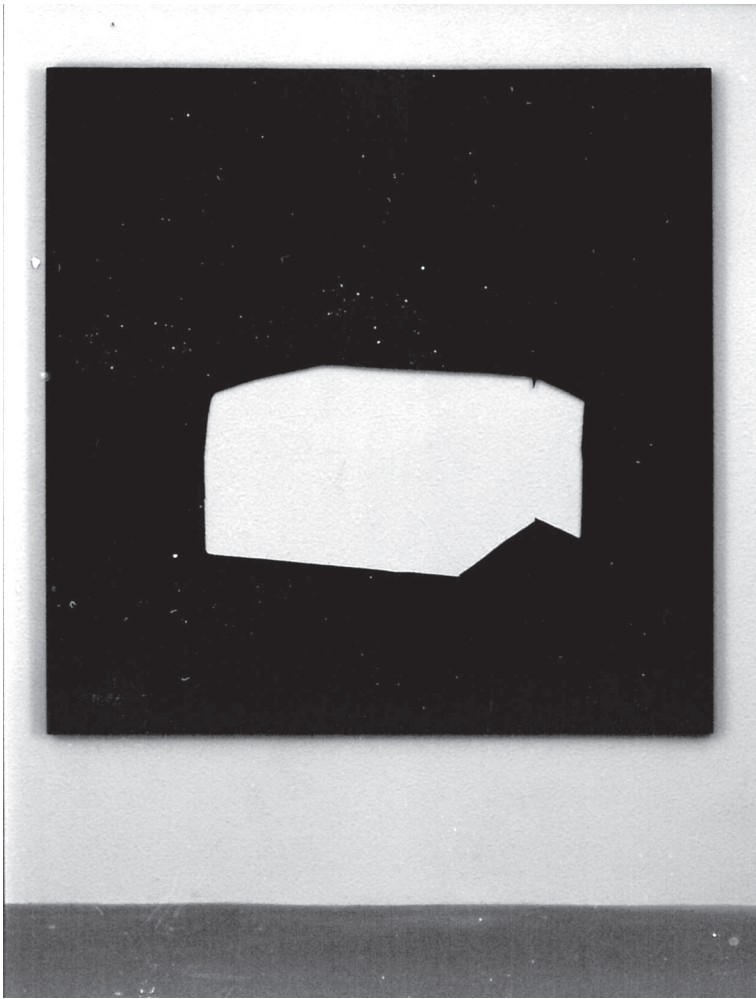


**an exhibition of
paintings and
other works by
David Troostwyk**





Above: David Troostwyk
Cardboard Dossbox, Savoy Place, London, 1998, resin and pigment on canvas, 152 x 153cm. Artist's own photograph from the artist's archive.

Front Cover: David Troostwyk
Letter from a British Soldier dated Nov. 1, 1917, 1997, resin and pigment on canvas, 51 x 51cm. Photography by Edward Woodman.

Not Black and White by Daniel Sturgis

There is a clarity with black and white. A simplicity. A beauty even. But although the tonal opposition may be concise, like text on a page, the reading may not be totally straightforward. This is the case not only with David Troostwyk's black and white paintings but with all of his work. Whether working with words or sound, paintings or plastics, Troostwyk brings complications to seemingly simple structures. However, he is always visually clear—straightforward—yet, within this precision he allows his artworks to resonate deeply and dwell with thoughtful consideration on the problems of representation and their association.

Let's begin with the signs. In this series of related works, which he began in the early 1970s and engaged with in various forms until the end of his career, he depicts words and phrases. In most instances the words are simply pasted on to the wall and printed in a clear block type in simple colours on white paper. The printing—in either letterpress or silkscreen—gives the text a materiality. You can't help but see this simple process with the ink sitting on or absorbed into the paper. Although printed they have a fragile quality as the ink is slightly irregular. This gives the text a mild haptic frisson, as the clarity of the typeface gives way to the work's materiality, to its hand-made qualities which emphasise the way a 'print-studio' print is—however much we might wish it not to be—unique.

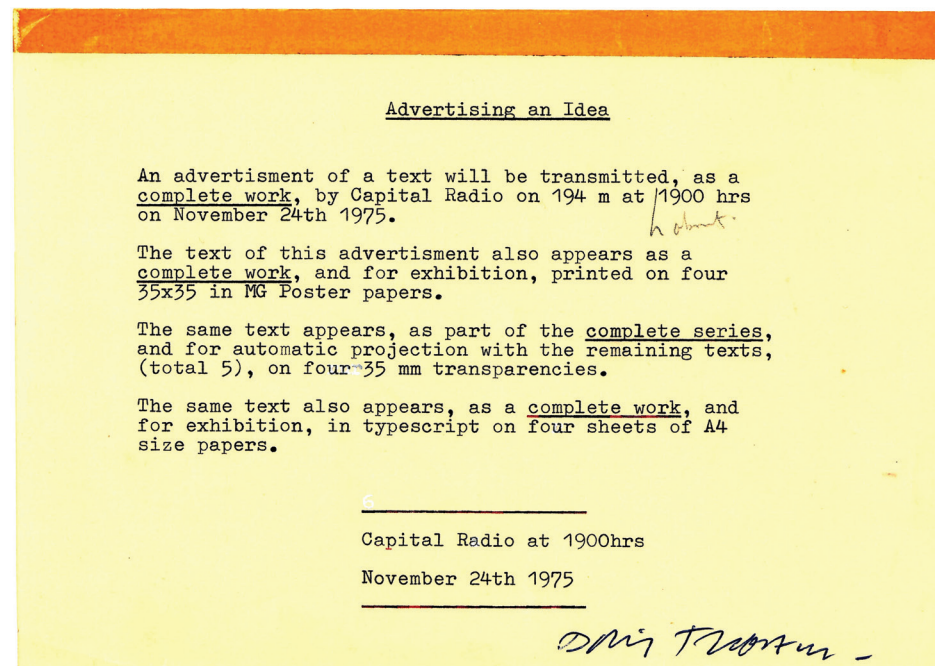
This quality is heightened again through the prints being pasted permanently—if anything ever can be permanent—onto a wall, or board, or painting. Troostwyk plays with these potentials and his texts always stress the singular and the specific. In one series, *Not Me* (1981) this uniqueness is pushed further as four permutations of a phrase—Not Me, Not You, Not Them, Not Us—are each painted in block capitals on a white canvas. The paintings which are individual and hand painted—as paintings tend to be—each have pasted in their bottom right hand corner a paper plan containing all of the set phrases. The work's proclamations seem clear. But are they? Not Me while stating ideas of artistic authorship and how works are read or communicated is also concerned with relationships, and the artist's own individual presence and subjectivity. In another work *Logo/Mark, Logo/Site, Logo/Trace, Logo/Relic*, (1975) *Logo* can be seen as an actual logo, or a sign, or emblem of itself. Similarly, *Mark* is a trace, a mark, or evidence of itself... and one goes on. But again, Troostwyk's own

presence is also visible, and expressed in a latent and slightly secretive manner. His own identity is proclaimed—it is after all his logo, his mark, his site, his trace, his relic and his absence.

This far more subjective interpretation rings true when one considers how these works progress into the 80s, where they turn their attention to ideas of desire and control. They use the language of advertising, to spell out the interactions between people. They speak of themselves, of how language and signs are self-referential, but also more poetically—in a kind of concrete way—to the human condition. They evoke the human sense of place and belonging—to ideas of *Territory* and *Possession*, to invoke the title of a yellow and black poster series from 1984, or cause, condition and presence, in the blue three-poster set *Their Origin Their Status Their Domain, Your Origin Your Status Your Domain, My Origin My Status My Domain* (1981). It is interesting to note that Troostwyk derived many of these phrases from previous advertisements, so within the texts there is an already worn-out feeling of the second-hand and the pre-used, and how a multiplicity of meanings can be evoked through simple phrases. Their bold simplicity and reflection on themselves and on their content, is also therefore laced, I think, with a passive and emotional charge.

It is not surprising to discover that in his youth Troostwyk had worked in advertising for the London Design Company and it is possible to see this formative experience of working economically connecting words with images as important in shaping the way as an artist he would later use the connections between language, image and idea in his work. However, advertising runs far deeper than just this interconnectivity. In his radio works, which constitutes a series of texts and recorded performances, this depth is perhaps most eloquently expressed. In *Advertisement of an Idea* (1976) which is really like an audible version of the signs, and as its title suggests is an actual commercial for the most elusive of things, 'an idea'.ⁱ This conceptual artwork was broadcast over three hours in the advert breaks on London's Capital Radio one Sunday night in 1976. Or in works such as *Are You Afraid of the Beautiful* (1980) a male and female voice more poetically reflect on beauty through the images of skin, water or a shoe.ⁱⁱ Subjects based on an advertising opinion poll that showed these images were the most memorable and powerful for viewers. Even Troostwyk's

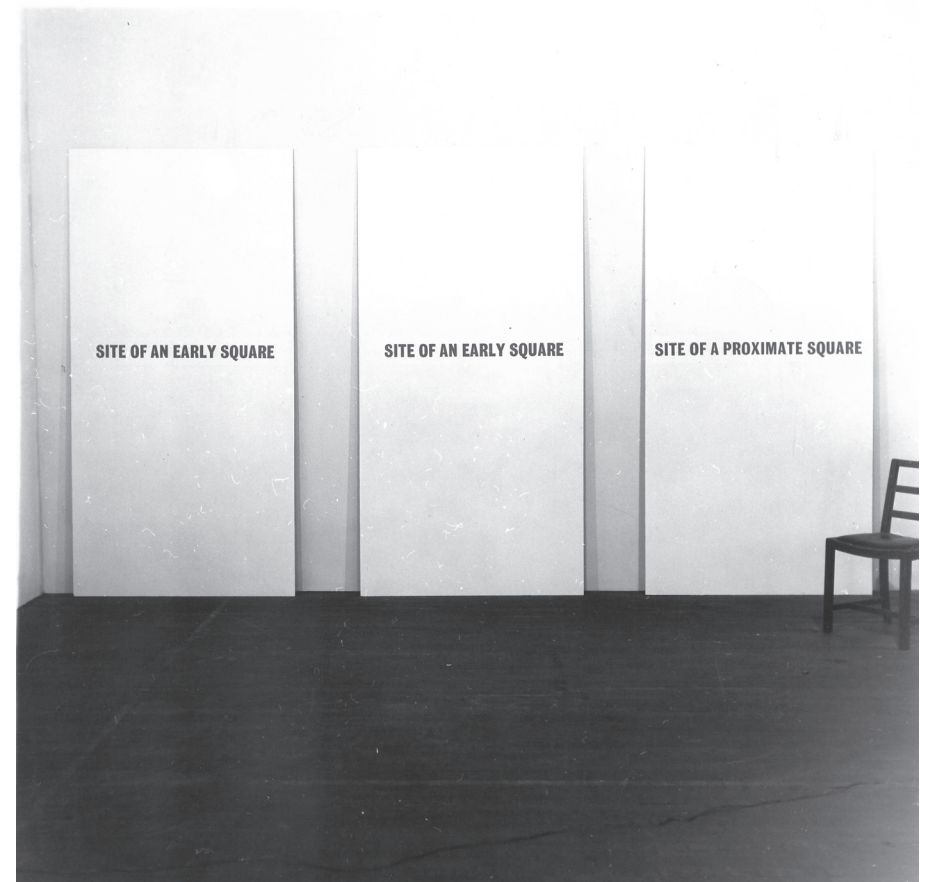
David Troostwyk
Advertising an Idea, 1975. Typed
sheet from the artist's archive.



Supreme Object (1979) can be seen to bring platonic absolutes in-line with the contemporary philosophy of advertising ideals. This complex installation which was the inaugural exhibition at Matt's Gallery in London, incorporated sound, text and a pristine shining white fiberglass replica of an actual washing machine.

In the signs-of-squares series—*Site of an Early Square*, *Site of an Optional Square*, or *Site of a Memory of a Square* and there are other variants (all 1975-76)—Troostwyk takes this reductive logic to painting. Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* from 1918 is important here. Not only in the genesis of these specific works, which seem to further the suprematist's reductionism where the white of the wall and the memory of a square having been present are seen to suffice, but also in a whole series of temporary and instructional wall paintings and wall drawings that Troostwyk made. In works such as *15 Malevich Squares* (1972), *Frame* (1973) or *Trace* (1974) Troostwyk instructed various sized black squares to be painted or drawn directly onto the gallery wall and then undergo several transformations and progressions through the display of multiple tracings on paper or plastic. The formalist ambitions of Russian suprematism were to resonate throughout the artist's career, with other works either directly addressing the memory of that historical avant-garde or more tangentially with works seeming to draw inspiration from it and lament its elegiac possibilities.

The varnish and tracing paper wall drawings are a good example of this. Simple drawings of squares or linear divisions are drawn on to a wall—the result of someone following a set of clearly written instructions. Troostwyk occasionally typed, but more usually wrote these, in a neat and distinctive block capital script on single sheets of A4 paper that could be photocopied and distributed. The geometry of suprematism—the white on white—is to be traced or painted on the wall in clear varnish. The clearness of the varnish, the transparency of the tracing paper being used to activate the whole wall as an idea of a utilitarian absolute. In *Tracing of a Diagonal* (1974) and *Tracing of a Horizontal* (1974) the recollection of clear polyurethane gloss painted directly on to Troostwyk's studio wall in Kennington is transcribed onto a wall in a gallery. Transcribed but directly connected to the original through individual and perhaps most tellingly architectural memory. It is no



David Troostwyk
Labels for a Wall, 1975-76.

co-incidence to find out that Troostwyk shared correspondence with, and visited the American artist Sol LeWitt, whose work was becoming known in Europe at this time. Certainly, Troostwyk's instructional pieces connect to LeWitt's work, to his wall drawings and to the pragmatic philosophy he laid out in 1968 in his *Sentences on Conceptual Art*. A philosophy which of course begins not with logic or rationalism but with a type of mysticism and an illogical leap of faith.

"Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.

*They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."*ⁱⁱⁱ

A leap which Troostwyk certainly took time and time again, and which can be seen to characterise all of his work which uses poignant and idiosyncratic connections to speak about ideas beyond themselves.

Troostwyk first found national recognition with a series of plastic works that developed out of his painting practice. In tune with the times at the Royal College of Art, where he studied alongside Dick Smith and Robyn Denny, he worked in oil on canvas on a series of bright and colourful proto-abstract paintings. Works that can perhaps be seen to be looking to both the formalism we might associate with artists such as Paul Feeley and other Washington colourists, as well as contemporary new-look graphic languages.

In time, Troostwyk can be seen to transpose some of the shapes and structures from these college paintings into clear or coloured plastic forms which he arranges on the white ground of the gallery wall. Works such as *Elim* (1969), which was awarded a prize in the John Moores painting exhibition that year, embrace an arte-povera simplicity and use the weight and material qualities of the PVC to create, through being tied, an actual formal shape. Other works such as *18 Items* (1971), shown at Kasmin Gallery, incorporate clear plastic and cast metal sculptural versions of a paddle-like form, to complicate spatial and material readings. Not only is the whole gallery space activated, when the wall in effect becomes a substrate for the placement of these precisely cut and arranged objects, but importantly light, shadow, movement and indeed the forces of gravity are seen to play on and activate them. And this must of course be coupled with the associative readings of the material itself. With *18 Items* the clear and flat plastic is resolutely utilitarian, but other works, especially those where the plastic is bunched or padded and in wipe-clean red or black, moves between the practical to the resolutely louche.



David Troostwyk

Example of a plastic work similar to Elim. Image shown from the artists archive dated 1969.

As this series developed a number of works, such as *Register* (1974), incorporated wall drawings underneath but visible through the clear plastic sheet. These works which can be seen as the precursor to the white-on-white squares, use the private codes of printer's or typesetter's registration marks. Working both on and off the plastic, and with and against alignment, Troostwyk fastidiously explores the interaction between two and three dimensions—the plane of the wall, the surface of the plastic and the spatial condition of the gallery itself. As Robin Coombes has pointed out in an extended essay for *Studio International* in 1974, these plastic works which dictate not only their own individual positioning, can be seen to be concerned with one of the central dilemmas of modernist painting “the difficulty of demonstrating two-and three-dimensional forms simultaneously”.^{iv} *Register* activates this dilemma with extreme beauty and simplicity.

In that same year Troostwyk himself submitted a review—although it was more like an analysis of—his friend the painter Euan Uglow's work *The Diagonal* (1971-77) to *Studio International*. In Troostwyk's text with its accompanying drawings and photographs the ‘internal mechanics’ of Uglow's work are examined and dissected. The empty box-like platform, where Uglow's model lays stretched out in the life room, is investigated by Troostwyk with forensic detail. The pulleys, plumb lines and notched measuring marks for the eye-to-brush co-ordinates that Uglow famously used are all recoded. Uglow's figure is absent as for Troostwyk, it is a portrait of a working process. That Uglow and Troostwyk were close friends is interesting for although working in such very different ways they shared a love of economy and clarity. I am tempted to see Troostwyk as the more sensitive and emotive of the two. Troostwyk exposure of his subjects, be that in this instance Uglow's studio set up, seems far more filled with the pathos and frailty of a precise human endeavor than Uglow's own painting of his diagonally arranged model.

Uglow gave Troostwyk as a present the toothbrush he had used in the remarkable still life, *The Three Graces* (1979-81). In this painting Uglow transforms this kitsch green brush, which resembled a naked female figure, by surrounding it with mirrors into a structural and erotized vision of the classical three graces. Arguably, it is perhaps not observation or humor that really links Troostwyk to Uglow, it is asceticism. In 1980 Troostwyk himself made a

huge, oversized sculptural model of a toothbrush, a sculpture that can be read as an homage to his friend. Again the brush is anthropomorphised into a figure, but in Troostwyk's case the work is, according to his close friend Andrew Wallace, ‘intended to be cast in pig iron and laid flat out of doors, allowing rust to make us aware and uneasy about how we care for ourselves’.^v

Troostwyk's ability to use objects, or images of objects, as well as words to speak poetically is unique. In another large sculptural work from the same period *October* (c.1980), a giant wooden coat hanger is leant against a wall. It is carved in hardwood and has a chrome hook. It is painted with one blade black and the other a bright Soviet red. Its size is daunting, but again not comical, as it seems to lament ideas of revolutionary change, as if you could hang up an ideology, like you can a suit, or switch it with the passing of time. Troostwyk was fond of saying he titled his works first and made them second and indeed in this work there is a total synthesis between title and object—a poetic coming together of the two to speak about ideas bigger than themselves.

There is a similar sort of poetry—tragic and economic—within Troostwyk's black and white paintings. These are perhaps his most iconic works. In each canvas a singular or occasionally multiple bright white form hovers in an expanse of darkness. The white is just the white of a primer or flat thin paint and the dark black, grey or umber a marginally rougher application of mixed resin and pigments. The works are always neatly framed in similar dark painted wood. The white form is clear and specific but often hardly readable without the title of the work opening it up. From the titles the forms reveal themselves to be very precise outline drawings of objects from the real world—a tramp's doss box outside the Savoy Hotel in London; the middle deck of the Titanic; letters from the First World War trenches; or stones from historic battlefields. The objects are drawn not exactly as silhouettes, nor as shadows, but as absences. And as such their whiteness burns with a tragic brightness. Another small sub-series concerns itself more with matters of the mind or of the self—an image of Sigmund Freud's couch, a hallucinogenic mushroom, or insects that metamorphosise between different bodies. And then there are the more enigmatic objects—an English garden pond, a curtain, or a fallen chair. It is hard not to read these paintings as at times reflecting on the tragedy, loss and the impact—personal and individual

—of European twentieth century history. And like the émigré abstract expressionist painters in New York in the late 1940s who dwelt and dealt with the dreadfulness of this history through painting, so too can Troostwyk be seen to deal with his family's own story. Of his response to losing his beloved half-sister when he was seven and as a youth living through the London Blitz. Of working for the Royal Airforce Signals during the Berlin Air Lift, and to his family's Jewish heritage escaping from Holland prior to the war.

If imbuing objects with resonance is an ingredient in Troostwyk's art, so too is a type of ritual. The ritual of careful making and meticulous research, as well as more secretive codes and actions. In the work he made, or planned to make, using stones from various battlefields in Scotland, France and America, Troostwyk not only sourced the stones by visiting the historic sites, but also in his sculpture *Stones from Passendael Washed in England* (2006) he ritualistically cleansed the stones; or with the stones from Culloden which he collected to form the basis for a painting, he painted the stones themselves black—though they were to be white—and marked each with a small carmine red prick of paint. The *Pierced Negatives* possibly take this trait to an extreme. A set of 35mm photographic negatives depicting a variety of still life like images, such as a leaf or a close-up of fur, are each pierced to allow through clear light. The nascent state of the photograph has been turned into a fetish-like and ritualised object. The pierced hole is an absence which allows in light.

Postscript

Camberwell and Peckham were hugely important for David Troostwyk; he lived in the area and taught at the College on a part time basis from 1965-1989. The decision to stage an exhibition of Troostwyk's work at Camberwell College of Arts has been catalysed by the David Troostwyk Sculpture Prize coming to the College in 2018.



David Troostwyk
Detail of *Stones of Passendael
Washed in English Water*, 2006.

Footnotes

- i. In this work the words Modern, Modern, Modern, Routine were spoken by different voices, and repeated to fill a 15 second slot. Troostwyk also made the work into a series of four exhibition posters, a series of four broadsheets, and as four transparencies for exhibition projection (all 1975).
- ii. David Troostwyk's texts works were collected together in the publication, David Troostwyk, National Day, London, Matt's Gallery, 1981.
- iii. Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* were written in 1968 and first published in the magazine *o-9* (New York, NY) edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer in 1969, and later the same year in *Art-Language* (UK). The original handwritten 15 page manuscript is in MoMa New York.
- iv. Robin Coombes, The drawn mark + the physical rectangle + the wall: recent work by David Troostwyk, in: *Studio International*, June 1974, Vol. 187, No. 967.
- v. Andrew Wallace, correspondence with the author, September 2018.
- vi. David Troostwyk's family history was explained by Philippa Beale, meeting and correspondence with the author, June 2018.

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Not Black and White by © Daniel Sturgis

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Back Cover: David Troostwyk

Letter from a British soldier dated
Oct. 19, 1917, 1997, resin and
pigment on canvas, 51 x 51 cm.
Photography by Edward
Woodman.

