

Flat

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Julian Dashper was born on leap day in 1960, a birth date deliciously portentous. What boy could endure a birthday once every quadrennial? And even if the family celebrated on the 28th, everyone would know it was just pretend. I can almost see the Dashpers now. A little boy screams, “Not fair!” The kids down the road taunt him mercilessly. His cries echo through the modernist house his father designed and built. And finally, there’s young Julian off to his mother’s pottery studio for the comfort of her clay, that messy, malleable material of creation.

No kid would wish for a February 29th birthday and no contemporary artist would wish for New Zealand’s remoteness. Who are New Zealand’s pioneering modern artists? Don Peebles, Gordon Walters, Milan Mrkusich, Ralph Hotere, and Colin McCahon, to name a few—people who, with the exception of McCahon, are unknown to almost all of us. By the time a Picasso washed up for good on the islands’ shores, the rest of the art world had

left the School of Paris far behind. That Kiwi Picasso must have been nothing but dead history to the eyes of any headstrong student, since every aspiring artist struggles with the question of what art should be *now*. This self-critical search has been Dashper’s primary pursuit for the last quarter century—“I make [art] for myself,” he wrote, “an audience of one”—and it must have been a terribly frustrating project for someone living in an upside-down world where modernism was just a castaway.¹

I know Dashper loves his country, and I don’t intend to be unkind to the down under. But when Dashper was still a student, it must have seemed that his entire country knew of modern art only through reproductions in books or pictures in magazines such as *Artforum International*, which can resemble *People* magazine in its attention to celebrity and scandal. There’s something inherently good when artists feel that they have to show up a hostile audience, and even as a young lad, Dashper knew

enough not to make the art of his parents' generation. Instead of fighting their artistic struggles with abstraction, he took abstract art as a given, as the baseline, once even asserting, "Abstract art is a noun."²

Combined, Dashper's infrequent birthday and the glossy reproductions he saw offered the tantalizing paradise of inclusion lost to the stark reality of his twin exclusions. No matter how much he desired to celebrate at both art openings and birthday parties, this promising artist had no choice but to linger at a distance, waiting for that exceedingly rare trip to see a touring exhibition of van Gogh paintings (a small show, where there were only eight paintings total) or to listen to famous artists who were just passing through *Australia*, like the Italian Mario Merz or the Frenchman Daniel Buren.³

In a way, Dashper's own personal remove, characterized by geographical isolation and cultural distance, was, ironically, *Midwestern*. His childhood was just like many of ours—a close-knit family, values steeped in tradition, and most of all, a friendly and comfortable community. But our Midwest has changed. The flat fields have become a flat world of strip malls, satellite television, Southwest Airlines, and Wal-Mart, and our children now live in Dallas and Denver, Singapore and Saigon; everyone eats at IHOP. But Dashper's New Zealand has remained partially protected from this new global sameness, from our strange new world that exists outside of any particular time or place. Though they speak English down there in New Zealand, in my mind his land remains one where the accent will forever sound regional and where the vegetables will always be freshly

FIG. 5
Installation view at New Vision
Gallery, Auckland, 1986.



FIG. 6
Untitled (English White Chain), 1992.

With Thomas Hart Benton's *Self-Portrait*, 1972.



picked. Midwestern forever, unlike you
and me.

*

Dasher spent the first phase of his career trying to face behind him and engage a modern tradition that could never actually be his, since it arrived in New Zealand without any struggle, both all at once and fully formed. A work like *Untitled (English White Chain)* (1992, fig. 6)

is a prime example. Just a length of white plastic chain of the decorative sort that can be bought at any hardware store, it acquires a symbolic register, invoking the serial practice of minimal works of art such as Carl Andre's row of bricks (*Lever*; 1966), as well as the standard museum practice of placing a barrier between viewers and works of art. It is also a way to claim or incorporate other works of art as his own: in Sioux City, the artist used the chain to hang a work

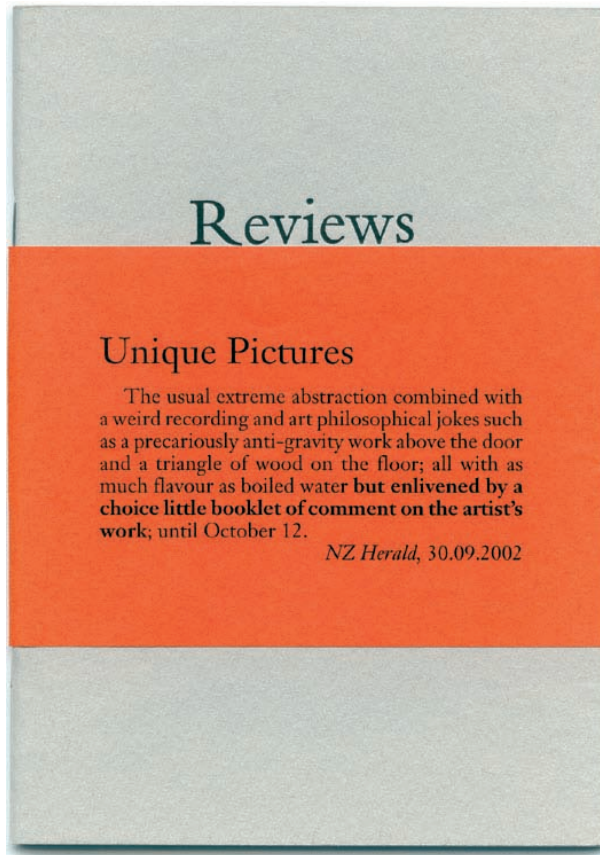


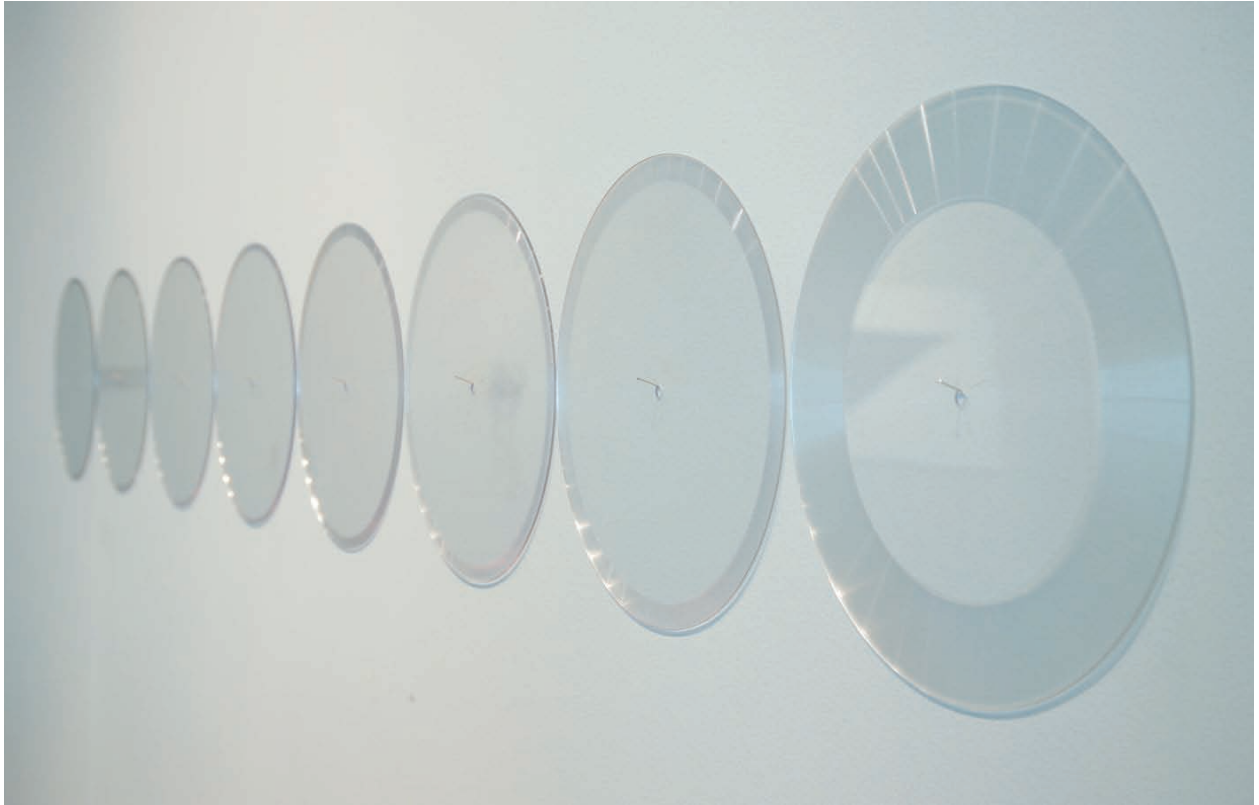
FIG. 7
Reviews... he loves me not, 2002.

FIG. 8
Blue Circles (1-8), 2002-03.

by Thomas Hart Benton, the great American Regionalist who taught Jackson Pollock. Dashper's artwork is an example of what he might call "a verb of sorts," since it transforms minimalism from an art style into an artistic solution to the prohibitive expense of shipping paintings or sculptures from New Zealand to exhibitions worldwide.⁴

English White Chain and other works like it that deliberately reference the history of modern art have the effect of dragging New Zealand back from the future, and this ambition has long

offended certain of his compatriots' sensibilities. In one amusingly hostile reaction, Dashper's art provoked an unbroken string of negative reviews from the *New Zealand Herald's* art critic—twenty-nine stabs in all from 1981 to 2002 (fig. 7).⁵ With this example, I don't mean to lash out at a fellow critic, who does fine work even if he willfully misses Dashper's contribution. Instead I want to illustrate that Dashper has refused to move away from New Zealand even while insisting that his practice be worldly, a pioneering stance for which he has had



no model. A New Zealander, Dashper's work has nothing whatsoever to do with his country. His art is neither about cultural pride nor progress, nor about being an outsider looking in on modern traditions. It makes a much more important contribution to the transnational conversation about what art should be *now*. It takes the artistic inheritance of the modern world and flattens out its pretensions toward depth. Dashper's art plays modern art's vertical register of private expression and cultural elucidation onto a horizontal plane of signification where raw belonging is all that art can declare.

*

Blue Circles (1–8) (2002–03, figs. 8 and 37) is the work of art that most relentlessly pursues Dashper's horizontal vision. It

is the culminating artwork of the entire first phase of his career, which this retrospective appropriately marks. This recent work is a series of eight clear-polycarbonate 12" records complete with sleeves and inserts that he created in dialogue with Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles: Number 11, 1952* (fig. 9), the controversial drip painting that hangs in Australia's National Gallery and that is distinctive for the eight vertical blue lines or poles that dance across its surface.

Dashper made his recordings in front of Pollock's painting on its fiftieth anniversary. There is one record for each of Pollock's eight poles; the record sleeves also feature successively smaller circles in one of four different shades of blue (the sizes correspond to the length of the recording and each shade of blue is duplicated). The recordings become successively briefer because

FIG. 9
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
Blue Poles: Number 11, 1952 1952.
Enamel and aluminum paint
with glass on canvas, 84 x 195 ½ in.
(212.09 x 488.95 cm). National
Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



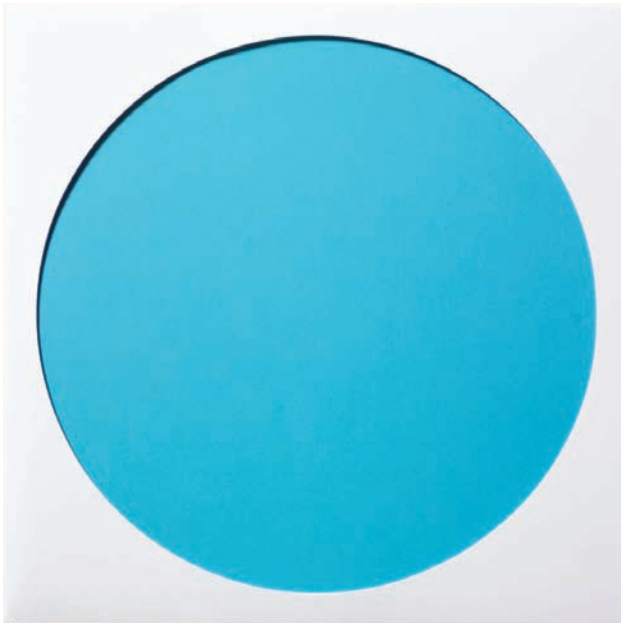


FIG. 10a–b
Front and back sides of *Blue Circles*
#8 record cover. See figs. 8 and 37.

the batteries in Dashper’s tape recorder began to fail: the first album runs for nearly a minute while the eighth lasts just a few seconds. All capture nothing but ambient noise, simply the hushed sounds that people make when looking at great art.

In thinking about Dashper’s *Blue Circles*, I hear seven different voices coming from it—though if the stars had aligned, I would have heard eight! Layered one on top of the other, each voice spins in my head until the meaning of the Pollock painting has totally slipped away. *Blue Circles* completely takes the life out of *Blue Poles*. Circles are poles seen from below, poles spun flat, poles sliced into seven sections.

The first voice I hear is a familiar

one, since *Blue Circles* seems as Midwestern as *Blue Poles* is American: Dashper had last recharged his recorder’s batteries during a visit to Lincoln, Nebraska. Since Pollock’s *Blue Poles* is often considered an exemplary American “action painting,” the work has been interpreted as a visual analogue for the energy that Pollock expended in its creation, in painting it. Dashper’s *Blue Circles* could also be understood as a work about energy spent, though here it would best be seen as part of a depletive process instead of a creative one, since Nebraska’s energy drained away completely by the end of the final disk.

This strategy of draining away is one motif to which Dashper has repeatedly returned, as he did in *Dear Leo* (1999,

fig. 11) and *Leaving Nebraska* (2001–03, fig. 38). In the former, Dashper called and recorded the famous art dealer Leo Castelli's answering-machine message on New Zealand's Father's Day, which fell two weeks after Castelli's death (Leo is also the name of Dashper's nine-year-old son). In the latter, Dashper recorded the drive to the Lincoln airport for his flight back home to Auckland. In each work, the recording freezes for posterity, an activity—Castelli speaking in New York, Dashper riding in Lincoln—that would otherwise have faded into the past of memory.

A second conversation in *Blue Circles* is one that updates the physical properties of Pollock's own all-over painting. *Blue Circles* transforms the colored skins of paint that soak into the canvas and rest

on the surface of *Blue Poles* by resurrecting the painting's physical materialization, which gets lost in its visual reception: when you look at it, the painting is only a picture and not a dynamic process. Dashper's work, however, doesn't let viewers forget Pollock's full-body presence, which is what it takes as its subject matter: Dashper substitutes the live Australian audience for Pollock's own body. The circles literally record how viewers engage this painting through their own movements, through their restless shuffling and scuffling. Dashper's mundane transformation of Pollock's creative dance drags the masterpiece from its glorious past into our average present.

This desire to transform modernist masterpieces is another theme that

FIG. 11a–b
Front and back sides of *Dear Leo*
record cover.

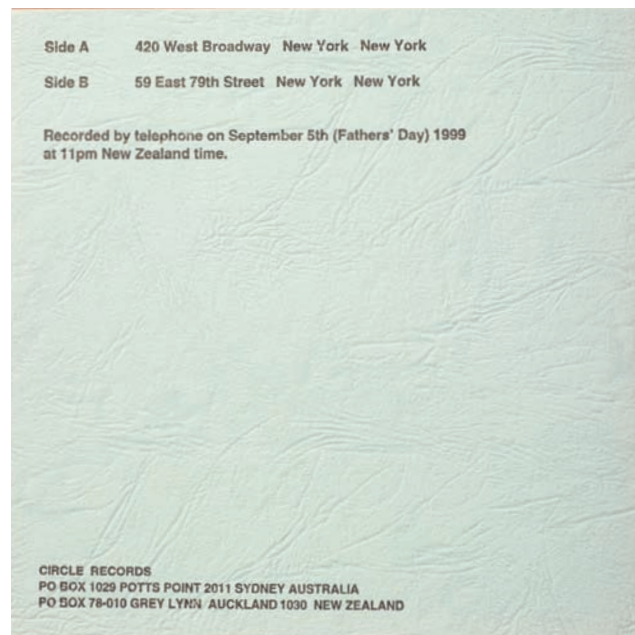
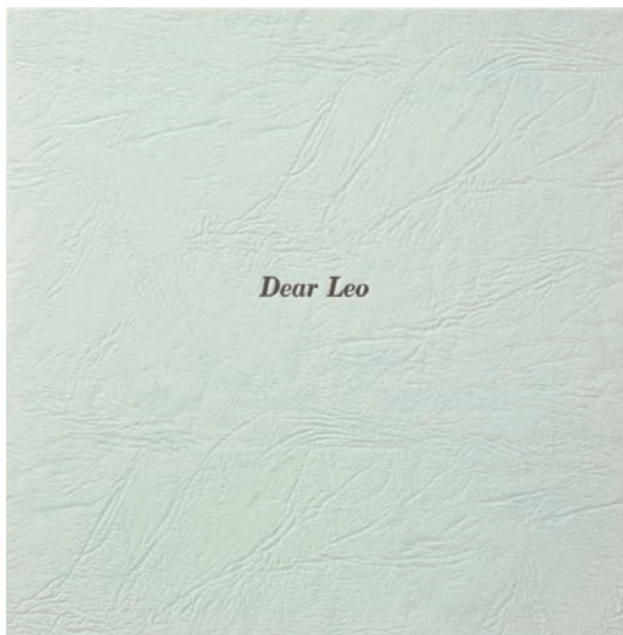


FIG. 12
Untitled (The Warriors), 1998.



Dashper often revisits. His many untitled drumhead works from the 1990s depict targets (colored concentric circles), a frequent image used by American painters Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Jasper Johns. *Untitled (The Warriors)* (1998, fig. 12) takes this theme even further: the drumheads are mounted on a kid-sized drum kit, suggesting the big beat of American modernism, its celebrity status throughout the art world, and hinting at its renegade persona, which all rock-and-roll bands share. But since Dashper embeds these references in what amounts to a toy, he lets us know that modern art is the game he's playing, and finally shows that modernism

itself is just a game, a format with rules and players.

A third way to understand *Blue Circles* might be to focus on the controversy that modernism itself relentlessly incites. When the National Gallery of Australia purchased *Blue Poles* in 1973, it paid what was then a record sum for a painting by a twentieth-century artist: two million U.S. dollars. The newspapers and taxpayers were outraged as they usually are when museums purchase advanced art for large amounts of money. A newspaper headline even accused: "Drunks did it!"⁶

This type of cultural scandal has repeatedly played out for all the usual

reasons; other famous instances include when the National Gallery of Canada bought the New York School painter Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967) and when London's Tate Gallery acquired Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (1966), which is a stack of bricks. Few seem to complain when a museum buys a Grant Wood. In *Blue Circles* Dashper has taken this routine controversy as his subject—why are record albums visual art? How is the sound of a gallery art? Why can't we listen to them? Here is an invocation of problems that concern the nature of art.

Controversy has been another regular subject for Dashper. For instance, an early painting entitled *Regent* (1986) is an energetic composition of thick bright paint strokes on brown velvet, which suggests a connection between the neo-expressionism of artists like Julian Schnabel, then prominent in the

art magazines, and the genre of popular art, such as the ever-accessible velvet Elvis. A more recent work like *The Big Bang Theory* (1993, fig. 14) continues this tongue-in-cheek attitude. It is Dashper's largest drum work, and consists of an installation of five drum kits in which the bass of each is labeled with the name of those famous-only-in-New Zealand artists. So there is *The Hooters*, *The Woollastons*, *The Angus's*, *The Drivers*, and *The Colin McCabons*, New Zealand's art equivalents of rock stars. Imagine the local press's response to young Julian's insolence: "If it is irony," wrote T. J. McNamara, "it is witty. If it is serious it is nonsense."⁷ While this and other earlier works deliberately courted a response like McNamara's, Dashper has recently resigned himself to a more self-confident acceptance of his art's inherent difficulty, no longer needing to provoke.⁸

FIG. 13
Julian Schnabel on location filming *Basquiat*, 1996, New York. Photo by Julian Dashper.

FIG. 14
Installation view of *The Big Bang Theory*, 1993.





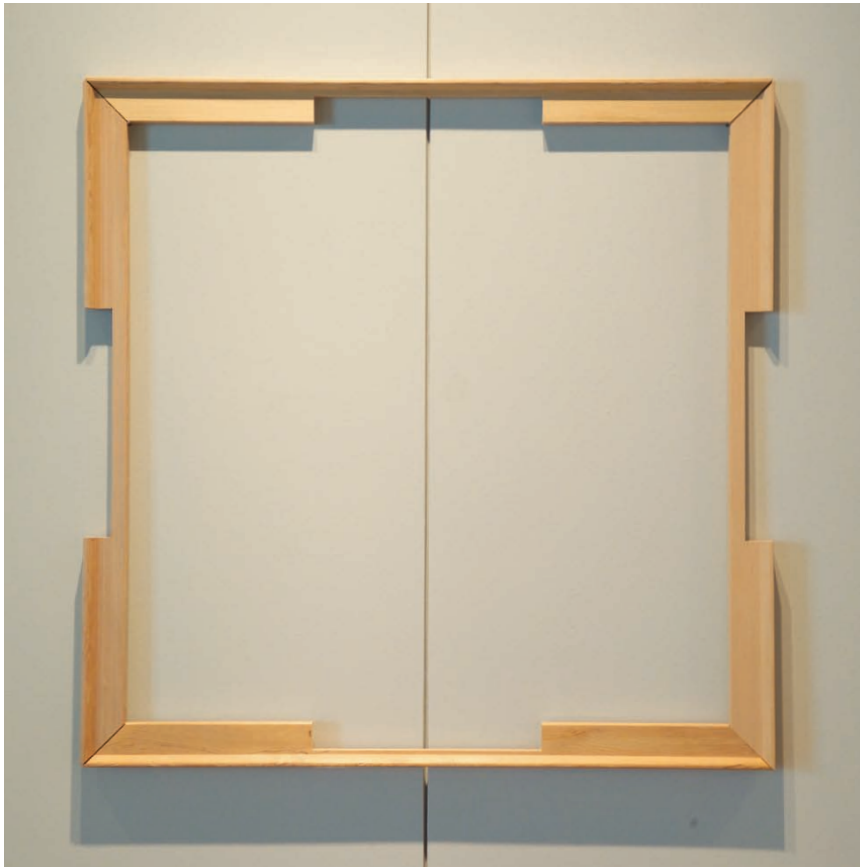


FIG. 15
Untitled 2001–02.

A fourth voice I might hear in Dashper's piece is the minimalist Donald Judd's, which asks me to consider how *Blue Circles* reduces Pollock's polychromatic residue (his flung paint) to the furrows carved into the blank, clear polycarbonate disks. This is a purification that stresses the dynamic facts of the action painting—the flung paint—as a frozen actuality: the painting and the record are identical to their facture. In this way, Dashper invokes Judd's famous claim that "the dripped paint in most of Pollock's paintings is dripped paint."⁹

Through this literalization *Blue Circles* strips the painting of its metaphysical pretensions; Pollock liked to argue that when he was in the act of making a painting, he was channeling the collective unconscious, one of Carl Jung's ideas in which he was interested. This engagement partially explains Pollock's brash claim, "I am nature," a statement on which Dashper riffed in 2003.¹⁰

The Judd connection is especially significant in thinking about Dashper, since he now owns forty-six books about the artist. Something of a practical

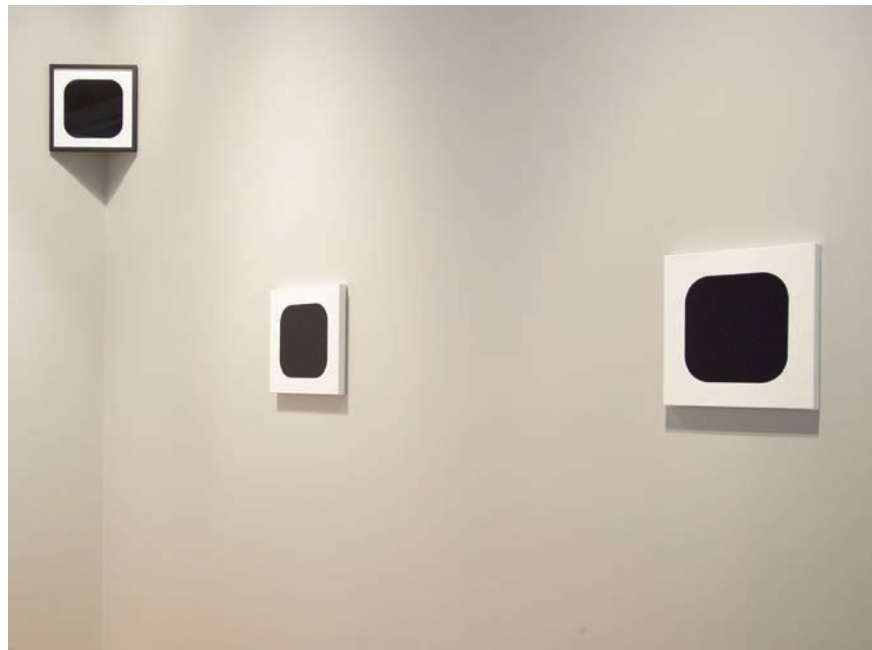
minimalist, Dashper spent three months at Judd's Chinati Foundation in the spring of 2001, playing the cowboy while forging *Untitled* (2001–02, fig. 15), his spare series of stretcher-bar works (stretchers are the wooden supports or frame underneath the canvas of a painting). He even adopted Judd's name on the occasion of *Introducing Donald Dashper*, an exhibition at Amsterdam's PS in 2002.

But in contrast to Judd, who abandoned painting for sculpture early in his career, Dashper has expanded beyond painting; he could fairly be considered a relentlessly transmedia conceptualist whose project is designed to devalue every standard artistic medium through open-ended reference and formal disruptions. *Untitled* (2000, fig. 16) is a clear

example of such a disruption. It is a photograph from which he produced two identical paintings; this order is exactly the reverse of the norms of reproduction, which move from the handmade original to machine-made copies.

The fifth comment I hear concerns the general status of *Blue Poles*; for as Dashper remarked, "Abstraction became generic long ago."¹¹ Though Australia purchased the painting to buy what it considered to be international cultural legitimacy, nearly any work from the accepted canon would have sufficed: *Blue Poles* just happened to be for sale. Would a Mondrian have meant anything different for Australia's worldly currency? What about that Kiwi Picasso? Each accomplishes the same end, which is both an attempt at and a claim for inclusion. As

FIG. 16
Untitled, 2000.



Dashper often likes to say, “the National Gallery of Australia feels to me like the elephant’s graveyard for modernism.”¹²

In the sense that modern art has become generic, become a type, *Blue Circles* is not itself a unique work. It is part of Dashper’s personal museum of art that counts, a collection that includes tributes to works by Mark Rothko (*Outside the Rothko Chapel*, 2002–03, fig. 36), Dan Flavin (*Buzz*, 2001), Sherrie Levine, (*Untitled (Sherrie Levine Napkins)*, 1992–94, fig. 26), Judd, of course (*Adelaide Judd*, 2002–03, fig. 17), and all those New Zealanders. *Blue Circles* is also part of Dashper’s collection of art’s significant institutions. Much like a lepidopterist chasing a butterfly, *Blue Circles* captured and pinned the National Gallery of Australia. Other works added are *Artforum*

International (*Artforum*, 1992, fig. 27; *Review*, 1992, fig. 29; *What I am reading at the moment*, 1993, fig. 30; and *Untitled (Intimacy Ad)*, 2005, fig. 43), the Stedelijk Museum (*Thin Ice*, 2000), Castelli Gallery (*Dear Lea*, 1999, fig. 11), and the Luxus Gallery (*Luxus*, 1997, fig. 18). In this way of thinking, the final claim made by *Blue Circles* is that any art in any place would do just fine, since all are interred in the same metaphorical graveyard.

The sixth conversation directly relates to art’s death, since *Blue Poles* is a particularly problematic painting by Jackson Pollock. In addition to its return to figurative representation (the poles are people), it belongs to the period of Pollock’s career where he had “lost his stuff,” according to critic Clement Greenberg, who had been Pollock’s greatest

FIG. 17a–b
Front and back sides of *Adelaide Judd (side 1)* record cover.

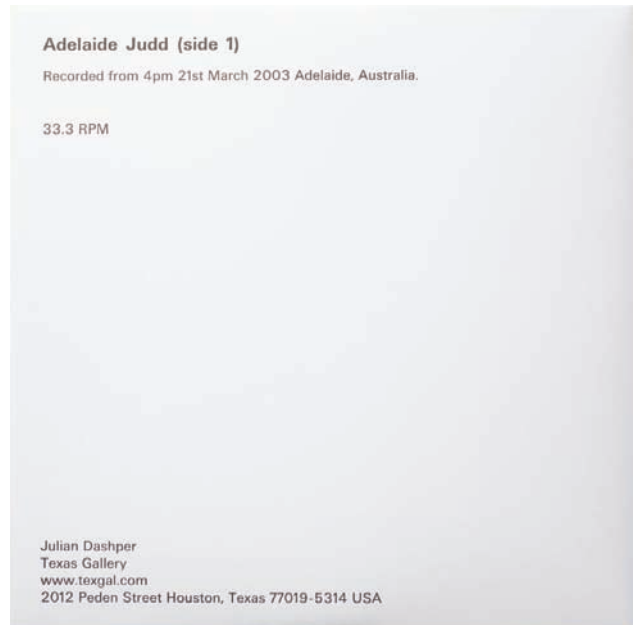




FIG. 18
Front and back sides of *Luxus*
record cover.



champion.¹³ And though Dashper is forthright that “the ‘death of painting’ is not my dialogue,”¹⁴ it’s hard not to think that *Blue Circles* is the logical conclusion to this sort of rhetoric. If in 1952, the most important modern artist can be said to have lost his stuff, then why not go ahead and say that by 2002, art had lost its stuff? Isn’t this what *Blue Circles* might show? Doesn’t it eliminate the high ideals of modernism in favor of the surface decoration of style and the cacophony of competing voices?

The final note I hear from *Blue Circles* is the concluding one, the only reasonable understanding that I can take from Dashper’s artistic project, given the previous six dialogues, which are themselves grounded in an engagement spanning

twenty-five years. Dashper reverses Pollock’s creative trajectory, which moved the drip painting from the horizontal floor on which it was painted to the vertical wall where it is seen, revealing weighty formal, social, and psychological depths to all who choose to see them. In returning Pollock’s vertical to the horizontal axis that all record albums must have, Dashper requires that we play the piece over and over again, spinning off different meanings with each listen (I’ve already played it six times for us in this essay). But eventually, like any album, it becomes overly familiar—just ambient noise that no longer captures our attention. Flattened by Dashper, the only sound that remains in art is the insistent plea to belong.

Notes

- 1 Julian Dashper, *Untitled (on the 4th July) 2005* included in this volume, note 54.
- 2 Dashper, quoted in Mark Kirby, "Pop's Art," in *The Twist* (Dunedin Public Art Gallery: Dunedin, New Zealand, 1998), 27.
- 3 See *Chronology* included in this volume.
- 4 Dashper, *Untitled (on the 4th July) 2005*, note 21.
- 5 T. J. McNamara, *Reviews... he loves me not* (Art School Press: Manukau, New Zealand, 2002).
- 6 Anthony White, ed. *Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles* (National Gallery of Australia: Sydney, 2002), 7-9.
- 7 McNamara, *Reviews... he loves me not*, 25.
- 8 Dashper, *Untitled (on the 4th July) 2005*, note 54.
- 9 Donald Judd, "Jackson Pollock" (1967), in *Judd, Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints* (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: Nova Scotia, Canada; New York University Press: New York, 1975), 195.
- 10 In 2003, Dashper showed a record entitled *I Am Nature* at the Texas Gallery, Houston.
- 11 Dashper, quoted in "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? A Conversation Between Julian Dashper and Trevor Smith," in *The Twist*, 19.
- 12 Dashper, *Untitled (on the 4th July) 2005*, note 45.
- 13 Greenberg, quoted by Rosalind Krauss, in Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Boston: MIT Press: 1993), 251.
- 14 Dashper, quoted in Kirby, *The Twist*, 26.

FIG. 19
Blue Circles (1-8) (detail), 2002-03.