

The 2017 commission by Rita McBride, *Particulates*, features a type of high-intensity laser that is normally reserved for industrial, military, and scientific use to harness light's efficient capacity to articulate space. At first glance the lasers clearly define the geometry of a hyperboloid of revolution, a hyperbola rotated around a single axis. Yet the contours of this shape are dispersed by the constant motion of particulate matter—ambient dust and molecules of water circulating in the air—that becomes visible as it passes through the beams of light. There is an otherworldly quality to this animated environment; it recalls the descriptions of a wormhole—a highly theorized, little-proven shortcut through space and time—that one might find in science fiction. A perceptual shift takes place as one looks closely at the swirling particles that reflect and refract the lasers' light. While formally the arrangement alludes to the possibility of time travel, the lasers reveal a macroscopic world of microscopic activity hidden before our eyes. However, the real and imaginative spaces conjured by *Particulates* remain elusive, and are protected by a series of custom carbon-fiber panels, titled *Guidance "Barriers"* (2017), which the artist designed to keep us at a lawful distance.

*Particulates* took shape after McBride visited Dia:Beacon in Beacon, New York, in 2016. There she encountered Dan Flavin's *untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection)* (1973) for the first time. The work, one of Flavin's signature "barrier" sculptures, consists of serially repeating square units of green fluorescent light that diagonally bisect the gallery, hindering passage from one end to the other. While the fixtures themselves are emphatically physical, the light emanating from the fluorescent tubes envelopes the surroundings and spectators in an ethereal green. Flavin described his first light-based works as "blunt in bright repose,"<sup>1</sup> a reference to the way in which the sculptures oscillate between object and environment. Or, as the art historian Hal Foster writes, the fluorescent works "remain at the threshold between aesthetic and utilitarian purposes, illusionist and actual space."<sup>2</sup> Compelled by the duality of this straightforward yet transcendent treatment of space, McBride conceived of *Particulates* as a site-specific installation that is both discrete and intangible. Her choice of green lasers and the inclusion of actual guiding structures, here reconsidered as a practical and an aesthetic necessity, improvise upon Flavin's barrier.

McBride's work vacillates in scale to explore architectural and sculptural form. She consistently draws on the reductive visual vocabulary of Minimalism and its concern for the perceptual relationship between an object, a viewer, and an

environment to investigate both concrete and metaphysical ideas about space. The structures that she designed for *Particulates* sit easily within her sculptural oeuvre. These pared-down iterations of a utilitarian object recall some of her most iconic interventions in concept. For example, both *Arena* (1997)—an ascending set of interactive bleachers—and *Mae West* (2011)—a monumental public commission that animates a traffic thoroughfare in central Munich—explore the architecture of collective assembly.<sup>3</sup> In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes that a "profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry [of inside and outside] which—whether we will or no—confers spatiality upon thought."<sup>4</sup> McBride has been interested in the social architecture of crowd control for more than a decade. *Guide Rails* (2017), a new work conceived for her 2017–18 exhibition at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels, is closely related to the barricades of *Particulates*. The work includes 200 linear meters of freestanding white-washed wooden elements, which rearrange the movement of bodies through the galleries. McBride's most recent works, *Guide Rails* and *Guidance "Barriers"*, point to questions of interiority and exteriority, of belonging and exclusion, which have never been more politically relevant. A series of works that the artist began in 2003 similarly explores questions of access through formal variations of keys and locks. As McBride explains, "while working on any project many decisions are made based on the practical needs of the public, but invariably, timely social issues make themselves evident."<sup>5</sup>

In 1968 the art critic, curator, and avid science-fiction consumer Lawrence Alloway defended the literary genre against accusations of kitsch, by describing it as "one of the forms of the self-study of industrialized culture."<sup>6</sup> Fifty years later, McBride similarly notes that talking about what could be possible sets today's societal structures in relief. Mechanisms such as the wormhole are, according to McBride, efficient devices for suspending disbelief, for creating distance between what we know as fact and what we entertain as plausible. Science fiction, as practiced by both Alloway and McBride, is not only popular entertainment, it is also a kind of methodological approach or category of analysis.<sup>7</sup> It is a generative and often humorous way of asking questions that uses the past and future to unpack the present and vice versa.

There is a picture of Earth from 1991 that was taken by *Voyager I*, a space probe that was launched in 1977, from the threshold of interstellar space. It depicts granular bands of green-and-red light set against a stark black background. One tiny luminescent dot—Earth—stands out within this speckled field:

"a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam," as Carl Sagan so famously described.<sup>8</sup> "The Earth," he went on to say, "is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena."<sup>9</sup> A portrait of the solar system, this image might just as easily be a detail of *Particulates*; the same phenomenon on two different orders of magnitude. While we may perceive the immensity of our infinitely dense universe as sublimely abstract, we are also constantly surrounded by reminders of its tangible reality. A recent study in *Geology*, for example, documents the proliferation of microscopic meteorite particles, essentially extraterrestrial dust, found all over rooftops and sidewalks.<sup>10</sup> "The invisible is real," Walter De Maria once declared.<sup>11</sup> *Particulates* suggests that we take this speculative claim seriously. If we do, maybe McBride's circular hyperboloid really is a wrinkle in time.

#### notes

1. Dan Flavin, "'... in daylight or cool white': an autobiographical sketch," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), p. 24.
2. Hal Foster, "Dan Flavin and the Catastrophe of Minimalism," in *Dan Flavin: New Light*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2006), p. 137.
3. McBride first used the shape of the hyperboloid of revolution on view in *Particulates* for *Mae West* because it offered a simple engineering solution to a complex problem of scale.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 212.
5. Rita McBride, interview by Alexis Lowry, September 19, 2017.
6. Lawrence Alloway, "Science Fiction and Artifacts: Science Fiction Is Global Thinking's Pop Culture," *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 3 (1968–69), p. 40. See also Rebecca Peabody, "Science Fiction As Muse: Lawrence Alloway and the Art of Speculative Criticism," in *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator*, ed. Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), pp. 26–47.
7. Peabody introduces the idea that Alloway's interests in science fiction were as much methodological as entertaining. See Peabody, "Science Fiction As Muse," p. 39.
8. Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*
10. See M. J. Genge, J. Larsen, M. Van Ginneken, and M. D. Suttle, "An Urban Collection of Modern-Day Large Micrometeorites: Evidence for Variations in the Extraterrestrial Dust Flux through the Quaternary," *Geology* 45, no. 2 (February 2017), pp. 119–22; and William J. Broad, "Stardust, Everywhere," *New York Times*, March 14, 2017.
11. Walter De Maria, "Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics, and Statements," *Artforum* 18, no. 8 (April 1980), p. 58.

**Rita McBride** was born in Des Moines in 1960. She currently lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany, and Los Angeles. She received a BA from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. In 1988 she began to explore architectural and sculptural form in works ranging from small-scale objects to large-scale commissions. Her major public works include *Obelisk of Tutankhamun* in Cologne, Germany (2017), *Bells and Whistles* at the New School in New York (2014), and *Mae West* in Munich, Germany (2011). Among her recent solo exhibitions are *Rita McBride: Explorer* at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels (2017–18), *Rita McBride: Gesellschaft* at kestnergesellschaft, Hanover, Germany, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2015–16), and *Rita McBride: Public Tilt* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (2014–15). In 2001 she initiated a series of genre-bending publications that often use anonymous collective writing structures. The second volume of her *Ways* series, *Futureways* (2004), explored contemporary art and science fiction, a genre that is particularly relevant to *Particulates*. McBride's first project with Dia Art Foundation took the form of a performative lecture on the work of Rosemarie Trockel as part of the Artists on Artists Lecture Series in 2003. *Particulates* was commissioned in 2016 by Dia and completed in 2017.

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#### checklist

**Particulates**, 2017  
Lasers, site-specific particulates, extraterrestrial dust, and water  
Courtesy the artist

**Guidance "Barriers,"** 2017  
Carbon fiber  
Courtesy the artist

Special thanks to Arup, New York, Cloudburst Misting Systems, Inc., Oxnard, California, CT Lasers, West Haven, Connecticut, and MEER Precision Cutting and Bending, New York, for their essential technical support.

*Particulates* is made possible by major support from Brenda R. Potter. Significant support is provided by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Dia's Director's Council: Fady Jameel, Leslie and Mac McQuown, Hope Warschaw, and Sara and Evan Williams. Generous support is provided by Frances Bowes, Nathalie and Charles de Gunzburg, and Marissa Sackler. Additional support is provided by Karyn Kohl and Light Art Space.

Cover: Rita McBride, *Particulates*, 2017. Dia:Chelsea, 541 West 22nd Street, New York City.  
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**Rita McBride**  
Particulates  
October 17, 2017–June 2, 2018



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