THE AUTO-NARRATIVE SUBJECT IN VIDEO ART

An exegesis submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Where was I?

This PhD project tracks a philosophical and artistic shift in my practice. It evidences a locating, a situating where previously there was none. The project explores the use of video as a tool for both documenting and articulating narratives of subjectivity. My principal departure point was the claim that historically, video art emerged at a moment when the notion of a constructed and multipartite subject had become increasingly accepted or at least widespread. That screen-based technologies have played a key role in effecting, reflecting or expressing this idea is central to the project. Video art provided a key critical space in which artists could articulate, critique or otherwise work through the notion of constructed and/or split subjectivity.

Across the fourteen artworks that form the substance of the project, I work through progressive iterations that both shifted and articulated my understanding of the topic. Over the course of the project, my video work went from being floating and disembodied to becoming increasingly ‘located’. This occurred in a natural and incremental manner as my making and reading shifted my understanding of both contemporary subjectivity and the role video could effectively play in the narration of selfhood.

The first chapter establishes my departure points and the genesis of the project. It addresses three early works and their role in defining my initial strategies and ambitions. The project began as an exploration of video art as a medium that has been used to explore subjectivity as mutable and multiple. Here, screen space is the site of encounter, a place in which the self is negotiated. Video is an uncanny space for self-encounter and, by extension, self-narration: indeed, I argue that this is a key reason for video art’s significance in visual culture.

The first chapter addresses three works, and through them I identify key ideas that inform the early stages and later re-emerge in a variety of forms across the project. Doubling and duality occur in a variety of guises as a key motif in the encounter between self and other and Freud is cited as the seminal figure in the modern evolution of the split subject (Freud).
I discuss the writing of Matthew Causey who has clearly articulated the place of the screen in supplanting the mirrors and automata of Freud’s ‘uncanny’ to offer us an experience of the other in our electronic reflection (Causey). Following on from this, the ‘real’ and ‘realism’ become contested terms in the tension of self/other binaries. In expanding upon this theme I reference Baudrillard’s key account of the screen and its corrosive effects upon the real (Baudrillard). This thread is traced through Bill Nichols’ writing on the lack of reality in reality programming and the implications for our own televisual selves (Nichols).

The form and materiality of video are identified as fundamental components of the project. Video acts not solely as a vehicle ‘for’, but also a key point ‘of’ the inquiry. The relationship between screen and physical space forms a fulcrum around which constructed subjectivity is explored. The particular approach to the constructed self that I adopt necessarily frames the project, and in this first chapter I introduce the notion of a performed self that is vitally linked to screen mediated experience. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity is cited as the key departure point for the model of performance that takes place within the various works of the project (Butler).

The second chapter traces the limitations of my early approach and narrates the strategies I undertook to break out of screen space. Strategically, the project needed to escape the relative safety and distance of the screen to more fully engage and implicate audiences. The gallery offered the potential to extend and allegorise the self/other dichotomy into the relationship between screen and site. Importantly, this allegory could also serve the ongoing underpinning of notions of the real. Jeffrey Sconce’s articulation of the intersection between the metaphysical and the screen figure is a key reference for describing the projects in this second chapter (Sconce). Having taken on performativity as a model of selfhood to explore, there was a clear need to break down the ‘authentic versus performed’ assumption that underpins many conceptions of the nature of realism. At this point, my use of the exhibition space functioned to break the spell that cast video as an exclusively other and thereby unreal space, which was at a safe or known distance from the audience. My work with space laid the groundwork for the increasing significance of site as the project developed.
The works discussed in chapter three present two divergent streams within the project and a choice that needed to be made in terms of its future direction. This can best be described in terms of the growing importance of site within the project and whether it was to remain a strategy and method for engaging and implicating audiences or whether it was to become a vector of inquiry in itself. During the middle phase of the project described in this chapter, I made a series of works that represented both options. Both bodies of work were satisfying and offered the prospect of future art-making possibilities. However, only the second option provided the next level of depth for the narrative that the project was following. I was no longer satisfied for the spaces within which I worked to act solely as a means of physical support and augmentation for the screen. This seemed an increasingly hollow extension of the voidal quality that had informed the earlier purely screen-based works. It was no longer satisfying as an account of space. The more I researched the sites in which I was to work, the more I became interested in narratives of place and their role in narratives of self. What’s more, I had a growing suspicion that these two narratives might be one and the same.

Chapter four represents the first step in this direction and in a sense combines the strategies and strengths of the two trajectories identified in chapter three. Crucially during this phase of the project, I began to create works in non-urban spaces. This changed my thinking enormously. The greater expanse of these environments mirrored the expansiveness and larger narratives that I sensed underpinned the constructed subject. Place was gradually supplanting space and subsequently site was no longer at the disposal of video. Video increasingly featured as a process rather than exclusively as an outcome. Rather than solely expressing or witnessing, video was now a means of situating subjectivity amongst the range of socio-cultural narratives that intersect in people and places.

I began to draw in these ideas as I simultaneously questioned the validity of narrative as a self-making impulse for individuals and peoples. I identify Miwon Kwon as a clear voice in articulating the urge to move back from modernist, rationalist space to the specificities of place (Kwon). This train of thought is positioned alongside the work of geographers such as Doreen Massey and David Harvey in defining our changing relationship to space and time.
throughout the post-modern period (Massey) (Harvey). The chapter touches upon a number of cultural forces at work in this migration from the vacuity of generic spaces and generic culture to the re-particularisation of art outside the vacuum.

The final chapter details the two final works in the project. These works were really the testing ground for the approach that had begun to take shape throughout the previous phase. I work through key narratives of Australian identity in places that sit at the nexus of contradictory and problematic aspects of our story of self. Video began to emerge as the middle space: an inside/outside space that allowed for the multiplicity of narratives of the self/site relationship to be imaged.

**Methodology**

My approach to practice led research in both my masters and my PhD was to think with the material - to make stuff and lots of it – in order that the practice led, framed and embodied the research. The project is ‘initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges, are identified and formed’ (Gray 3). It is a project conducted first and foremost with primary sources, the artworks.

Whilst makers are constantly chipping away at the challenges this presents for academics from other traditions of research, it remains contentious and thus requires some contextualisation. One way of understanding this form of knowledge creation can be found in contemporary understandings of intuition. Intuition is a form of knowledge that relies on unarticulated pattern recognition, a recognition that is more ‘direct’, in that it bypasses language centres. It is described by Gary Klein in his studies of intuition in the business world as Recognition Primed Decision (RPD) (Klein). Artists use exactly the same process but perhaps the process appears more mysterious because they make lateral or unexpected connections between ideas in different fields, discourses, indeed any strata of existence. There is nothing mysterious about intuition and the understanding of it is essential for understanding the way research functions in creative research.
In my case, the most apt illustrations of the process can be found in the work. For example, at the time at which I began the art-making that framed this project, did I have access to the convenient phrase “constructing the self as ‘other’”? The answer is no and this points to a key element of artistic, project-based research, and the strange ways it contradicts our usual notions of the linearity of the research process. This manner of work privileges a ‘knowing’ prior to articulation and points up the significance of the relationship between showing and explaining. For, as can clearly be seen in the work that underpins the first two chapters, I had constructed a technological ‘other’ that was also, literally, the self. Those artworks were ‘thinking through’ a multiple, divided and non-integrated self. My capacity to have and to ‘show’ this knowledge pre-empted my capacity to explain it in words. As I reflected upon those works and developed the proposal for my doctoral project, I found those words. This was not because I found some writing that explained my work to me. I would describe the process as identifying other thinkers and makers whose work provided points of resonance and alternative approaches to the same ‘problems’.

I do not use the work of theorists to explain my work, prove its worth or provide me with subject matter. The writing and the making provide two mutually reflexive modalities through which my work is articulated (Murphy). If an artist maintains this relationship between the two elements – language and making – they will avoid the pitfall of attempting to ‘prove’ an idea in the positivist sense, a mode of practice doomed to tedium. The trick with such an approach is, as pointed out by Gay McCauley, ‘how to avoid objectifying what can only be subjectively experienced without succumbing to the temptation of placing oneself at the centre of the analysis, and how to move intelligently between the contingent details of observed reality and interpretive comment’ (McAuley). With this warning in mind I have adopted a mode of discourse that can straddle that divide and navigate that subjectivity in a mode close to its structural heart, namely narrative.
The Writing

This body of writing is an exegesis. Exegetical writing means literally a critical explanation or interpretation of another source – historically the bible. This document is very much a supporting document. It exists solely in relationship to the primary ‘texts’ of this project, which are the fourteen art works referred to by it. In the spirit of Gay McAuley’s quote above, I do however try to give a primarily objective account and analysis of work constructed from, and about, the heart of subjectivity. I recognise that complete ‘objectivity’ is neither desirable nor possible in the context of a practice-led project. Rather, it is in the self-conscious treading between subjective and objective research impulses that reflexivity about, and clear articulation of one's practice can occur.

Practice-based PhDs in the creative arts do not need to legitimise themselves through science or critical theory or philosophy – albeit a current trend to do so. The role of the exegesis is to contextualise the artwork, and it is the prerogative of the artist to decide what that context is. As touched upon above, in this exegesis I nod towards various thinkers from psychoanalysis, art theory, critical theory, performance studies and media studies. I acknowledge the intersection of my work with theirs but I do not seek to explain my work in their terms nor am I setting out to write a piece of critical theory. In addressing their ideas I am identifying illuminating resonances in the interests of distilling, crystallizing or presenting through another modality an idea that is already occurring in the practice. Similarly I acknowledge and discuss the work of many artists. Their work does not provide inspiration for my own. Indeed, I am not sure I understand that word as it is so commonly used in ‘explaining’ art works. Once again they are works that I found illuminating to encounter; works that provided another lens through which to view my own. While I may appear to be providing a list of ways in which my work does not ‘rely’ on that of others, I am not in any way suggesting that it occurs in a vacuum. Rather, my work is highly contextualised, and one of the things this exegesis seeks to do is to make that context clearly evident to the reader.
In writing of her approach to navigating the relationship between making and writing, Siobhan Murphy coined the term ‘Narrative of Practice’ (Murphy 12). Her approach dovetails very nicely with my subject matter in that it identifies complex social entities, like people, places or art practices, as occupying, and deriving from, multiple narratives. One or several of those narratives may be apparent depending upon the context of one’s encounter with the entity: ‘I noticed that what I was doing was crafting one particular story out of the many that could have been told. This story traced a specific trajectory through the period of research and its multiple strands’ (Murphy). Murphy outlines an approach that embraces the fact that narrative is contingent and multiple. She also recognises that research accounts must necessarily exclude as much, or more, than they include in the interests of a cohesive and legible narrative of outcomes. Her non-linear approach also validates the eddying, coalescing and evolutionary development of research projects in the creative arts (Murphy).

What follows, then, is one of many of the stories I could tell, and have told, of this project.
Chapter One: THE FERTILE VOID

The project took root in the fertile void of the purely televisual, where there is no site beyond the screen and no context beyond the frame. Screen space is an unnatural space: unbounded by physics, it is a space in which anything is possible. Given this, it has proved to be an ideal space in which to explore identity as an amorphous, mutable and unstable substance. To capture and exploit this quality I began to experiment with encounters with the self in this ‘other’ space of the screen. Firstly I created a literal double and then later harnessed the formal and material properties of video. These devices allowed me to explore video as a presence that signified access to other realms and possibilities. Further to this end, I experimented with a variety of conventions of screen language, from cinematic realism to the handicam aesthetic of reality television as a means of signifying the ‘other’ reality of the televisual void.

In this chapter I discuss the three single channel video works that framed my PhD project. These works provided me with important insights and whilst the form of my work changed markedly from this point on, many key departure points were articulated during this phase. In this chapter, I introduce key ideas something in the manner of a list. Some of these ideas are central to the project, whilst others clarify the space in which I was operating and my conception of video art practice when I began the project.
**Electro**

**Duration:** 2'39"

**Year:** 2003

In a suburban kitchen, in the small hours of the morning, a man encounters a shimmering ‘double’ of himself as he wanders from bedroom to bathroom. The man overcomes his initial fear and tries to communicate before attempting unification with his doppelganger in a bid to escape a perpetual 2:00 AM of fear and transcendence.

As the 2003 date indicates, this piece is not actually part of the body of work produced during the PhD, but rather was created in the year prior to my commencement. I have included it here in the exegesis because it is the work that ‘started’ the project in the sense that it began to draw together ideas that I felt could sustain a doctorate. Though it is not part of the assessable creative folio, it would be disingenuous to begin to tell the narrative of my PhD project without referring to this foundational work.

**Twin Share**

**Duration:** 5’35”

**Year:** 2004

A man sits, having a non-descript conversation in a non-descript motel room when he is confronted by himself via closed-circuit television. The situation takes a turn for the surreal as his image makes a bid for escape from its cathode confinement.

*Twin Share* was a work commissioned by Philip Brophy for inclusion within the De-Score project. I was teamed up with composer Tim Catlin to create a surround work for screening in the ACMI cinema. In several senses it was a direct extension of *Electro*, this time growing
out of footage I had shot in motel rooms across America during my Australia Council residency in Los Angeles.

**Roller**

**Year:** 2004

**Duration:** 3’26”

A banal accident appears to be looped, reversed and restored by its own kinetic force.

*Roller* continued work I had been doing using my own image but also combined it with earlier more abstract, materialist works. I enjoyed its simplicity, which was somewhat of a departure for me at the time, but as the famous Angelino Tom Waits said, ‘Sometimes you just put a groove in it and call it an ashtray’. *Roller* stills seems to sum up my experiences in the wasteland of LA’s freeways very aptly. Whilst it is a relatively small work in the sense of intention, planning and the time it took to make, it is significant because it was actually the first work I made after I had defined my PhD project. In this way it took on added significance. Now some of the ‘key words’ I had nominated for the project began to weigh heavily against new work as it arose.

**The double**

Over the years preceding *Electro* I began experimenting with the elasticity of screen and story space. This experimentation centred on the use of my own image in combination with a variety of self-reflexive devices. At a certain point the next obvious step in the self-reflexive journey was to create a double. The work reflexively considered its own status as artwork. This inward gaze may be seen as a reflection of the artist considering his own nature. The act of creating a double seemed an obvious literalising step that could capture both ideas simultaneously.
Electro embraces this possibility, employing cinematic devices and the familiar sci-fi motif of the ‘double’. Science fiction as it has developed since the enlightenment has provided a unique venue in which not only to speculate upon the physical nature of the universe and the future of technology but also to ‘literalise’ or ‘image’ psychological dynamics or philosophical constructions. Of course science fiction is not the exclusive province of the doppelganger. There are deeper folkloric roots in which the double appears in many ways in many cultures from Irish and Eastern European folklore until a cycle of works appear during the romantic period which include the poet Heinrich Heine’s Der Doppelgänger (1982), The Devil’s Elixir by E. T. A. Hoffmann (1979), Peter Schlemihl’s Remarkable Story by Adelbert von Chamisso (1993), Dostoyevsky’s The Double (1997), and Poe’s William Wilson (2009). The individual and identity were important themes of romantic period creative work and the doppelganger features as a motif that challenges the integrity of the self.

As described by Nick Mansfield in his work on the evolution of subjectivity in the modern era, the doppelganger is a ‘common motif in proto-modernist fiction [which] dramatised the confrontation between a protagonist and a counterpart who is his near-identical reflection or complement’ (Mansfield p.100). The motif remains a mainstay of cinema in works from Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958), to DePalma’s Body Double (1984), Cronenberg’s Dead Ringers (1988), Carpenter’s Starman (1984), Verhoeven’s Basic Instinct (1992) and Lynch’s Lost Highway (1998). Clearly then the notion of a second ‘strange’ self has deep psychological roots. Tapping into this history, I made a second self.

This splitting became a vital and recurrent motif throughout the course of the PhD, both within the artwork and in my thinking and reading. Whilst initially it took the form of doubles, over time it was rendered in a variety of ways, from the literal and formal to the more oblique, as will be seen in subsequent works. Doubling recurs overtly in Twin Share and once again screen technology is the means by which this encounter with an ‘other’ self is engineered. As in Electro, the technology is seen to operate as a means of creating the

1 Somnium (Latin for The Dream) is a fantasy written between 1620 and 1630, in Latin, by Johannes Kepler. It is considered by Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov to be the first work of science fiction.
double, and it is through this doubling that latent or repressed content is uncovered. In the case of *Electro* we have a paranoid, confused and alienated self whilst in *Twin Share* an insistent and potentially violent self seeks to break the delicate surface of the bounding screen interface. In both, ‘reality’ is ruptured by this incursion. Coincidentally, Mathew Causey describes this phenomena in reference to *Twin Peaks*: “the uncanny and videated doubling of [agent] Cooper is the signal, the crisis point, wherein the dream space of fragmentation via technology invades the real space” (386). So too in *Electro* and *Twin Share*, these video doubles represented a threat not only to the real but also to the stability, and singularity, of the self.

Importantly, as my work developed, I blunted or nuanced this duality in such a way that the protagonist could never fully subsume his repressed counterpart. The relationship between above and below became more blurred, increasingly producing relativistic impasses that locked me in stasis. This unresolved duality can be seen in the work of many other video artists, such as Singaporean artist Ming Wong’s restaging of *Death in Venice* (Wong). Wong plays both the younger and the older characters and utilises conventionally ‘bad’ acting and hammy costumes to create further slippages between perception and reality, history and fact. Spanish artist Jordi Colomer expresses the confrontation of dualities rather more melodramatically in *La Ville* (Colomer). The work utilises dual screens to proffer two denouements to the same situation. On one a young woman in pyjamas moves along a ledge and finally plunges into the void; on the other the same character manages to reach a window.

**Self as other**

How do we encounter this self that is doubled? As in a simple mirror, the splitting of the self allows us to relate to ourselves as others might. I see myself, but also see myself seeing myself. Screen based technologies can exploit or exacerbate this dynamic: the self that looks back can be manipulated such that it becomes quite ‘other’ to the self that looks. For Matthew Causey, this is a key moment:
the critical moment in new media performance works specifically and digital culture in general, when the presence of the Double is presented through mediated duplication, the simple moment when a live actor confronts her mediated other through the technologies of reproduction [...] the experience of the self as other in the space of technology can be read as an uncanny experience, a making material of split subjectivity (384).

Causey’s essay draws heavily on The Uncanny and it seems Freud described quite well the possibility of the autonomous screen self:

[...] an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes (15).

This is precisely what happens in Dostoyevsky’s The Double (1997) and is a scenario echoed in contemporary culture from James Cameron’s Terminator 2:Judgement Day (1991) to Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan (2010). Like these cinematic examples, Electro and Twin Share used contemporary moving image technologies to achieve this digital doubling. They also provided an occasion for reflecting upon those same technologies and their effect upon how we see and understand ourselves. As discussed below, the image of a second video self occurred to me unpremeditated, in the nature of a dream or vision. However as I reflected upon it and continued to follow the leads it suggested, my thinking and making developed around this idea of the doubled or split self.

Simultaneously, I sought out writings that explored the notion of an encounter with the self as ‘other’ through screen-based technology. The motif of the screen double is used as a means of discussing the greater and greater displacement of life into screen mediated experience. Variations on this notion can be found in contexts from Baudrillard’s simulation theory (Baudrillard Simulacra and Simulation) to Bill Nichol’s writings on ‘reality’ television (Nichols) and Matt Causey’s exploration of screen and projection technology in contemporary live art (Causey).
The idea of an unstable and displaced self resonated deeply with me and led me to consider the relationship of performance and screen art more closely. Causey makes a good case for the screen as a contemporary version of Freud’s dolls, mirrors and automatons. Causey suggests that in a similar way, the screen serves to ‘bring forth experience, construct the space wherein we double ourselves and perform a witnessing of ourselves as other’ (386). At the pertinent point in Freud’s *The Uncanny* Freud is actually quoting directly from Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*. Jentsch has taken as a very good instance “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate”; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata’ (5).

In Electro there was an ‘other’ that had come home to roost, to occupy the shimmering non-space between the screen and the flesh. I was interested not only in the potential it offered for understanding our relationship to the screen in culture broadly but also in what it might tell us about the role of performance in video art. What did it mean for artists to self-consciously reach into this ‘space between’? Could video be a means of intervening in this self/other encounter?

**Self-Performer**

In developing my ideas around performance and narrative as modes of self-making I was greatly influenced by the work of Shelley Day-Sclater. Her work was the first encounter I had with the idea that the performed could be ‘true’. She states: ‘[the] notion of ‘performance’, for some, implies a degree of superficiality, of inauthenticity of the self that inhabits those narratives. This is because it is contrasted to an assumed ‘real’ – a binary, real or performed, underlies our thinking – where the ‘real’ is the privileged of the pair’ (322). She goes on to stress that performance and narrative, through their profusion, de-emphasise the import of a single truth, and offer the possibility of multiplicity. In so doing these processes raise the importance of context, of whom we are speaking to, or performing for. She continues, ‘when we focus more closely on relationships, the self/other boundary becomes blurred in interesting ways’ (322).
The idea of a self performed and constructed in narrative was a keystone of my own work in the early phase of research. In tracing these ideas back through performance studies and psychology I encountered and was further influenced by Judith Butler’s notion of performativity. Though Butler’s exploration focuses on gender, I find it applicable to subjectivity more generally. She pursues the notion that identity is constructed in performance: ‘Such acts, gestures, enactments generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’ (136). Importantly she stresses that there is not an a-priori and authentic subject that pre-exists the performed subject, but rather that the performance constitutes the subject (25). This approach has been very influential on both the social sciences and the arts over the last two decades. As Marvin Carlson puts it, ‘the condition of ‘performance’ may be read, in itself as tending to foster or look towards postmodern contingencies and instabilities,’ and that performance ‘may be thought of as a primary postmodern mode’ (167).

Video serves as an accomplice in this performative process, not only to document, but also to place us in the screen space. Screen space has come to occupy so much of our time and thus our minds, arguably acting as agent in the confusion and destabilisation of scripts for the performed self. In reference to Don Delillo’s play Valparaiso, Miwon Kwon articulates the internalised audience that constructs our telesvisual other self, ‘...life is footage waiting to be shot. Experience is not real unless it is recorded and validated through media representation. It is in this mediated virtual space that we talk to each other today. This is the way we tell each other things’ (160-161).

These ideas provide the lens through which to view and understand the ‘I’ that occupies the performance works in this project. By giving form to the notion of a doubled self encountered as other, and allowing me to describe it clearly, Electro provided a frame for much of what was to form my PhD. It was the also first of the doubling works and the first of what I came to understand or consider as ‘expressionistic’ works. In this section, I describe a style of expressionism that became linked to the notion of performing oneself, or narrating oneself into being. I use the word expressionism to convey the idea that reality is
distorted by subjectivity. I also call on the broader traditional sense outlined by R.G Collingwood in which expression means the transmission and recreation of emotion in another (Collingwood 129). This was significant for me because the image at Electro’s core had arrived unbidden and I was able to translate it to the screen fairly directly. As an artist this was a powerful moment. Whilst I had been happy with my work during the first six or so years of my exhibiting history, I had often felt cramped by the second-guessing and over-thinking that certain artists can be prone to: a little bit of art education can be a dangerous thing. With Electro, here was a work that had released a thought I did not know I had, an image from deep inside for which I was both maker and audience. The connection between the work and myself was uncluttered, clean and deep.

I had been working increasingly with performance since 2000 but this exorcising of potent emotional and psychological content was different. Here I was performing my self, yet the work was neither confessional nor diaristic. This was a key idea that compelled me to re-consider the prevalence of performing artists in video, artists who had used their own image. I started to draw out connections between the nature of the technology, the historical context in which it had arrived and the way artists had used it. Without giving way entirely to a techno-determinist view of video art history, I began to re-consider the relationship between these elements. It was this thought that formed the spine of the PhD project and led me to begin using the term ‘auto-narrative’ for understanding this mode of performance.

Auto-narrative refers to that which is simultaneously true and constructed, a performed self, operating in the space between inner and outer. It was the term I began to use to encompass and describe the range of performative video art practices that utilised the artist’s own sound and image to address the nature of the subject/object/text relationship or, as I have described it in my introduction, the maker/context/video relationship. Narrative is understood in this context as a primal sense-making impetus universal to human cultures. It begins with an Aristotelian definition of narrative as a set of events in cause-effect relationships (Aristotle). Importantly it is a set of events placed in cause-effect relationship, which suggests both choice and options. This notion is reinforced or compounded by the importance narratives have come to have in areas of the social sciences.
where they are increasingly considered ‘one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves’ (Andrews 77–78).

Auto-narrative work is further characterised by the maker’s self-conscious or even self-reflexive frame of reference. A useful term in this context may be the German ‘selbstdarsteller’ (literally translated as ‘self performer’). The work of the late monologist, Spalding Gray (Gray), provides a clear and exhaustive example, but video art is littered with examples from Linda Montano (Montano) to Pipilotti Rist (Rist). A second related term is ‘performative documentary’ which, as defined by Bill Nichols, ‘puts the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension. Realism finds itself deferred, dispersed, interrupted, and postponed’ (96-97). For Nichols, ‘realism’ belongs to a prior mode of documentary making with an emphasis on the ‘historical world’, a ‘real’ world that is referred to by the representations contained within media. Conversely in our current moment Nichols describes a media landscape in which, ‘[s]ocial responsibility dissolves into tele-participation. Our subjectivity is less that of citizens, social actors or “people”, than of cyborg collaborators in the construction of a screen world’ (54). These ideas were key to my evolving understanding the prevalence and potential of performance in video.

Now that I had had a taste of putting my work at the service not only of my intellectual processes but also my emotional state, I could not go back to my previous drier and over-thought methodology. I was enjoying the balance or tension between intellect and emotion in my work. I felt the inclusion of expressive content, balanced by my wry humour, gave a fuller picture of what I was trying to communicate. Many contemporary artists, including myself, grow tired of the flip and vacant postures of the ‘postpost’ era. I aspire to and enjoy the work of artists who are able to combine critical distance and humane engagement. The tension between these two tendencies is the edge that must be walked by many artists. Negotiating this contradiction extends or refers into the negotiation of emotional engagement and intellectual distance. Further dichotomies that may seen to line up under these two tendencies might be subject and object, inside and outside, feeling and thinking, content and context, anxiousness and ennui, anger and impotency.
So too in *Roller*: duality is again a recurrent motif. It is a work in two halves or in which two contrasting components spark off each other, a further iteration of the duality or split found at the heart of much of my work. *Roller* is another example of the manner in which this new-found expressionistic potency was finding its way into the work. *Roller* was begun during my time in Los Angeles on an Australia Council Studio Residency. The residency was my first and I found the experience very isolating. At a certain point I put aside the work I had imagined I might make there and tried to give some form to the consuming experience of this very singular city. Under the over-arching notion of auto-narrative performance I had identified as central to my PhD, I began to experiment with a variety of approaches, the results of which were *Roller, Twin Share* and “OW!” (this last work is discussed in the next chapter).

Whilst *Electro* and *Twin Share* had used naturalistic performances and narrative devices to convey inner states, different techniques were used to generate the expressive content of *Roller*. Extending upon the handicam motifs outlined in the subsequent section on realism, the abstract sequence utilised the precariousness of the domestic handicam for its effect. Cinema is a key reference point here as many films have used the shaky camera for the purpose of disturbing viewers, whether diegetically (a video camera is present within the story space and images from it form part of our point of view) or non-diegetically (the shaky camera view is present but not accounted for in story space). *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez) is the chief contemporary example for the former approach whilst its noble ancestors of the north American woodland, *Evil Dead I & II* (Raimi), exemplify the latter. The following passage from Adrian Martin in the first issue of *sensesofcinema* says it better than I can. “Terror comes from intense moments of sound-and-image confusion, illegibility, chaos, uncertainty, agitation – abrupt camera tremors or plunges into darkness, parts of human figures that cannot be discerned, mysterious apparitions, zones of blur […]” (Martin).

Terror is too strong a word for the effect of the slowing and abstracted passage that forms the body of *Roller* but Martin’s observations point up the power of limiting the amount of information given to an audience, restricting their access to the full context of an image. ‘Less is more’ is one of the ways in which abstraction can function not simply to give us less
literal information about a given depicted situation but also to give us access to what cannot be seen, the thoughts and emotions of characters. Images used in this way can literally ‘leave something to the imagination’. Roller’s charge resides in the co-incidence of, and slippage between, a reading of the work as the disorientating document of an ‘accident’, or the expressive rendering of an inner state. The righting of the situation, the fact that it pops back to normal at its conclusion, confirms the interiority and absence of physical consequence of what we have just seen.

**Materiality**

In all three works that comprise this chapter, the material of video is exploited as surface and texture, the physical and electronic ‘stuff’ of video. Video as a material punctures the realistic spaces of the three works in different ways to provide a portal to otherness. My interest in video as a material goes back to my first degree in Television Production and was explored subsequently during my second degree and MA. I felt that if video provided such a limited analogue compared with film then that limitation should be exploited for its particular aesthetic uses as a material. Without access to a Fairlight or other video synthesiser, I went the low-fi route. I used the means at my disposal to explore materialist abstraction through features like the lens, artificial gain, white balancing, physically interfering with tapes, and simple edit suites to create degraded and distorted images.

The interest in distortion continued into my first years of digital video and has reappeared in various guises over the years. The distortion sequence in *Twin Share* is a return to the good old days, as I utilised tape distortion, admittedly combined with the convenience of some digital flexibility, to achieve the work. I have an enduring interest in the nature of noise and its mutating definition across the spectrum of audio-visual practices. As a child of the tape era I was raised on noise and I still have great affection for it as an aesthetic. It ‘generation gaps’ me to some degree because I remember when there was a real nowhere land of noise between the television channels, and when tape was a much more malleable material. I have seen these artefacts subjected to the fetishisation of subsequent generations for whom an absence of signal is registered as a blue or black screen.
In my discussion of *Roller* I described one function of abstraction, as an opening up of ‘anti-realist space’, a fertile gap in which a variety of content from myself, and the viewer, might flow. In *Electro* the double is composed of video noise, whilst in *Twin Share* this idea is literalised as the doppelganger emerges from, or is granted his independence through a passage of video material abstraction. A space is opened up between the ‘real’ of the story world and an uncanny parallel world occupied by the double. The abstraction process opens the way for him to cross between those spaces. In each of these works the material of video is that intermediary: it is the space between inside and outside, self and other. Key to defining or imaging the nature of that material is the use of degraded or absent signal, allowing the stuff itself to override that which it is supposed to be carrying – the image.

Sentimentality can also allow us to project qualities onto a material. As a culture we are prone to sentimentalise our recent technological past. Witness the interest in analogue synthesisers during the nineties. More recently, as high definition video has taken over from film and Kodak shuts down factories worldwide, we have not only Tacita Dean’s acclaimed *Kodak* of 2006 (Kodak) but also a huge renaissance in direct-to-film practice amongst younger artists. Harmony Korine’s recent oeuvre sheds another light on this mode of making. As a child of the eighties, his work has a special place for the texture of video. His *Trash Humpers* (Korine) of 2010 borrows from the now ‘otherness’ of VHS, a texture that has now gone the way of Super 8 to signify a space lost to us. Korine however does not evoke the halcyon innocence of the baby boomers’ youth but a decaying and chaotic suburban netherworld. Outmoded technologies have become a material shorthand to represent these lost or other spaces for us.

The space of no signal has disappeared. As noted above, instead of the fuzz and crunch of ‘noise’ we now have blue or black. 2 TV noise is now history, and with its historical status comes signifying potential. It can represent the ether of television’s ‘non-space’, a space of no signal. Perhaps the fact of television noise’s historicity lends it even further to these purposes, pointing not only to a place lost between channels but also lost in the past.

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2 Digital media is arguably on or off, a 0 or a 1, there is no noise inherent in the system, although glitch aesthetics have remedied that to some degree and the ghost may still be found in the machine.
Electronic rather than mechanical, when I turn the television off there is no ‘there’ there, it is around us, unseen except through the ‘medium’ of television. Television can become the vessel through which the unseen and unheard are seen and heard. The image is flat yet it plays at having depth. Television is in fact quite playful in this respect. Consider the space in which a newsreader sits. Various intersecting and colliding graphic and physical devices of varying opacity defy any strict analysis of their planar location.

Not only can television create unreal spaces in a single image: it then proceeds to morph them in an infinite variety of ways such that the space of television is elastic. When space is elastic, so is time, and temporal elasticity is never more evident than in television land. Jeffrey Sconce’s detailed history of the electronic media as ‘mediums’ for the transmission of the other worldly or the uncanny pitches television as bringing ‘ambiguities of space, time, and substance’ to our lounge rooms (126). Complicating Baudrillard’s notion of the infectious unreality that television effects upon the world is its frequently depicted status as a ‘haunted technology’ (Sconce 124-166). This term casts television as a space which not only transmits across space and time but also autonomously occupies its own unique dimension (Sconce 168-209).

Television may have conventions, but it has no rules, no physical laws to obey, nothing is determined. Television is the great deregulated, relativistic yet fertile void where anything is possible and all is interchangeable. Television may be the cause of all this unreality but it is also the venue best suited to discussing it. Realism hence became a particularly significant, and charged, concept for the project.

**Screen Realism**

I began to conceive of the PhD as centred on an auto-narrating protagonist as a means of exploring video as an accomplice in the performance of identity. In my earliest understanding of the project, the notion of narrative, as applied to my own making, was relatively restricted. I was open to a very expanded notion of narrative when applied to other artists’ work, but in my own work I felt I needed to create something that was recognisable as ‘narrative’ in order to keep the project legible. In works like *Electro*,
cinematic devices were used to create a set of events in cause-effect relationship. This format was used in the service of communicating a ‘truth’ of sorts about the artist within the context of a work of fiction. At this point, I conceived of auto-narrative as constructed yet ‘true’. It was constructed in recognisable narrative language to act as a departure point from which I could discuss a range of formats and strategies involving artist-performers.

Given that I wanted to communicate something authentic yet fabricated, and was using cinematic language as a departure point, cinematic realism seemed a sensible convention to adopt. I felt that it was a style familiar to audiences and was culturally coded for greater ‘truth value’. From the beginning I was interested in an audience being implicated by the work. I felt that stronger empathic responses could be derived from the conventions of cinematic realism. Of course realism does not require a narrative nor does narrative have to be realistic. In this context, I use the term ‘realism’ to refer to the common and non-academic understanding of the verisimilitude of cinema and television to the characters, locations and situations it depicts. Understandably, many conventions of craft and contesting theories have grown up around the use of the term so when I refer to realism subsequently I will define the manner in which it is operating through the description of devices, conventions and techniques.

In each of the works described in this chapter the different devices for echoing the realism of cinema and television were undercut or played off against non-realistic components or events. For example, *Electro* was strengthened by harnessing the power of the ‘unheimlich’, literally the un-home-like. I prefer to use the German word because the English translation, uncanny, actually refers to something outside your ken, something unknown, which is not really an accurate or helpful translation in this context. The unheimlich is not outside our ken but rather something that is disturbing because it is at once familiar and strange, all the more disturbing for being ‘home-like’. This cognitive dissonance occurred in *Electro* because the banal suburban setting combines with the supernatural events. The events do not occur on another planet but confront the protagonist, and hopefully the audience, all the more for occurring in such a familiar setting.
Roller and Twin Share share in these preferences about setting. I was interested in trying to keep the environments banal, by which I do not mean boring but simply ‘everyday’. This was important in the first instance because I was performing myself, and thus it was important to perform in environments in which I might very believably be found. These environments are known and unexceptional: nothing is specific, everything is interchangeable. For, like a town in a western, these were ideas of places, containing just enough detail without any contextual specifics. However, they also share a level of intimacy or domesticity. These are private places: a kitchen, a car, a motel room. They are environments where we can ‘be ourselves’. They are then environments that are extensions of the self, extensions of the psyche. Where else but in this world of the mind made visible would I meet myself? In each case, in different ways, this turns out to be an un-home-like self, a self that is not quite the self.

In all three works, the banality of the setting was enhanced by key production choices. For instance, I had an aesthetic preference for working with available light and using as much location sound as was feasible. I was also interested in harnessing improvisation and working as closely as possible to colloquial language and familiar situations. These strategies, combined with the important fact that I was a non-actor, made me a kind of ‘actual’.3 An ‘actual’ is a term used for an actor who portrays a character or situation that is very close to their own lives. Key exponents of this type of casting are Robert Rossellini and Ken Loach, two directors whose approach to realism has fed back in to the approach of professional actors. All of these elements provide important prompts for the audience’s reading of the work.

In contrast to Electro and Twin Share, Roller evokes ‘reality’ television programming with its handicam aesthetic and the fortuitously captured accident. It is reminiscent of programs like ‘World’s Worst Drivers’ or ‘Funniest Home Videos’. From this beginning it slows and stretches into a more expressive and abstract passage that conveys the latent content lurking beneath its banal exterior. Like the other works it relies on a mismatch between the

3 An actor who has actual life experience of the situation they are required to portray. This notion will be further expanded and complicated throughout the exegesis to discuss art specific models of performance and specifically the selbstdarsteller or self performer.
markers of the ‘true’ and those elements that were more expressive to provide additional traction with an audience. If an audience were given cues about the reality (read truth, veracity, authenticity) of a character, then additional psychological and emotional weight could be transferred to the events that followed. Twin Share, for example, sets up a banal situation through the extended scene of the phone conversation and orange peeling so that as the transformation and break out sequences occur they have all the more impact. As in Electro and Roller, the non-naturalistic content takes place within the already established quotidian context of the work to that point. This play between the everyday and the extraordinary continued right throughout the doctoral project, long after I had left cinema behind as a primary referent.

Realism vs. ‘Reality’

A different set of realism markers were applied in the case of Roller than those of Electro. Roller used handicam-realism: the low-fi texture of the small lens mini-DV camera; the auto focus and iris; the unconventional and convenient framing afforded by the dashboard mounted (and thus clearly small and domestic) camera that is seen to be activated or operated from within the screen world; and the ‘non-performance’ of the protagonist and his occasional frontal address to the camera. All of this tells us this is a camera that is diegetically present and acknowledged in contrast to the ‘hidden’ camera of most naturalist cinema.

These elements are intrinsically linked to the history and evolution of video technology, and to a lesser extent 8mm and 16mm, and are part of a code for the eye- (or video-) witnessed event. They are all contraventions of ‘correct’ cinematic form even if they have been co-opted by narrative cinema and television for the purposes of realism over the last 40 years. There has been an avalanche of ‘amateur’ – read bad – video made in this mode, both self-consciously and unselfconsciously, over the last fifteen years since the explosion of video art that followed affordable desktop editing. One excellent example of the potential of this mode of making is The So Called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Mind by Pawel Althamer (Althamer). This is a series of films Althamer recorded with fellow artist Artur Żmijewski that document the artist exploring alternate states of consciousness such as LSD,
peyote, hashish, the truth serum and hypnosis. The works are all captured in the ‘shooting from the hip’ style of amateur videography that allows for a great degree of freedom and responsiveness. It also lends the work an authenticity and intimacy that audiences have learned through their own familiarity with the technology whether through their own hands or those of other makers.

In his article *Documentary in a Post-Documentary Culture?*, John Corner discusses the rise of reality television and its move away from the values and functions of the observational documentary tradition (Corner). Amongst many points, he discusses the rise of the performative engagement of participants in this mode of production. More than mere stiffness or self-consciousness, the camera provides an opportunity for performance, not of an ‘other’ but of the self. This self may be idealised or fantasised, but it is nonetheless projected and invested in as the self. This is, to differing degrees, tacitly understood and accepted by the audience, a clear indication that the performed nature of subjectivity is now a given.

An interesting contrast to this notion is portrayed in a work that uncannily emulates the *Big Brother* format. In Dieter Roth’s *Solo Szenen*, one hundred and twenty eight televisions were presented in a grid showing the artist eating, reading, on the phone, working, dressing, showering, sleeping, simply living the last year of his life – he died in 1998 (Roth). The work demonstrates and exercises the potential ubiquity of video. The work offers the potential of video to simply be present in real time and record the banal profundity of life. Whilst it may not forward my arguments I must confess that the honesty of this work has a dignity and gravity that cuts through any theoretical posturing. It demonstrates the potential of the medium to potently present the poetry of daily life.

However, the makers of reality television do not require ‘natural’ behaviour nor is it expected by an audience. Even more important is the consequence that, as Corner suggests: ‘belief in the veracity of what you are watching is not a prerequisite to engagement’ (263). This has profound implications for the way we construct our social and private selves. Not only does it suggest that we have accepted subjectivity as constructed rather than innate or enduring but also that we do not need to think something is true in order to believe in it. As
makers, we simply need to press the ‘truth button’ well enough to implicate and activate an audience.

Perhaps this is a given. If we look at the impact of narrative in literature, theatre and cinema, we can see that audiences are genuinely engaged and moved whilst knowing that something is not factual. However there has previously been a distinction between an artistic truth and the reality outside of the story world. This no longer holds true and I have explored this idea throughout the PhD in a variety of ways. In the case of Electro and Twin Share, cinematic realism was exploited in combination with the presentation of the artist undisguised to complicate the truth of what was being seen. In Roller the artist is again unadorned and presented to us in the manner of reality television. As will be seen in later installation works, I went on to employ further devices to complicate the relationship between artist, document, representation and viewer.

The power of realism was something I had always used. Now, I began to consider it as a vector intersecting with other ideas I was developing around the nature of performance, character and narrative. These techniques were to provide an important grounding for my later installation projects. The tension between the real and the expressive components of projects became an important dynamic, mutating and becoming less literal over the course of the research project.

Realism had, then, become a loaded element of my work. That is, I was exploiting its power at the same time that I sought to critique it. I knew, but thought I could ignore, the fact that cinematic and televisual realism were problematic. Whilst they may be a powerful set of conventions they are simply that, a style. As I began to critically assess its role in the project, I began to expand my notions of realism. In the next section I identify these problems more clearly and describe how I found a way forward.
But...

If realism was a means of representing the real, then the important thing to remind ourselves at this juncture is that there was no real to be broken into. The entire ‘world’ of *Roller, Electro* and *Twin Share* was contained within one screen space, even though that space might have been occupied by realities of different types or levels. This confusion, break down of, or incursion into the real via a technological doubling echoed elements of simulation theory in an interesting way and a brief excursion into that perhaps all too familiar territory is unavoidable at this juncture. Baudrillard’s notion that ‘[c]ommunication, by banalising the interface, plunges the social into an undifferentiated state’ has been taken up so often and in so many contexts that it has itself become banal (*The Transparency of Evil* 12). When depictions only reference other depictions, when conventions for depicting reality become the reference point rather than reality itself, then the differences between things, the differences that compose reality as Baudrillard would have it, begin to break down (*The Perfect Crime*). Miwon Kwon extends this notion of difference to the construction of identity formation ‘... the issue of difference is key to any understanding of identity formation...difference is a process of continual identification/[mis]recognition and alienation/[mis]recognition intrinsic to the [self-] construction of identity and subjectivity – that is, as a complex relational process’ (148).

Traditional means for creating continuous time and space with the moving image do not acknowledge, unless in the case of satire or some other form of post-modern reflexivity, that they are engaging in conventions. Self-concealment is one of the important rules. We/they ignore the knowledge that the conventions are not indexed to the world outside of media but rather rely for their reality effect on their resemblance or contrast to previous depictions. As we know they are copies of copies. There is some irony to the fact that conventions for depicting reality can corrode it but arguably this is the nature of language; to describe is to abstract. Nonetheless the sense of Baudrillard’s argument is very clear and in any work dealing with the capacity of media to relate to, or represent, lived experience we ignore it at our peril.
In *Roller, Twin Share* and *Electro* I used a variety of methods for breaking the spell of media, setting up realistic screen worlds and breaking or interrupting them. Importantly however all of these works remained firmly and entirely within the world of a single screen. I have discussed models of realism as a means of setting up the audience for the incursion of another force, another quality of experience or psychological content. The reflexive process of making eventually led me to question this method. I had a growing dissatisfaction because these works relied upon the spell of the moving image, a spell that is most powerful when narrative is activated. That is the way the language of spatio-temporal continuity has evolved to keep the audience on the hook, contained within the total story world.

I began to look for means of making this problem more visible within the structure of my work. Importantly however, I did not do so with the sole intention of being yet another artist illustrating the loss of the world. While I conceded the power of Baudrillard’s argument, I felt that we nevertheless occupy the world: we speak not only to it, but in it. For, as with all arguments for the loss of the world, at some point we look up and find we are hungry or sleepy or horny: we are still here. We must then be able to critically occupy this space. We must engage with the ‘truth’ of it as lived in the world.

Whilst I was very happy with the trio of works described in this chapter, my dissatisfaction with elements of them prompted my practice to engage with site much more concretely. For while I had been quoting cinema and television in a critical manner, for audiences there remained the ‘ride’ of the cinematic construction. The audience’s disembodied identification with the protagonists was largely a cinematic experience. Many of my ideas for these works were blunted by the fact that the cinematic allows us to be inside but outside.

It is true that *Electro* was constructed such that the ending and beginning dovetail around the blackout to produce a ‘groundhog day’ loop, albeit without the happy ending. This important motif appears - or recurs - in *Roller*. Whilst in *Roller* the loop may function in a manner more reminiscent of audio sampling, it still retains the quality of an existential trap. But how, beyond the loop, did *Electro* engage with its gallery context? As it is presented on
the supporting DVD, it has credits and titles but it was made for the gallery and at the moment when the light blows we cut to black, returning neatly to the beginning. It is a story of no story, an anti-story; no one learns anything or progresses. Cinema has of course played this notion out in many ways, but operating in the gallery I had the distinct advantage of not merely suggesting a lack of progress but making it actual. The audience never got any sense of a beginning or ending: there was punctuation but no resolution. This video loop and its self-contained critique of linear narrative became central to a great deal of my work from that point on. It allowed me not only to begin to engage with the formal restrictions of video installation but on many occasions functioned as a key means of engaging with the thematic heart of my work.

The shimmering, impermanent quality of the Electro character served not only to provide an image of a being who occupied a non-physical realm – like television land – but also implied a character who was ephemeral, less stable than his flesh and blood counterpart. In the first instance this quality appealed to me because it suited the narrative and also gave this seemingly distressed character a fragility that could be read not only narratively – he was from the ether so he was ethereal – but also allegorically. His distress rendered him unstable and his grip on the world was tenuous.

Over time this fact took on a greater significance as I started to recognise a truth in this image. I experimented with it in Twin Share, which sees a character shifting between states of solidity and Roller that tears the fabric of a moment and smears its protagonist across it. In Electro, and these subsequent works, this multiple and shimmering character reflected my own ideas about the instability of the self, the 'I', the subject. As this resonated with me I found my own thoughts and experiences reflected in a range of theories of subjectivity from psycho-analysis to post-structuralism. Whilst I had encountered these ideas previously, in light of my new work they had greater resonance for me and I could see a second plank of my doctoral project emerging: a connection between the performative nature of so much video work, the pervasiveness of the screen in post WWII culture and the growing understanding of a subjectivity that was no longer innate but constructed and contingent upon context.
These thoughts urged me into the next phase of my project. Rather than bridging parallel spaces within the screen space, as in the works in this chapter, I began to form bridges between screen space and physical space. Thus began an engagement with site, which, whilst not envisaged at the start of my PhD became completely central as time went on.
Chapter Two: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Breaking free of the televisual void, I set out to work more explicitly with the limitations and possibilities of video installation. In the first of my site-specific works I attempted to activate space and audience alike. Emptiness remained a critical quality in these works and one that has endured to the present, but it was no longer a voidal emptiness. I became interested in how video occupied, animated and engaged with the space it inhabited.

“OW!”

Year: 2005/06

3 Channel Installation

“OW!” began during my residency in Los Angeles and arose as a direct response to my immediate and extended environment there. It is the final of the three works I began in LA, all of which I discuss in this exegesis.

For the most part I was very alienated and lonely in LA. I tried to just hang out in my studio and work on a large piece that was due and I ended up pretty much locked up, in the space and in my head. The giant air conditioning duct in which I am stuck in “OW!” was in my LA studio. I kept staring at it and imagining myself stuck in it, so eventually I just followed through and stuck myself in there. The ceiling was 18 foot high and so the image I imagined was always one of being suspended up there, stuck, but also in danger of falling should I get unstuck.

A family of Phillipinas were very kind to me in LA; they had me in their home for Thanksgiving and New Year and even Christmas morning. This family of women ran residential care facilities for the developmentally disabled. We had Thanksgiving at one of their ‘homes’ with a bunch of their residents. One of the residents was a chronic hypochondriac. He spent the entire day wandering around yelling “OWWWWWW…. OWWWWW! My arm hurts”. Although there was nothing wrong with his arm, he was
convinced it was broken. They had taken him to hospital and had him x-rayed and shown him the x-rays, but still he complained of the pain. He had previously been convinced he had cancer and only a series of tests had eventually proved otherwise to him and he had started up about his arm the very next day. This guy fascinated me. For him the pain was real and constant. It was terrible to see and reminded me of being a child with an earache, or seeing babies on aeroplanes in pain from the pressure but unable to understand why or deal with it other than to express it directly and verbally. I was also compelled by this guy as a performer; he had a most piercing and nasal voice and he kept it up all day.

“OWWWW...OWWWWWWW, my arm hurts, my arm huuuuurts!”

I have included this narrative of the development of the work because it demonstrates that whilst formally I had moved away from the explicitly narrative frame of the previous works, this new work became a clearer example of auto-narrative. In a different manner to the previous works discussed I drew elements together to make a performative work that spoke for me, was me, but was also fabricated. It wasn’t ‘really’ happening to me – I had to construct it, but it was true. This should not be considered acting but rather as a construction of the self via performative means which the artist experiences as a truth.

The resultant installation was the final work of the three that came out of my time in Los Angeles. It was shown in two venues, Conical Gallery in Melbourne and Adelaide’s Experimental Art Foundation with variations in each space.

**Tragic**

**Year: 2005**

**2 Channel Installation**

Having pursued myself across the televusal void to bust forth from TV sets and then get stuck in an air-conditioner, I now dispose of my own body and clean up afterwards. For *Tragic* I extended the work begun with “OW!”. The exhibition took place just a couple of months afterwards, and I continued to intersect televisual presence with the spatial
concerns of gallery installation. **Tragic** was described as ‘minimalism meets melodrama’ by Adrien Allen, the curator of Conical where **“OW!”** was first shown (Allen). For an off-the-cuff remark this observation contained a great kernel of understanding of the work. Melodrama is certainly present in the exaggerated and heightened drama, even if these were given a wry treatment. The melodrama was then placed amongst otherwise mute formal video components that were perhaps minimal in their ‘truth to materials’.

**Tragic** was the second of my exhibitions at Clubs Projects inc., an influential artist-run initiative that operated in a variety of forms for several years in Melbourne in the first decade of this century. Clubs was a unique space. Encouraging experimentation by the artists they invited to exhibit, the committee were focussed on process and dialogue rather than finished outcomes. In both of the exhibitions I undertook there I made the work on site during the course of the installation period. This was something I first began with **“Hey!”** at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts back in 2002 but ‘re-discovered’ for **Tragic**. From this point on in the project it became a key technique for anchoring installations to spaces, particularly in later works like **Round** and **Stonewall**.

I have also enjoyed the results of the pressure it places the performance under. It calls upon me to improvise and experiment, making the installation itself a type of performance, folding in yet another layer of confusion between performance and reality.

Christian Jankowski’s **Tableux Vivant TV** captures the possibilities of this strategy on a much larger scale. The work utilized the convention of the tableau vivant to create a cleverly – almost too cleverly – self-reflexive narrative about the commissioning and construction of his work for 2010 Sydney Biennale (Jankowski). He worked onsite with the biennale office and local video makers to fabricate a documentary of sorts that was both the process and the result of his work. Humour is a key element in Jankowski’s work and for this work the artist did not spare himself. He managed to stay on the right side of sincerity and the work had punch for it. Just when it seemed a little too ‘smart’, the work was redeemed by a most ridiculous sequence in which a television presenter relays the artist’s doubts as he stares out to sea. This most saccharin and clichéd image somehow registered as sincere and captured the truth/untruth duality that ran through the work.
In my most fundamental embrace of the televisual as an undifferentiated space, I was echoing a trajectory of thought that had reflected our collective relationship to our location in – and significance to – the universe. These ideas are picked up in later chapters but at this early stage I was unwittingly tracking the evolution of the discourse of place that has been part of post-modern thought. The televisual non-space can be seen as one expression of the limitless void that humanity recognised during the ascent of scientific re-conceptualisation of the universe. Jeremy Millar summarises nicely the supplanting of place by space that was linked to the growth of science as the conceptual paradigm that re-defined our understanding of location.

In pointing towards the increased importance of infinity, place had contributed to its demise twice over: not only was space seen as the more useful concept with which to explore the infinite, but the very things to which place seemed best suited – a sense of belonging, for example – were now considered intellectually irrelevant. The particular had been eclipsed by the universal; space had triumphed over place (Dean and Millar 15).

Over recent decades, ‘space’ and ‘place’ have once again become contested ground in geographic discourse and the evolution of thought in this area has naturally found its way in to arts practice.

My move out of the box and into the gallery was however an intuitive, tentative and small step in the direction of the specific and a recognition of the limits of the infinite. But the gallery also acts as a type of void; it is just white rather than black. It was physical space but nonetheless a space premised on malleability and the suspension of rules. My misgivings about the uncritical immersion of audiences were answered by this move into space. For as Ursula Frohne points out, installation, in ‘[s]plintering the standpoint […] causes Christian Metz’s principle of the identification with the camera […] to become invalid’ (Frohne). I
however wanted my cake as well: through the use of the devices outlined below, I wanted to continue to complicate and implicate the viewer’s gaze.

“OW” took the form of a video installation consisting of two large televisions suspended on the wall. Each of them contained a third of my body represented at close to one-to-one scale. The effect was one of a televisual magician’s box with me not only confined but also cut in half, the two halves separated and discontinuous. The situational and figurative traps of Electro, Roller and Twin Share became much more physical and actual in this work. In both versions of the exhibition, the image of the air conditioning vent appeared to come out of a concrete bulkhead in the gallery. The scale of my image, the relationship of the images on the two monitors one to another, their stacked positioning and their relationship to the architecture of the gallery all lent the work a sculptural quality.

The EAF show was on a much larger scale that I think served to isolate the protagonist more precariously and further from the audience. At the time I was very pleased as this seemed in line with the psychological tone of the work, though on reflection perhaps the intimacy of the first rendering was more powerful. In any case, they each had their strengths. I was interested in using monitors rather than projectors for this work and the series it started. I was thinking quite explicitly not just about video but also about TV. Monitors ‘say’ TV: they bring that medium and all that goes with it into the space in a way that projection does not. TVs are human scaled, more or less, a point beautifully made by Gary Hill’s Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place from 1990 which dissects the body and places each piece on a monitor of the appropriate size. TVs also contain the world in a way that projection does not. There are little people inside TV and it has a physicality and ‘thereness’ that projection does not.

In both iterations of this work there was a third monitor that depicted an element of the exhibition space, again at one-to-one scale, directly in front of the space it imaged, as though one could look all the way through the monitor and see what was behind it. For the Conical exhibition, a power point was chosen. This was the first exhibition of the work and the power point image was one I devised on site during the installation. Whilst I was very pleased with its mute visual redundancy and formal minimalism, it was also a breakthrough
idea for me. It served to cement this installation more firmly in the physical space of the gallery and activate the alignment of the other video elements with the space as well.

For the EAF show, rather than a power point I used the locks on the loading bay doors. I chose to show the work at the ‘end’ of the gallery near the toilet door and the loading bay. The loading bay doors are usually concealed by a large wall which I removed before lighting the entire wall very flatly to transform the three monitors and the environment into a single large canvas. Like the power point that was turned off, these were doors, gateways to elsewhere, just like TV but this time you weren’t going anywhere. It also succinctly raised the idea of television being simultaneously a window or portal and an object. It showed you an image without transporting you and as such could raise thoughts about the un-critical use of video in the gallery.

In addition to my previous comments about the safe distance at which the audience were left by my single channel works, I had and continue to have reservations about the ‘monitor on a plinth’ or ‘plasma on a wall’ model of video installation. All of the apparatus of art making have been exploded over the last 100 years and yet video is occasionally given something of a free ride regarding its engagement with the gallery. “OW!” began an engagement with this problem. I began to create video experiences that did indeed provide a window, but not a window that led to another space. Rather, it was a window to the space you were already in. This started me down the path of a number of strategies for activating physical space and complicating the ways audiences were ‘with’ video in the gallery. As Simon Horsburgh noted at that time, ‘the work could raise ideas about installation, space and physicality, yet structurally never shy away from being about video’ (Horsburgh). I was intrigued by the possibilities offered by this technique and it subsequently became a central device in my next work, Tragic.

Tragic was the next work in which I attempted to make apparent the schism between world and image by pushing them closer together. In addition to some matting for superimposition and a few invisible edits, I once again utilised one-to-one scale to achieve the appearance of real space and time. As with “OW!” there was an additional monitor on which ‘nothing’ happened. In this case it simply displayed the bracing arm of the Pivottelli
supporting the monitor’s weight, surrounded by the patchy walls of Clubs Projects Inc. I enjoyed the play on the ‘support’, a term often used to refer to the supporting medium or technology for a work. Here, the support was importantly central and on show. The monitor was placed between two windows to further subvert the illusory nature of video and undermine its function as a window onto another place. In addition to conflating screen and physical space, this device also pointed to the artifice of screen language that contrives to have the monitor appear as a window though which we see another world. As in “OW!”, instead of seeing another world, we see simply the world behind, or through, the monitor and in so doing the illusory space of video is questioned.

In addition to their role in engaging with formal and artistic traditions, perhaps most importantly of all these doublings continued my exploration of contemporary identity as a fusion of physical and technologised selves. In both of these works two selves divided via screen technology are locked in some form of existential precariousness. The screen still remained the primary site for these projects but architectural extensions or ‘sitings’ had begun to expand the possibilities for contextualising the work outside the vacuity of the box.

Mark Hansen writes that ‘Crary, Virilio and Mitchell are cited as chief proponents of the notion that digital imaging detaches the viewer from an embodied, haptic (based in touch) sense of physical location and ‘being there’ (Hansen xiii). In the previous chapter I touched upon Baudrillard and Nichols’ comments on the corrosive effect of screen technologies on bodily experience. Hansen in turn highlights a discourse that claims digital technology compounds and accelerates this decay of the real. My installation work sought to make the schismatic relationship between image and world real, to make the gap between them actual, physical, visible. This is in line with Margaret Morse’s description of the screen’s potential in installations to ‘uncouple from its interdependent position in relation to the viewer, setting notions of identity and selfhood and ultimately the sense of cultural control over artifice at risk [...] The once quasi-omnipotent and unencumbered eye has become embodied, foregrounding engagement with the screen’ (64-65).

**off-screen time and off-screen space: the presence of absence**
In “OW!”, utilising the real space of the gallery and depicting it allowed me to infer the entire space, to charge it, to make it more visible. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Baudrillard tells us that what is on-screen has become more real than what is not (The Perfect Crime). We can see popular examples of this every day. Being on TV does not offer us a chance to be famous, it simply offers many of us a chance to be: the screen lends us denser visibility. How this will mutate now that television is losing its status as the central platform of culture remains to be seen but the effect still remains at present. For when we are in the thrall of the screen the space we are in becomes largely invisible. In contrast, “OW!” and Tragic showed an image of the space you were in, making it continuous with the screen. In so doing these works inferred the off-screen space and made it present. Indeed, Tragic extended this concept through the cinematic device of off-screen action: all we saw on-screen were fragments of consequences of what had occurred off-screen.

A useful notion to locate this real/not real space-time is televisual presence, the omnipresent non-space floating in the ether and coalescing behind the screen. It is interpreted in several works in the first half of my PhD project as a ‘real’ yet usually unseen and uncanny dimension revealed to us only through the televisual medium. In Electro and Twin Share this additional dimension gives expression to malevolent and angst-ridden energies that attend the hyper-real space of video. In “OW!” this quality is expanded upon. This ‘other’ space is called up in “OW!” and Tragic through the use of off-screen space, implied through the use of the videographic representation of the gallery space as continuous and at one-to-one scale. Similarly ‘off-screen time’ was implied in the same way, or as an extension of, the same effect. If the space audiences could see was the space they were in, and if all elements were in the positions they were in currently, then the space was ‘continuous’. If they could also see things and people that were not present in the space with them, then how were they present? Was this a recording of a previous moment or was another dimension or possible moment being revealed to them through the screen?

The fact that video is a live system compounds the effect. Unlike film, video requires no processing; the output of the system can be seen instantaneously. Video’s liveness is now a given, but it remains a defining formal element and source of its particular ‘presence’.
Testament to this fact is the popularity of Fox Sports, the single most popular cable TV channel in Australia. When TV is finally off the perch, brought down by the choice and flexibility of the internet, sport is what people will still pay money for, because it is 'live'. But this liveness is not new, just sometimes overlooked as the previously distinct screen technologies of film, television, video and the internet converge. It was however known very well by the first generation of video artists. Video is an energy, not an object: electronic rather than mechanical, when I turn it off there is no ‘there’ there, and even when turned on it is depthless and flat. Video space is flat but also elastic. In a single image it can create physically impossible spaces and then proceed to morph them in infinite variations.

Not only is video space elastic but so too is video time and this potential was immediately recognised by artists. Video art began by asserting itself in contrast to the dominant codes of television and cinema. As outlined in Jon Burris’ insightful analysis of the period, the first generation of video artists deliberately defined themselves in opposition to the linear narratives of television, in a mode reminiscent of an angry teenager rejecting the parent (Burris). The rapid uptake of video technology by artists was arguably a response to the ubiquity of television, a completion of the communication cycle or feedback loop. But artists chose not to respond in kind, not to adopt the language of television; that would come later. Early video artists rejected not only the content of television but also its formal conventions. Instead of fast paced and diverting narratives, artists experimented with tempo, rhythm and duration to draw audiences into dialectical relationships. Whilst this type of experimentation was alive and well in the hands of the post-war film-making avant-garde, video technology’s immediacy gave artists something else they had been looking for.

4 For example, in the last twelve months the following data reveals the centrality of cable television to live broadcast media.

99 of Top 100 Programs in 2010
For 2010, sports programming on Fox Sports delivered 99 of the top 100 rating programs Source: OzTAM National Homes, Wks 1-52, 2010, Consolidated Data, S-S 0200-2559. Total People, Projections. Where applicable the audience for +2 Channels was not combined with main.

3 of the Top 15 Rating Channels
In terms of average audience and share of STV viewing, Fox Sports 2 is ranked #5, Fox Sports 1 is #6, and Fox Sports 3 is #11. Source: OzTAM National Homes, Wks 1-52, 2010, Consolidated Data, S-S 0200-2559. Total People, Projections, Share to Selected
That is, it enabled 'real time' responsiveness in the material combined with a range of sculptural, or spatial, possibilities.

Bruce Nauman seemed to really ‘get’ this about video straight off. His closed circuit installations, like those from the Performance Corridor group (1968-1970), offer a meditation on the possibility of a real-time system amplified through the psychology of the viewer (Nauman). Nauman offers more than a set of perceptual experiments. He adds a playful paranoia to the mix by sending the audience back upon itself, looking over its shoulder to catch a glimpse of the just past, ‘surveiling’ some spaces whilst cutting off access from others entirely. These works are profoundly still, yet full of narrative and metaphoric content the moment they are encountered. Similarly, Dan Graham created contained and perversely static works. He added temporal dislocation to Nauman’s spatial dislocation of the image’s input and output. In Graham’s six variations on the Time Delay Room (1974), he played with an 8-second delay between the recording of the image and the audience seeing the image played back (Graham). In two rooms with two monitors each, audiences encountered a real-time view of the other room on one monitor and a view of themselves from 8 seconds previous on the other monitor. In cascading feedback relationships, these perceptual rat mazes make unwilling performers of audiences, confronted by video’s potential to amplify the self-consciously performative nature of social space.

Artists like Dieter Kiessling continued in this vein with installations such as Two Cameras (1998), a work in which two cameras video each other with their respective outputs fed to two adjacent monitors (Kiessling). The cameras ‘hunt’ focus in the low light and the constant noise of their auto focus motors are amplified as a soundtrack. Kiessling continues the work of defining the formal parameters of video, shutting the system down further to exclude participation of the audience. Cameras function as surrogates for the audience, trying, but failing, like Graham and Nauman’s audiences, to ‘see’ each other. Rendering the frame even more static, Darren Almond’s A Real Time Piece (1996) relayed a live video feed of his empty studio to London’s Exmouth Market (Almond). Time stands still here, as there is nothing to ‘fill’ the moment, nothing propelling the work forward, nothing to see.
All of these works find means to articulate the ‘presence of absence’ that can charge video space. Video time is also infected by its technology. Tacita Dean’s charming film loops such as her recent *Merce Cunningham performs STILLNESS (in three movements) to John Cage’s composition 4’33” with Trevor Carlson, New York City, 28 April 2007 (six performances; six films)* are a testament to time’s relentless march (Dean 2008). Here, looping projectors are so cumbersome in their infrastructure they are like a window into the back shed of some cardigan-clad boffin working on perpetual motion, his machine in constant need of attention and decaying all the while. Video can turn the same trick without even trying: press a button, select an option and it loops away. Of course this is not value judgment or competition but simply an illustration of the inherent weightiness and mechanicality of film in comparison to the flighty, electronic quality of video.

Video installations deny dramatic development, rejecting not only the form but the possibility of linear time. In a perverse, if rather limited, rendering of this potential Douglas Gordon’s *24 hour Psycho* (1993) with a loop time of one day presents the audience with narrative time stretched beyond their capacity to perceive it (Gordon). Whilst comparisons may be made to Warhol’s *Empire* it is the fact of the installation’s loop that sets the two works apart (Warhol). Gordon’s work is not a feat of endurance for there is no need to stay - it doesn’t end and so there is nothing to stay for – indeed one may argue that there is nothing to arrive for.

Closed circuit works offer a Greenbergian distillation of video’s formal properties, but video’s attraction must also surely lie in its potential to bring a critique of broader moving image culture into the gallery. In *Tragic*, I experimented with combining the simulated liveness of an apparently closed circuit and the charge of melodrama. I have no illusion about directing the audience into an explicit consideration of the range of issues outlined above in my discussion of other artists’ work. However I did seek to create, through the techniques I have discussed, a dialectical response in the audience, a re-direction of their own self-consciousness into identification with my body locked in stasis.
me/you...screen/place

The combination of these approaches to space and time launched a profound change in my approach to video installation. They were devices that could charge the space between viewer and screen and allow me to create a less passive environment. Here, my ideas about the relationship between contemporary identity and the screen might not only be raised or represented but experienced in the moment of encountering the work. At this point in the PhD project, my focus shifted entirely to video installation and away from single channel works.

I began to isolate and exploit the physicality of gallery experience as a point of differentiation from more familiar viewing environments and modes of spectatorship. The gallery is a space in which audience members are self-conscious, both of themselves and their bodies. This is the opposite of the cinema, the darkened space in which the audience becomes immersed, and as such disembodied, with their usual cues for spatial orientation all subjected to audio/visual re-direction. Television’s mode of spectatorship is disembodied in a different way: it takes place within our homes, where one lets go of the social self to a far greater extent than is possible in the gallery. Video installation, in contrast, gives us an audience in a heightened state of self-consciousness in the presence of the moving image.

A variety of artists and commentators have discussed the means by which the body is elaborated and re-constituted through technology.\(^5\) Perhaps it is only that these ideas are perhaps interpreted a little too literally or enthusiastically that they may occasionally ring hollow. Nonetheless they are powerful notions at work in our culture and reflect a level, or version, of our reality. Perhaps an argument can be made that at the moment when digital malleability means the indexical relationship of image to reality is no longer possible, there is reason to re-inflate time and space and to re-inhabit the body. Video installation offers a

\(^5\) From Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Haraway 149-181) and the trans-humanist speculations of cyber-punk authors like Greg Bear, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling to the art of Stellarc, Phillip Brophy, Lynn Hershman and Ian Haig - to name a very few.
venue in which the complicated relationship between screen and physical space, between ‘there’ and ‘here’, between self and other can be literalised.

**Loop Time**

I had created the narrative groundhog loop for *Electro*, but *“OW!”* took the notion further, cycling seamlessly to leave me stuck up there in the air conditioning vent. There was no dramatic arc whatsoever; it was a form of temporal stasis. In this work the loop started to function in an even more important manner for me. The loop was not discernable at all in *“OW!”*. If, more than having a circular structure, there really was no clear beginning or ending, no arc at all, then the time was a continuous present. When this was combined with the fact that the images doubled and extended the space you were in then there was a collapse of screen space-time and physical space-time. The moving image was present with you in the space in a different way. It didn’t collapse space in order to transport you somewhere else. In an echo of early Dan Graham or Bruce Nauman and the banality they share with CCTV, *“OW!”* showed you an element of the space you were in, in ‘real time’. Importantly this time was not quite as real as Graham or Nauman’s. Rather, pre-recorded imagery allowed me to collapse narrative spaces together.

The demands of intersecting the static gallery with a time-based medium simultaneously provide not only a potent formal challenge but the opportunity to re-state a philosophical position over and over…and over. The video installation loop is a formal rejection of the notion of development inherent in the cause-effect progressions that propel linear narrative. In this way video installation has embedded within it the structural kernel of existentialism, an endlessly repeating and thus timeless moment where existence precedes meaning because of an inherent incapacity to build patterns of developmental progression. A ‘real’ universe can be constructed which is isolated in time, a universe in which there is no history because time is not moving forward. Ursula Frohne captures some of the dramatic potential of this ‘anti-cinematic’ formal parameter well: ‘video sequences in art installations develop their own visual dynamics by repeating themselves, like traumatic experiences, to the point of compulsion. Particularly when individual sequences are repeated, the motif of
time is fore-grounded as an aesthetic experience between excess and reduction’ (Frohne). Elina Brotherus’ *Le Miroir* (2001), captures this with a simple poetry. In the simple single screen installation, she slowly appears out of the mist of her bathroom, revealed briefly in the mirror before it is ‘re’-misted over (Brotherus). Brotherus is revealed only to be concealed. Ultimately we get neither as she hovers in the repetition of a quotidian moment that speaks beautifully for life’s elusive loopiness.

The video loop thrusts us into the midst of a work at the moment we enter it: no status quo is assumed and no resolution can last. Video installations deny dramatic development, rejecting not only the form but also the possibility of linear narrative. This proved a valuable realisation as it could serve the ideas I had about auto-narrative and the way they lined up with theories of subjectivity. In *“OW!”* and *Tragic*, here were subjects cast adrift from temporal context, as though they suffered from Korsakoff’s syndrome: nothing was innate, nothing preceded, nothing endured. The ever-present moment of the loop speaks to life as a sentence with commas rather than full stops. As Shelley Day-Sclater puts it, ‘subjectivity is best seen, not as the product of anything, but in processual terms, as a dynamic state of always-becoming in the ‘transitional’ spaces of culture that are, at once, both cultural and psychic spaces’ (328).

**Erasure**

In my work the spaces in which I perform become extensions of the self, places in which the metaphoric becomes actual and the internalised becomes the externalised. As I worked through my own ideas, read and encountered the work of others, my work would reflect, or just as often pre-empt, my growing sense of the relationship between screen and subjectivity. I ‘chose’ on occasion to image quite literally an expression of a particular psychological dynamic. One of the narratives that can attach to *Tragic* functions as an example of just this.

The literal doubling of *Electro* and *Twin Share* recurs in *Tragic*. Indeed, the split is a motif that continued to recur throughout the project, applied to bodies, screens and spaces. It was
so fundamental and simple that it was malleable and so it could operate in a variety of ways as its significance grew and shifted across the project. Amongst the many ways in which it functioned in this early stage was as an illustration of the notion of a split self, a self that was not unified or innate but multiple. Tragic continued the threads of self-obliteration, violence and danger that had been appearing in my work, and when reading across the narrative of the entire body of work, it could be seen that things had progressed...or deteriorated. The divided self remained and once again the two halves were in opposition but the confrontation had now occurred and a messy clean up was required.

In addition to extending the matter/anti-matter metaphor that lies beneath Electro and Twin Share and taking it to a narrative conclusion, Tragic embodies a second possibility. The narrative contains the cleaning and erasure within it: not only is the artist killed but his body is disposed of and all trace is cleaned up. In addition to being a split self, this is a self that is re-told, re-made. The earlier works challenged the idea of a singular unified self by trapping it in a single moment confronted by its multiplicity. In Tragic, however, the loop does not simply recur but has embedded within it the undoing of its previous incarnation, its previous ‘telling’, ‘narrating’ or ‘performing’.

Once again, the mechanics of the video installation loop became poetic but also fundamental to the work. Rather than the single endless moment that “OW!” drew, Tragic looped a type of linear narrative: there was a sequence of events. Though this meant a degree of regression into the realm of linear narratives, the trade-off was that I was able to employ the motif of erasure, an idea that would surface in different ways over the course of the PhD project. In Tragic, the loop allowed a moment to be repeated but on each occasion it was played back upon a tabula rasa. That is, the blood had been mopped away: this was literally the ‘scrapped tablet’.

Tragic embodies in a new way the auto-narrating self, born again from moment to moment, narrated into being once again. Amongst the angst of a self-obliterating self, it is important to note that the act of erasure is also the act of creation for it is a fertile void that allows the possibility of something new. Hopefully the work can express, or at least consider, this duality. These ideas were not simply interesting philosophical chewing gum. I had, and do,
feel the reality of the instability of identity. The fact that performance fiction and truth were not mutually exclusive but rather inextricably bound together was central to the work.

**BUT...**

These works proved very successful for me and filled my toolbox with ideas that continue to sustain me methodologically and ideologically. However the work still occupied something of a void, albeit a different one from the single channel works. In *OWI* and *Tragic* the non-space was the gallery. Like TV, the gallery space has an unreality all its own. It is an intellectual rumpus room where everything can be trashed because art always rights itself like a knock-down clown. No matter what is thrown at it and how many times its death is declared, it keeps on coming back from the dead like a horror movie villain. This can have an effect on the stakes and the degree to which an audience and the non-gallery world can be implicated by an artwork. With this idea in mind I set out to locate my work a little more firmly.
Chapter Three: TWO TRAINS, ONE LINE

In this chapter we dip out of chronology to identify two parallel streams within the project that are fused in later works.

**Inner Dark**

*Drama* and *Not That, Not Now* could be termed the most inward looking of the installation projects, or at least they offer that appearance. Both of the works activated space, but the spaces were darkly humorous and melodramatic, seemingly untouched by the world outside the psychology of the protagonist. In one sense *Drama* and *Not That Not Now* went in the opposite direction of the site-based explorations I will describe in chapters five and six, because they explore the gallery as the undifferentiated space of the mind. They offer a solipsistic view of the world in which others offer always and only a reflection of that which is repressed within the self. Importantly however *Drama* and *Not That Not Now* drew very explicitly on the world of the screen, soap opera and children’s afternoon television. They offered a world-view in which television and life are conjoined and inseparable and they present video art practice as a means of reflecting upon that state.

**Drama**

*Year*: **2006**

*Single Channel Installation with Mirror*

In a setting redolent of American daytime soap operas, a melodramatic confrontation is endlessly rehearsed.

In *Drama* the violent tendency in my work was re-directed into the breakdown of the relationship between the artist and viewer, re-configured as two combatants in a melodramatic confrontation. The endangered ‘self constructed as other’ in the various doublings of *Electro, Twin Share, “OW!”* and *Tragic* was projected onto the audience as
they were dragged into the mirroring psychology of the protagonist. The echoes and destabilizations between video and physical space that defined the previous body of work were extended and amplified for Drama. I used a mirror in the gallery to place the viewer in the position of one of the players and they could see my image over their shoulder reflected from the opposite wall. This created the effect of the soap opera convention in which both characters face the same direction in a two shot whilst speaking to each other.

Not That, Not Now

Year: 2008

2 channel installation with surround sound

A banana is not always just a banana.

Not That, Not Now was made for a group show at Linden, My Doubtful Mind. The exhibition was curated around the theme of phobias and I chose to exorcise some demons around my own bananaphobia. The narrative that spans the work can simply be taken at face value as an amusing childhood anecdote. However, by presenting us with a literal visualisation of a mind in which a two dimensional father figure haunts an eternal childhood, it also functions to address the manner in which images, incidents and characters from childhood are internalised in idiosyncratic ways to form subjectivity.

Projection

Drama was the first of the installation works in the PhD project to use a projected image. Whilst the same effect could have been achieved with a large plasma screen, the idea of projection was central to this work and allowed the echoes between technology and content to once again be exploited. Drama drew upon the Freudian notion of psychological projection to effect the entangling of the audience in this ongoing existential struggle. Every viewer of the work was configured as a potential ‘other’, a vessel for that which is unseen or unrecognised, and drawn into the paranoid and narcissistic rehearsal in which the protagonist is stuck.
Unlike “OW!” and Tragic, this installation did not utilise ‘quoting’ of the space in order to tie the screens to it. The use of the mirror and the direct address created the effect of the protagonist looking into the eyes of the audience and served to collapse the gallery and screen spaces in a different way. Rather than the literal splits of earlier works, the manner in which theories of the constructed subject and the mechanics of the installation came together worked upon the audience differently. The audience was implicated in a new way. Rather than the use of scale and the referencing of the gallery space, here audience members are directly addressed and projected into the image. They are players in the middle of the dynamic process, joining in the confusion of self and other, self and image.

Drama was created for gallery four at Melbourne’s Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP). The CCP is a rough nautilus with gallery four at its centre. Like finding a Minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth, the architectural psychology of circling inwards towards this installation that consumes all visitors had a mythic appeal for me. It also served to ‘internalise’ the process that was played out. It occurred in a darkened room without windows, a cell, a typically psychological space. You had to travel inside, into the dark to find the character rehearsing the same moment endlessly. Of course whilst it was ‘narrativised’ as a moment, it was more accurately a psychological dynamic in which a guy is stuck. He saw himself reflected back in everyone he encounters. All visitors offered him a mirrored other, whether as his long lost twin, arch nemesis or lover.

Not That, Not Now used surround sound and two synchronised projections in a darkened room to create the illusion of two characters in relationship – if not exactly in conversation. Both projections showed the characters at life size. As can be seen in the documentation, the ‘child’ protagonist appeared to sit on the floor whilst in the second projection an aggressive patriarch interrupted him intermittently by bursting through a door. The projectors were masked off so that their images blurred at the edges and bled off into the blackness of the room. The gallery was very successfully blacked out and it took quite a while for people’s eyes to adjust. This meant the artifice remained concealed for all but the most curious visitors. It was quite effective, so much so that on one occasion when I was present in the gallery a small child approached the character sitting on the ground and
began speaking to him. The darkness was spatially disorientating and, whilst the
dimensions of a room were suggested, the room disappeared when there was no character
to give light and provide spatial cues. This compounded the sense of a physically elastic and
deeply psychological space. The darkness served to make ambiguous not only the type of
space one was in, but also the type of space the characters were in.

Like *Drama, Not That, Not Now*, existed in a largely undifferentiated space, and thus had
the capacity to be experienced as a psychological space. There were a couple of different
types of environment I intended to suggest through situating the performance in such an
ambiguous space. The protagonist’s unkempt appearance and fearfulness might seem to
place him in some type of solitary confinement, but his child-like position in the story and
the way he moves and sits might also place him on the floor of a rumpus room. People also
observed that he is a little like a primate. The combination of the hirsute arms, his manner
of moving about the floor and the banana theme all contributed to this unintended but
nonetheless fitting interpretation.

Sound played a major role in this installation. Through the use of surround sound, I was
able to give the impression that the protagonist was scurrying around in the darkness when
he was off-screen, like a rat. I was also able to make the ‘father’ character sound like he was
walking down the hall towards the door he arrives at. Not only did this give him greater
gravity and menace but also meant his presence suffused the space. He was all around the
space rather than just a figure in a doorway. For his part, the protagonist appears, as in
*Drama*, to be addressing someone, perhaps the audience, but there is also the possibility
that he is talking to himself. This ambiguity is of extreme importance. He is trying to
convince an audience that includes himself of the narrative he is telling. He is narrating
himself, or a version thereof, into being. This is not to say he is lying or does not believe
what he says, but rather that his act of telling is a creative one.

**Doubling**

In *Drama* the split self was formally internalised. It was not visible in the same manner as
in the doppelganger works but the psychology of it became more pervasive and florid. All
audience members were dragged into this self/other confrontation, merely by being present. The split and subsequent confusing play between the real and the televisual is echoed in South African artist Candice Brietz’s *Becoming* from 2003 (Brietz). For the work she learnt to perfectly recreate scenes by six Hollywood a-list actresses. The original and the copy were bound together back to back with all backgrounds removed. The subsequent fusion between the original and the copy played perfectly to our media constructed selves. The title to the work is intriguing, evoking as it does the state of transformation from one thing – or self – to another, connoting selfhood as a process. Interestingly, *Becoming* as also the title of an MTV programme in which teenagers re-perform a music video by a pop music icon (*Becoming*).

In *Not That, Not Now*, the ‘split’ that can be found throughout the PhD project appeared again but not in quite the same way. This time, the ‘other’ was more clearly personified, this figure was known. This Oedipus failed to kill his father but instead moved him in upstairs on a permanent basis – a fate worse than death, perhaps. *Not That, Not Now* was a version of the father, but it was really more a splinter of the patriarch fused together with a 1970s advertising campaign and a comic phallus. Importantly, the father was in silhouette: he was visually, sonically and performatively less complex than the child character.

Therein lay a classic Freudian split. A fully formed, three-dimensional character, the ‘I’ of the work, was plagued by a dark, oppositional and lesser known ‘other’ half. Between them, they could be seen to form a rudimentary conscious and unconscious. But this is only one way of seeing them. Equally important is the reading in which a moment, a version, an aspect, of this guy’s father has lodged in his mind and remains an oppressive critic. Seeing these two characters as aspects of the one psychology was aided by the fact that the abusive patriarch’s comings and goings are in a directly inverse relationship to those of the simian protagonist. Superman/Clark Kent style, they are never in the same place at the same time.

**Seriality**

As the performative works of my PhD project started to accumulate and centre around similar situational motifs, they began to take on a serial quality themselves. As in soap
opera, narrative closure could be delayed indefinitely without any meaningful resolution, both within the works themselves and across the ‘series’. These qualities compounded my critical rendering of narrative as a means of situating ourselves and in turn understanding constructed and contextual subjectivity. Delaying or eliminating resolution brings the causal and linear nature of most narratives into question. This is not a matter of negating narrative’s value but rather examining it critically.

Drama borrowed several elements from daytime soap operas, most particularly Days of our Lives (Days of our Lives). In addition to the use of melodrama and costume, I compounded the reference to soap opera through the use of a circular and ponderous solo piano piece, which is almost but not quite the Days of our Lives theme. I also saturated and degraded the image to bring it closer to the NTSC look I recalled so strongly from my childhood. When the audient stepped onto the glow-in-the-dark footprints to occupy the correct position to be in the frame with my projected image, they were lit by a small red-tinted light to match the cast of the video.

Soap opera was interesting to me for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an archetypically televisual medium. Whilst it was born on radio, it has been part of television since television’s inception. It was a natural extension of my conceptualisation of TV as a place, because in soap, whole lives are lived on the box. Soap’s seriality is a defining quality of television in contrast to cinema. The massive narrative arcs of soap can span lifetimes, quite literally: Days of our Lives has been on nearly every weekday since November 8, 1965, five years before I was born and it is far from the oldest (Wikipedia, Days of our Lives).

Television is the medium that is in our homes. Its seriality and the simulated live-ness that goes along with it make characters and situations more real for people, more embedded in their lives than cinema ever can be. We talk to TV characters, we own them in a way we do not own cinema actors. Cinema actors are more stellar: they are of the heavens, of the

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6 NTSC is the colour system used in the USA. At 640 X 480 pixels, it has a lower resolution than PAL (768 X 576), the Australian system. Given this lower resolution, colours ‘bleed’ at the edges and have a lower tonal range than PAL. This gives NTSC a characteristic and unmistakeable look.
imagination. TV actors are with us, in our homes and daily spatial lives. Witness, for example, the stories soap actors tell of being accosted for their on-screen behaviour. For *Drama*, it seemed that soap was an ideal venue through which to complicate the relationship between the real and the screen, self and other and confuse which side of the screen was occupied by whom. Soap opera also provided the motif of confused or stolen identity, of the lost twin, or of endless love affairs fired with complex histories and contradictory emotions. This was very useful as a means of suggesting a highly fluid subjectivity that could be rewritten depending on the context required by each possible version of the story.

During this phase of the project the level of formal and conceptual repetition within the work began to echo the seriality of television. I was slowly emptying my image, hollowing it out and shifting my image away from me until it was something else. Through the mediation of the technology and the sequential nature of my work I was shifting the signifying relationship away from an auto response to a jagged, stuttering, second-guessing one. The hollowing out that characterised work like *Drama* finds resonance for me in seminal video works of several important artists in the 1980s. In *The Nature of Things* from 1987 Eija-Liisa Ahtila and a friend list brands as they recline, “Oh dear fuck if only I could maintain a state of the new” (Ahtila). Much like the early video work of Phillip Brophy (Brophy) and Max Almy’s *Leaving the 20th Century* (1982), their all too clever vacancy is certainly funny but also leaves one with an emptiness in the pit of one’s stomach.

**Un/Realism**

As outlined in chapter one, the notion of cinematic and televisual realism sat beneath early works in the doctorate. It remained both a key interest and tool for complicating the real/fake, performed/ authentic dichotomies I was trying to subvert. As with many of the underlying ideas, realism went through several permutations as the project progressed.

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7 Witness the 2007 Christmas Eve assault on *Days of our Lives* veteran Drake Hogestyn by a man quoting past story lines.
For *Drama*, the convention of the loop was actualised or made ‘real’. The work contained a ‘loop of no loop’, for rather than repeating a single version of the performance I performed the piece over and over changing it a little every time. That is, rather than looping a single take of the performance, it was performed forty-two times and then nine subtly different takes were chosen and linked together. This afforded a couple of different readings: here was life as an endless rehearsal in front of the mirror; or perhaps a moment that one cannot escape, a moment in which escape is threatened and transcendence is promised, but never delivered. This element undercut the unreality of the work. Here was a guy trying to convince himself, trying to get it right but fated to repeat his mistakes.

*Not That, Not Now* continued to explore the relationship between different codes of realism and their relationship to the confusion of selves in the moving image. One reading of *Not That, Not Now* shows it to resemble a video-diary: it is a monologue delivered in the first person direct to camera; the events outlined are from the character’s biography; the language is colloquial; and the performance is overtly naturalistic and apparently improvised. All of these are familiar tropes from the video diary format, be it authentic or fabricated.

*Not That, Not Now* could also be read as a type of exploded cinematic couplet, that shot/reverse-shot base on which the language of continuity editing is built. The evolution of the visual language of narrative cinema has grown to allow us, as an audience, to slip from moment to moment between identification with various protagonists and/or into a god-like detachment from the entire scenario. We are trained to read camera angle and shot size in these terms. Seen through this lens, *Not That, Not Now* becomes a shot/reverse shot couplet spread across the gallery. In narrative cinema, the use of eyelines and the ‘180° rule’ ensure the continuity of movement and gaze from shot to shot. Together they create a

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8 Video diaries are a key part of the reality television format, particularly the reality-game hybrids such as *Survivor* (2000 - TV programme, CBS), *Big Brother* (originally produced in the Netherlands, 1999, TV programme, Veronica TV) and *MasterChef* (1990-2001. TV programme, BBC). These diaries are used by individuals to confess their ‘innermost feelings’. This intimacy is typically constructed with a solitary figure in frame and a direct to camera or very acute angles of address. The internet has provided unlimited space for this mode of self-expression, primarily through personal YouTube channels.
structure in which someone sees and someone is seen and thus two people are experienced as being in conversation. In this installation the eyelines cross but are on two different screens. In fact, the work could be edited into a single screen very easily because its eyelines intersect to create a convincing back and forth exchange. This is facilitated by the fact that the work was constructed such that the two characters were never present in the room at the same time - when one appeared the other disappeared.

These possibilities are formally interesting but their relevance to the project lies in the manner in which they draw the audience into identification with the characters. A number of production elements combine to create a rather convincing impression that the ‘I’ of the story is me, Dominic Redfern, and the story is true in its entirety: the overt naturalism of the performance; the conversational quality of the text; the frontal address; the ‘real’ time; and the one-to-one scale. At one level this is desirable, but it also has its downfalls. Rather than questioning the work and its construction, the audience ‘believes’ the story and enters into the complete transference and identification with the characters that attends naturalism. Once it becomes about the story, it is no longer about stories. As an artist this can be frustrating because the work’s entertainment value is confused with its success as art.

In both Drama and Not That, Not Now, the psychological stakes were raised in comparison with my earlier works. Audiences were more invested in characters whose inner world suffused or overwhelmed the space. This emerged as an effective mode of drawing audiences into screen space but in terms of the overall project, the relationships between screen and physical space and between screen and site had become de-emphasised. The psychological stakes were raised but the screen had consumed the site and unreality had swamped my other concerns. At one level this meant that the works created a hyper-screen experience and provided a critical reflection on our consumption of and by the screen. Its solipsistic nature however continued to read as an imbalance or indulgence.
In the second half of this chapter I discuss two works that represent a transition from the solipsistic and perhaps insular existentialism of the first half of the PhD project. The space of the screen had changed. I had initially worked with it as a voidal space as outlined in the first two chapters. The gallery in turn had become a type of blank, a neutral architectural extension of that spatial conception. The works in the next section represent a move to a more socially engaged phase, in which I adopted different strategies to link subject and context through video. The strategies were different but perhaps more importantly the conception of context and site changed. Rather than the screen world of pure artifice, now narratives of site began to pile up within the screen and inflect the subject constructed therein. My previous work had dived into the void of post-enlightenment universalism, but formally and intellectually I had reached the limits of my taste for the notion. As my reading and work had developed so had my belief in the possibility and importance of the specific and the located. The two works discussed below represent an important step towards the mature and concluding phase of the project, which fuses strategies and outcomes from the work in this chapter.

**20000**

**Year: 2005**

**2 Channel Installation with Surround Sound**

A 19th century submariner is trapped outside, or within, the walls of the gallery. Swimming around and around, denied entry, he is doomed to re-live this moment over and over.

*20000* was made when I was invited to make a work for the Alliance Français Cultural Centre in Melbourne as part of a cultural exchange exhibition. Given it was the one hundredth anniversary of his death, and given my interest in science fiction, I chose as my starting point Jules Verne’s *20000 Leagues beneath the Sea*. A scan of the internet had revealed that Verne’s work suffered from poor translation into English until the 1960s
(Wikipedia *Jules Verne*). As such it seemed a good departure point for an exhibition on cultural difference. To extend this motif of translation further I took cues for the aesthetic design of the work from the Disney movie and ride based on the novel. These small steps in research represented a shift away from dealing with galleries as architecture to contain screens. I had began to engage with narratives of place.

**ROUND**

**Year:** 2006

**4 Channel Installation with 4 Channel Surround**

Running, stumbling, getting up and running on, escape is impossible.

For the Interface Festival in Berlin in 2006 I constructed an installation at the Wasserspeicher in Prenzlauer Berg. The Wasserspeicher are part of a cluster of historic brick buildings once used for the water supply of the suburb.

**Looping in place**

For *20000* I used 2 monitors on opposite sides of the gallery and had the submariner swim between them, tapping on the walls until he came into view. His ‘movement’ was conveyed through the surround soundtrack. This work continued my use of ‘real time’ and one-to-one scale with monitors. Here, however, I used flat screen LCDs to suggest the monitors as an extension of, or flat window upon, the walls of the gallery space. Amongst the spaces on offer at the Alliance I chose a central room that had no windows to the outside, which allowed me to create my own. It also had timber panelling, which I quoted and extended in the manufacture of my ‘portholes’.

The formal devices I used were combined with an extension of the installation loop to once again trap the protagonist in a precarious narrative fragment. He literally circled around and around, creating a physical or spatial loop as well as a temporal one. However there was a key difference: my quotation of architectural devices was no longer simply anchoring
the work to the physical space. The particulars of that physical space were now being referenced culturally. They were being exploited to give us a portal into the broader geo-cultural environment radiating out from a physical location. This work operates quite differently than anything discussed thus far. This is not the void of the gallery turned into my head. This is not a purely existential non-space, but rather an actual space with an actual context. So whilst the situation of the protagonist is very familiar from the previous works, there are also broader sets of references that ‘locate’ him. This is a strength of the work when viewed in isolation. It extended the way I was beginning to understand, relate to and exploit site.

The site for Round was the Wasserspeicher which contains the water tower that can still be seen on the Prenzlauer Berg coat of arms but also the Wasserspeicher kleiner and grosser, the big and small reservoirs. They are unique environments in which to work, consisting of a series of concentric, round brick chambers. For the exhibition I was given the central chamber. It also had a circular chamber at its centre but this was sealed making mine the final room one could enter in the series of circles.

The uniformity of the brickwork and the unique acoustics of the reservoir combined to create very disorientating places. We unconsciously learn a great deal about an environment from the acoustics of it. We get a sense of scale, shape and surface from the reflections that sound makes. We combine this information with the triangulation of our eyes to get a full picture. The Wasserspeicher’s shape meant that there were few visual cues to let you know whereabouts on the circle you were and the sound was no help at all in this respect. The sound would bounce around in a most strange way so that you were sure that some one was approaching you from around the circle only to have them appear right behind you. All of these qualities made it an ideal space in which to construct the installation I had in mind.

Based upon the video and images I had been sent of the reservoir I determined to create another trapped looping work. The spaces looked like dungeons and I thought a character that ran around and around, attempting, but failing, to escape would work well. In the manner of the rest of this body of monitor-based installation work, Round involved the use of one-to-one scale video as well as footage that appeared to be unedited and in ‘real time’. 
The work was also shot on-site. Once again these elements combined to locate the work firmly in the space and create an illusionistic relationship between the video space and the physical location. The protagonist was trapped both in the narrative and within the video medium. I used a surround sound speaker array and four monitors to create a spatially accurate portrait of myself running around the circular room of the Wasserspeicher. The speakers were located facing into the circle whilst the monitors were facing out with their backs to the inner wall of the circle. Whilst this may seem to have dislocated the sound from the image, the sonic ‘smearing’ that occurred in this reverberant space meant that the illusion still functioned very well.

Having devised this – once again – ghostly/creepy work, imagine my surprise, when, upon arriving onsite, I found a small plaque on the far side of the building memorialising the people who had been interned and died on this location. The Nazis used the reservoir – already disused in 1933 – as an improvised holding centre during the period of emergency powers following the Reichstag fire in February of that year. Having discovered this, I improvised changes in the tone of the work including costuming and the way I approached the ‘tenor’ of the performance. Importantly though, just as 20000 was not ‘about’ Jules Verne, neither was this work about Nazi Germany. It did however continue my evolving understanding of the use of site. It also meant the work could operate on multiple levels and provide a range of access points for audiences.

Its main purpose remained the exploration of video technology as an agent in our understanding of subjectivity as fragmented, multiple and mutable. The danger with Round was that I might be seen to be co-opting or belittling tragic historical events for my own ends, and so I had to tread a line between acknowledging that history and yet keeping the work deliberately open in its titling and the didactic information attached to it. The notion of ghostly presence that had been so vital in earlier works had become a little too cute but was nonetheless very successfully realised here in the combination of formal and architectural elements. Finally, it was almost too much, with my interest in loops as a formal and thematic device, to be given a round room in which to work. What else could I do but run in circles? So the work was successful on its terms but marked a point of repetition that was no longer fruitful.
So...

20000 and Round start to explore the links between site and identity. In a sense these works represented a philosophical shift, an opening out to the world, an engagement with place rather than simply space. The protagonists remained adrift, as in previous works, but the geography of their universe had shifted. Whilst the PhD project continued to throw up works in which context was more existentially generic, the locating of subjectivity became another thread at work, another idea trying to find its way to the surface. It also became a technique, a way of operating. These two modes in the work, that of the existential void, the anyplace, and those works that were located and inferred information about subjectivity through location, were not mutually exclusive or oppositional. The style of work I described in the first half of this chapter (Drama, Not That, Not Now) is not a style I am finished with, nor which represents a dead end in any way. Rather, these works show an alternate mode of working that crops up and seems to exist in parallel to the more overtly site-based strategies within the project. The sets of works are not hermetic: they reach out to each other and eddy around ideas that pop up and submerge at different moments throughout the project. The internal logic of the project has sought to work through these possibilities and the ways in which they might marry or converse.

The nascent engagement with site glimpsed in 20000 and Round can be seen as both a development but also a lapse in terms of the PhD project. It pointed the way to more sophisticated works like WIRE and “I've come a long way”, but I was not there yet. The engagement with site in 20000 and Round ran the risk of being a little too contrived. I had travelled to Berlin with a work that I thought would simply harness the dungeon-like quality of the space to make a rather emphatic work from the ‘trapped ’ series. Having learned something of the site’s history on my arrival, I felt it could not be ignored and so I made some changes, which seemed relatively small and went some way towards acknowledging that history. To a degree this is in line with my experience at the Alliance with 20000 even though 20000 was marginally more intentioned in its engagement with site.
The use of devices like costuming and more explicit cultural references signalled a reaching outside of the existential isolation of “OW!” and Tragic. There was a desire to extend these techniques, perhaps arising from a sense that this body of work had run its course. Whilst at one level I was happy with the results of 20000 and Round, they also register as perhaps less psychologically potent than several of the previous works. There was a possibility, as in any trajectory in art making, that at a certain point when ornamentation creeps in, whilst it may be engaging and clever, there is a subsequent loss in charge. There is nothing wrong with costume and quotation in and of themselves and both re-emerge as successful strategies in later works. Here, though, it seemed to indicate a chaffing at the restraints of the techniques I was using. There was a danger that my strategies were becoming formulaic: I wanted to break out of the box. With regard to the line of inquiry I had set out for the PhD project, the general themes remained constant but at this point lacked their previous vitality. The work had become somehow less about a performed self and more simply about performance.
Chapter Four: PLACE

In this chapter, social and personal narratives intertwine more inextricably than before as my work engages with the geo-social landscape that I occupy. Whilst the principal shape of these works remains dominated by personal psychology, the settings belong to a bigger context and acknowledge the role of socialisation beyond the world of the screen and gallery. These works represent a fusion of the strategies identified in the previous chapter and mark an important step in the ambition of the project.

"I've come a long way"

Year: 2007

4 channel installation with surround sound

This installation was shown at the Chulalongkorn Art Centre in Bangkok and consisted of four synchronised video projections with a surround sound track. The projections were in two pairs comprising four sides of a square, one pair depicting myself crossing Lake Tyrell, Victoria’s largest salt lake, and the other showing crowds at Bangkok’s weekend market. The salt lake footage showed a spare and barren Wimmera landscape divided between the pink-brown of the lake and the bright, clear inland sky. I slowly, almost imperceptibly appeared out of this landscape walking towards the camera. At the point at which my body completely filled and blackened the frame I then appeared on the opposite screen, firstly with my body filling the frame and then walking away into the distance. For the audience I appeared to cross the space between the screens, momentarily blackening both, as though the gallery occupied a non-space between these two halves of the landscape. This experience was accentuated by the use of the surround track that enabled me to create the effect of my footsteps crossing the space from one side to the other, seemingly walking ‘through’ the audience. Perpendicular to these screens were another pair containing images of the large crowds that attend Bangkok’s Chatuchak market. At about one minute prior to the point where my image crossed between the salt lake screens, the crowd stopped
walking and stood about shuffling until just after I crossed over, as though signalling or
acknowledging the moment.

Stonewall

Year: 2009 – 2 different iterations

3 channel installation with surround sound

Stonewall was realised in different iterations for two different venues: Art Centre d’Marnay
in France and, in an expanded form and accompanied by a second work, Mythos, for PICA in
Western Australia. Whilst the French exhibition preceded the Australian one, the dramatic
architecture of PICA’s central gallery presented an ideal venue to show this work and the
work was conceived and developed with both spaces in mind.

Stonewall exploits devices developed earlier in the PhD project such as one-to-one scale
and time combined with video shot on site and fused with the gallery space. The largest
projection component of the installation was shot in Queenstown, Tasmania, a
simultaneously alpine and ‘lunar’ backdrop for the work. As I climb through this harsh and
barren terrain I recount a winding narrative that cycles seamlessly back on itself over ten
minutes. The ‘loop’ is completely concealed in both the text and editing. At the opposite end
of the gallery I fall through a video trompe l’oeil, two screens which depict, or double, the
space they occupy. Stonewall is anchored to the gallery space and punctuated by this ‘site-
specific’ work, created in a twin monitor version for CAMAC and in projections at PICA. The
trompe l’oeil images act as windows through which we can see the space immediately
behind them and every few minutes their mute redundancy is punctuated by an image of
me flashing through frame as I fall to the floor. At CAMAC we can see ‘through’ to the rock
wall behind them at one-to-one scale. The stone wall of the gallery is characteristic of the
rustic architecture of that region and its tones and rough hewn quality make for an
interesting echo with the stone slag heap I climb in the Queenstown projection.9 When I

9 This simple visual relationship was key to the development of the work after I was asked
by the director of CAMAC to produce a work for the gallery. I had visited the centre on an
earlier trip to Europe in the same year I first saw Queenstown and the colour relationship
first visited PICA, I had been struck by the scale of the central gallery space, with its extremely high ceiling and mezzanine walkway. Having already conceived the idea of the falling figure I thought this space would make for a quite dramatic rendering of the work.

**Mythos**

**Year: 2009**

**8 channel installation with 6 channel diffused soundtrack**

*Mythos* was the second video installation created for the PICA exhibition that featured *Stonewall*. *Mythos* is drawn from video shot across three years and a number of environments. *Mythos* brings together site-specific performance works and landscape studies from across a variety of locations in Australia and Finland to engage not only with very particular environments but also with our understanding of place. It is an ambitious work using eight different screens across three gallery spaces with soundtracks from each room bleeding into each other and drawing audiences in. The work marks a greater shift in my practice, ‘into’ the landscape. This work marks the transition into the final phase of the project that sees conflicting narratives of site intersect with narratives of subjectivity. The work included footage shot in Finland presented as a land of lakes and pines, saturated and verdant. The work included macro landscape studies for the first time as well as a sequence in which I emerged from a pristine lake as though born. Galleries two and three contained further performance works and studies from the arid Lake Tyrell and Wilsons Promontory after bushfires.

**Echoes and repeats**

As has been discussed throughout the exegesis, one of my primary formal challenges has been to break the passive viewing state that the screen triggers in us by activating the gap between screen and physical space. This serves several purposes: firstly, it activates the stuck with me. This seems noteworthy in that it demonstrates the unlikely and occasionally mysterious ways in which projects develop from unlikely beginnings.
audience because the screen impinges on the space they occupy; secondly, it complicates the relationship between screen space and real space, shifting from a *same/other* and *real/unreal* relationship to a blurred or merged state; and finally, these first two principles combine to complicate the self/other relationship between the various Dominic Redfers that populate these spaces, rendering them all real/unreal and addressing the animating theme of the project, screen-constructed identity. To this end I had previously explored the doubling or echoing of the gallery space through video tromp l’oeil and even created rough synchrony in *20000* and *Round*. However, *I’ve come a long way*’ was the first occasion that I was able to realise my long-held ambition for working with fully – and reliably – synchronised video.

Synchronisation has obvious uses for a project that implicates and activates space by making connections across multiple sources. As outlined in chapters two and three, I had been working with the idea that by linking screens in various ways, the space between them, the off-screen space, becomes charged or impregnated with the energy that connects the screens. This can occur narratively as in *Tragic* where we are left to fill in the gaps in the story, or spatially as in *Round*, or in combination through the use of sound and eye-line as in *Not That, Not Now*. The audience knows that the temporal link between the screens is created technologically, but my hope is that the experience of that link is tied to the content of the screens.

By this stage of the project, the split that began with the doppelganger in *Electro* had become more subtly embedded in my work. In *I’ve come a long way*’ the void space, the televisual ether, is activated through a combination of surround sound and strict synchronisation. What we are left with is two equally hollowed-out halves split between front and back. The screen is a mirror that renders both the halves equally empty, and, as in a mirror, the back and front can never occupy the same space. The self/other, real/unreal dichotomies of *Twin Share* and *Electro* had passed through the confusion of selves represented by *Drama* and *Not That, Not Now* to now occupy a state of mirrored vacuity.

The motif of emptiness recurs at multiple levels throughout *I’ve come a long way*: the Australian environment that is depicted is spare in the extreme; the soundtrack attached to
it uses multiple signifiers of emptiness such as overly loud footsteps and heat buzz; the Thai screens are full, yet their conspicuous footsteps render the crowd silent as well; and finally the central void of the gallery is not only a place to stand and watch but a space wherein emptiness is pointed to by the work. *I've come a long way* once again extended the mechanism and motif of the video installation loop from a formal device into a poetic one, finding me trapped within the screen. Even as I break the surface of one screen, I appear in another. I walk endlessly on, arriving only to continue on my way, passing through.

In the screens that separate the two moments of the fall from one to the other in *Stonewall*, we once again see the motifs of the split and the repeat that recur throughout the PhD project. For CAMAC, there is a further cleaving which replays the device from “OW!” in which the body is dissected in the screens, in that the falling body is divided as it traverses the screens. At another level of remove, we see dichotomus relationships played out more broadly across the work. Firstly there is the interior/exterior play that occurs in the large projection. There is also the fact that the installation is in two halves and can be read as two works which split the space of the gallery from the world outside.

Collectively, these components activate notions of site in different ways, bringing into relief the ‘non-space’ of the contemporary art gallery and contrasting it with the very specific experience of negotiating a ‘natural’ environment. This contrast plays out further elaborations on the relationship between site and identity that began with *I've come a long way*. *Stonewall* presents us with both a nihilistic inhabitation of the gallery’s void and an engagement with the meta-site of Australian mythology, namely ‘the land’. Unifying *Stonewall*’s components is their collective sentence that dooms me to fighting gravity and inertia: the never-ending narrative of one is punctuated by the slow, floor-slamming beat of the other. The endless Sisyphean rise and fall created by the sum of screens registers a futility and dark humour that engages with, and questions, our endless ‘making sense’. In this way, the work offers a critical reflection upon one of the PhD project’s aims, namely investigating video’s role as a sense-making technology.

*Stonewall* used the synchronisation of screens and the beat provided by the double screens to activate space and link the elements clearly as a single work. Throughout the PhD
project, the sonic component of video has been consistently important in bringing off-screen space to life and colouring perceptions of on-screen action. *I've come a long way* also provided new challenges regarding sound, in that it contained no sound from the original locations and everything was re-created in my studio to control the atmosphere and tone. I stripped away all the original sound from the Bangkok market and then remade the footsteps of the crowd. This meant that when in the installation, you were in the presence of a large crowd, eerily silent except for their footsteps. This gave the work an additional gravity and presence, setting it up for the moment when my figure crossed the space. The salt lake environment was also constructed using Foley recording\(^\text{10}\) and synthesis to evoke the oppressive heat of the environment and isolate the figure in the noisiness of silence. The expressionistic devices outlined above, in combination with the naturalistic illusion of the pausing crowd and the spatial link between the screens, made for a unique psychological tone somewhere between the mundane and the transcendently metaphysical.

**The landscape as narrative**

The appearance of the ‘environment’ outside the non-space of the gallery in *I've come a long way* is very significant, marking a further step away from more solipsistic constructions of identity. My focus on activating the site of the gallery had eventually led me outside of the gallery, and prompted me to incorporate expanded ideas of site at the intersection of narratives of place and selfhood. This move extends the notion of conflicting and multiple selves into a space mapped by overlapping, multiple and contradictory narratives of place and people. The work of Shelley Day-Sclater continued to prove vital in reflecting my growing sense of narrative as a force at work in perception and cognition:

> Narration is a dynamic signifying practice that is the work of embodied human agents in cultural settings. At times those settings are local, at times more global; the historical, social and geographic contours of our lives fashion the language

\(^\text{10}\) Foley is the process of recording sound effects in a studio setting that are synchronised to events on screen such as footsteps, door slams etc.
and discourses that we employ to construct our stories and make claims about ourselves (322-323).

The PhD project continued the exploration of constructed identity, but utilised an expanded set of references in terms of the cultural and geographic specifics of the environments in which I was working. Further, the notion of place became contested ground as well. Whilst I had never thought of gallery space as neutral, it was, at least a space with pretensions to modernist, rationalist neutrality, the best ground zero artists could manage. Perhaps I can use the allegory of a black board, a slate on which artists worked, with its own histories certainly but histories that were known – and contained. Now I had ventured into a much larger world, a text – like the gallery – but a text that was more hotly, broadly and variously contested. I was in the landscape but the first question I had to answer was, what is a/the landscape? The most encompassing definition I have encountered comes from Jeremy Millar:

A landscape, then, is the land transformed, whether through the physical act of inhabitation or enclosure, clearance or cultivation, or the rather more conceptual transfiguration of human perception, regardless of whether this then becomes the basis for a map, a painting, or a written account (Dean & Millar 13).

My move into the landscape was intrinsically linked to events leading up to and including my time in Bangkok in 2005-06 on an Asialink residency, the experience that was the genesis of this work. Prior to departing for Thailand, I had begun work on a project with Philip Samartzis and Philip Brophy on a landscape based, live audio-visual work to be presented in Berlin in late 2006. The initial journeys out into the Mallee to collect footage for this project lodged a seed in my mind. I came from a place just like this, the western edge of the Riverina. Because I felt I had been ‘born’ upon moving to the city at age twenty-one, my rural upbringing was a memory I avoided for the most part, aside from the occasional colourful tale at a dinner. Working in country so similar to where I had grown up was a difficult but fascinating experience and one that continues to compel my interest some five years later.
I had thought of the heat and dryness as reflecting the cultural and emotional barrenness that I associated for a long time with those spaces. Upon seeing again the environment I had avoided since moving to Melbourne, I began to imagine a work in which I crossed a large wheat field. Over time that paddock became a salt lake. Meanwhile, my experience in Thailand was so familiar as a narrative of artists on residency as to render it banal. Somehow the isolation and separation of being in a foreign country had put my Australian home in stark relief and I could not wait to get home and create this walking image. I was invited to do the Thailand show and it fused with the halting crowd from Chatuchak market. In the process, my narratives of selfhood, via this personal journey, became more inclusive and began to address geo-cultural narratives of identity.

But whilst this personal story has a place in the evolution of the work, there were other logics at work in my choice of the Wimmera-Mallee as the backdrop for my performance. As I began to think about landscape performance, I became interested in the history of landscape. The allegorical landscape paintings of Caspar David Freidrich such as *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (1818) or *Chasseur in the forest* (1813-14) caught my attention, a reference I was to pick up later in *Stonewall*. These figures contemplating dramatic landscapes can be read as reflecting the inner state of the subject but also exalting in the indifference and grandeur of the natural environment. This keyed into my desire to have the environment function as a reference to existing traditions and simultaneously operate as a psychological environment.

I also hoped that by this choice the work could also reference the Australian landscape art tradition. In a way, the image of the vast Australian interior is standing in, as I am, for non-indigenous Australia. It represents one of our key cultural narratives and thus it represents us. The Wimmera-Mallee is a region that has appeared repeatedly in our cultural narratives, from the work of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd to contemporary artists John Wolseley and Phillip Hunter. It can indeed function as a type of shorthand for our interior, representing both the reality of this anti-European environment as well as operating as a metaphor for the enduring sense of absence and difficulty that trails our history of engagement with the land and its original inhabitants. In this sense, *I've come a long way* became a layered and
complex meeting of various strands in a story of identity and pointed the way to subsequent works in the PhD project.

In *Stonewall*, the reference to Romanticism is further articulated. The environment for the climbing figure clearly echoes Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (1818). This progenitor of the landscape tradition similarly presents landscapes that dwarf the figures and transforms environments into metaphysical spaces. *Stonewall* quite deliberately echoes this *construction* of landscape. As in ‘I’ve come a long way’ and *WIRE* (discussed in the next chapter), *Stonewall* presents landscape as a backdrop that is simultaneously interior and exterior, mirroring and containing the protagonist. It is a space that pulls us back to the protagonist through the abiding metaphor of the struggle against nature, albeit one’s own or that outside one’s door. *Stonewall* extends my investigation of the dynamics of monologue from *Drama* and *Not That, Not Now* and the interest in environmental performance which began with ‘I’ve come a long way’.

Taking as its structure a form of simple creation myth, *Mythos* allegorises a transition from the verdant European environment to the arid Australian interior. In so doing, it searches for means to engage with the complex history of Australian European settlement and its relationship to our understanding of the natural environment. It is a truism of Australian art history that the landscape genre has been key to the evolution of non-indigenous Australian identity. It is a truth so unfashionable, familiar and problematic as to be rendered banal. However it remains one of the chief cultural means by which we have come to understand who we are: through imaging, and thus attempting to understand, where we are.

In reflecting upon the body of recordings that *Mythos* was constructed from, I was very taken with Miwon Kwon’s notion of the ‘departicularised’ place (Kwon 157). The forensic scoping and macro-videography techniques that I developed during this period, and which form part of subsequent works such as *WIRE*, sought to ‘re-particularise’ the landscape. I sought to re-inflate space through the distortion of scale such that it could not be contained within a vista, and re-inhabit time through the use of extended choreographed takes. The process was unlike that used to construct images in which I was audio-visually present: it
was physical in an entirely different way. I could not collect images from a shot-list the way I might when I needed to direct myself and others in performative works. I had to occupy both myself and place in an altogether different manner.

I used a telephoto lens to shoot at quite close quarters, often working with objects and plants quite close to the ground – if not actually shooting the ground itself. Whilst my preference was for these very long and slow shots to be quite smooth whilst still maintaining a scoping or questing, and thus spontaneous, quality, the telephoto lens greatly exaggerated any movement I made. This meant I needed to hug the camera and tripod, and slow my body and breathing quite considerably. My seeing of and being in the environment were changed considerably by this process. My experience of time, scale, dimension and perspective were all deeply altered by the state I needed to occupy. These studies became a type of performative engagement with the environments in which I was working. The subsequent recordings offered a new and different type of record of that engagement. Henri Bergson beautifully articulates the experience of the body as a mediatory actor between the internal and external: ‘[i]t [the body] is then the place of passage of the movements received and thrown back, a hyphen, a connecting link between the things which act upon me and the things upon which I act’ (Bergson 196). The conversational and bi-directional process he describes very aptly conveys the action that not only produces images but also witnesses my own sinking into place or ‘grounding’.

As I began to work in this way I re-discovered two works made by Bill Viola before he submerged himself in the sloppy humanism that characterises his recent oeuvre. Hatsu Yume (1979) and I do not know what it is I am like (1982) both share the unhurried and settling quality that I was experiencing and seeking to represent. They were doubly significant as feature length video art works that could sustain the viewer’s interest. As such they demonstrated clear ways in which video could continue to differentiate itself from cinema and television and provide a third space. Of particular significance in this regard are the bison and bird sequences in I do not know what it is I am like and the bamboo sequence in Hatsu Yume. They operate with no apparent agenda or logical drive but simply provide an audio-visual experience of places and the entities that animate them. Over their generous timeframe they encourage a shift in spectatorship that demands a cognitive state
neither semiotic nor purely phenomenological. What arises is a mix of the two that surpasses the aesthetic interludes of the most ‘un–editorialised’ of documentaries.

Yang Fudong’s *East of Que Village* provides a gripping contemporary example of this approach. His compositions are quite cinematic but his subject matter and the five-screen installation arrangement create an expansive temporality that allows for a deeply immersive experience across the twenty minutes of the work. *East of Que Village* is a return to origins, shot as it was in the area near where he grew up in North China. In a similarly tough environment to *WIRE* (discussed in the next chapter) Yang follows a pack of dogs who ultimately consume each other to survive. The bleakly allegorical and realistic sit seamlessly and indistinguishably side by side. A term that I have come to consider useful in thinking about the manner in which all these works operate is ‘isolarion’. This is the name of a James Atlee travel book, which he in turn borrowed from the 15th Century maps that describe specific areas in detail, but that do not provide a clarifying overview of how these places are related to each other. For me this evokes the deep looking that does not claim the grand narratives previously associated with mapping the world; dominion and colonisation through knowledge.

As I developed these ideas in my installations, my encounter with Doug Aitken’s *Eraser* in 2008, ten years after it was made on the island of Montserrat, was a particularly resonant experience in respect of the ideas above (1998). Aitken traces a line from one end of the island to another, investigating small details as well as remnants of the inhabitants who had fled the destructive force of a volcano one year previously. The level of detail and the downward gaze scanning the abandoned landscapes of a visually lush but fragmented world were all points of reverberation with me. The immersive seven-screen installation invited a deep and contemplative experience and was reminiscent of the work of UK artists Jane and Louise Wilson, *Free and Anonymous Monument* (2003). Counter-intuitively, the fragmented and distorted places of these installations invite deeper engagement with place than the spatio-temporal continuity of conventional cinematic depiction.
Identity as Narrative

Although I am isolated in ‘I've come a long way’, I am placed at the centre of the work and the world it creates, and the milling crowd pauses to acknowledge my passing. Do the Thais care, or are they just being polite? They fidget, look self-conscious and loiter only as long as is necessary to be courteous. They register my arrival, after the lengthy lead up, as something of an anti-climax. Humour of this type often finds its way into my work, but it is important not merely as a means of making the work accessible to an audience. For, whilst my art often finds the individual alone in an empty universe, this is not an entirely tragic situation, nor one to be taken completely seriously.

As a metaphor, the humorous encounter could be read in a number of ways and it deliberately keyed into Thai Buddhist attitudes and social conventions, an aspect of the work that was well received by the audience. Beyond this reading, the work functioned to image the self-important and blundering Australian encountering the group orientated and socially adept Thais. In so doing, it provokes discussion of the place of Australia/ns in Asia and allegorises the meeting of our cultures. This contextual reading of the work underlines the importance of moving out of the enclosed spaces of domesticity and the gallery. It cracked open the potential for larger contexts for my project.

*Stonewall* is one of the final pieces in my PhD project and fittingly, it offers a meta-narrative, a pointed reflection upon the nature and role of narratives. The elusiveness of its own narrative serves a crucial function. It is not only a critical reflection upon, and perversion of, conventional narratives, but also a narrative that resembles life as lived. Rather than a series of events that line up causally to present us with a reasonable and sensible sequence, in *Stonewall*, themes and characters emerge only to slip away. What is potent and significant in one moment is lost in the next.

*Stonewall* presents narrative as a pattern recognition exercise that fails us. It is a world in which the protagonist struggles with the apophenia we use to ascribe meaning in its
arguable absence. He has the appearance of forward progress and sense-making where there is no sense to be had, no progress to be made. In *Stonewall*, this tendency or function is in a constant process of falling apart for the protagonist. He continues to try and talk himself up the hill but he never reaches that conclusion: the narrative continues yet cannot be followed.

I have spent time with many audients in the presence of *Stonewall* and watched them stick with it for several loops only for them to realise that no matter how hard they try they cannot keep it straight. Tenses shift and we slip from first to third person, in a place where places become other places from one moment to the next. The audient finds that they cannot keep the thread: it evades them. In discussion, they reveal that they had assumed they were not concentrating or not listening well enough. But after a time, it becomes clear that they cannot win, they cannot get the completed pattern, the formal reward for following a narrative.

In this way, *Stonewall* resembles listening to a family member recall their night’s dream at the breakfast table. We wait all the while for it to behave as a story should, but we know it will just ramble on indefinitely and nonsensically. Of course the text is not simply jibberish: it presents us with characters in conflict with themselves, their families, their peers and social norms. It is deliberately constructed to paint fleeting images of situations and social dynamics replete with the conflicts that activate cinematic and literary narratives.

*Stonewall* is the work that answers and indeed seems in some sense to be the inverse of *‘Not That, Not Now’*. Whilst there are occasional light moments or elements of comedy, it refuses to entertain. This is a narrative that refuses to carry you because, unlike *‘Not That, Not Now’*, it keeps slipping away. At the centre of the work is the notion that as the narrative slips away so too does the protagonist. It is this intrinsic link between identity and narrative that the work makes explicit. The story is the person, the person the story.

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11 Apophenia is the experience of seeing meaningful patterns or connections in random or meaningless data.
Halil Altindere’s *Dengbejs* (2007) provides a beautiful illustration of this idea. For most of the work’s duration we are located in a timber-lined room, seated on the carpeted floor with a group of Kurdish men. The men are storytellers, ‘dengbejs’ in Kurdish. They sing the history and mythology of the Kurdish people, they sing themselves. When they leave the room at the end of the piece their location is revealed: a series of wooden structures grafted on to the top of a very tall apartment block. The structures resemble the rambling backyard lean-tos of many Australian homes but are more intentional – and better constructed! Like the songs they sing, the structures are their cultural continuity in exile. The work offers a dramatic illustration of narrative as a self-witnessing/self-making/self preserving drive in culture. In a more existential mode is the Portuguese artist Vasco Araujo’s *Eco* (2008). Based on Cesare Pavese’s *Dialogues with Leuco* (1965), the installation shows six characters sitting around a table in conversation. Araujo lip-synced his own voice over that of all the other actors as they converse with phrases such as ‘You don’t really know me or know yourself’, ‘Talking helps me to find myself’, ‘I can’t remember’.

Araujo’s work echoes the disorientation of *Stonewall*’s ‘narrative’ and the relationship of *Stonewall* to Nouveau Roman French novels of the late modern period (works which share the metaphysical questing of Pavese’s *Dialogues with Leuco*) has been noted (Jorgensen). However, my key cultural reference was the cinematic equivalent, *Last Year at Marienbad*, which is of course linked to the same literary moment through the person of Allain Robbe-Grillete (1961). At a formal level this cultural reference can be observed in the disruption of plot and timeline as well the repetitive and fragmentary nature of the work. It may be posited that the Nouveau Roman period emerged post WWII as a response or processing of the great rupturing of Europe’s grand narrative, blasted as it was by the first half of the century. Whilst this notion deserves a thesis of its own, it is worth observing in passing because it represents a complete marriage of formal concerns with those of content. In this case it can read as a critique of narrative form paralleling a loss of faith in narratives that had hitherto structured lives and cultures.

The title of the work is derived from its idiomatic meaning in which “to stonewall” is to withhold information by distracting or delaying. Of course there is the allusion to the stone walls of the Art Centre d’Marnay and the rock-strewn environment that I negotiate in
Queenstown. But most crucially, the title refers to the elusive quality of the story I relate. Promising significance yet consistently failing to deliver narrative ‘closure’, here is a story that has many of the qualities and features of narrative and yet ultimately fails to satisfy. We are told of journeys and death, sex, marriage and families, but whilst there is conflict there is no resolution. For the CAMAC version, the narrative was even further undermined by the attempts of the French interpreter I recorded trying to keep up, in real time, with the frustrating text. His valiant attempts were placed in the rear speakers and can be heard peeping through in the document. Viewers created their own ‘mix’ by moving forward or back, towards the French or English versions. Whilst I considered using this element in the PICA version it seemed too oblique and potentially distracting for the bulk of the audience.

**Walking and Talking**

*Stonewall* is both a walking and a talking work. In unifying these devices in a single work, it suggests the way in which they may at one level be seen as parallel within my work. Whilst elsewhere, walking and talking present visions of the protagonist as alternately isolated in the cosmos or in relationship with others, collectively they offer primary allegories for one’s progress through life. Both walking and talking might seem to offer a linear rendering of life as a journey or narrative, or a narrative of journeying. However, all of the works in the project that utilise these allegories simultaneously undermine them in a number of ways. It has been my aim to complicate the model of linear temporality and narrative, rendering it as an imperfect structure for unifying experience. I have had to embrace and recognise its ubiquity within contemporary media whilst finding means of making it more useful in accounting for contemporary experiences of non-linear and multiple narratives of self. This has been seen throughout the project in the various loops that undo the notion of progress, the fragmenting and rending of unified space and time, and the humour and other punctuations that serve to arrest the forward trajectory.

The journey is a key narrative device from Homer onwards and I discuss a couple of expansive ‘road movies’ in the next chapter, but Jordi Colomer’s *En la Pampa* bears mentioning at this juncture. It is also a road movie of sorts set in the Atacama desert in northern Chile. The road movie is the great existential genre and Colomer combines it with
one of the great existential spaces of twentieth century cinema, the desert. Across multiple screens a rootless man and woman are progressively uncoupled from family and familiarity. Colomer used improvisation to generate the drifting narrative; he set his actors adrift in the desert to see what would happen. So in a sense his characters’ disorientation is real. The third character, the desert, ultimately seems to quietly overwhelm and subsume the protagonists as their former narratives dissolve into its vastness. Similarly the dissolution of the individual became an important part of both the works discussed in this chapter.

The realist function of the moving image is a large part of the rhetoric, and reality, of the collapse of space in the 20th Century. The fragmented space and elided time of the moving image combine with an increasingly globalised culture of entertainment and architecture to render our environment a series of generic and interchangeable non-spaces. Time-space compression was the term coined by geographer David Harvey in his influential work *The Condition of Postmodernity* to describe processes that create experiences of accelerating time and diminishing distance. According to Harvey we are in the second great era of time-space compression where ‘processes that [...] revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time’ are at work (240). Obviously travel, global trade and communication are important elements of this phenomena but the language of moving images has evolved to express these experiences.

Our present moment has brought challenges that warrant a re-inflating of time and space to recognise and re-particularise the local. At a moment when digital malleability means the indexical relationship of image to reality is no longer possible, there is reason to re-inflate time and space, to re-inhabit the material body. Video is positioned within this project as a means of critically occupying that space between subject and context, between inner and outer worlds. In the next chapter the journey into place continues. I position personal psychology within a cultural narrative inextricably tied to space, a ‘space in which remembrance continues to activate the past as something which, to quote the philosopher Henri Bergson, is “lived and acted, rather than represented”’ (Dean & Millar 14).
Chapter Five: CONTEXT IS SUBJECT

During this final phase of the PhD project, social narratives came to the fore of my work. The project now had at its centre a critique of the possibility of a purely personal subjectivity. In these final two works, *Wire* and *Concentric*, place and people, subject and context were increasingly confused and co-mingled. I took on some central myths of Australian identity and explored key sites at which they coalesced and collided. The project continued to explore video and performance as an interface between subjectivity and the narratives through which we bring ourselves into being. But in these works narratives increasingly broadened out to include ‘people’ (rather than my personal psychology) and ‘place’ (rather than the voidal spaces of earlier works).

By this stage, the personal was slowly being overwhelmed by the social, and my camera had become ever more outward looking. I had begun to think of sites as loci for intersecting and colliding narratives. The geographer Doreen Massey perfectly articulated this notion in her seminal work, *Space Place Gender*: ‘(places) can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself’ (152). But as my ideas about place become more articulated and complex my ideas about subject matter that mattered and subjectivity had become profoundly altered by the course of the research. I had come to occupy a position in some ways antithetical to that with which I began. Miwon Kwon articulates well my growing doubt throughout this phase of the project: ‘[t]he advocacy of the continuous mobilisation of self and place identities as discursive fictions, as polymorphous critical plays on fixed generalities and stereotypes, in the end may be a delusional alibi for short attention spans’ (165).

Andrea Fraser’s *Official Welcome* points the way to the dead end that this model of subjectivity can lead to. Whilst her target is the art world, a target she hits with great accuracy, humour and acid, one is left with the sense that there is no place left to occupy. Artists are implicated and reduced by the work and artistic identity is left desiccated. In her
multiplicity of truths and falsehoods, her mimicking of the various postures and identities of the art world, she leaves one with a great hunger to be somewhere else, just to be somewhere. Steve McQueen sets out to chart this journey ‘back’ for himself in several of his works. In *Gravesend* he spans the globe from the Congo to his location in the U.K. In a clear reference, Gravesend is where *Heart of Darkness*’ Marlow sets out from for the Congo, a ‘road movie’ that collapses history and psychology, inner and outer journeys. McQueen traces a similar journey through a collapsed geo-cultural landscape that once again finds first world comfort resting on third world labour. Similarly, works like *Carib’s Leap* and *Western Deep* trace roots of his own narratives of self via Grenada and further back to Africa. Both works represent a network of geographic and cultural references that intersect in a place where the mythology and the actuality of his narratives are overlaid and given equal weight.

In this chapter, in order to continue the narrative I trace in the exegesis, it is necessary to discuss the historical moments with which the two works engage. To this end, rather than speaking across *WIRE* and *Concentric*, I address them sequentially.

**WIRE**

**Year: 2010**

**4 channel installation with surround sound**

As mentioned in Chapter 5, I began to make works in the Mallee in 2006. This shift had roots in my personal history, in that it marked a return to places that were akin to the environment in which I grew up. I had relegated such places to the margins of my imagination, but through the camera’s lens, I began to re-particularise my relationship to these sites. Simultaneously, the ‘I’ who performed in these sites also shifted. Previously, the landscape was one more voidal space that could function as a canvass onto which to project a private psychological state. Now, the ‘I’ who performed was not so much a Dominic Redfern in some kind of inner turmoil but rather a Dominic Redfern who was attempting to understand or take on board the multiple complexities of a given site. The outward looking camera that showed ever more of the environment had inflected the way the individual
subject operated within the work. This was now less Dominic Redfern than ever, rather it seemed to be a work about an individual standing in for a people. More than *Mythos* and *I've come a long way, WIRE* contained narratives that can no longer be considered personal. This work had taken a sociological turn, and the narratives it at once contains and questions are not solely about individual subjectivity.

Working in the Mallee, I observed the decline of what has always been, at best, marginal farming country. I began to investigate the cultivation of the area and learned of the soldier settlement schemes. In September 2006 I travelled to Europe briefly for an exhibition. Whilst there, I drove to the battlefields of northern France, where I was immediately struck by the lack of fencing. Growing up in rural Australia the barbed wire fencing that lines every roadside was so ubiquitous as to be rendered invisible. Given the central role of barbed wire in WWI, its absence took on greater significance for me as I travelled through France. In this observation, the seeds of *WIRE* were sown. *WIRE* brought together the very different environments of the Mallee region of north-western Victoria and the Picardy region of north-western France, centring on the events of July 1916 and their aftermath around the visual motif of barbed wire. The work offered a critical reflection on our national pastime of battlefield tourism and the culture of sentiment and fascination that has attached itself to WWI.

The Gallipoli campaign has been mythologised as the historical moment in which Australia’s nationhood was born. The fighting in Picardy on the western front in the years that followed, however, resulted in far greater losses and was considered by the Australian soldiers to eclipse Gallipoli in brutality and inhumanity. The battle of Fromelles in July 1916 was the first engagement of Australian troops on the Western Front; they were slaughtered there due to the failure of British command and communications as well the defensible, fortified positions held by the Germans. The battle was responsible for one of the greatest losses of Australian lives in one twenty-four-hour period with over 5000 casualties (plus 1500 British) compared with German losses of about 1500 (Carlyon 96). In 2008, Fromelles also became synonymous with the location of one of the single largest mass graves of Allied troops discovered in decades (Holt & Holt & Commonwealth War Graves Commission).
The Mallee, an arid region on the border of Victoria and South Australia, similarly occupies the borderlands of our cultural imagination. This region contributed many soldiers to the war but is also where many of them returned, when this marginal land was shared amongst veterans as part of the ‘Soldier Settlement Scheme’. Between 1918 and 1934, over 11000 returned servicemen were allocated farming blocks under the Scheme. In this first phase of the Scheme, many of the farms failed, whether undone in the short term by the unviable size of the blocks and lack of experience, or ultimately by the economic downturns and droughts of the 1930s (Keneley). The Mallee is an environment that has always been a metaphor for struggle, heartbreak and hardship: a supposedly inhospitable and dreary landscape on the margins of Australian cultural imagination.

The AIF died for arbitrary and demented objectives in their early battles in France, places pulverised beyond recognition, changing hands so frequently as to render futile the very notion of boundary. They returned home to create and defend new boundaries in the landscape, boundaries once again destined to fail. Whilst the scheme was improved after WWII, soldier settlers after WWI had a very difficult time. The motif of wire, demarcating territory on the western front and again in western Victoria serves as an appropriate marker for the embattled state of these men at home and abroad. **WIRE** traced the fences of soldier settlers, reading the archive of their labour to find poetic means for placing it in the broader context of their pivotal moment in Australian history. The work did not attempt to replicate the sweep of a comprehensive historical document but rather sought to ‘re-particularise’ through the details of visual and emotional experience. This tracing did not seek to represent the AIF or WWI but rather stand in for the searching, ‘narrativising’ and mythologising that sees so many Australians travel to battlefield sites across the world. **WIRE** illuminated crucial areas of Australian geo-cultural identity but not by creating a causal historical narrative. Rather, it emphasised the meaningless and arbitrary. It provided an experience that was fragmentary and visceral, representing not individuals or events but embodying a psychological tone. It also straddled a difficult divide in trying to acknowledge the suffering represented by these events with appropriate respect whilst critically engaging with contemporary attitudes that memorialise, sentimentalise and distort them.
To single out a particular exemplary passage, after searching aimlessly through the frozen muddy field that is, and was, the Frommelles battlefield, I sit amongst the plough furrows and commence to cut off my hair. In developing the work this seemed an appropriate gesture bringing together as it did a number of potential meanings: an evocation of the uniforming process that young men go through to become tools for war; as a shaming gesture that is enacted upon women who ‘sleep with the enemy’ during wartime; and a gesture of mourning. The ‘I’ that is present to conduct this performance and ritual differs markedly from earlier incarnations of the protagonist in this project. Rather than the untethered and rootless disorientation imaged in earlier works, this confusion does not occur in an undifferentiated void. This wanderer has too many maps, too many roads.

The installation consisted of four projections and a surround sound track. The projections broke up the space through floor-mounted screens offset from each other at a variety of angles and united by a surround track that contained environmental recordings in combination with minimal musical elements. The visual components were shot on high definition video, lending the work a lush realism. Once again the components were synchronised and through this synchronisation the protagonist crossed from screen to screen across voids within the gallery, collapsing space and time and emphasising his tenuous place in his environment. As mentioned in the previous paragraph the use of these devices had altered in tone across the project. The collapsed space/time of the screen no longer served solely to isolate the protagonist in a non-physical space as it did in works such as “OW!” or *Tragic*. Having embraced the void of space that was emblematic of modern conceptions of site, uprooting traditional notions of belonging and differentiation, the work now sought to re-particularise, to re-inhabit specific places and histories.

The two environments – French and Australian – were treated very differently. The Australian footage was characterised by macro perspectives and a roving ‘forensic’ eye that transformed details into psychological spaces paralleling that of the bereft man. The Mallee

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12 Hair cutting was a common practice in France, Norway and the Netherlands in WWII to punish women who had collaborated with the Nazis. The practice was revived by the IRA during the ‘troubles’. Cutting of hair during mourning is widespread, or was historically, and may trace its roots in western culture to Old Testament references in Isaiah and Jeremiah.
was depicted as devoid of life whilst the ‘absent’ man searches a country that is not his own. The French footage, meanwhile, was more controlled, objective and conventionally ‘cinematic’. The Mallee was shot in the red sun of forty-plus degrees whilst Fromelles is in the soft winter light of sub-zero conditions. The work contrasted these environments, summer and winter, north and south, to express the impossibility of bridging the gap between the present and historical moments.

Both environments are empty in different ways and fuse to evoke displacement and absence. In the Mallee we see a goat slaughtered at the roadside, tangles of wire and weeds, rabbit corpses and faeces in plague proportions. In Fromelles the wind blows across fields of frozen mud under grey skies whilst the protagonist engages in a Beckettesque journey amongst the screens, asking in poor French and German, “Où est l’avant?” (Where is front?) and “Wohin ist der front?” (Where has the front gone?). The character does not attempt to represent or speak for the men of the AIF. Rather, he embodies the search for that historical moment and expresses the impossibility of finding it. An outsider, he is in a state of existential confusion reminiscent of Camus’ *L’Étranger* or Kierkegaard’s ‘Young Man’ from *Repetition*. These images, in their dirt road wandering, draw upon the Agnes Varda film *Sans Toit ni Loi* and the war time recollections of artists like Robert Graves (2000), and the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon to construct an image of fragments, of fleeting encounters characterized by misunderstanding and confusion.

**Concentric: working title**

**Year: 2010**

**3 channel installation with 4 channel sound**

In *Concentric*, the shift away from personal psychology goes one step further. Figures are becoming absent, heard but not seen. In two of the three screens in *Concentric* people are no longer visibly present. We have evidence of their actions and we can hear them, but their image has been replaced by a record of their actions. Visually, and literally, the individual subject has become subsumed by the site. The three screens of the work are in varying states of darkness from sunset through to firelight and lanterns. This darkness functioned
to image the darkness obscuring these narratives, a darkness that is growing. Once again I created trompe l’oeil in the same manner as the site-specific projections for PICA. From a certain vantage point the screens showed the parts of the building that were directly behind or obscured by them. In the manner of *Tragic*, these screens revealed something unseen in the site but it was no longer an imagined or fantastic event. Instead, I imaged events stemming directly from the site’s history.

As discussed in the last chapter, I had increasingly turned to the history of Australian landscape art as a bridge to the narratives of place upon which the project had begun to focus. In reading about the origins of this tradition, I became very interested in the natural science artists and cartoonists of the convict period. I was surprised to learn just how few images of convicts existed. Despite the centrality of this period to the mythology and history of Australia, less than fifty images survive that deal with convict life (Smith 23). For me, this meant for my first site-specific work in Sydney I had to reference our convict past.

Greater Sydney is the home of our convict roots and with the theme of labour in mind, I wanted to find an image that could represent the hidden history of convict labour that laid the city’s foundations. It is a little known fact that treadmills were used in Sydney, Brisbane and Tasmania. They were an extremely arduous form of punishment and whilst they were commonly used for the grinding of grain, they were also used for the express purpose of torture with no utility derived from the labour. The treadmill was the departure point for *Concentric*. It is an image that resonates with me strongly, echoing as it does the recurrent motifs of entrapment and circularity that are present in much of my work, from “OW!” to *Tragic, Drama* and “I’ve come a long way”.

From that beginning the three images making up the installation deal with the site in a series of steps from Sydney to Redfern and to Carriage Works itself. *WIRE* had led me in the direction of intersecting and colliding narratives. Carriage Works took this a step further, with the exhibition site itself providing a physical nexus for the multiple narratives of place and identity that intersect there. My installation found poetic means of evoking hidden histories of labour embedded in the site through a series of concentric circles. Firstly, there is the very specific place of the Everleigh carriage works in the Australian labour
movement. Ben Chifley was a train driver in Sydney and one of the leaders of the 1917 general strike that began at Redfern and involved 97000 workers at its peak. The strike was sparked by the institution of a time and motion study, a Taylorist initiative that saw the use of a card to record the movements of all staff during work time. These cards were the spark that led to the prolonged general strike and ultimately Chifley’s dismissal for his role (Taksa, *All a matter of timing*, 5). Given that the Australian Labor party is currently seen by many to be undergoing a crisis of values, it seemed timely to evoke a moment when the stakes for organised labour were much higher. The work was not however intended primarily as political critique but simply to evoke this central narrative that still animates our political and thus cultural life.

The second of the concentric circles references the indigenous history redolent at the Carriage Works site. The suburb of Redfern is Australia’s most famous and long-standing urban Aboriginal community. Whilst members of the Gadigal tribe have occupied the land now called Redfern since before European settlement, the train yards are also partly responsible for today’s urban community because Aboriginal men came looking for work and camped nearby (Barani). It is a difficult thing for many non-indigenous artists to find means of dealing with indigenous Australian history but making site-based work in Redfern necessitated an acknowledgement of the Aboriginal community. I chose an image that literally represented the campfire but also had a range of metaphorical possibilities.

Finally, the treadmill locates the installation in the misguided sentimentality of our convict mythology. Completing the outermost circle of the work’s expanded site, we find the protagonist trapped in a treadmill. There is nothing figurative about this loop: the futility and circularity of historical narratives is here literalised by the physical loop on which he is compelled to drive fruitlessly. Like the other qualities that endured throughout the project – the disorientation, the entrapment, the doublings and divisions – the allegorical tone of the loop had expanded to draw in broader concerns. It is not a different figure however; his concerns remain those of defining subjectivity in the context of a reflected other self. However the other he sees reflected is not confined to the screen but is reflected in histories and mythologies of selfhood that encompass a deeper and broader pool of narcissus.
Where am I?

Reading this exegesis you have tracked my journey from an undifferentiated video space that spilled out from the screen into the mutable space of the gallery and finally out into the world. I have travelled from the infinite vacuum of space to the finite details of place. Throughout the PhD project, complicating screen and physical space emerged as both a strategy and a theme. As I strove to shift audiences away from the vacuous ‘safety’ of the screen, I too was shifted. As I variously fell through and pushed at the limits of the screen, I found my body was ultimately not able to be contained by it.

As media matters less so the body matters more – the reaffirmation of the affective body as the enframer of information correlates with the fundamental shift in the materiality of the media: the body’s centrality increases proportionally with the de-differentiation of the media (...) digitisation underwrites a shift in the status of the medium – transforming media from the forms of actual inscription of reality into variable interfaces for the rendering of the raw data of reality (Hansen 21).

This journey was prompted by the underlying intention of investigating video as an agent in reflecting and facilitating articulation of the self through performance and narrative. I came to understand these terms through my own making, the making of others and the reflexive processes of reading and writing. Through these concurrent research processes, my understanding of performance and narrative became both more specific and more encompassing. That is to say, these terms have collected a range of simultaneously expansive and specific meanings as I have encountered a variety of makers and writers. This has occurred in parallel with their accrual of meaning within my practice, as tools, as strategies, as ‘ways’. The narrowing of the field of my vision, the refining of detail that is mirrored equally in the content and form of my work has revealed in both cases that the more closely I look at less, the greater abundance I find.

Video proved to be an important medium for both expressing and ‘working through’ the self as a product of narrative, the classically postmodern ‘subject as language’. However, after
making several works that featured a self ‘made’ through signs (Drama, Not that, Not Now, I've come a long way’ etc.) I ultimately found it to be unsatisfying or unsustaining as a model of selfhood. This was not because I felt bereft or disappointed and needed a way back from the abyss of an entirely contingent self. It was the work that led me there, incrementally, step by step, as outlined in the exegesis. I was led by the various iterations of the work to the conclusion that if the self is only language then the self is only mind, only abstraction. This denied a crucial factor, namely the body and its cultural contexts. I did not reach this ‘conclusion’ and then set out to embody it in my practice. The practice led me there and through written reflection, I found a way to articulate that development in the modality of language. Describing this shift in language, as I am doing here, is a secondary step: a very important secondary step because it exemplifies the reflexivity that characterises practice-led research. Nevertheless it is important to emphasise that these notions or problems were ‘worked through’ in the specific materiality of my video art practice years before they came to be described here in exegetical form.

To return to the narrative arc I was describing, my journey into place from space had the unexpected boon of demanding a style of embodiment that served multiple masters and enriched my practice. Not only did it require an embodiment of myself as artist beyond the phantasms of the screen. It also extended into the demands for a ‘performed environment’: the physicality of place required an engagement with the physicality of the body. Importantly, I went ‘there’. I did not merely read ‘about’ the places I made work in. Rather, I went and negotiated it in some form with my body: I climbed it, walked across it, looked closely at it, felt it in my hands.

My body is then in the aggregate of the material world, an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the manner in which it shall restore what it receives (Bergson 4).

The artworks from the latter part of the project like Concentric, I've come a long way, Mythos, WIRE and Stonewall show my body’s negotiation with places: they are a record of
The artworks are a vital record of proximity and engagement, of locating and negotiating these places with my body. The places in question were not regarded or engaged with as neutral or untrammelled. I have very deliberately set out to deal with place as contested, as a latticework of intersecting narratives of ownership, usage, creation and fiction. This development in my practice has led me further afield in my reading. The sources I imagined sustaining the project when I began are not those best suited to describe my project as it concludes. The core of the project has remained but it has drilled down into the heart of its central premise in unexpected ways.

Story provides an intermediate or transitional area of experience in which the self continually negotiates its position in the world, inscribes itself in relation to the available cultural scripts, integrates past, present and future through acts of remembering and telling (Day Sclater 327).

Along the way I have realised that my own PhD project traced a parallel development in theoretical discourses. clubs

Considering our growing immersion in the image world, how would we come to know ourselves individually or as a culture without the ever more convoluted inflection of our bodies, our sense of self, and our relations to the world and each other with the evolving electronic image? Yet, let us not forget the subtext of the art discussed throughout this essay: the ineluctable difference of waking life from the other scene, ultimately inaccessible—however immersed we may feel—beyond the threshold, on the other side of the screen (Morse 74).

The all-consuming nature of art-making and the doctoral experience have challenged me in ways that exceeded any of my previous degrees. The duration and profundity of the project have meant that ‘I’ and the project are inextricably linked. But how could that not be the case in a project that used my own body and image as both vehicle and subject? In the end this project maps a ‘total’ development, a gestalt evolution that has encompassed my artistic, intellectual and personal selves.
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