

Rita McBride has a way with words. *Explorer*, the exhibition's title, is at once tongue-in-cheek and accurate. Immediately following the artist's name, it suggests that McBride is herself an explorer, which is true of all good artists. However, she punctures the term's bravura with her dry humour. She spotted the shiny logo on the back of a Ford Explorer, struck perhaps by the irony of branding: a car that offers the promise of the open road, stuck in a traffic jam.¹

Quotation is typical of McBride's approach, whether in words or forms. She has a particularly sharp eye for shapes and structures in our urban environment that usually go unnoticed: air conditioning units, vents, pipes, skylights, telecommunications boxes. McBride transforms their typical materials or shifts their scale to create sculptures that explore the tensions between functionalism and formalism. However, quoting other sources is not simply about "shifting an item from one context to another; in her hands it became a form of translation with all the distortions and misunderstandings that this implies."² These works are not readymades: even when she maintains the scale of the original, she alters its material, bringing new connotations to the form. As she once declared: "Materials are not just adjectives. They're operatives."

All of McBride's works presented in *Explorer* are 'things'. Even when they include images – which only two of the thirty works presented here do – their objecthood is stressed, with a physicality and materiality that is key to their meaning. Yet, while McBride is undoubtedly a sculptor, her work has never been limited to one discipline. She has developed a series of important works in public

space, which continue her exploration of publicness, social interaction and society. She has written fiction in a pioneering series of collectively authored books (that she also co-edited). They adopt a sexy, radical approach to art criticism and provide a humorous take on the art world and its structures.

Indeed if there is one continuous element in McBride's diverse practice over the past 30 years, it is her pursuit of a line of structural inquiry. Certain projects could be classed as institutional critique, where the subject of her inquiry is not simply an individual art institution or its particular architecture, but the wider context of the art institution as conceived within the trope of Modernism. McBride believes in the importance of being able to take apart one's own tools. Evoking the rallying cry of DIY "If you can't open it, you don't own it", she explains: "That could mean opening your mobile phone and understanding it as a mechanism. Or it could mean that we as artists explore fully the institutional mechanisms that we inhabit and that support us."