

It may mean a completely new episode in world communication, enabling people to carry out audio-visual meetings from anywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, the technology used for television – the transmission of signals between one location and another – via communication satellite or towers over land – held the public's imagination in awe. The invisible relays travelled across space and materialised on glass screens. The test-pattern TV broadcast was the domain of pioneering electrical engineers and technicians first working in the 1920s. Aesthetics were not their priority. As a technical document, it was about calibrating and producing a viable image.<sup>2</sup> Photography preceded TV, and TV didn't kill off photography.

I reference black and white television test-pattern broadcasts because Shaun Waugh's *Test Chart* (2024) conveys the suggestion of this information transmitted through the air and via terrestrial ground transmission in the 1960s. Receptions to 'invisible' data have shifted, but by harkening to a modernist abstract aesthetic and technology, *New Games* continues Waugh's conceptual investigations into how photography contributes to our ontological uncertainty.

Made up of over one hundred prints ranging in size from 3.5 x 5 inches (the smallest) to 16 x 20 inches, the human eye perceives Shaun Waugh's *Test Chart* flickering on the wall in a visuo-spatial field. Each print busy with columns built from small grey squares, the numerous sets developed by Waugh through an analogue process in the darkroom. One of the conceptual drivers in Waugh's oeuvre is to make the very tools of his trade the very creative work. This time around, his attentions are focused on colour management calibration and test pattern output. Colour management is the process of ensuring consistent and accurate colours across various devices (cameras, monitors, printers). It's a process used to achieve optimal results. The colour characteristics for every device in the imaging chain needs to be precisely calibrated and known.

The first step for *Test Chart* saw Waugh produce a digital negative of a calibration proof-sheet as a master transparency from polyester film. Each print in the work is effectively a copy made from this transparency. In the darkroom, Waugh shone light through the membrane, and, as a progenitor to many, reproduced hundreds of prints. The various types of photographic paper stock Waugh used are crucial to results. Both the exposure time in the darkroom as well as the time already locked into the age of the paper dictate the results of each print's formal and perceptual qualities.

Waugh's methods carry a blend of chance: some photographic paper stock coming into his possession by luck, some gifted to him, and others repurposed from storerooms, cupboards and vaults. We go from materials found in an everyday cupboard to a version of the mathematical sublime when the prints are amassed on the gallery wall. The work the result of a negative exploding out its multiples; the arrangement based on a physics diagram illustrating how energy and light first spilled through the universe in chain reaction. Waugh pushed pins through the four corners of each print to fasten them to the wall. Pins-like data.

Liken the columns to telecasts, or think of them as representing streams of code—flows of data—cryptographic data—gaze at them with probability theories in mind—a worldview of a universe in flux, stars that appear when on the dark side of the moon, the precipitation of energy—randomness from exquisite mathematical order—the sublime scale of counting stars in—or, maybe, the suggesting of the predicative algorithms that covertly control our patterns of online

behaviour. To simply push light through a transparency and capture thousands of bands of squares, is okay too: this is the miracle trace of ontology fixing shapes on paper with light and chemicals.

Presented on other walls in *New Game* are twenty-four works from the series *Cascading Shadows* (2023–24), photographic works which dematerialise objects through digital and Artificial Intelligence assisted photographic processes. Sparked by observing how his children playfully stack their toy blocks on the living-room floor, Waugh cuts his own rectangular blocks from wood, paints them all over in one colour, and stacks two (each of a different size) one on top of the other on a portable tabletop studio set-up on his kitchen table. After lighting the arrangement from opposing directions, he then photographs the blocks and the shadows they cast. Fascinated by how shadow is cast and light is absorbed, Waugh turns to his computer to render a new photographic image. Using Adobe Photoshop, he clear cuts around the perimeter of the wooden block. With a click of a button, he removes the referent of the block from the digital photograph, then replaces it with a solid colour from Photoshop, chosen as one of 24 from a ColourChecker® chart (the photographer's universal reference tool). He prints the exact digital values onto photographic paper using a process called absolute colour matching.

Shadow is photographic proof of an object that paradoxically can be said to no longer exist. *Cascading Shadows* toy with the indexicality of photography, refuting, in Roland Barthes' words, the "necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph."<sup>3</sup> Waugh seems to speculate on the ontological essence of photography, of which Barthes famously stated: "I can never deny that the thing has been there."<sup>4</sup>

As with many artists who wrestle with visual perception, Shaun Waugh interrogates photography's claims to reality. Aligning old and new technologies, *New Games* grapples with the medium's technical and material characteristics to arrest disjunctures in our ways of seeing. Waugh offers meditations on the aesthetic pleasures had when perceiving forms and shapes: their colours and hue, their depth, their dimensions. Way past TV bedtime, it's timely in the fourth industrial revolution, with image generators startling comprehension. Drawing on machine learning and Artificial Intelligence, a key to Waugh's approach to photography is the slippage between image and object and the mental and perceptual games this throws up for the viewer. Never quite sure what kind of image we are seeing, *New Games* wilfully sets out to point to a conceptual volatility of shapes and colours; the non-verbal lessons that would help us recognise and understand the shape and data of our world.

Marcus Moore, October 2024<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.theage.com.au/culture/tv-and-radio/from-the-archives-1966-australia-uk-linked-by-first-direct-telecast-20211118-p59a0w.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Messages travelling across borders and entering people's living rooms on TV sets was not only scientific technology, but a form of cultural imperialism. The first test signal transmitted by the British Broadcasting Corporation to the Antipodes was sent to Perth, Western Australia on 24 November 1966. Received at the Carnarvon tracking station, the test pattern ran for 1 and a half hours starting at 1 p.m. The image was not an abstract, but a map of Britain received some 8,890 miles away 'in very good quality.' Ibid, [www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au). The focus of a longer text would address such an instance of visual culture through other theoretical wavelengths.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Parts of this text are from my essay 'Building Blocks and Colour Lessons,' in *Shaun Waugh: Subject Failure* (Rim Books, forthcoming 2024).