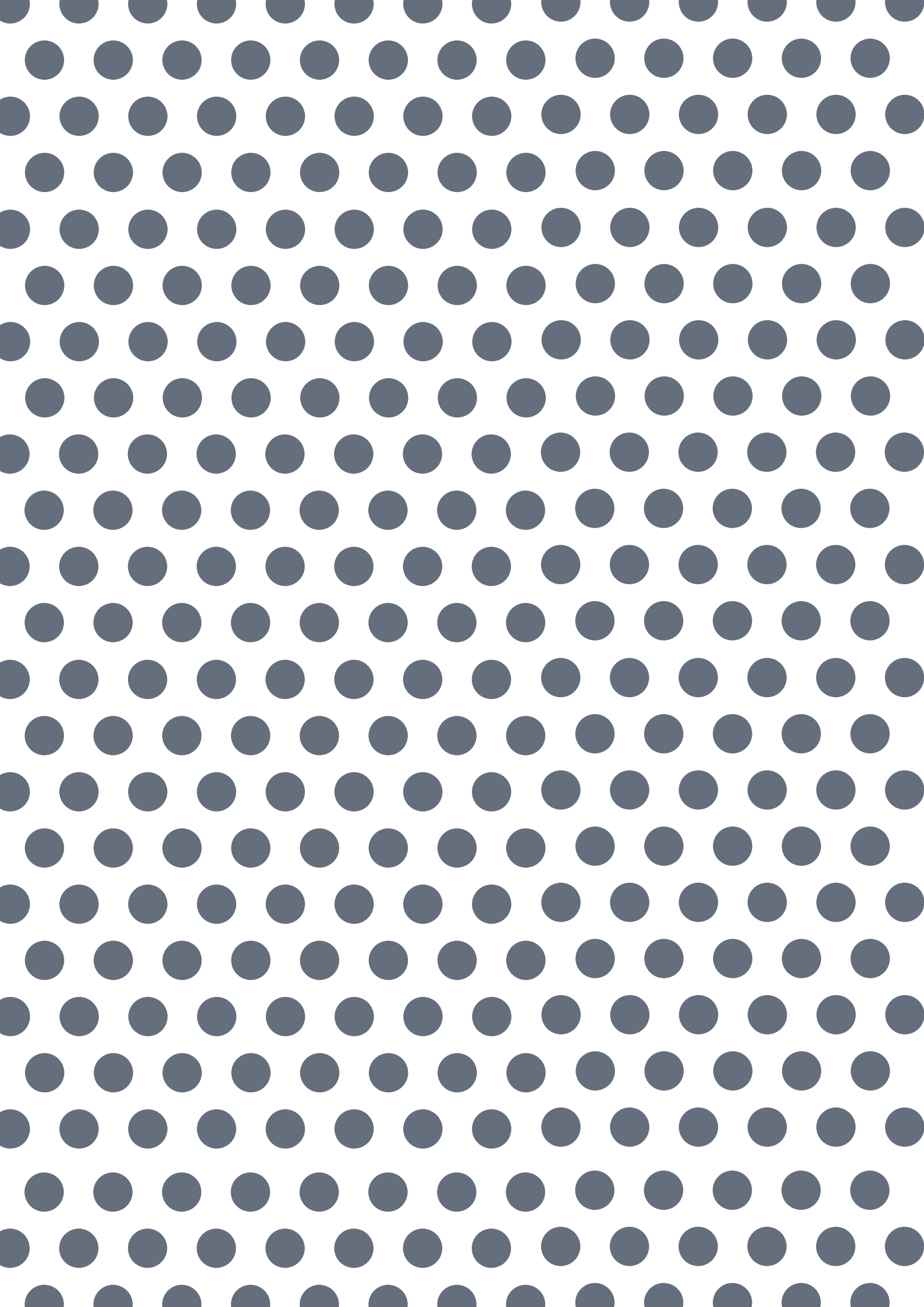


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Interviews

- Page 4 *On the Before and After Experience*
 with **Sébastien Cliche**
- Page 22 *Between the Seen and the Unseen*
 with **Xinyi Liu**
- Page 42 *On Seeing with Your Hands and Maritimidade*
 with **Isa Rodrigues**
- Page 64 *On the Unexplainable Energies that Move Us*
 with **Dana Major**
- Page 74 *Stitching Together Coincidences*
 with **Lyudmila Kalinichenko**
- Page 88 *On IRA, the post-Soviet space and Resisting the Glorification of Death*
 with **Marko Kolomytskyi**
- Page 106 *Shaping the Woods that Grow Alongside You*
 with **Babar**

Featured artists

Kristen St. Clair.....14	Tabea Wasserfall.....40	Julia Braun.....82
Lillian Morrissey.....18	Barbara Lapointe.....52	Hunter Blaze Pearson.....84
Karolina Koblen.....30	Elizabeth Wood.....54	Maryam Ghasempour S.86
Lucy Cade.....32	Talu Fischer.....56	Rory Perras.....98
Sarah Finucane.....34	Shujing Shen.....58	Anna Banasiak.....100
Amber Skye Alcock.....36	Daria Lada.....60	Evy Tsolaki.....102
Tosya Kravtsova.....38	Yang Weifeng.....62	Peter Christian Lange.....104

Legal notice and additional image credits: page 118

I set up situations
that involve a degree
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for self-realization.

– Sébastien Cliche



Thermal State of Information, 2024
Installation (detail) - Acrylic tray, photography, water, salts, time

Page 6: Field of Culling, 2024, Installation - Wood, sealant, books, water, salts, time

Page 7: Thermal State of Information, 2024, Installation (general view & detail)
Wood, acrylic tray, injet prints, books, plaster, slides, water, salts, time
Photo credit (both photos): Jean-Michael Seminaro





On the
Before and After
Experience

with

Sébastien Cliche



Self-portrait by Canadian artist Sébastien Cliche

Hello Sébastien, it's a pleasure to have you. We start all of our conversations with a little time travel – what were your beginnings in the arts?

Thanks for having me! For as long as I can remember, I've always loved drawing and tinkering. As a child, I would spend hours inventing my own worlds and making up games. I was also fascinated by collecting all sorts of small objects, which I would assemble into little boxes to create imaginary machines that didn't have any particular function. It's not that far from what I do now, ha, ha!

So would you say it was always clear to you that you wanted to "become" an artist? And what did your path towards becoming one look like?

It was always there, yes. In elementary school, I remember being asked to draw what we wanted to be when we grew up. While most of the boys illustrated police officers, firefighters, or astronauts, I drew a figure wearing a beret,

holding a paintbrush, and standing at an easel. Later on, after briefly considering other art forms like theatre or architecture, I enrolled in a visual arts program. From there, the path was fairly straightforward. I had the chance to do many solo shows in artist-run centres, which became a real laboratory for experimenting with different mediums and building a practice centered around installation.

And your practice is what I'd like to speak about next. As you just mentioned, it centers around installation, specifically performative installations that simulate work environments such as offices or laboratories. Thematically, your work deals with the evolution of knowledge, memory, documents, and data. Can you please tell me more about your work?

There are several elements in that question, so I'll try to summarize... In my mind, the exhibition space is often treated as a site of unfinished and ongoing work. That's why there's usually some sort of generative system in my

pieces—mechanical, chemical, or digital. I set up situations that involve a degree of instability and give the work a potential for self-realization. Contexts such as offices or laboratories function as scenographies and narrative frameworks. It's a proposition to the viewer: this is not (just) an exhibition, but another type of space, part of a fiction. And it's no coincidence that these are workspaces—places where operations are underway.

As for memory and documents, that theme relates to how we collectively organize and regulate our world through the recording of knowledge.

“I’m very inspired by physical media used to archive realities that are fundamentally immaterial.”

I read that your practice also explores the notion of control and its social and psychological implications...

Control is a broader reflection that runs through all my projects. It can operate as a theme—as seen in some earlier works involving surveillance systems—but it also pertains to the process itself. Returning to the generative works I mentioned earlier, which rely on protocols to produce the artwork: in generative art, control shifts away from the artist's gesture and toward the system that generates the result. I appreciate this approach because it necessarily includes chance and tension in the process. You constantly have to adapt to what emerges. Control is always in dialogue with letting go.

A project I’m curious to learn more about is “Thermal State of Information,” which was exhibited in 2024 at CIRCA, Art actuel, Montréal and at Galerie R3. Can you please tell me more about it?

I first presented the project in 2023 at Vu gallery in Québec City. The setup differs with each presentation, but overall, the installation consists of a series of deep trays filled with documents (like books and photographs) and plaster casts

of storage media like reels of magnetic tape or slides. All of these elements are submerged in a saline solution mixed with other chemicals. Over the course of the exhibition, the water evaporates, and the objects become encrusted with crystals of surprising shapes and colors. It may look like organic proliferations, but it's surprisingly all mineral compounds made from different chemical salts.

You just spoke about the crystallization that took place in “Thermal State of Information,” and you used this process in other projects too, such as “Field of Culling” or “Table of Records,” for example. What is special about it is that the viewers can witness your work evolve over time, the objects look different at different stages of the exhibition. Where did the idea to work with crystallization come from and what is it that fascinates you about it?

Crystallization came into the work more or less by accident. At first, I was simply looking for a way to slowly alter or erase photographs over the course of an exhibition. Through experimenting with different processes and chemical compounds, I accidentally produced a surprising crystallization effect. That ended up becoming the heart of the project. Even better than simply erasing the content by covering it up, the crystals create new inscriptions formed by matter in transformation.

What I find thrilling is that despite all the tests conducted in the studio, the outcome is always unpredictable. Many factors are at play: solution volume and chemical concentration, ambient temperature and humidity, the nature of the objects to be crystallized, etc. Eventually, I stopped following my recipe book too closely in favor of a more intuitive approach. Each viewer encounters a specific state of matter depending on when they visit the show.

“Some people are very drawn to this time-based process and will come back two or three times for a kind of “before and after” experience.”

Within the installation “Thermal State of Information” there is one piece I’d like to know more about, it’s “Mining.”

That piece is quite different because I started with a drawing before building it—something I rarely do. It’s a stack of 150 boxes, the kind used to store documents or administrative archives. They form a large cubic mass that looks as if it’s been excavated on one of its sides, like a mine carved out to extract raw material. This reveals the inside of the boxes—a dense accumulation of papers cut in a way that resembles sedimentary rock. Once again, it’s about blurring the line between medium and content. As if information were a material. The piece plays with scale and hovers somewhere between the reality of everyday office supply and the aerial view of a geological landscape.

A question we ask in all of our interviews is about the creative process. What are the first steps you usually start a new project with and from there, how do you progress? And is there any part of the process that is especially enjoyable or important to you?

I keep a lot of stuff in the studio—found objects, materials, remnants from past projects. I call it my inventory. Usually, when starting a new work, I’m looking to develop an element or aspect of a previous project—something secondary that I didn’t explore much but that still holds potential. I’ll go into the inventory and begin improvising freely with objects and scraps.



Mining, 2024
Installation - Wood, boxes, paper, water, salts
Photo credit: Jean-Michael Seminaro

“These initial experiments don’t necessarily end up in the final exhibition, but they allow me to think through action, using concrete materials and embracing unpredictability.”

That phase is very important. It often feels very awkward, but the idea is to be open to any detail, any new direction. The most unique and interesting parts of a project often have their roots in those moments.

The other phase I really value is at the other end of the process, when I’m installing the work in the gallery. There are still many decisions to make at that point. Most of the time, I have no detailed plan. I leave myself as much freedom as possible to make choices based on the space and my state of mind at that moment. It’s a crucial part of the creative work. I’m often surprised by how much I leave open until the very last week before the opening.

Speaking about the creative process, are you currently working on something you’d like to share with us?

I’m currently working on a long-term project: a generative installation conceived as a transformable environment. This project doesn’t rely on interactive technologies but instead uses tangible, adaptable setups that visitors can move, combine, and reconfigure. The action is not driven by any feedback system or reward: there is neither protocol nor assigned objective. Individuals are confronted with their own desire to act and the attention they choose to give it. The installation thus accommodates multiple configurations where every gesture leaves a visible trace and establishes an implicit relationship with others—those present, those who have passed through, and those yet to come.

I’ve already developed an initial phase of this project with willing participants. Now, I’m looking for a suitable venue to produce and present it to the public. This process takes time, as not every gallery is well suited for a project that can become somewhat chaotic.

I hope you can find the right place for it. We're already at the end of our conversation, so I have a few last questions for you. First, let's switch sides for a moment – when you are the viewer and not the author of an artwork, which works are the ones that draw you closer?

In general, I'm drawn to works that offer multiple layers of interpretation, that are generous and play with the boundaries between styles. I'm usually less engaged by minimalist or highly referential pieces—though of course, there are always exceptions. I'm an open viewer.



Memory Card 02, 2024
Inkjet print on mat archival paper, 50 x 76 cm

Next, you have been the recipient of the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Fellowship in Contemporary Art and your work has been exhibited in important institutions such as the Centre d'art contemporain de Meymac in France, Momenta Art in New York, or VU in Quebec City, to name only a few. What does this recognition mean to you and does it affect the way you approach your practice in any way?

For me, the goal is always to have the opportunity to create and carry out my projects. Recognition helps secure funding and opens up new avenues to present the work to the public. Of course, there can be a temptation to repeat the formulas that have brought success—and that's not necessarily a bad thing—but personally, I give myself the freedom to explore new directions. I enjoy being in an experimental process, and when I feel too comfortable with

certain approaches or formats, I close a chapter and revisit an element or concept from a past project that was under-developed. I then approach it with a new perspective, new methods, or new materials.

Third question, are there any fellow artist you'd like to recommend?

I'd like to highlight the work of Mat Chivers (@matchivers), a mid-career artist with whom I share many research interests. His work is rich and vibrant, navigating between science and philosophy. There's also Kuh Del Rosario (@kuhdelrosario), an artist with a unique voice who works with a wide range of salvaged materials to create sculptural installations that blur the line between the personal and the collective—truly inspiring. And finally, Émile Riopel (@emilieriopel), a promising young artist with whom I share a DIY “bricolage” approach, building poetic and precarious assemblages out of repurposed everyday items.

Any piece of advice you'd like to pass on to fellow artists, especially to those just starting out in their career?

Success in the arts is often framed through an economic lens, as if the true mark of achievement were making a living solely from one's practice—as if that's what separates the artist from the hobbyist. But I think what matters most is the work itself: its capacity to evolve, to resonate with others. It can help to organize your priorities with a long-term perspective rather than getting caught up in the rat race.

***“And if I had one piece of advice:
offer your help to fellow artists.
There's so much to learn that way.”***

And lastly, please complete the following sentence:

When I create, I feel...

...free and conflicted.



Up: *Thermal State of Information*, 2024 (Photo credit: **Jean-Michael Seminaro**)
Installation (detail) - Wood, acrylic tray, injet prints, books, plaster, water, salts, time
Down: *Thermal State of Information*, 2024, Installation (detail) - Wood, acrylic tray, plaster, water, salts, time



Up: *Eclipse 05*, 2024, Inkjet print on mat archival paper, 47 x 47 cm
Down left: *Thermal State of Information*, 2024, Installation (detail) - Acrylic tray, books, water, salts, time
Down right: *Drifting*, 2022, Inkjet print on mat archival paper, 56 x 82 cm