

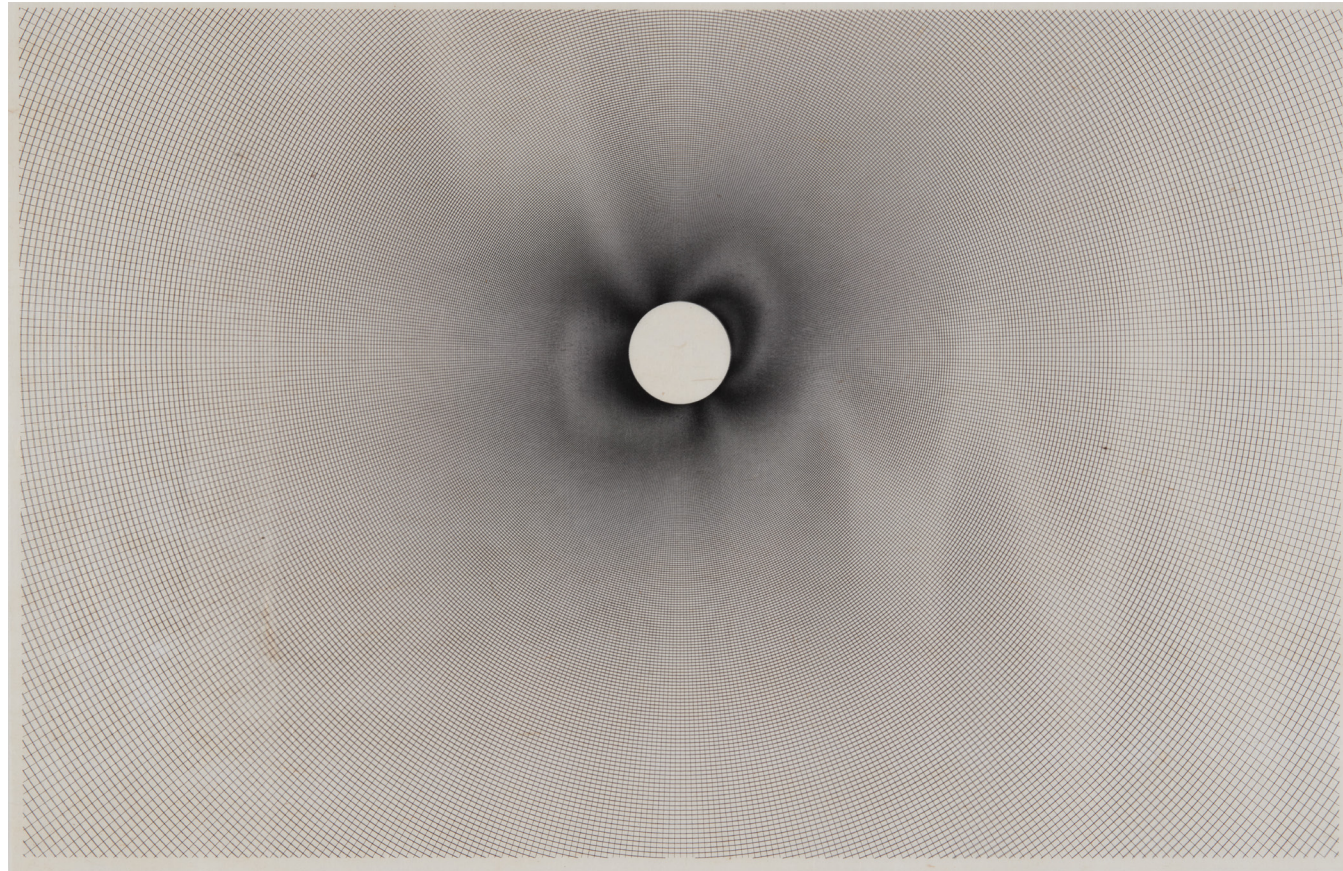


One of the most indelible images of the common office printer comes from Mike Judge's 1999 film *Office Space*. Repeatedly frustrated by the device's failure to perform properly, three employees, two of whom have just been laid off, drive to an isolated field, where they attack their tormentor with a baseball bat, laying bare its internal hardware. For the film's many fans, the scene is as cathartic as it is hilarious. Two decades later, it remains a touchstone for its frank and humorous indictment of technological determinism and middle-class ennui.

In the late 1990s, Marsha Cottrell worked as a layout designer in the office of a magazine publisher. During this period, she began to experiment with a computer and printer. Explaining her transition from painting to this new medium, she said, "Since I couldn't be in my studio, it was natural for me to consider how I might use the tools in my immediate environment."<sup>1</sup> She began to explore the formal possibilities of punctuation marks, shrinking and layering them to create fingerprint-like shapes and smudges, saying, "I was interested in the idea of making an organic mark with a computer."<sup>2</sup> Cottrell's emphasis on the role of the body (she is quick to point out that printer toner is carbon-based) is underscored by a recent work, in which she imprinted her hands on two sheets of paper covered in toner. She stopped the printer midway through its process, after the toner had been applied, but before it had been heat-fused to the paper. This bold assertion of the artist's body and authorial agency is an undercurrent in Cottrell's practice.<sup>3</sup> She makes ingenious use of technology, but at cross-purposes, for example, by running carefully selected handmade paper through a printer numerous times in order to build up compositions layer by layer. Speed and efficiency are precisely *not* the point. But, significantly, she does not take a proverbial bat to her plastic and metal collaborators. Hers is not a project of undermining, but of exploring.

Cottrell calls her work "computer-assisted" rather than "computer-generated," and has compared her process to conventional sketching: "With a crayon on a piece of paper, a gesture might be motivated by one's arm or body. I hold the gesture in my mind and try to map it out by sliding the mouse a few inches."<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on the connection of mind and body evokes the Renaissance concepts of *disegno* and *invenzione*, in which the drawing hand was understood as a direct extension of the inventing mind. In Cottrell's work, the computer and laser printer are inserted into this process as collaborators and mediators. She has embraced the computer monitor, off-the-shelf vector programs, and the technology of laser printing as readymades. Her mastery of these tools includes a keen awareness of their limitations, and the ability to work within them, or to turn them to her advantage.

In the *Aperture Series* works, round-edged rectangular shapes flicker suggestively at the intersection of here and nowhere. Although two-dimensional, their perceptual affect is akin to the spatial environments of Doug Wheeler or James Turrell—embodied rather than merely visual. The hallucinatory works titled *Environments* figure tantalizing spaces which, although impossible, nevertheless seem capable of being occupied by a body. These works are the result of an incremental, additive process that usually begins with Cottrell selecting a preset shape



*Untitled (9:43:29am)*, 2018, laser toner on paper, unique, 11 x 17 in

from the software's tool palette. She alters and positions it on the screen, prints it, assesses the result, and returns to the computer to make the next move. Each adjustment on the monitor or pass through the printer carries a degree of risk. Will the printer behave as expected, or will it malfunction, undoing hours of labor? As this process suggests, Cottrell is interested in the ontology of the body as it relates to technology. Although her chosen tools impose limits, the works themselves gesture toward limitlessness. What does it mean to consider the monitor as a penetrable aperture, rather than a solid screen?

Our most enduring ideas about sublimity come from the natural world, and in recent works, Cottrell has probed the traditional iconography of the sublime—vast horizons, glowing moons, radiating suns, solar eclipses. At a time when each of us holds in our pockets a powerful tool for photographic reproduction, these drawings remind us that the sublime is not located in representations of the visible, but in the effort of “alluding to the nondemonstrable.” As Jean-Francoise Lyotard wrote, “it can take a year to make a blank square; in other words, to create nothing (assuming that that's the only form of the unrepresentable).”<sup>5</sup>

Although they may conjure natural phenomena, Cottrell's works are extraordinarily self-reflexive. *Untitled (11:08:10am)* takes on a different cast when one considers its central orb, reminiscent of the moonlit landscapes of the Romantics, as a visualization of the beam of light that inscribes the artist's image onto the printer's drum. *Untitled (12:45:01pm)* and *Untitled (Slip)* flaunt the “errors” that remind us that these exquisite compositions were created on a seemingly quotidian office printer. They are poetic manifestations of the tension that drove *Office Space's* antiheroes to violence. By including, and even encouraging, accidents in her process, by emphasizing the inherent characteristics of her tools and medium, even as she pushes them to their limits, Cottrell suggests that she is searching for a resolution—between body and machine, nature and technology, mind and body—that may never be found. Instead, she gives form to the search itself.

—Rachel Federman

#### Notes

- 1 Marsha Cottrell quoted in Margaret Carrigan, “Awkward Technologies,” *Modern Painters* (March-April 2017): 65.
- 2 Marsha Cottrell quoted in Elizabeth Stinson, “A Laster Printer Made These Ghostly Abstract Images,” *wired.com*, September 16, 2016.
- 3 The work is reminiscent of Bruce Conner's photocopied hands in *Prints* (1974), a boxed edition whose tongue-in-cheek aim was to demonstrate to a prospective employer the value of the artist's fingerprints, or his “hand.” The photocopier is a technological predecessor of the laser printer.
- 4 Marsha Cottrell quoted in “Punctuation Marks,” *Art on Paper* 7, no. 6 (April 2003): 86.
- 5 Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Presenting the Unpresentable,” trans. Lisa Liebmann, in *The Sublime, Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley, 136; 131-2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). Originally published in *Artforum* (April 1982).