Anne Neukamp

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Getting Things Undone

You're sending an email. It's the first of many, today as always, because we are all correspondence-burdened bureaucrats now. To fire off the message you click automatically on a little glyph: if the email program is Microsoft Outlook, the option forced upon many and unthinkingly accepted by many others, you scoot your cursor upwards to an icon shaped like a paper aeroplane and, bang, send. You don't linger on it – there's no time – and maybe you never, ever, previously registered what the sign represents, even the poetics of it: winging something out into the world with a message inside, hopeful that it'll go where you want. A paper dart feels like the most archaic, analogue, haphazard and slow way of communicating; email, by contrast, feels instantaneous and rock-steady (unless you wind up in spam). There's maybe a little triumphalist irony built into the design. Who pauses to reflect on this? A graphic designer on holiday, perhaps. And, also, Anne Neukamp.

A major component of the visual vocabulary of Neukamp's paintings is the vast, near-invisible ocean of anonymous formatted imagery that exists, primarily, online. Knockoff icons, dull clip art, logos, functional models for 3D printing. This is the visual language that we, in some degree, engage with every day and yet mostly don't see at all, navigating it fluently with our minds elsewhere. We see – sort of – but we don't look. In this sphere, we're automatons, being daily trained to use our eyes less. Now consider Neukamp's *Untitled* (#1)(2023). On a grid – the device artists often use for copying and scaling up imagery, she has hand-painted fifteen times, on a couple of different scales and on one occasion rotated, what looks like a typical, if less recognizable, 'send' icon: a folded sheet of paper, its inside black-shadowed.
In contrast with the hyperspeed of click and send, Neukamp has laboriously, almost sacrificially, hand-painted this innocuous thing, brought it – and, perhaps, everything it capsules about online obliviousness – to the forefront of out attentions. She's almost made herself machinelike in reproducing it, but the painting is full of tiny, handmade differentiations and complications. Absurdly, comically, instructively, and protectively, it feels as slowed and painterly as the wipe-clean and transactional online world can get; and when we look at it, we're really seeing. It would be too much to say that Neukamp, here, redeems her vocabulary. Rather,

she steals back a borderless and deadening symbolic field for painting –
for herself, and for the rest of us.

In doing so, she also reflects on where materiality has gone, and how it
might return. *Token* (2020), for example, is a pixelated yellow-and-black
icon that, even to those of us less versed in the world of Bitcoin and
NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens), suggests some kind of slightly random optical
stand-in for a financial instrument – in fact, it's helpful not to know
the specifics, just that 'it's from the internet', a waystation between
the real and not real (money, and speculation).
Now, in Neukamp's hands, it's something very like an abstract painting,
though also to a weird degree representational. And thanks to her pro-
cess, which is improvisatory – she doesn't know how the painting will end
up – it's now a thing with all kinds of interesting visual niches to ex-
plore, to get caught up in. The left side, for example, is relatively
perspectival and cartoonishly spatialized, except that the space reverses
and contradicts itself as you look. The right side flattens out, so that
space in the painting becomes an impossible thing.

Meanwhile, on another level of generosity, Neukamp is colliding textures.
She works in oil, acrylic and that oldest and most flexible of painter-
ly mediums, egg tempera, employing a complex process so that everything
is effectively on the same plane. Her 'backgrounds' are often textured
and lusciously abraded. The painting, as opposed to the atemporality of a
glyph – the same every day – feels to have time in it and asks for time
to regard it. It takes a weightless thing and gives it acres of ambiguous
substance. This process can sometimes turn itself inside out: try getting
to the bottom of the complexly composed *Planks* (2022), in which some su-
per-flat representation of the titular builder's-yard item is stacked up
three ways across the canvas, the sections intersecting in spatially im-
possible ways. Here as elsewhere there is a deadpan, mordant humour in
Neukamp's composing. How can these planks do that, you might ask for a
second, how can they outrun physics. Because they're not real. Because
they were never real. Because they're painted. The original 'plank' here
is a ghost – cue postmodern theorizing about the absence of an origi-
nal referent – something we're leaving behind in an increasingly virtual
world, as our lives transfer into whatever enfolding successor to the
'metaverse' takes hold. But for now, if we're lucky, we can still move at
the speed of art.

Much of Neukamp's work does funny, compensatory things to time: to busi-
ness time, specifically. Not long ago, she began painting on large
calendrical organisers – dodging the artist's fear of the blank surface,

working with and against their grids, and also operating in a manner that recalls both the dailiness of On Kawara's date paintings and the looseness of Martin Kippenberger's hotel stationery drawings. Whereas the squared-off format and dates of the formatted calendar are bossy and controlling, Neukamp acts like a worker gone rogue, reserving the right to do what the hell she wants over the template, turning it against itself, often dizzyingly with regard to 'realness' and surface and spatiality. In one example, painted depictions of 3D renderings of liquid spills meet a 'real' postcard depicting a painted egg (*Untitled* [monthly planner #13], 2022); in another, a Felix the Cat-type figure disappears sideways where his body meets the grid's verticals (*Untitled* [monthly planner #3], 2022). In such gaming we glimpse someone faced with a cookie-cutter world and still thinking, inventing, being free, and that freeness transfers to the viewer, too, who gets to navigate these paintings and discover their kinks and, in gamer parlance, their easter eggs without being bossed around.

It's notable that one of Neukamp's calendar drawings features a circular, perspectival hole, around – and, impossibly, behind which cluster ghostly afterimages of the coinlike circle that would have been cut out to make it (*Untitled* [monthly planner #1], 2022). Neukamp likes to poke holes in things and leave teasingly open – like a hole – the reason why. This is highly apparent in her *Piles* series. The first 'hole' here: what are they piles of? Some looks like clip-art representations of coins, another anachronism that pretty soon we might not use at all but that will enjoy a longstanding and near-nostalgic second life in digital form (Hey, remember physical money? Remember Scrooge McDuck, surrounded by his bullion?). Others have a bite taken out of them – except, of course, there was no biter – and seem to have been based on representations of cookies. Therein, of course, is another slice of wit, since 'cookie' has a different and more nefarious meaning online. In culinary reality, something delicious for you; online, something you can't eat or see and that's also tracking you and making money for someone else, part of the contemporary gold rush of data mining. Online, you don't get cookies – well, you can 'accept' or 'refuse' them, but that's it – rather, cookies get you. The only way you get to possess the cookie is to paint it, or, as a viewer, to have this kind of ontological fun with it. In Neukamp's cookie-pile, the top two cookies are solid but bitten, and the next three down are hollowed out (*Pile* [#5], 2021). They're her cookies now, and they don't work anymore, except to make a painting.

The effect of multiple, repeated renderings of these piles, paradoxically, is not to create clarity. The stacks keep appearing, in the way that the

same icons keep appearing online and making us see them less and less, but in this case the effect is that we see them more, without coming to the kind of conclusions that would allow us to dismiss them. A solid pile of whatever they are is bitten into, from the right, by a contour that looks a bit like a jigsaw puzzle edge (*Pile* [#3], 2021) Another, teetering, appears supported – as if it needed it – by a tubular line (whose shadowing, inevitably, feels spatially impossible) (*Pile* [#6], 2021). The realm of the intangible, such paintings imply, can be so much more sportively weird than what big business foists upon us.

And, since we're probably stuck with it, why not have some ironical fun? In *Familiar Object* (2017), Neukamp offers up a hybrid form twice: an L-shaped red form that looks clipped from a 3D render of a bit of furniture (perhaps) accessorized with something like a squirt of mercury or a metal propellor. Again, she's turned herself into an analogue copy-paster, repeating the enigma, as if that would help us identify it. What's familiar is that this stuff comes from the internet – beyond that, Neukamp is signal-jamming, undoing a smooth transaction, and giving us something to see. The rhythmical *Leverage* (2017), which insistently 'repeats' its primary image three times, uses a form redolent of an opened laptop to create a trapdoor in space – the whole, with a flat form on the right completing a rotational motion made by three combined shapes, suggests instructions for something, but for what? Similarly, *Routine* (2015) offers four views of a hand holding a circular shape: here's how you do it, whatever it is. You feel like the circle might have had a logo on it, one that the artist has assiduously scrubbed away.

In her refusals, Neukamp makes sure to offer something else. Humour; compositional satisfaction; a Bartleby-like refusal to conform to the pressures of administration, to – in the language of corporate self-help books, 'get things done', rather a combination of doing and undoing. A painting like *Sign* (2018) is out, on one level, to create gentle frustration. Its central form is a fusion of schematic and puzzle piece, so that it fizzles on a double level: there's a suggestion of sign language – but most of us don't know sign language – and there's a jigsaw part that will never find its home (because it's marooned in a static painting). But as a composition it's very satisfying, the graphic firmness and rightness of the central form against the eye-snagging texture of the greyed-out background – overlaid on a peachier hue, which breaks through here and there – plus Neukamp's patented sneakiness concerning flatness and depth where she's outlined the hand-jigsaw thing. The painting reminds us that satisfaction does not always come from completing a task, or from rationality – that something unfinished that you can keep going back to might be worth more than the

bland pleasure of getting things done. That a key without a lock – as in *Picklock* (2017) might still constitute a gift.

Beyond this, Neukamp's art might represent a sly coup. Many artists, seeking the impression of relevancy, are on the lookout for as-yet-unbroached subject matter, the previously unseen that pinpoints the contemporary moment, without recognizing that it might be right in front of our eyes. Neukamp has sedulously claimed – without a great deal of respect for it – an entire bland yet latently melancholic visual world hiding in plain sight, a world that when transferred to painting sits in some visual equivalent to having a word on the tip of your tongue. (Nothing here feels to come directly from, say, Apple's operating system.) Technology has turned the act of seeing into instantaneous recognition or maybe even less – simply mindlessly moving your finger or cursor to the right part of a screen. Painting, in being the most patient and layered of formats, the handmade inverse to this technocratic landscape, has a role to play in rehabilitating eyes dazed and blunted by these daily clockwork processes. It's precisely because we never really saw before what Neukamp is placing before our eyes that we can enter her paintings and get ensnared in their ludic complications, asking 'wait, what's that?' while feeling uncannily like we've been there before. We have, just not like this, and we never lingered so long.

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