian capital.

And the following images

Martin Grover; copy of a watercolour by Henry Parke 'Student Surveying the Temple of Jupiter Stator at Rome', 1801. With permission from Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Commissioned for this exhibition.

Photographs of Blinky Palermo making the work 'Blue/Yellow/White/Red' for the exhibition 'Strategy: Get Arts (contemporary art from Düsseldorf)' at Edinburgh College of Art, 1970, curated by Richard Demarco. Photographs by George Oliver. Courtesy of Demarco European Art Foundation & Demarco Digital Archive, University of Dundee.

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