

Plus or Minus Two

Michael Hanna operates at the edges of our conscious minds, laying out new pathways of affective experience. His work takes many forms, from text-based sculpture, to video and immersive environments with site-specific and responsive installations. He factors in disruptions to our ways of seeing and processing information, to how things operate – a spanner in the works. Glitches, occlusions, hypervisibility, overstimulation, dissociation, temporal slippages – to what end? Hanna teases out new lines of relation between sensory experience, psychology and society. His work sets in motion open questions about how our behaviour can be altered at micro and macro levels; how we make sense of the world.

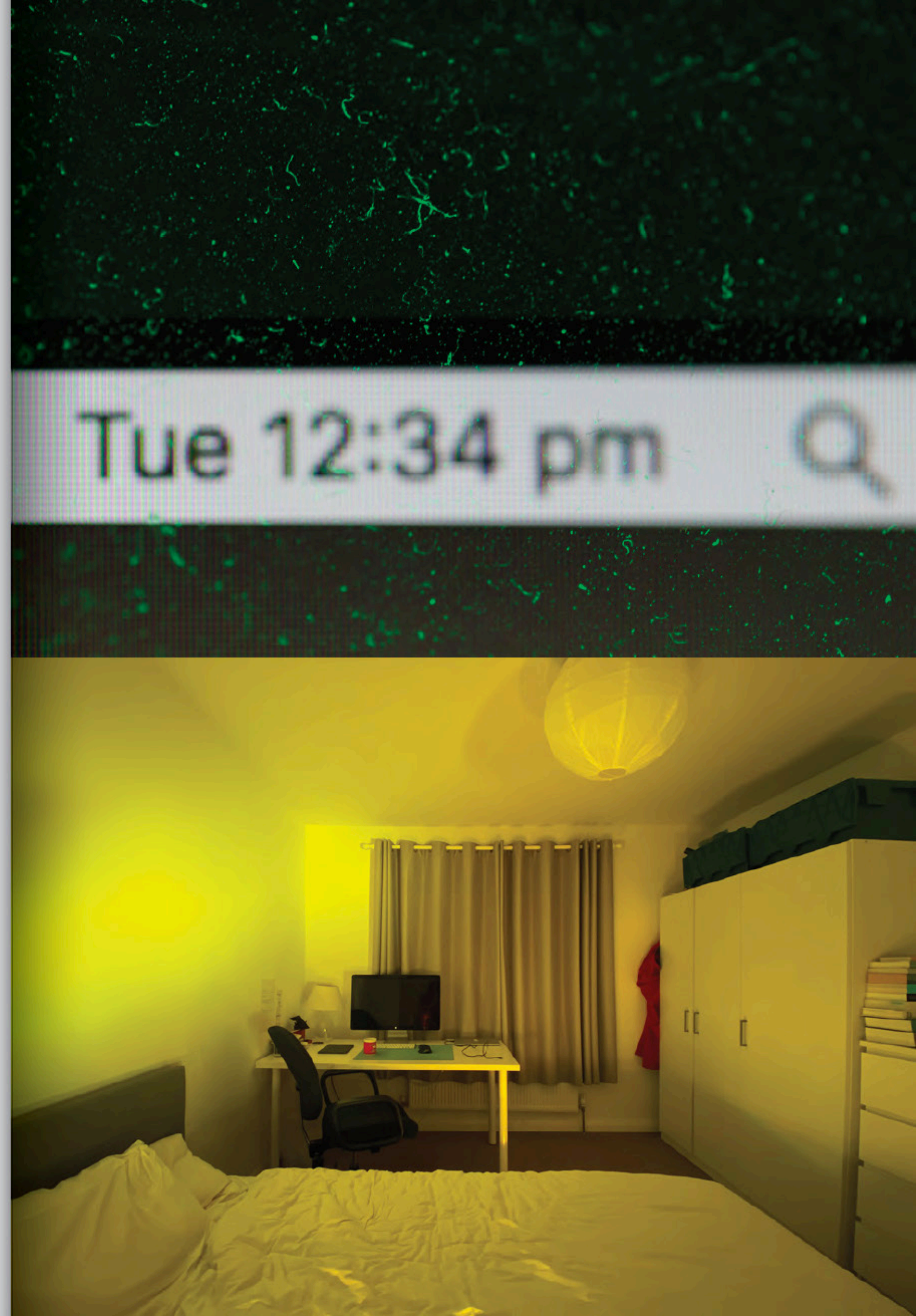
Drawing on scientific methodologies of classification, Hanna's *Predictable Contact* (2017), which was shown at Naughton Gallery, Belfast, is a multi-channel video installation bathed in a synthetic magenta twilight. Thirty-two microfilms¹ focusing on optical perception are projected on to the wall at a scale that stretches beyond scientific testing standards. The uniform magenta hue – a colour Hanna drew on from the space itself and amplified sensorially – dissolves further the optical distinctions between each microfilm. It is generally accepted scientifically that the human brain can only store around seven items in its short-term memory, plus or minus two.² The eye therefore cannot take in all 32 microfilms at once, so focus waxes and wanes. And we can retain only a fraction of what we see. The work puts forth an affective sensory experience to test the limits of the visible and the perceptible in any given moment.

In Hanna's current project, *A Living Colour Index* (2020), he turns the experiment in on himself, while continuing his exploration of how colouration impacts cognition. The work is site-responsive in the most immediate way – a reaction to the lockdown directive to stay home brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. An online project conceived with MAC (Metropolitan Arts Centre) in Belfast, over the course of seven weeks Hanna lights his home with a different colour each week, moving through the colour spectrum from red to violet. The project takes the scientific standard of controlled environmental conditions – his home – and refracts them through an acutely personal lens. Hanna posts a photograph of his home environment to the MAC Instagram account each day, and pairs it with a selected quotation taken from literature, colour theory, science fiction, the arts and philosophy

– each quote broadly related to space, perception, time and memory. With routines, work, and life in general significantly disrupted, what does it mean to experience so much undifferentiated time at home? The logic of switching colours each week is to factor in some variance. As writer Joshua Foer has noted: ‘Monotony collapses time; novelty unfolds it. [...] Creating new memories stretches out psychological time, and lengthens our perception of our lives.’³ Hanna’s project tests out these statements in real time, a 49-day durational performance-cum-experiment.

The project is developing a diaristic quality. Images so far range from a yellow-hued bedroom-turned-office, to an orange-tinged photograph on the wall, to a Mac computer clock, the dust-covered screen pixelated in a green hue. The steady accretion of images recalls filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s early experimental work *La Chambre* (1972). In this silent, ten-minute film, shot in a single take, a constantly rotating camera unfolds a 360-degree view of a small room and the things it contains. Each completed rotation is its own chime of the clock, as it is with the passing colours of Hanna’s *A Living Colour Index*. With both pieces, suggestions of artistic subjectivity emerge through the fixed formal properties of the work’s construction. For Hanna, what informs the image choice each day? Does colouration preordain composition? And if so, does this aesthetic dimension belie a psychological state? Looking retrospectively at the project, I wonder if we might ascertain how each colour affected Hanna’s rest, work, sleep and mood. Would a spate of blue-tinged photographs of screens connote the colour’s capacity to aid focus, or to induce restlessness? Through this voyeuristic, indexical window into Hanna’s lived experience, the present becomes cloudy – yellow’s residual trace in orange’s now – evoking philosopher and critic Roland Barthes’s conception of the photograph as ‘that-has-been’, a ‘superimposition [...] of reality and of the past’.⁴

Hanna’s recent exhibition *Looking Backward* (2019) at PS² in Belfast was drawn to this same temporal collapse, envisioning the promised futures of utopia through a historical text. The exhibition draws its title from Edward Bellamy’s 1888 novel of the same name, then a bestseller and since largely forgotten. Written at a time of significant wealth disparity and socio-economic turmoil, its utopian premise sees the narrator awaken in the year 2000, fresh from a 100 year-long sleep, into a promised new land where wealth is evenly distributed, social justice is the rule not the exception, and banks, money and political parties are obsolete. Hanna is drawn to the social, political and imagined architectures of utopian vision, but also to how







page 92: Michael Hanna, *Predictable Contact*, installation view, Naughton Gallery, 2017. Courtesy the artist

page 95 top: Michael Hanna, *A Living Colour Index (Green Tuesday)*, 2020. Courtesy the artist

page 95 bottom: Michael Hanna, *A Living Colour Index (Yellow Saturday)*, 2020. Courtesy the artist

previous page: Michael Hanna, *A Living Colour Index (Red Wednesday)*, 2020. Courtesy the artist

top: Michael Hanna, *The Ones Who Walk Away*, 2019. Found image

bottom: Michael Hanna, *Computers!*, 2019. Courtesy the artist

utopian ideals fail and become outmoded.

Through photography, text, painting and moving image, *Looking Backward* mimics these structures of Bellamy's utopia in its somewhat wistful aesthetic of future's past. A neon text work, *Computers!* (2019), hangs in the gallery window facing on to the street, a seeming relic of once-newness; the withering language of technological innovation. *The Ones Who Walk Away* (2019), two photographs of aeroplanes flying above a depopulated urban landscape, installed in a deliberately quiet way, evokes another possible fade into obsolescence. We might now wonder: will air travel ever be the same? The short-circuited future of Concorde haunts these images, whose once-bright possibility caught the imagination of artist Wolfgang Tillmans in his 1997 exhibition *I Didn't Inhale* at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Tillmans staged a vision of a world he would like to live in. Concorde was one such emblem. Hanna looks to his own future's-past, too, installing a painting from 2007, *The Diagnostic View IV*. The work directly copies painter Luc Tuymans's *Der Diagnostische Blick IV* (1992), which Hanna had re-made for an application to an anthropological art school in Germany, highlighting other, more personal, avenues that did not come to pass. The future as we think or imagine it never truly arrives, which brings us back around to perception – we can only hold so much in our minds at once.

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1 The artist's term for short individual films or animations.

2 See Wayne Welten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations*, Wadsworth Publishing, 1989, which references George Miller, 'The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information', a paper published in the *Psychological Review* in 1956 which outlines the brain's limited capacity for short-term memory.

3 Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, Penguin, 2011.

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans., Richard Howard, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1982, p.76.