



VHILS

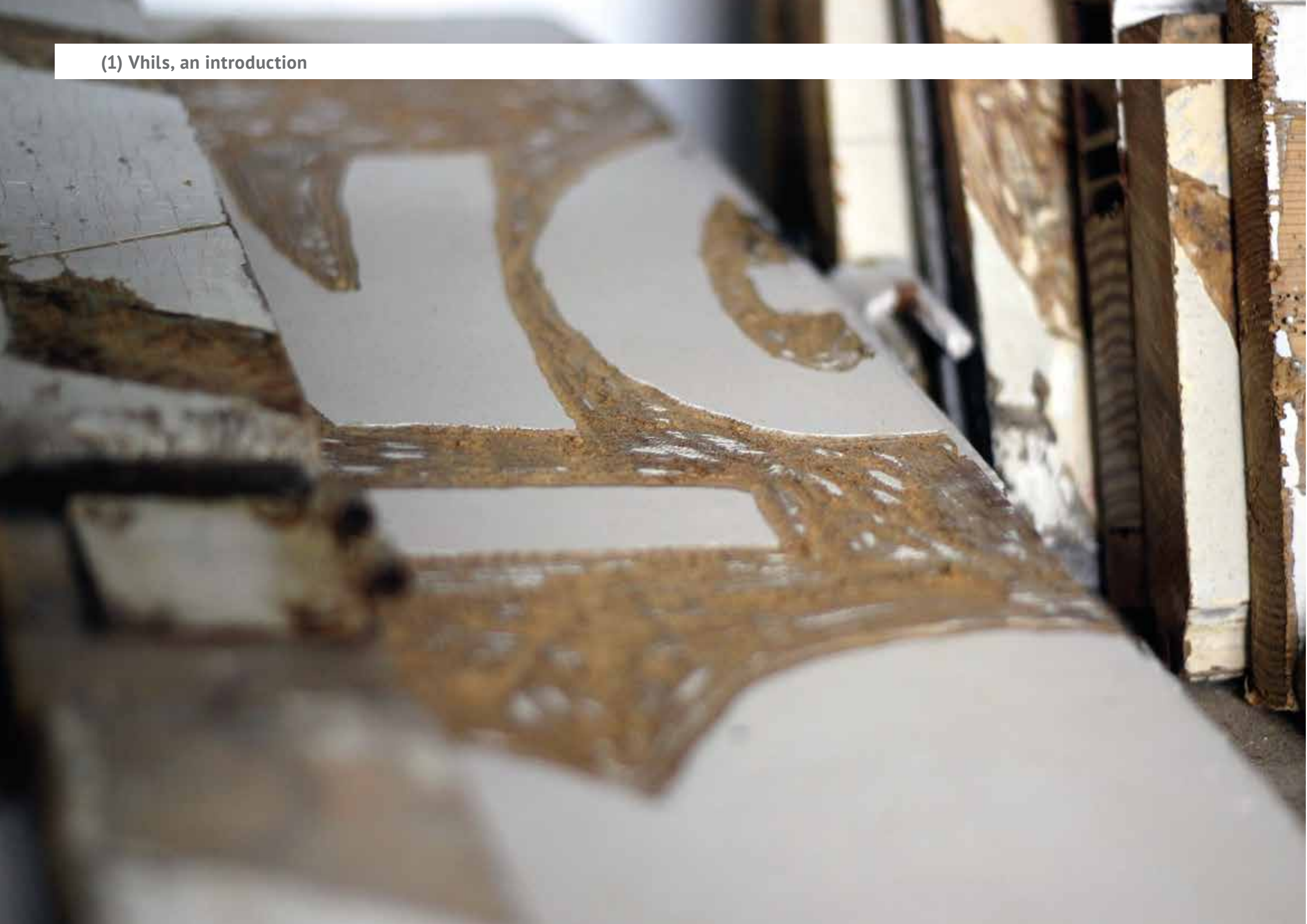


reality

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(1) Vhils, an introduction



Vhils, an introduction

Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto (born 1987) has been interacting visually with the urban environment under the name of Vhils since his days as a prolific graffiti writer in the early 2000s.

His groundbreaking carving technique – which forms the basis of the Scratching the Surface series and was first presented to the public at the Visual Street Performance group show in Lisbon in 2007 and at the Cans Festival curated by Banksy in London the following year –, has been hailed as one of the most compelling approaches to art created in the street in the last decade.

This striking form of visual poetry, showcased around the world in both indoor and outdoor settings, has often been described as brutal and complex, yet imbued with a simplicity that speaks to the core of human emotions, expressing the struggle between the aspirations of the individual and the demanding, saturated environment of the urban spaces he lives in.

Vhils' ideas, concepts and techniques were greatly influenced both by graffiti – expressing the creative takeover of public space by the individual – and the contrast created in the streets of Portugal between what remained of the political murals that emerged in the aftermath of the 25th April 1974 revolution (which overthrew the conservative dictatorship that had stifled the country since 1926) and the new graphic languages displayed by advertising which had since taken over the country's public space. The resulting superimposition created what he saw as an interesting visual dialogue, forming chance arrangements which shaped his perception of how things are formed and would lead him to the notion of creating compositions through the use of different layers. This would be a pivotal concept he would further explore after coming into contact with the technique of stencilling around 2004.



He was also affected by the huge transformations brought on by the expansion of Lisbon's suburbs over the surrounding countryside, replacing the colours, serenity and freedom present in nature with the more oppressive, monotone designs of buildings, factories and urban infrastructures that expressed a new social and economic paradigm which he later realised was part of an increasingly intense process which is imprinting a uniform design on both the form and content of modern cities around the world.

From this point of view, Vhils' work deeply reflects the search for a lost essence, which his process of carving walls and other media – often described by the artist himself as a form of contemporary urban archaeology – aims to symbolically bring to surface. This act of excavation is a conceptual attempt to reflect upon the different layers that form us, both individually and collectively. It highlights the ephemeral nature intrinsic to all things, pointing out the poetics of decay and replacement, destruction and creation which the accelerated pace of progress has instilled into the urban dimension of contemporary life.

This concept is further emphasised by his recurrent use of the portrait – highlighting the often minimised importance of the individual amidst the artificial environment he builds and lives in. Also worthy of note is the way he often portrays unknown, ordinary people, in a bid to underscore the contrast between the simplicity of normal human lives with those superhuman ideological constructs presented by advertising – opposing these with a new generation of Unknown Icons. Often carved in dilapidated buildings and neglected corners of the urban space, these are also used to symbolically restore a degree of humanity to lifeless, derelict environments.



Vhils has also been exploring the fundamental relationship between the individual and his surrounding environment based on the notion of reciprocal shaping – a process by which both develop a shared character. From this point of view, both the urban environment and the people who inhabit it are intrinsically locked in a cycle of influence, where each is shaped through this inescapable interaction. This was clearly explored in the carved styrofoam pieces first presented in his Diorama series in 2012.

When he first began using stencils, Vhils followed the common practice of creating by adding layers to form contrast and depth. However, he eventually became interested in exploring other possibilities and came upon the idea of reverse stencilling – combining the notion of creating by means of destruction he retained from graffiti vandalism, with that of creating through the removal of layers. This new approach, first explored by cutting through amalgamations of advertising posters he gathered from the streets, was eventually transferred and applied to walls – replacing the cutting knife with the drills, hammers and chisels that have become one of his hallmarks.

Although his artwork has moved away from graffiti, many of the tools and techniques he resorts to have a clear connection with those used by the most extreme form of this illegal practice, emphasising the aesthetics of visual vandalism. By employing etching acid, household bleach, corrosive chemicals and other abrasive materials, Vhils has intimately linked the poetic expression of his work with the brutality of the process.

He was to take this ruthless aesthetics even further in his works involving pyrotechnic explosions, exemplified in the collaborative video piece M.I.R.I.A.M. with Portuguese music collective Orelha Negra released in 2011. Other collaborative efforts with musicians include a long time partnership with Portuguese-Cape Verdean rapper and social activist Chullage, with whom he worked extensively in projects of a social nature in impoverished neighbourhoods. He has also designed the artwork for some of the musician's records.



Based on these premisses, Vhils has also amassed a huge body of work in other media, such as paper, wood, metal, styrofoam, screen prints, and installations among others. He has been producing gallery work and commissioned pieces since first signing up with renowned Lisbon gallery Vera Cortês Art Agency in early 2006.

This partnership would see him included in the gallery's main group shows in the following years and would lead to his first major exhibitiv venture – an ambitious three-part show in collaboration with architect Miguel Maurício held in Lisbon between September and December 2006 called Building 3 Steps. The gallery would also hold his first solo exhibition in January 2008, titled Even if You Win the Rat Race, You're Still a Rat. He was also one of the driving forces behind the graffiti and urban art annual group show Visual Street Performance, held in Lisbon between 2005 and 2009.

After finishing school in 2005 he worked as a freelance designer in advertising, motion graphics and illustration.

He enrolled in the courses of Graphic Design (at Lisbon independent art school Ar.Co), and 2D/3D Video and Animation (at Lisbon new technologies school Restart), but completed neither, choosing instead to move to London in 2007, where he took the Foundation Degree in Art Skills and Practices at the University of the Arts – Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design.

In London he started working with screen print studio Pictures on Walls (POW) and become involved with the growing global street art scene. After making a striking impression with his carved pieces at the May 2008 Cans Festival – earning him a place on the cover of venerable British daily The Times – he was invited to join the team at the exclusive Lazarides gallery. This would see him included in its Outsiders group show held in New York in September/October 2008, alongside some of the gallery's most prominent names. It also led to his first solo exhibition outside Portugal at Lazarides' London space in July 2009 under the name Scratching the Surface.



Since then he has been taking his art to many corners of the world – in solo and collective shows, collaborations with other artists, commissioned interventions, urban art festivals and independent actions.

Some of his most ambitious projects to date were carried out in 2012. In the beginning of the year he was invited by the leading Magda Danysz Gallery, with which he had recently started working in France, for an artist residence at their new space in Shanghai, China. For two months, Vhils and his recently assembled team were busy working both indoors and outdoors. While there, he witnessed a major urban renewal process being implemented by the local government which was expropriating city centre properties under a gentrification scheme.

This theme struck a chord with Vhils, who had already observed the same process in other parts of the world, including Portugal. His outdoor intervention in the city – to accompany the solo exhibition in the gallery – involved carving the portraits of several of the people who had been displaced on what was left of their

demolished homes, in a symbolic gesture meant to highlight some of the individual and collective memories of the former community.

In September 2012, Vhils and his team arrived in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where for over a month they worked in the city-centre slum of Morro da Providência alongside local inhabitants, where a similar process was taking place. Like in Shanghai, the city government was also implementing a major urban renewal scheme in a bid to revamp some of Rio's less glamorous areas in the run-up to the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. After listening to the aspirations and concerns of some of the inhabitants regarding the expropriation process, Vhils carved their portraits on what remained of their homes, again in a symbolic move to express part of the individual narratives that composed the communal history of the city's oldest slum.



Most of these actions offer an incisive reflection on issues that have been recurrent and transversal to Vhils' work, such as the notions of urbanity, development, consumerism, waste, and their consequences on the course of the human story. The narrative that Vhils has been composing over the last few years with his work is heavily based on a critical, yet deeply interested reflection on the experience of living in the contemporary urban environment at this complex moment in history, focusing on highlighting and exposing the sombre dimension that lies behind the current model of development and the material aspirations it encompasses – unsustainable, yet inebriating; overwhelming in its relentless effacement of individual and cultural uniqueness.

Miguel Moore

March 2013

(2) A selection of works ~ Walls



Lisboa, Portugal, 2014





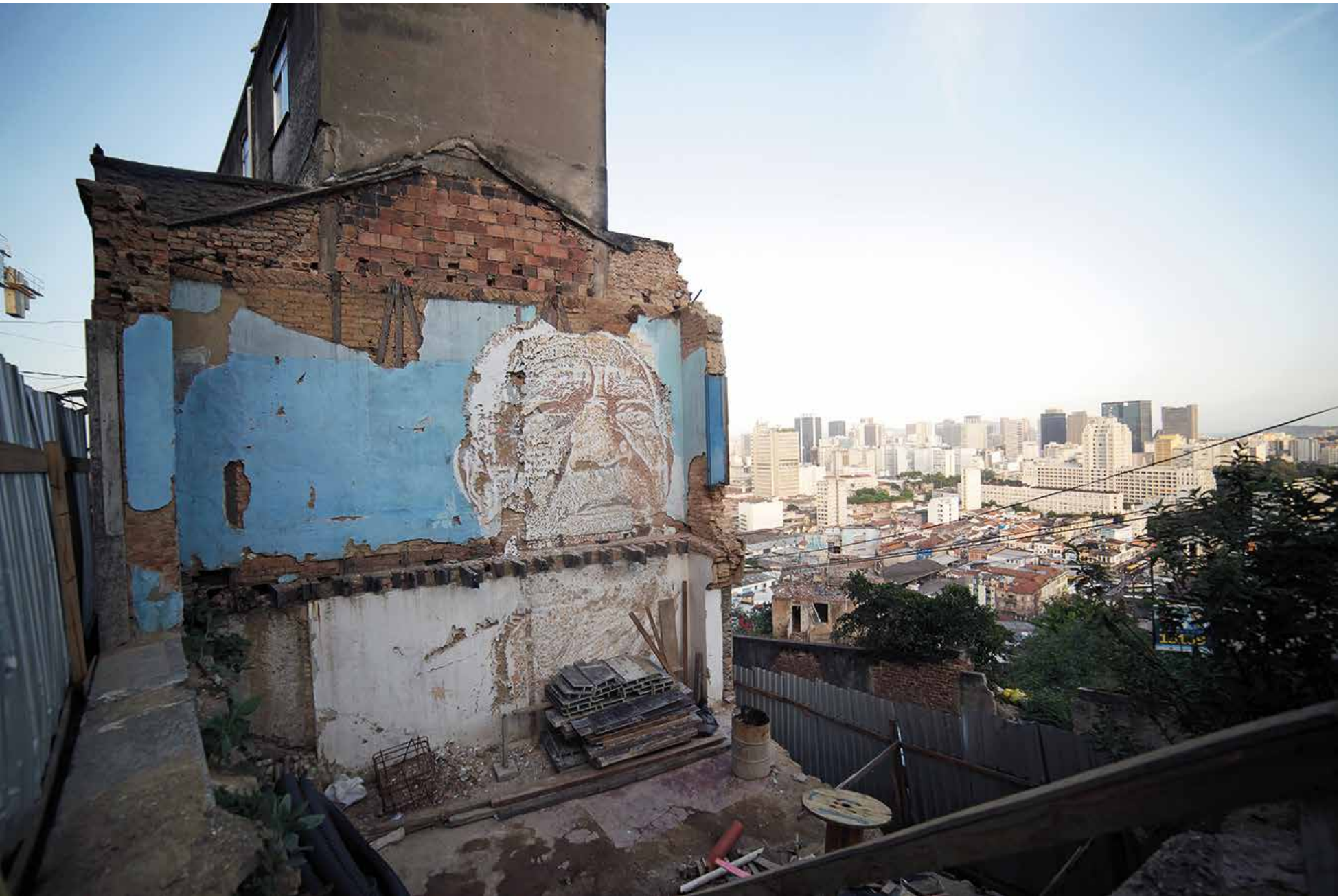


Alcántara, Lisboa, Portugal, 2014









Shanghai, China, 2012

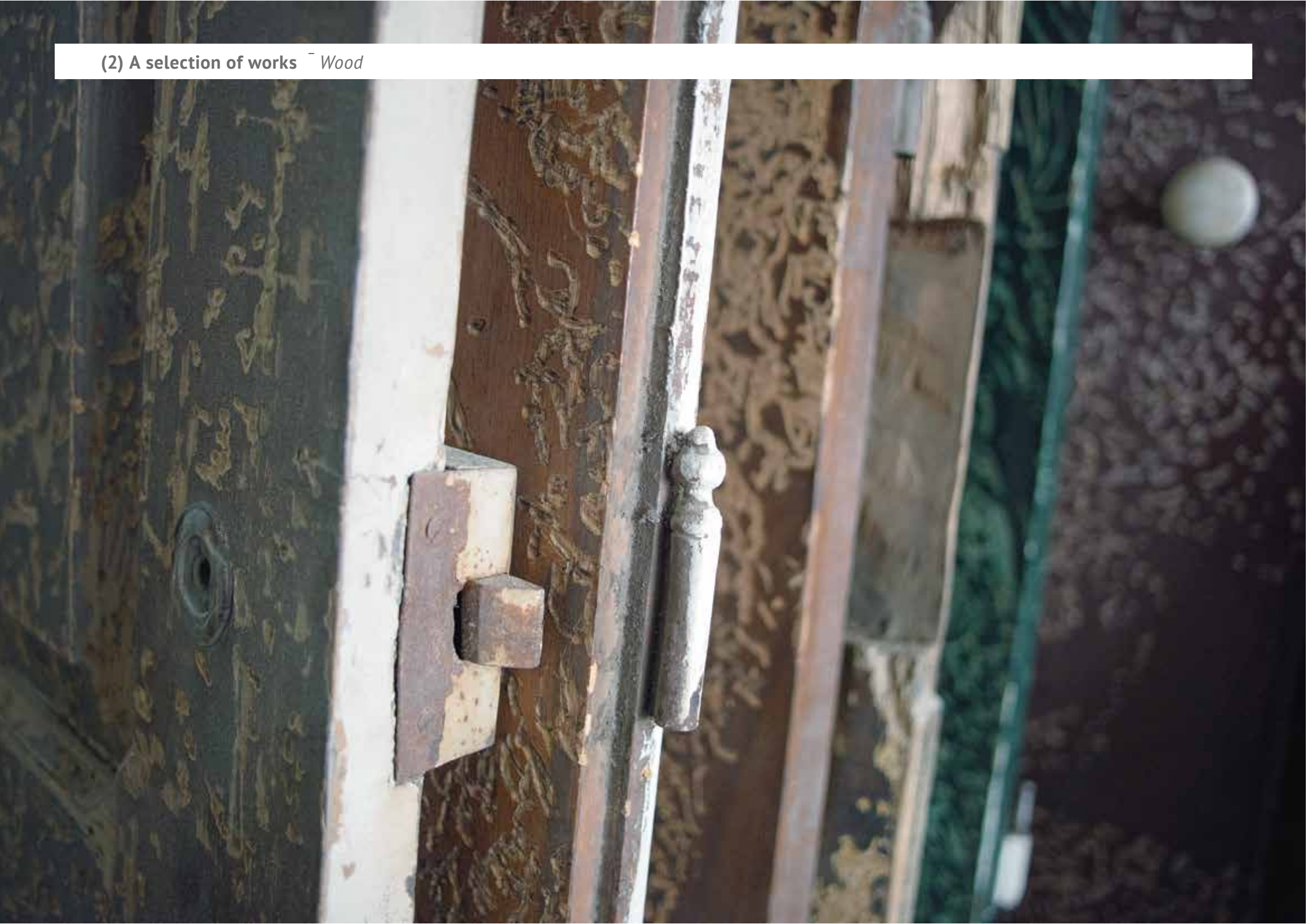




The Cans Festival, London, UK, 2008



(2) A selection of works - Wood









(2) A selection of works - Metal

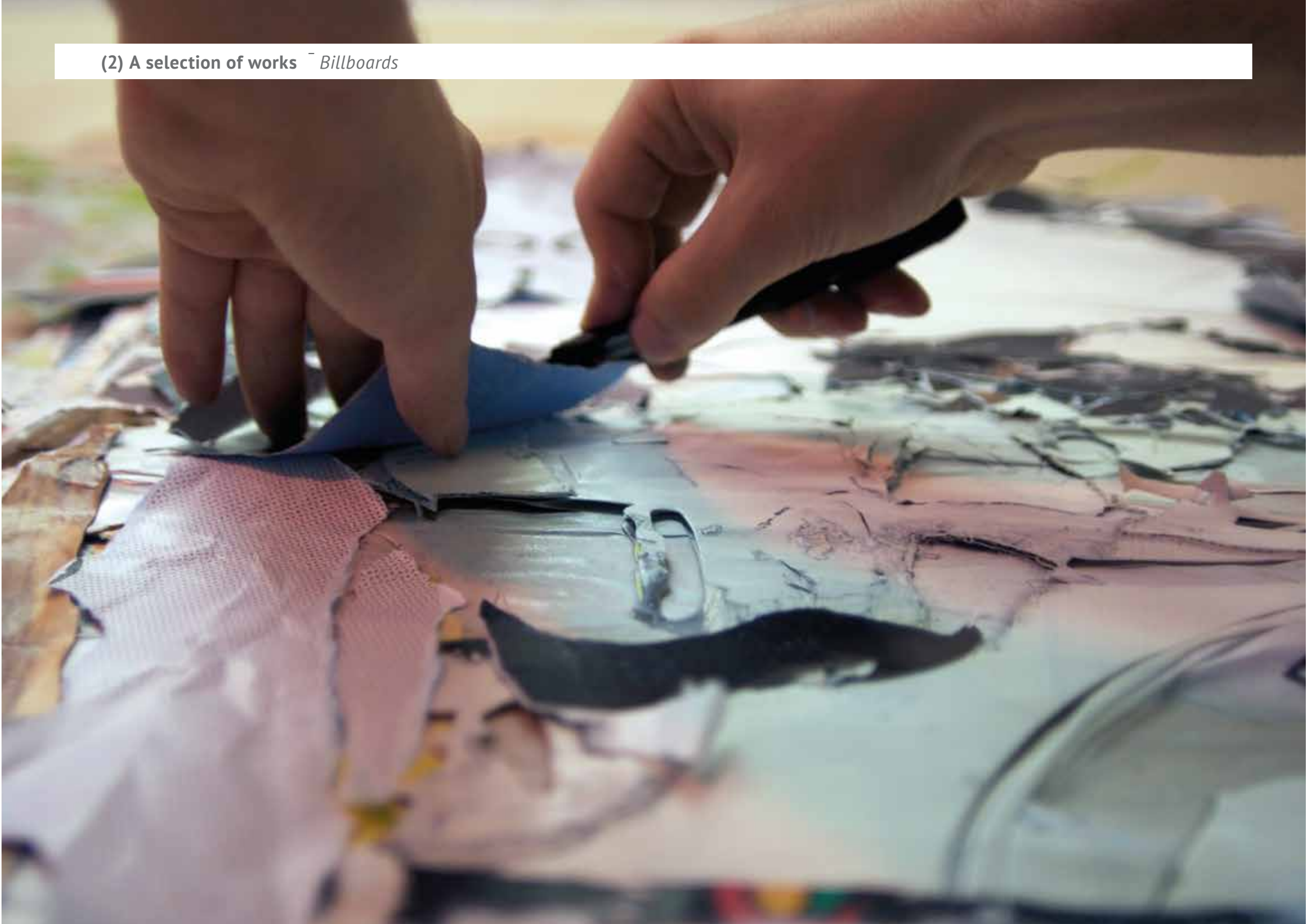








(2) A selection of works ~ Billboards





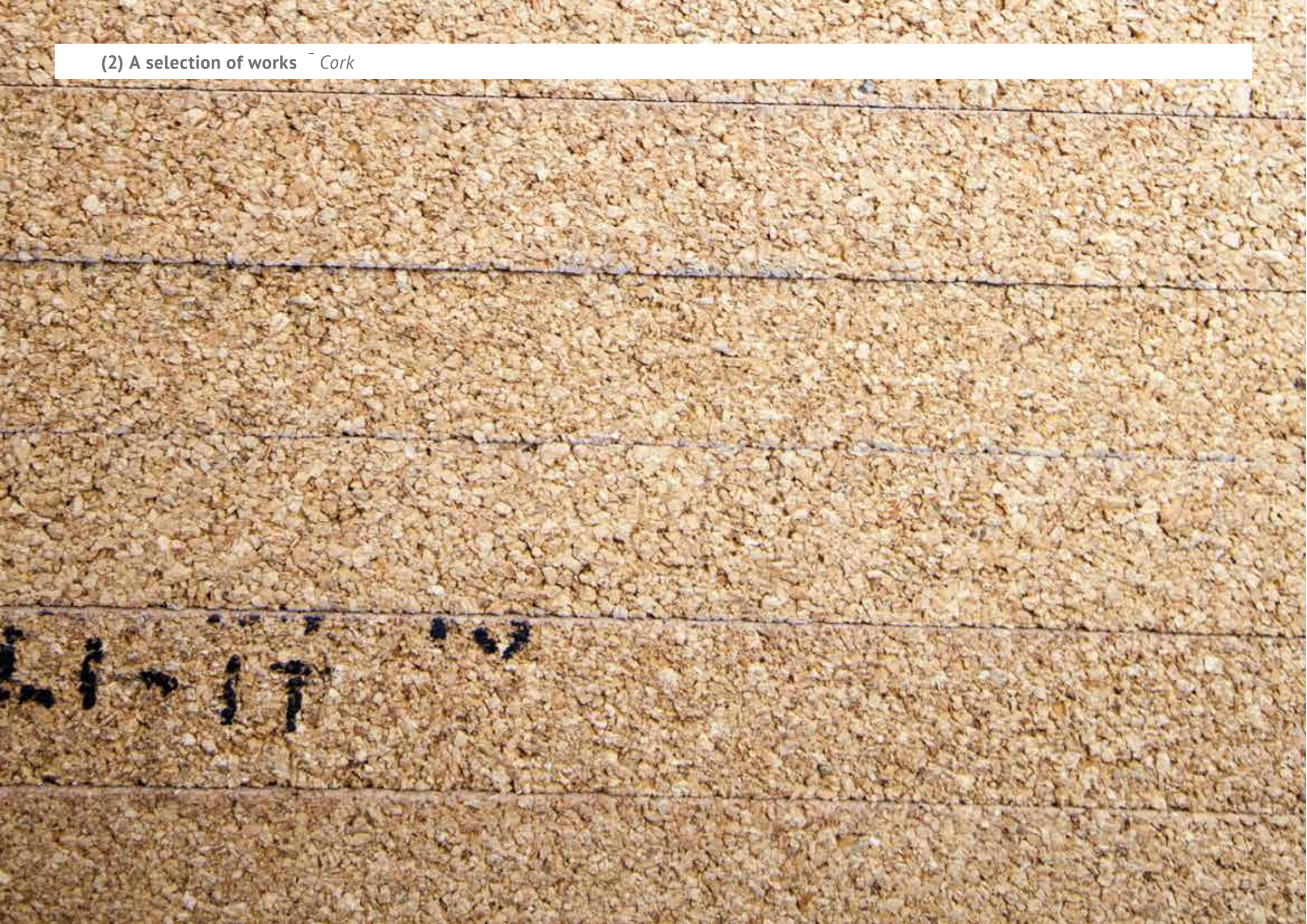








(2) A selection of works *Cork*







(2) A selection of works ~ Dioramas

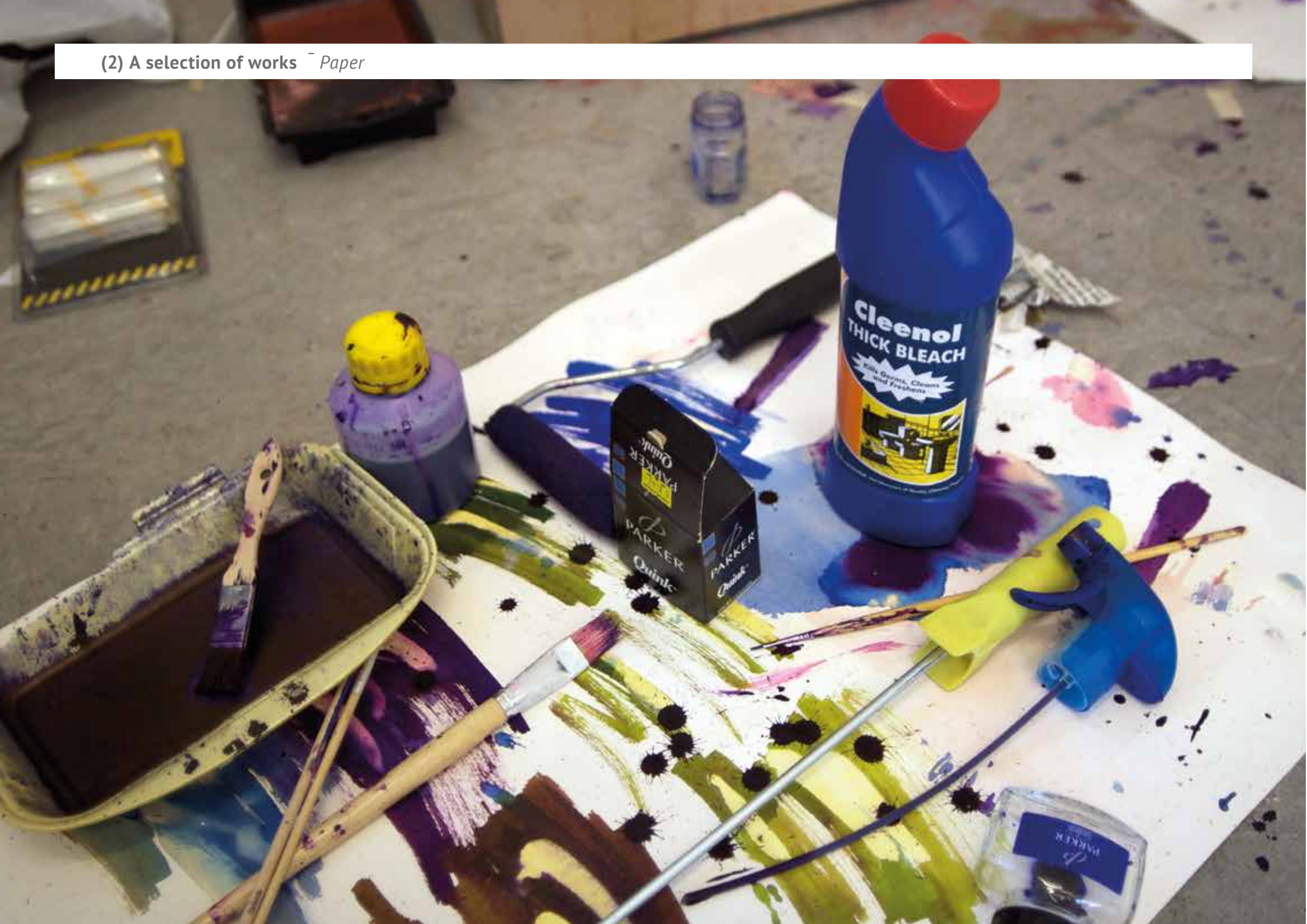








(2) A selection of works ~ Paper



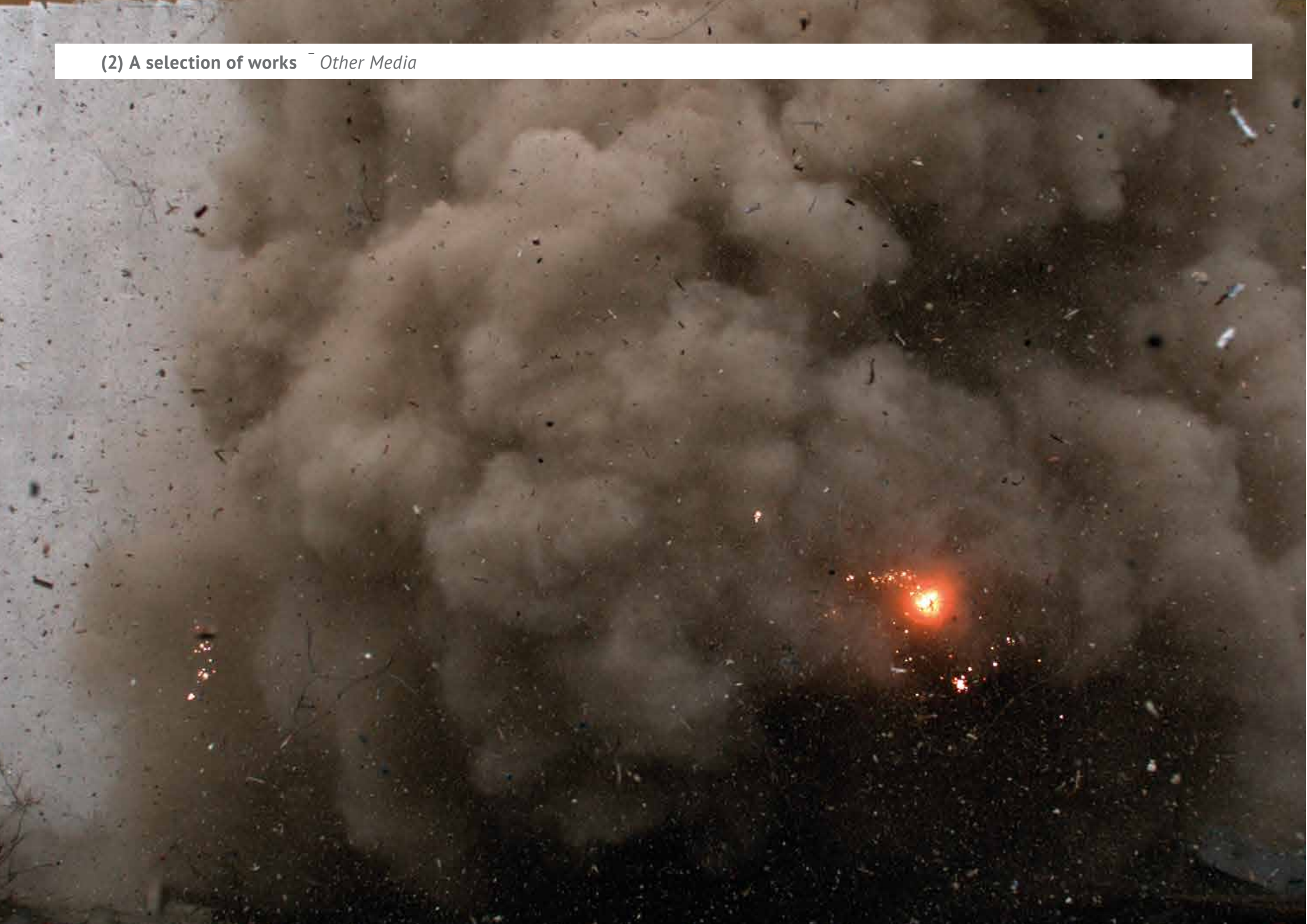




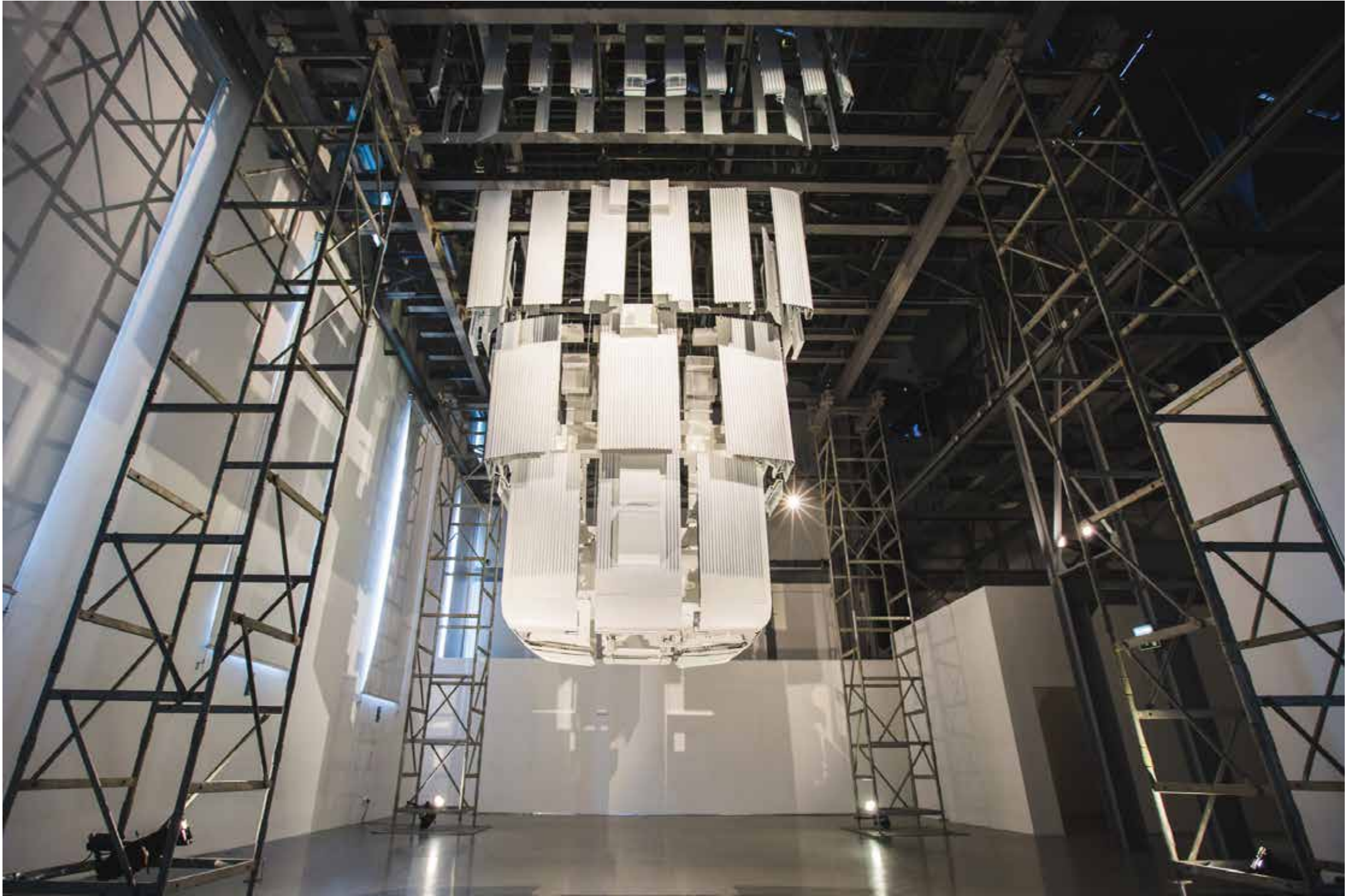
Fragmentation Series #2



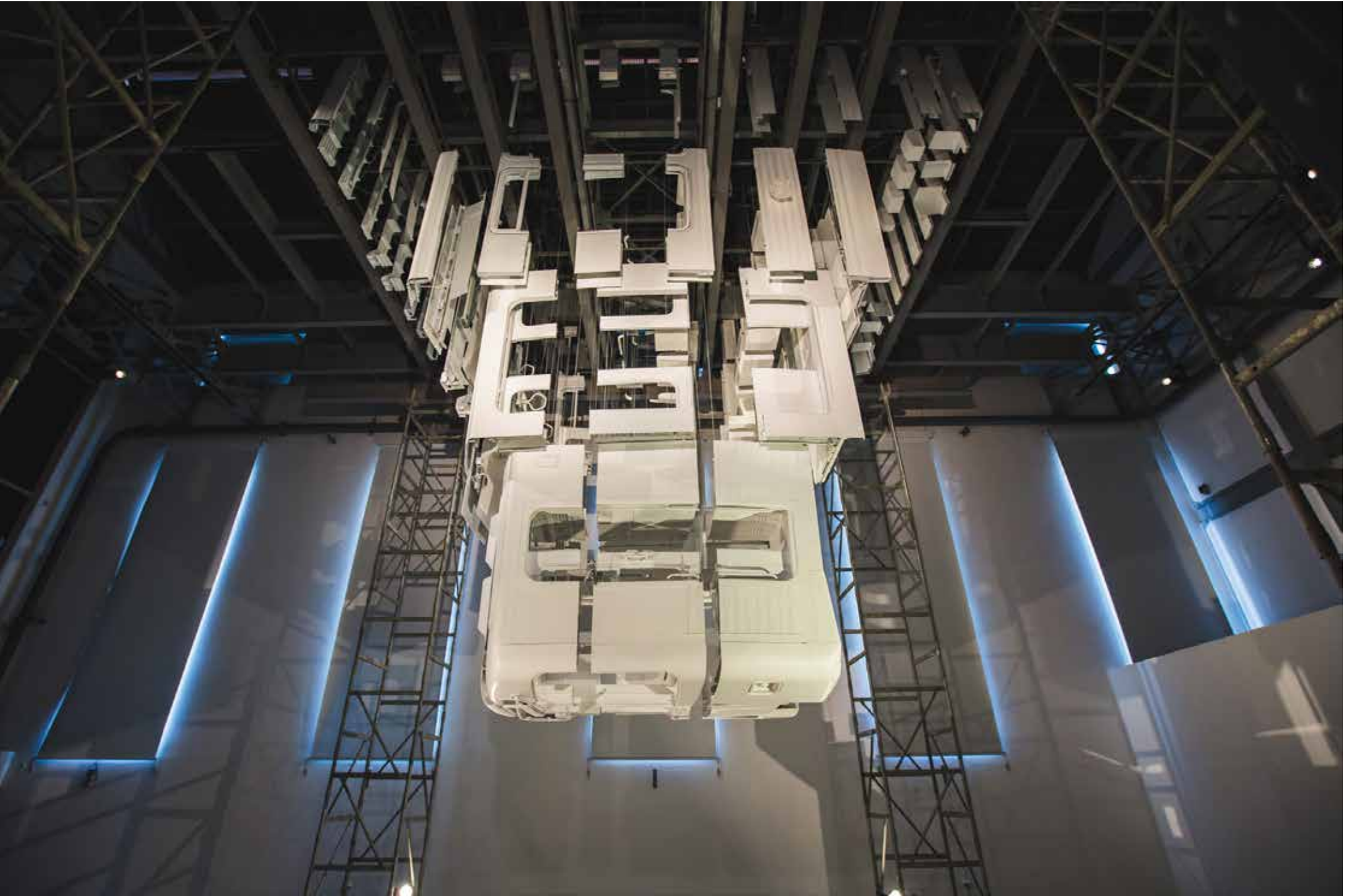
(2) A selection of works *Other Media*



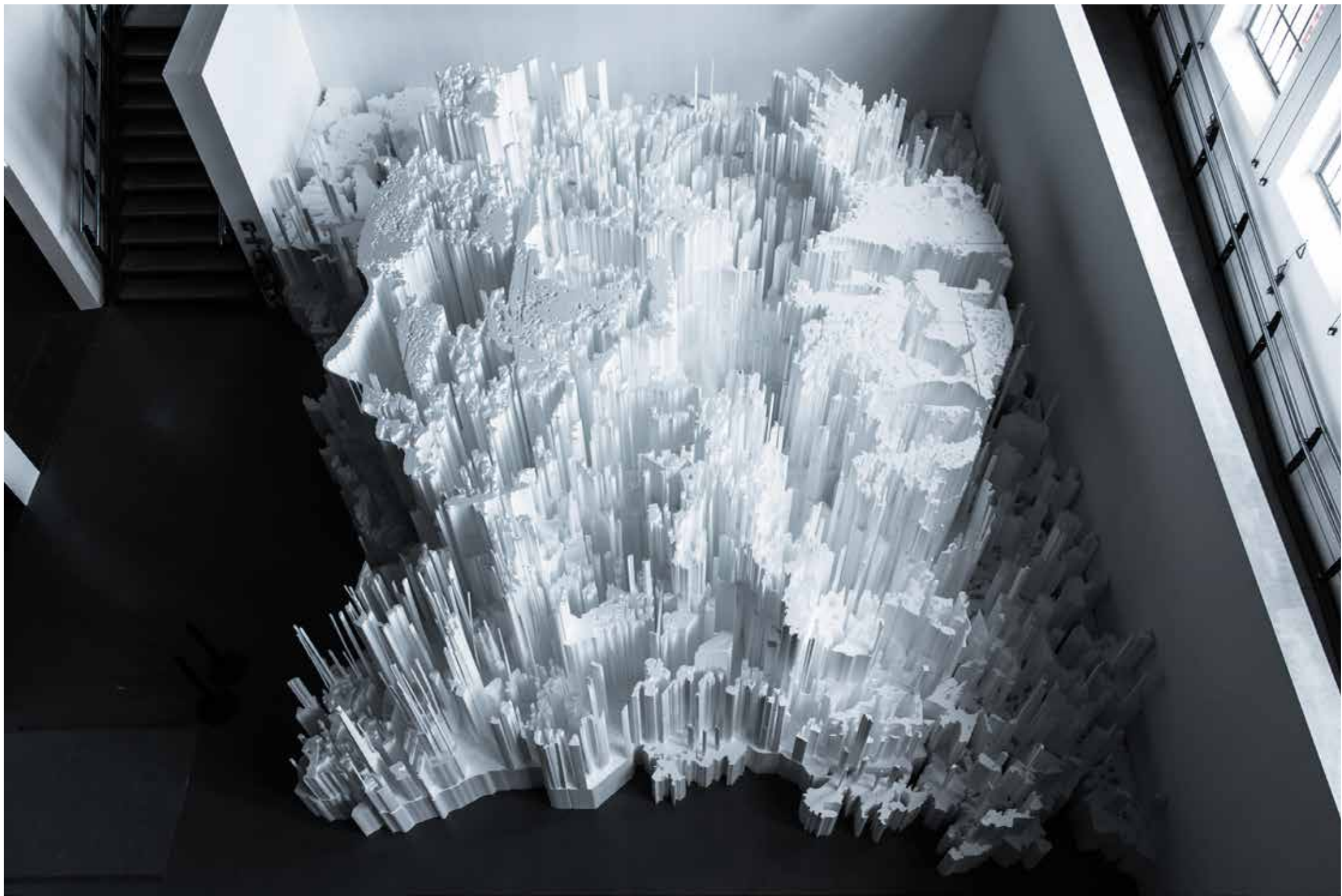
Dissection

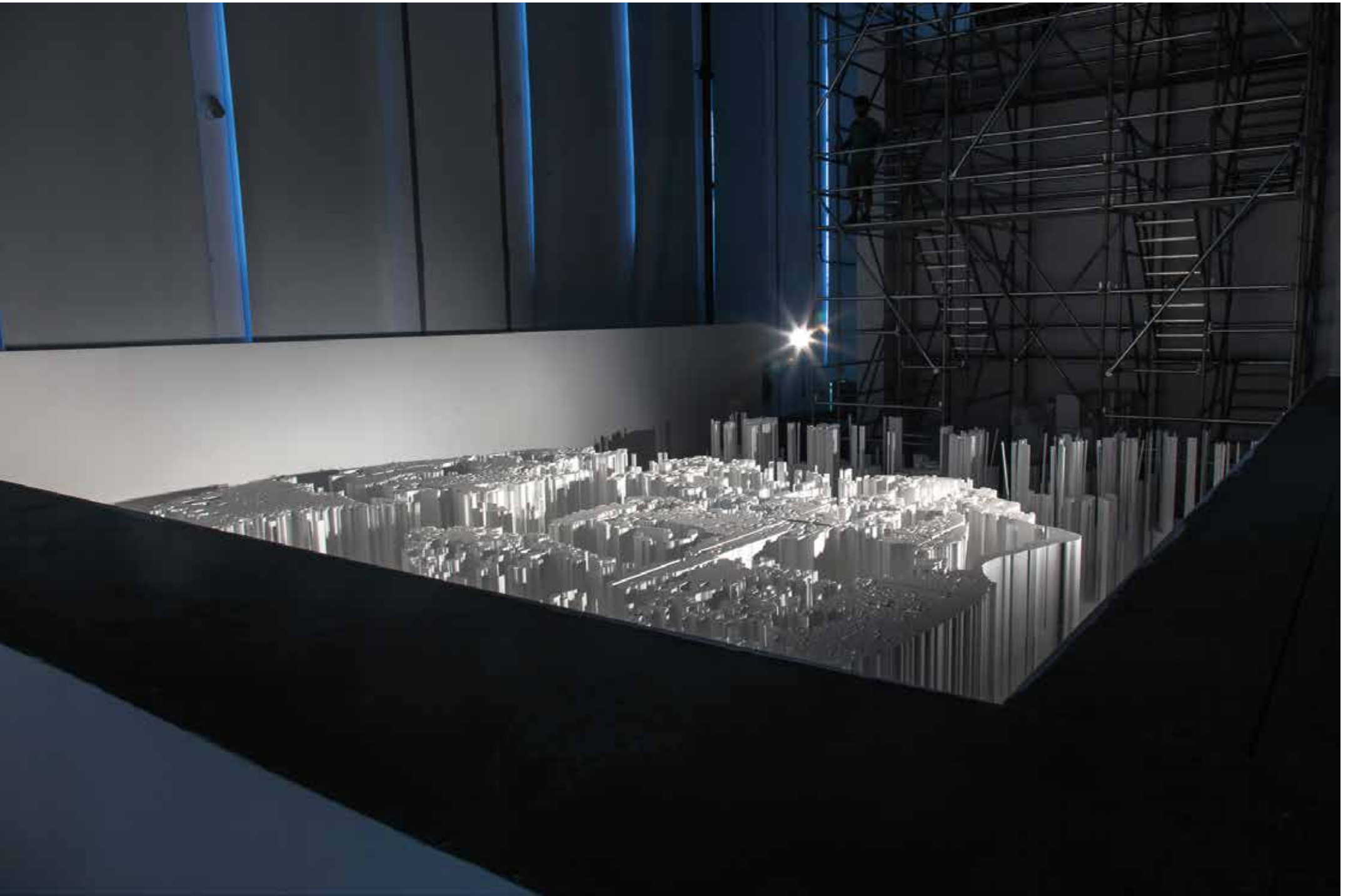


Dissection



Anagrama









Detritos



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