

Something's Gotta Give:

Subjectivity and the everyday encounter, through the
moving image.

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ABSTRACT

The break-up of my long-term relationship unintentionally guided my MFA project. Over the past two years I found myself in the position where I needed to respond to unexpected personal circumstances that caused trauma in my life. Without warning the intimate parameters that I had coexisted within became inaccessible to me. The state of dysfunction that ensued through this breakdown caused me to reconfigure my values as an artist and to find new ways of being productive. With the presence of immanent deadlines it was necessary for me to adapt the activities of my practice to align with my emotional circumstances. Through this reappraisal, I found that my artistic activities function in partnership with my personal life, and that to attempt to disentangle the two is essentially missing the point.

The brokenness and dysfunction that began as setbacks, have intimately sewn together my work and life, and through this I inadvertently located the political concerns that orient my practice. The necessity of this bind has invested a new urgency in my work and raised the questions that form the pathway of this thesis. My research project stakes a claim for the value of subjectivity, through the vulnerability of the personal, and the artistic vitality of the historically repressed everyday environment. My video practice resonates through a feminist disposition, the subjective politics that underpins my work. Harnessing an evolving catalogue of lived experience I have gathered disparate sources, bringing them together in this thesis. My own personal experiences are used as primary figures in my work and it is through these subjects that my research has been shaped. I take a journey of questioning and reflection, with the company of artists and researchers who inspire my practice.

I record fragments of my surroundings, daily minutiae, fleeting observations and temporal moments. Through structural filmic devices - the long take, fixed view and close-up magnifications - I hold these ephemeral encounters, repeatedly rewinding, pausing, and zooming in. I am interested in the subjective qualities that can be drawn out through filmic excavation. The outcome of my research project is a series of video recordings, projected at varying scales in the gallery. The images are pieces of my daily life and objects that were the focus of bored and empty stares while I lay in bed. Housed in the space of the gallery, these intimacies are brought into a field of public and private subjectivities, where they resonate through the embodiment of the viewer.

Declaration

This is to certify that

- (I) *the thesis comprises only my original work towards the **Masters of Fine Art***
- (II) *due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,*
- (III) *the thesis is 13383 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices*



Tara O'Conal

PREFACE

At the beginning of the MFA I borrowed a book from the library called *Long Life Cool White: Photographs and Essays by Moyra Davey*.¹ I discovered the book by chance, while scanning the library shelves for something new to read. I remember liking the diaristic style that structured the text. Davey writes in fragments, tangentially, with the looseness of casual reflection. She writes:

*I'm drawn to fragmentary forms, to lists, diaries, notebooks, and letters. Even just reading the word "diary" elicits a frisson, a touch of promise . . . I am similarly drawn to fragments of an artist's oeuvre, a single image in a magazine or brochure. I tear these out and hold onto them.*²

Davey intertwines personal anecdotes with theoretical discourse and artistic musing, employing various different stylistic modes throughout the text. Skimming through pages I saw her signposting the likes of Walter Benjamin, Virginia Woolf and Susan Sontag, and figured I was in safe hands.³ Through my affinity with Davey's writing, I have chosen to implement the formal devices of her text in the structure of this thesis. As with Davey's text, my writing takes the form of notations, fragments, conversations, anecdotes, and speculations. This writing is not motivated by a search for 'final truths' but through a desire to join the conversations of Davey and other friends I've found along the way.

¹ Moyra Davey, *Long Life Cool White: Photographs and Essays by Moyra Davey*, (USA: Yale University Press, 2008).

² *Ibid*, 93.

³ *Ibid*.



Fig 1⁴

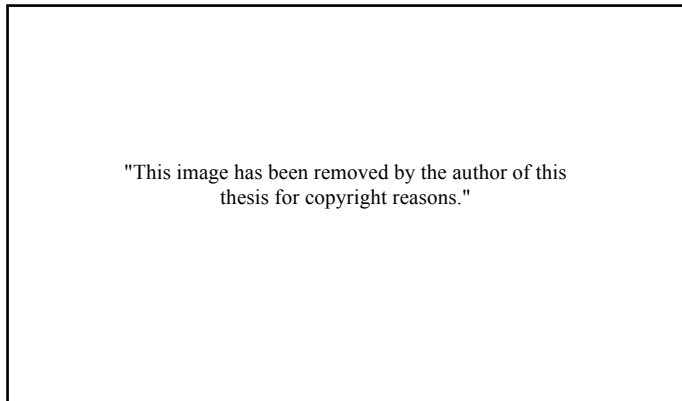


Fig 2⁵

⁴ Tara O'Conal, *Untitled*, digital image, 2019.

⁵ Moyra Davey, "Unnamed image," in *Long Life Cool White: Photographs & Essays by Moyra Davey*, (USA: Yale University Press, 2008), Photograph, 78.

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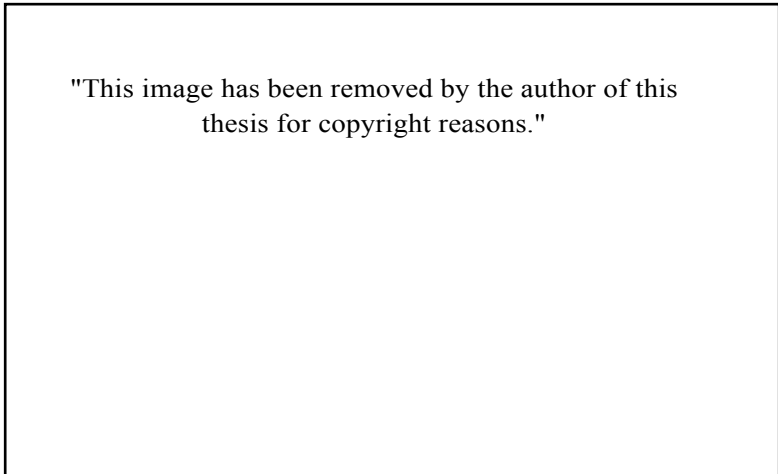
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- *Two dreams*

I had two dreams at the start of the MFA project:

- A had a dream about a film. It was a short film that I had constructed from a sequence of fragments, short pieces of footage, joined together to form one continuous length. The images were taken from disparate sources but together they formed a relative whole, unfolding a discreet logic through abstract connections. The film was all I could see in the dream and I felt as though my world had become an image.

- I had a dream about a blue room. We were living together in an old meandering kind of house with rooms lined with bookshelves and filled with objects that we had collected over the years. Everything was coloured in shades of blue, variations scaling chromatically up and down. We sat together, well you sat and I know I was there with you, as seems to be the way with dreams, I couldn't see myself, but only feel that I was present. At the table were a number of books and papers, piled up, loosely gathered together. We sat together in comfortable silence. A melancholic emotion resonated, which I felt both in the dream and afterward on waking. The walls of the room were painted the same shade of blue as Nan Goldin's *Self Portrait in a Blue Bathroom*.⁶



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Fig 3 ⁷

⁶ Nan Goldin, *Self Portrait in a Blue Bathroom*, 1980, photograph C-print, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/nan-goldin/self-portrait-in-blue-bathroom-london-0RJltr6l3gLTfetvhMXp7g2>.

⁷ Goldin, *Self Portrait in a Blue Bathroom*, 1980.

- *Notes on Blue*

A year or so after discovering Moyra Davey's writing I finally looked into her artistic work, prompted by the recommendation of a friend. Examining her films and images online, I felt with elation that I had found a kindred spirit. I'm currently reading *Role Models* by John Waters and felt heartened to learn of his treasured collection of Moyra Davey photographs - it quietly excites me to discover these little connections between people I admire.⁸ Davey's videos bring together art and research, structured loosely as a film essay. Her practice moves through an ongoing investigation of language and image, finding threaded connections between these processes. In her videos Davey recites and performs the content of her writing, imbuing the text with presence through voice and physical action. She reads excerpts of literature, theory texts, notes and diary entries as she walks around her apartment. The camera focuses on objects, pictures, architectural features, and on Davey's figure as she moves around her apartment. Davey paces fluidly from chronological information to personal narratives and poetic imagery, the video fragmenting through these various devices. Time and space are ruptured and reconfigured to compose a narrative that forms through aesthetic and metaphoric relationships.

In Davey's film *Notes on Blue* (2015), the camera watches from a static position, the artist passing in and out of frame.⁹ She walks around her apartment reading aloud from her notebook. Davey reminds me of my friend Nina a little, her long lean frame and straight dark brown hair, and of Anne Charlotte Robertson, for the same reasons and because they are both observed in their apartments among the debris of everyday life. Davey reads aloud a quote by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, from a 1978 interview where he speculates: 'the more honestly you put yourself into the story the more that story will concern others as well.'¹⁰ Davey describes 'the paradoxical notion of the very personal and intimate having a wide resonance'¹¹ The social and political resonance of personal material is often overlooked. There is value in finding the strength to share the things that are perhaps less visible, less overt, to access what is closest to heart. This generosity and humility can be found in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist who I have admired from my earliest days at art school. His work *Untitled* (1991), an image of an empty bed printed as a public billboard, comes to mind.¹² A powerful statement of love, daily intimacy, mortality and the politics of sexuality, Gonzalez-Torres work resonates both poetically and politically.

⁸ John Waters, *Role Models*, (USA: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), 267.

⁹ Rainer Werner Fassbinder quoted in *Notes on Blue*, directed by Moyra Davey, (USA: Walker Art Centre, 2015), HD video, accessed on 2/9/19, <https://vimeo.com/181580581>.

¹⁰ *Notes on Blue*, directed by Moyra Davey, (USA: Walker Art Centre, 2015), HD video, accessed on 2/9/19, <https://vimeo.com/181580581>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991.



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Fig. 4 ¹³

Derek Jarman's film *Blue* (1993), is a film that I became aware of a few years ago, and have considered most recently upon watching Moyra Davey's film *Notes on Blue*.¹⁴ Jarman experienced degraded vision due to his contraction of AIDS, able to perceive only a few remaining colours, including the colour blue.¹⁵ Jarman's film features a single static image of the colour blue with a voiceover and musical soundtrack.¹⁶ The film uses International Klein Blue (IKB) as an evocation of 'the void' and immateriality, foregrounded by Yves Klein's historic 'blue' liminal manifestations.¹⁷ Primarily released through cinema distribution, the BBC also broadcast what is termed a 'simulcast', an audio version of the film on radio.¹⁸ Listeners were given a postcard of IKB so that they could look at the colour alongside the radio broadcast.¹⁹ I find this detail interesting, that the film image is translated into a physical printed image and used as a kind of 'key' to the audio. Jarman began his artistic career as a painter, and the structure of this simulation leads me to reflect on the materiality of the image.

¹³ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991, Billboard. https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/04/04/printout-felix-gonzalez-torres/.

¹⁴ *Notes on Blue*, directed by Moyra Davey, (USA: Walker Art Centre, 2015), HD video, accessed on 2/9/19. <https://vimeo.com/181580581>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Mason Leaver-Yap, "Film without Film: Derek Jarman's Blue," Walker Art Centre, Published on October 23 2014. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/film-without-film-derek-jarmans-blue>.

¹⁷ Leaver-Yap, "Film without Film. "

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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Fig 5²⁰

I'm reminded of a fragment of footage I shot during a Skype call with my mother. During the call Mum holds up a picture of a poppy she wants to paint. The picture wavers in front of the screen, an unstable image that is not *quite* flat, fluctuating through the movement in the video. The picture is reframed through the video's durational quality, an usual experience for a painting I think. This kind of reframing occurs in the world of Jarman's *Blue*, where the filmic blue is recontextualised in the printed postcard material for the BBC radio audience. The depth of sound and audio recording, and the depth of movement in a video recording are both *perceived* depths, projected to the sensorial viewer. This tension has always been of interest to me within video and sound mediums, the perceptual resonance of the immaterial.



Fig 6²¹

²⁰ Moyra Davey, *Notes on Blue*, 2015, video still, HD video. <https://vimeo.com/181580581>.

²¹ Tara O'Conal, *Untitled*, video still, digital video, 2019.

Back to *Notes on Blue* - Davey's film is punctuated by blue artifacts and my eyes land on patches of blue from scene to scene, a kind of eye spy game. A blue mythology builds through this layering of colour, a visual list, notations of blue. Davey describes her feelings toward Jarman's *Blue*, her personal reactions, reflections from the past, her own poetic extensions, layering these modes of reception to form a subjective lineage of the work.²² Davey travels swiftly between reference points, returning to Jarman's *Blue* as the central locator. I think Jarman would have felt at home in Davey's work, being someone who valued the collective creativity in the process of filmmaking and writing, perhaps more than the finished works.²³ Watching *Notes on Blue* online, I notice all the blue markers on my computer screen. I watch Davey walk around her apartment reading out notes, talking about P.J. Harvey, an artist who I admire.²⁴ She mentions Tilda Swinton, an actress who I always thought I might look like when I grow older, when my hair goes white, and who John Waters said went to the Oscars without make-up on (so cool, I thought and vowed I wouldn't wear make up to work the next day).²⁵ Every time I copy and paste an internet link directly into the footnotes of my thesis it automatically copies in the colour of International Klein Blue and I wish I could leave it that colour as a kind of homage. And if I had more time I'd talk about all those other lovers of blue - Maggie Nelson, Rebecca Solnit, William Gass, to name a few. But blue is only one tone of this paper and I must move on.

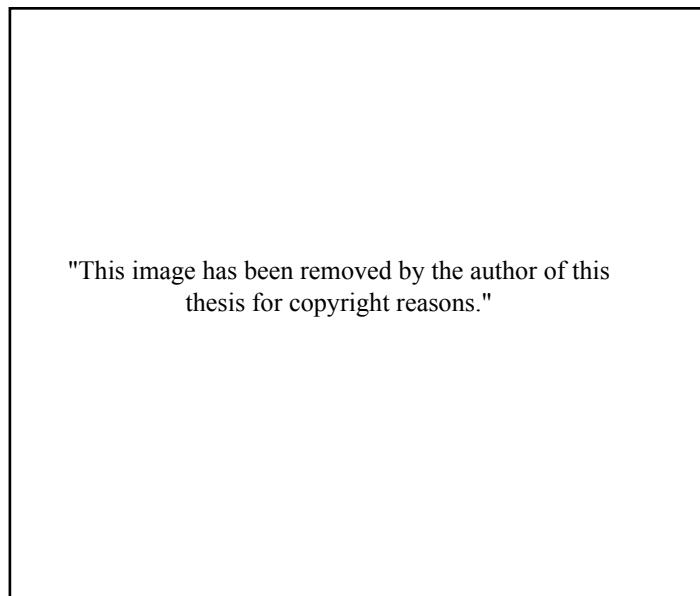


Fig 7²⁶

²² Moyra Davey, *Notes on Blue*, 2015, HD video. <https://vimeo.com/181580581>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Waters, *Role Models*, 79.

²⁶ Davey, "Notes on Blue."

BLUE: Text of the film by Derek Jarman.

The doctor in St. Bartholomew's Hospital thought he could detect lesions in my retina - the pupils dilated with belladonna - the torch shone into them with a terrible blinding light.

Look left

Look down

Look up

Look right

Blue flashes in my eyes.

Blue Bottle

buzzing Lazy days

The sky blue butterfly

Sways on the cornflower

Lost in the warmth

Of the blue heat

haze Singing the

blues Quiet and

slowly Blue of my

heart Blue of my

dreams Slow blue

love

Of delphinium days

Fig 8 ²⁷

²⁷ *Blue*, directed by Derek Jarman, (Copyright of the Estate of Derek Jarman, 1993), projected video, script (excerpt), *BLUE: Text of the film by Derek Jarman*, accessed on 10/10/19. https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180716/BLUE_derek_jarman_ang.pdf.

- Breaking up

We were in the throws of breaking up, in the process of romantic dissolution, and I had just spent hours in our bedroom staring blankly, caught in a daze. You were in the next room finding the creative inspiration you'd been searching for over past years, an opening up that I presume had been encouraged by our breaking. The situation has the opposite affect on me and I feel paralysed and unable to move from the bed, let alone piece together a sequence of thoughts leading to some kind of action. Around four p.m. on this warm sunny afternoon, after a long period of stagnation, I reach a point of anxiety that pushes me to act. I feel that if I don't do something soon I'm going to scream. I feel like I am actually going mad with boredom. I set up my camera, pointing it toward a leaf, which is pressed up against the venetian blinds that shield the room's single window. I had noticed this leaf-situation daily over the four months that we lived in this room, but I hadn't thought it to be 'important' enough to film. But in the absence of literally anything else I could possibly think of filming, the leaf seemed to be a viable option. My life perceivably crumbling around me, the leaf embodied a calm and stoic presence that felt steady through our unraveling.

Struggling to process the situation beyond what lay in my line of sight, both the camera and I held the leaf as the singular focus of our tunnel vision. I sat on the edge of the bed, next to my tripod, and stared while the camera recorded. I stared at this leaf, singular and pressed into the blinds, until I felt so empty and bare, and until my gaze was suspended. If you sit staring at something for long enough this can happen. Later, upon viewing the video, a friend said that the leaf image makes her think of me sitting in my room staring into space. It's the kind of thing your eyes rest on when you're vaguing out or allowing your mind to drift. I noticed the sunlight filtered by the glossy green leaf, the gradients of light and shadow that seep through. It was an Arum Lily leaf, a symbol of mourning, and it was singular, poised and very slightly leaning, supported by the venetian blind. The lines of the venetian blind created shadows from behind the leaf. Barred horizontals intersected with thin white veins forming a geometry specific to this relationship. In various opacities, shadowy lines created impressions upon the leaf's surface. The sun made contact with the reflective surface of a moving car, causing a flash of light. The car transmitted this light to the leaf, which burned brightly through green flesh. My interest peaked at this point of disruption and I felt as though I was witnessing a climax of sorts. I watched this 'film' over and over again, as though repeating and rewinding. My mind hovered in a kind of focused boredom.

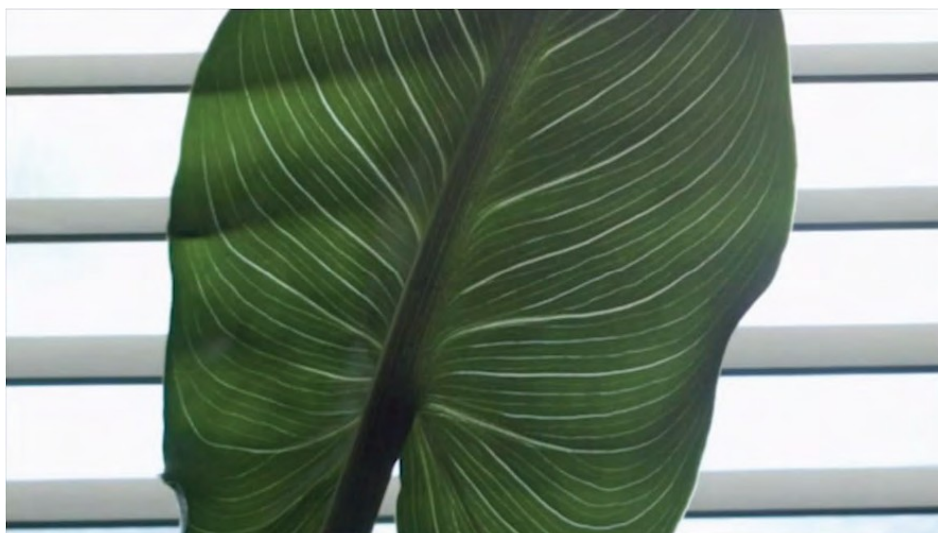


Fig 9²⁸

Around eighteen months after filming this video I trawled through my hard drive searching for an image from which to build a new video work. I hadn't thought about the leaf footage since making it, and it surprised me to come upon it again after so much time had passed. Watching the video I could clearly picture the scene of the break-up. Our bedroom, dark grey carpet, things scattered around in a lived kind of order, single leafed Arum Lilly plant in front of the window, light grey venetian blinds. The image is a screen that prevents me from looking further, and though I know in reality the world moved outside of the window, I am isolated from it. Nothing happens, but for an occasional flash of light that quickly illuminates and sparks an interruption to the otherwise static surface of the leaf. Minutes lengthen, and then I just see lines, smooth, clean and abstract. I remember the poetry of Agnes Martin's geometries in her intricately patterned drawings. The same unflinching form that gives me a sense of security also builds tension, hovering in a paradoxical state where imprisonment and comfort coexist. After around four minutes of relative stillness, the footage is interrupted as my ex-partner walks past in front of the camera and then out of the room again. His unexpected presence has the impact of affirming an absence. I stop watching the video there, at the point of his departure on the screen.

(After a screening of my videos I heard someone comment: 'It is about a break-up.')

²⁸ Tara O'Conal *You're So Special*, video still, digital video, 2019.

²⁹ MFA student at my completion seminar, Victorian College of The Arts, Melbourne, July 2019.

- *The suspended image*

Upon listening to Moyra Davey's memorialising of Chantal Akerman in her film *Hemlock Forest* (2016), I realised that I had begun writing about Akerman without proper introduction; jumping soullessly into a fairly clinical analysis of her work.³⁰ I will begin with my own reminiscing of sorts. I came to Akerman's work quite randomly, around 8 years ago, when a friend lent me a DVD of short films, including *La Chambre* (1972).³¹

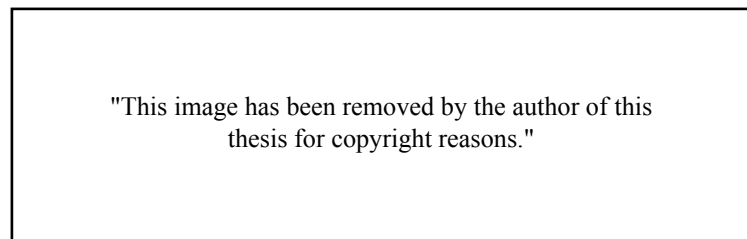


Fig 10³²

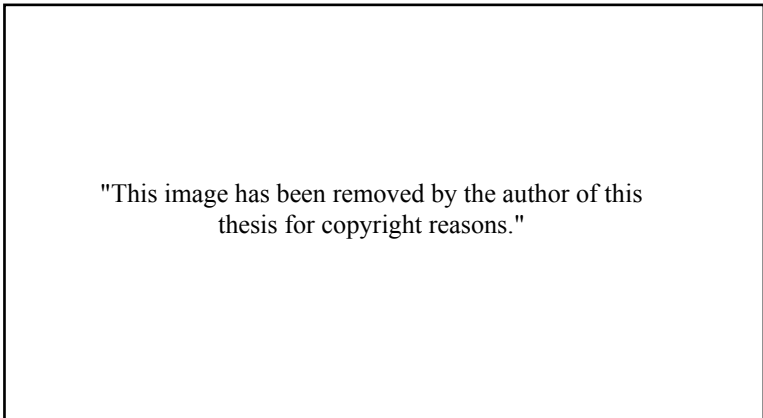
In *La Chambre* the camera slowly pans around a bedroom, revealing the scene of the room incrementally. I find bedrooms interesting, and welcome the opportunity to inspect them, though it is not often that I have this opportunity. I like seeing the familiar objects that are used each day, the treasured photos and images on the wall, the things that are kept close. *La Chambre* invites the viewer into this experience, into the space of Akerman's bedroom, the slowly repeating revolutions of the camera allowing you to look, over and over again. Around and around, each time I notice more detail, including the figure of Akerman herself, sitting on the bed. Akerman's restricted and tightly held point of view gradually reveals fragments of the image, enclosing the viewer in the film's durational structure. *La Chambre* was transformative to me, exposing me to a kind of structuralism that I hadn't yet encountered, though I know I was also probably quite naive at the time. Through the repeated revolutions of the camera, Akerman drew my body into the time and space of her room. I felt an affect of this event that caused me to consider film to be a holistic perceptive situation rather than something purely optical. This really shifted how I thought about film and influenced the aims of my video works going forward. I became interested in how I could impact the viewer's bodily reactions, through the structure of time and the slow release of perceptual material in my video works. From then on I devoured Akerman's work however I found it, and came to differentiate between those who knew of her and those who didn't (poor souls). Moyra Davey is one of the fold, of those devoted to Akerman, and those who mourn her passing. I don't know if it is morbid, or cold of me to say, but when I learned of Akerman's death I guess I felt a mixture of shock that she was no longer alive, but also understanding at her leaving. Her films have a disposition that is familiar to me, a melancholic tone that hovers on the edge of things.

³⁰ *Hemlock Forest*, HD video, directed by Moyra Davey, (USA, 2016), accessed on 20/8/19. <https://vimeo.com/169375334>.

³¹ *La Chambre*, video, directed by Chantal Akerman, (United States, Belgium, 1972), DVD.

³² Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre*, 1972, video. <https://www.criterion.com/films/20976-la-chambre>.

Through *Hemlock Forest*, I find that Davey has also read the text *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, by Ivone Margulies.³³ Davey mentions Ivone Margulies' love for Akerman's work, and this admiration is evident in Margulies' text, a deep critical analysis of Akerman's filmic accomplishments.³⁴ Margulies discusses Akerman's use of the long take in film, a device that has become associated with her work. Margulies comments on the experience induced by the long take, writing that: 'The insistence on remaining with the scene even after its narrational or referential information has been decoded, inevitably solicits an estranged experience of the image.'³⁵ In her film *Là-Bas* (2006), Akerman uses the long take as a primary structure throughout the film's duration.³⁶ *Là-Bas* is an autobiographical account of Akerman's Jewish identity and childhood, set in an apartment in Tel Aviv. The film consists of a series of fixed extended shots, filmed through the framework of two large windows and a glass balcony door that make up one wall of the apartment. The windows are covered with matchstick blinds that are not quite flush with them. The view outside is of the windows, balconies and terraces of the opposing buildings, an observational perspective that follows people on the balcony of the neighbouring block. The voyeuristic perspective of the narrator builds a sense of loneliness and isolation as she watches the outside world from the containment of her home. The sonic presence of the narrator accompanied by their visual absence causes a fluctuation between presence and absence. This dichotomy feeds into Akerman's autobiographical experience as she describes feelings of alienation and distance toward her home and family.



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Fig 11 ³⁷

³³ Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), quoted in Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest*, HD video. (USA, 2016), accessed on 20/8/19, <https://vimeo.com/169375334>.

³⁴ Davey, "Hemlock Forest."

³⁵ Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 105.

³⁶ *Là Bas*, directed by Chantal Akerman, video, (France, 2006), DVD.

³⁷ Chantal Akerman, *La Bas*, 2006, video. <http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/chantal-akermans-la-bas-the-suspended-image-and-the-politics-of-anti-messianism/>.

Chrysanthi Nigianni articulates the 'suspended image,'³⁸ a term that she uses to define the long take or fixed point of view. Nigianni describes the suspended image that occurs through Akerman's 'Long takes, . . . and a camera that stares produce(ing) another 'seeing' and a sense of additional reality.'³⁹ I feel this phenomena occur when watching *Là-Bas*. The figures moving on the balcony in the opposite building become almost mechanical, their movements repeating in a routine pattern. The structural device of the long take is a minimalist strategy that Akerman uses in her films. Akerman used minimalist elements through time structures, repetition, reduced content and compositional style. This approach opens up space for the viewer's subjective assumptions to evolve.⁴⁰ French film critic and theorist Andre Bazin suggests that 'the long take opens up time for thought within the flow of film.'⁴¹ Bazin comments:

*a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his (her) part to the action in progress . . . here is called on to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his (her) attention and his (her) will that the meaning of the image in part derives.*⁴²

Through her use of the long take, Akerman's films allow time and space for the viewer's subjective interpretations to form. Akerman valued the relationship between moving image and the physical time of the body, stating that the experience of time is the most important thing in film, 'time and energy.'⁴³ In Akerman's films time and duration are experienced as a physical reality for the viewer, as the images unfold through real time structures. Russian formalist Victor Shlovsky comments that 'the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known . . . to make the stone stoney.'⁴⁴ This quote describes the impact of Akerman's time structures and how the viewer becomes involved in a perceptive experience rather than an illustration of an event. Phenomenologists argue for subjective knowledge, through sensory perceptive encounters, rather than preconceived objective truths. This relates to Akerman's work in that by offering a perceptive encounter, rather than formulaic objectivity, the viewer can form a personal connection with the narrative. The meaning of the work occurs both through Akerman's intent and the subjective relationship between the viewer and the image.

³⁸ Christine, Nigianni, "Chantal Akerman's *Là-bas*: The Suspended Image and the Politics of Anti-Messianism," *Senses of Cinema*, Vol 67, 2013, accessed on 20/8/19. <http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/chantal-akermans-la-bas-the-suspended-image-and-the-politics-of-anti-messianism/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Laura, Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 129.

⁴¹ Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 129.

⁴² Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 130.

⁴³ Chantal Akerman, quoted in Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

⁴⁴ Victor Shlovsky, quoted in Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 73.

Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) falls into this category of experience.⁴⁵ I attended a screening of the film last summer at the Artist Film Workshop in Fitzroy.⁴⁶ A group of around twenty of us gathered in a hot tin shed, the garage door opened out onto the back laneway. The film was silent but for the clicking of the 16mm film projector, and the sound of traffic a block away on Nicholson Street. From memory we watched an hour and a half of the five hour and twenty-one minute film, and I recall drifting in and out of focus throughout this period of time.⁴⁷ Moving through states of boredom and desire, I sat with the softly focused figure of John Giorno asleep on the screen. I felt close to the others watching beside me, connected through our devotion to the delicate gesture of the film. The soundscape that gathered from nearby streets reminded me that outside of our stillness the world moved on.

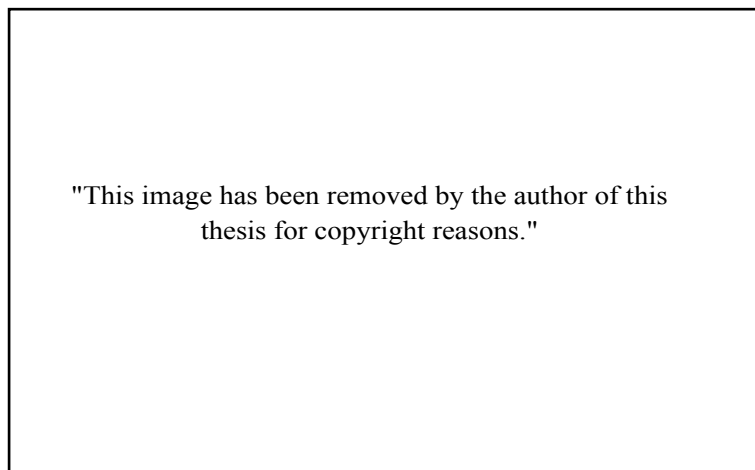


Fig 12⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Andy Warhol, *Sleep*, 1963, video.

⁴⁶ Artist Film Workshop, Kerr Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne, 28 February 2019.

⁴⁷ Warhol, "*Sleep*."

⁴⁸ Andy Warhol, *Sleep*, 1963, video still, video, accessed on 14/9/2019, <https://www.ercatx.org/october-30th-green-screen-film-series-warhols-sleep/>.

- *Post*

After a concerted effort to maintain the normal order of my life post break-up, I eventually accepted that any sense of normality had departed. I took a period of leave away from primary obligations, removing the activities that usually punctuated my days. Time and space became interior situations, and without external interruptions my environment took shape through the containment of my daily rituals. My world narrowed into a specific geography, stretching from my bedroom, kitchen and garden, to the supermarket a couple of blocks away. I felt as though my life existed in the quiet space between emotion and the concreteness of daily rituals. With long periods of introspective time available to me, the personal narratives of my life rose to the surface. Alone with my thoughts and few other distractions, I experienced what felt like a lifetime of silenced emotions with poignant clarity. Illuminating my natural melancholia and depressive tendencies, these circumstances required a strategic approach so as to maintain a grip on the everyday reality of my life.

My recently ex-partner fell in love with someone new in the time it takes me to get out of bed (bed was, for me, a place in which much time was spent). I wonder if there is ever a way to regain energy without first completely falling apart? Amelia Jones gave a lecture at the V.C.A. in 2018, and I took comfort in her words then.⁴⁹ Jones shared her own narrative of trauma, and how an emotional breakdown had caused an unexpected shift in her work.⁵⁰ She spoke about how trauma can be used to strengthen our modes of creative output.⁵¹ Sometimes things need to break so that they can grow. There are numerous analogies in the lives of plants that support this claim and I am reminded of this as I prune back an indoor plant on the brink of death.

During travels to Japan in 2017, I visited a coastal area called Tottori. The area is most famous for its enormous sand dunes, which are described as being like those in Egypt. Though impressive I cannot say I have reflected on them since. After seeing the dunes I embarked on a long walk along the coastline, following a path that had been carved through steep rocky cliffs on the edge of the island. After a couple of hours I came to a small village, the name of which I cannot recall. The village consisted of multi-story stone houses connected by narrow stone pathways, too narrow for a vehicle to enter. The village was signposted by way of clothes lines, letterboxes and collections of potted plants, each forming patterns through their repetition. I saw a man tending to his bonsai garden, delicately clipping and tying, he sat among a group of tiny trees that were plotted around him. This simple meditation impacted me, and his devotion to the aesthetic measures of restriction, through cutting and binding.

⁴⁹ Amelia Jones, "Public lecture," The Victorian College of the Arts, 23 March 2018.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*



Fig 13 ⁵²



Fig 14 ⁵³

⁵²Tara O'Conal, *Untitled*, 35mm photograph, 2017.

⁵³Ibid.

- *Taking Notes*

As I attempted to reframe my existence, post break-up, I experienced a conscious shift in the nature of my creative output. I didn't have the headspace to construct works in a formal sense and it was with difficulty that I applied myself to any kind of pre-meditated activity. Somehow I knew that I needed to do whatever it was that I felt like doing, and for the first time since I began academic study I chose to rely purely on my intuition. With the conscious decision to lift the frameworks that I had previously relied upon, I responded to a newly felt compulsion to write poetry. More like notations than formal poems, I recorded my thoughts and feelings and noted my observations through short pieces of writing. It sounds cliché, and in many ways I suppose it was, but I had determined to follow my instincts and this is what felt right.

Initially I wrote out notes by hand, feeling comforted by the tactility of handwriting and its closeness to the body. I wrote out the thoughts of my internal dialogues with an automatic fluidity, it felt like words had already formed in my mind and they just needed a place to fall. I named the things around me, composing notes and lists, gathering things together through both likeness and paradox. All the things that *feel* 'blue', or all the things that happened while I was waiting for the bus, or the things that I lost while finding other things. Sometimes I wrote a note to describe a single moment, like the coolness of the shadows in my room around mid-morning. Through the aesthetic structure of my immediate world I articulated the material of my interiority, a process of giving shape to the shapeless. Through this act things felt secure, and perhaps I was trying to carve out a form in the absence of the structure to which I had become so attached.

*blue flowers in a
blue vase
blue jeans drying in front of the bar heater
sparkling
mineral
water
blue veins
jazz playing from the house next door
the lines of the venetian blinds run
at a slightly different angle
to the weatherboards
outside the window*

Fig 15⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Tara O'Conal, *Untitled* - notation of blue things in my bedroom, 2018.



Fig 16⁵⁵

Whiling away hours, days and weeks, I secured myself within the confines of my bedroom, a kind of self-imposed institutionalism. My world became smaller, punctuated by the sunlight that streaked across the wooden floorboards, a patch of peeling paint on the wall, the two-inch gap underneath the door, footsteps padding down the hall and rain falling outside. As I found myself often contained within the parameters of my room, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) now comes to mind.⁵⁶ Woolf suggests that if women are able to secure themselves a place away from the disruptions of the 'common sitting room'⁵⁷ they might find the coherence with which to write. She reflects on the rarity of this circumstance for the 19th century woman, stating that: 'to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a soundproof room, was out of the question.'⁵⁸ Woolf's claim that '... a woman must have money and a room of her own in order to write fiction ...'⁵⁹ speaks to the value of demarcating a private place for writing, away from the noise of sociability and relation. I understand the architecture of this situation to be not only physical but also emotional. 'A room of one's own' feels solitary, it is a place to be alone with your thoughts.⁶⁰ My psychologist notes that it is when I'm alone in my bedroom that I feel the calmest.

I usually wrote for a couple of hours before going to sleep at night, I wrote with ease, and writing felt good. The content of my writing consisted of exactly what I had done that day, conversations with my mother, bored reflections, interactions on public transport, the minutiae of my daily life.

⁵⁵ Tara O'Conal, *bedroom*, 35mm photograph, 2018

⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1929). http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/PikliNatalia/Virginia_Woolf_-_A_Room_of_Ones_Own.pdf.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

- Anne Charlotte Robertson

'There is a tendency to film your life like it is scenes'

- Anne Charlotte Robertson⁶⁹

I became exposed to the work of Anne Charlotte Robertson through a screening held at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2018, and her films had a profound impact on me. I felt I could relate to her anxious sensibility, but more than this I was struck by the way her films translated as a direct communication of her life. They are raw and unfiltered and their immediacy belies the theoretical and conceptual knowledge that informed her work. Robertson found a language in film through which to be her self. When I watch her films I can *feel* her.

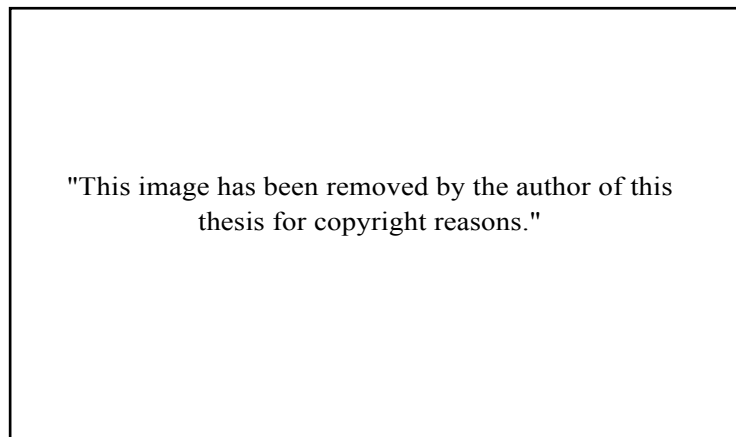


Fig 18⁷⁰

Through the Harvard Film Archive, the institution that holds the entire collection of Robertson's films, I gained personal access to a number of works. Watching the films on my laptop in bed I feel like I have a secret private relationship with Anne Charlotte. I pour myself a glass of wine and settle down in the evening, it's quite romantic. I've even cooked recipes from the *Moosewood* cookbook, incidentally also something I used as a teenager and the book that Robertson cooks from daily, as shown in the *Five Year Diary* films.⁷¹

Born in 1949, Anne Charlotte Robertson was a Massachusetts based filmmaker who used a Super-8 camera to create experimental autobiographical films. Over the course of her life, Robertson maintained a practice of diarising, through both writing and film. Robertson wrote her earliest diary at the age of eleven, in December 1960, titled *'Is This My Life?'*⁷² Robertson's *Five Year Diary* project began when she was an art student in 1981, and the final project consisted of a series of

⁶⁹ Anne Charlotte Robertson, "Five Year Diary," 8mm film, November 1986. <https://blogs.harvard.edu/hfacollections2/category/anne-robertson/>.

⁷⁰ Anne Charlotte Robertson, "Diary entry," Anne-Charlotte Robertson Collection, Harvard Film Archive, (Harvard University, USA). Sourced from <https://blogs.harvard.edu/hfacollections2/category/anne-robertson/>.

⁷¹ Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Five Year Diary*, (Massachusetts, USA, 1981-1997).

⁷² Brett Kashmere, "Is this my life? Part Two: Discovering Anne-Charlotte Robertson through the Harvard Film Archive," in *women's film and television network uk/ireland*, <https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/2018/03/09/is-this-my-life-part-two-discovering-anne-charlotte-robertson-through-the-harvard-film-archive/>, viewed on 2/9/2019.

eighty-one reels, shot up until 1997.⁷³ Through a first person point of view, Robertson creates an intimate self-portrait, documenting many hours of her daily life.⁷⁴ She constructed images using experimental editing methods, processing the footage through techniques of montage, collage and stop animation. Robertson's emotional and psychological experiences are a thematic in her work, intensified by her aesthetic treatment of the footage. Her internal dialogues and personal anxieties are laid bare as Robertson freely expresses her feelings in front of the camera.

In 1988, the American Museum of the Moving Image screened Robertson's *Five Year Diary*, approximately forty hours long at this point in time.⁷⁵ Robertson filled the gallery space with childhood artifacts and was physically present during opening hours over the week long screening. The films offer meditations on Robertson's identity as a single woman and an artist, and her everyday life - cooking, gardening, talking on the phone, reading and writing and visiting her mother. Robertson's artistic statement:

*I am a 50-year-old woman, single, with a vow to poverty. The title Five Year Diary refers to the little blank books with locks and keys, that allow only a few lines to each day's notation; the audience is invited to be my brother and sister, and see what a life can yield. My present and future hope is to leave a full record of a woman in the 20th century.*⁷⁶

This statement leads me to Walter Benjamin's discussion of the *aura* in relation to film. Benjamin drew out these concepts in his text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.⁷⁷ Benjamin identifies aura as a unique quality contained within an event or artefact when viewed in its original context and prior to processes of reproduction.⁷⁸ Aura is something that is felt in the primacy of the beholder and is a sensation that Benjamin suggests collapses through technologies of reproduction. The advent of photography and film displaces the value once held in the 'original,' opening up possibilities of dissemination and absorption that democratise the experience of art.⁷⁹ Benjamin's argument speaks to the political resonance of film, through which the marginalised are made visible. Through film recording and editing Robertson is able to communicate the complexities of her life, creating an autobiographical account that would otherwise be unseen and intangible in a broader social/political context.

Ever since video cameras were marketed to individual 'users' amateur filmmakers have recorded their everyday experiences through the home movie. Mobile phone cameras have opened the gates for a myriad of personal expressions - selfies are the first things that come to mind, leading on from

⁷³ Kashmere, "Is this my life?"

⁷⁴ Haden Guest, director of Harvard Film Archive, in *Anne-Charlotte Robertson (1949-1912)*, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/20929/anne-charlotte-robertson-1949-2012->, viewed on 2/9/2019

⁷⁵ Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright-Wexman, (eds.) in *Women and Experimental filmmaking* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 206.

⁷⁶ Kashmere, "Is this my life?," in *women's film and television network uk/ireland*.

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production* (Somerset: Prism, 2010), p. 19.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

the popular convention of the home movie. Filmmakers have adapted the parameters of the home movie, a format that has traditionally been associated with the nuclear family, reinterpreting this framework through cinematic contexts.⁸⁰ This adaptation can be used to critique the idealistic familial associations that are inherent to the home movie format, offering counter views of the domestic experience. Anne-Charlotte Robertson's diary films borrow from the tradition of home movies, replacing the everyday life of the nuclear family with her own story of a woman who is "single, with a vow to poverty," a "full portrait of a woman alive in the 20th century."⁸¹ This subversion of the home movie questions the idyllic vision of home life that advertising companies and Hollywood movies promote. Robertson challenges social norms by drawing attention to her circumstances as an aging and mentally ill woman, juxtaposed through the formality of the home movie. I am reminded again of the invisibility of the aging single woman, though the internet tells me that '40 is the new 20.'

Robertson's work is a part of the lineage of experimental film, though critics have noted her absence from this discourse and from film history in general. This is perhaps attributed to gender bias; to the work being 'too quotidian, too ordinary; it's format too domestic,'⁸² and therefore seen as lacking a theoretical perspective. Maybe it's fitting though, that the most information I have been able to find on Robertson and her work is through Harvard University's Anne-Charlotte Robertson blog-site. The Harvard Film Archive holds the entire collection of works: film reels, video-tapes, notes, photos, cassettes and personal ephemera. I've watched the ten reels of *Five Year Diary* that they sent me, and I wait with eager anticipation to watch the remaining seventy-three films that still are in the process of digitisation. I feel as though I am watching someone's life unfold, and in a sense I am. Reading Anne Charlotte's obituary on the blog-site I found out that, like me, she had worked at a library, and that she loved gardening.⁸³

Her avocation was organic gardening and she kept multiple plots at the Framingham Community Garden where she donated vegetables to homeless shelters. She canned and pickled yearly, giving to families, friends, and those in need. She loved all living things, and surrounded herself with plants and animals.

- Obituary of Anne Charlotte Robertson⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman, "Introduction," in *Women and Experimental filmmaking*, 227.

⁸¹ Kashmere, "Is this my life?," in *women's film and television network uk/ireland*.

⁸² Kashmere, "Is this my life."

⁸³ Obituary of Anne-Charlotte Robertson, *MetroWest Daily News*, Sept. 19, 2012. accessed at <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/metrowestdailynews/obituary.aspx?n=anne-robertson&pid=159975330&fhid=11304#fbLoggedOut>, 2/9/2019.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

- *Cats*

I get a call from my ex saying he's accidentally run over the cat. I find it hard not to see this as indicative of an over-arching finality. I go back home to Adelaide to try to get some headspace. Staying with parents, for around 10 days. It's an interesting feeling like I'm in another world, a different time zone. I wear a dressing gown in the morning, I do a jigsaw puzzle and feel a sense of achievement, cats are on everything. When our cat Coconut was still with us I spent a lot of time filming her. Due to her anxious disposition and neurotic tendencies, this was one of the only ways I could really get close to her. I set up the camera on a tripod, mounted over her favourite chair, poised and awaiting her arrival. I filmed her sleeping, cleaning, eating, drinking, etc. Coconut became the sole subject of an ongoing home movie. I zoomed right in, so close that I could see a whisker twitching or the narrow slit of an eye glazing over in sleep. I wondered if Coconut was aware of my filming - a line of questioning that has pervaded the ages of cat-human interactions.

I exhibited some of my footage of Coconut at Blindside Gallery in February 2017. Prior to that time I hadn't really considered Coconut as a subject, but as the hours of footage built up I realised that I had inadvertently begun making work. My gaze became a close inspector, magnetised to the slightest fluctuations or nuances, compelled to capture some little movement that I hadn't yet recorded. Watching Coconut sleeping, I fell into the rhythms of her breath, the automatic ins and outs that bind us all together. Like my experiences with Akerman's long takes, watching Coconut's furry abdomen breathing in and out causes a kind of abstraction over time. My eyes fixed on the patch of long white fur moving up and down, and over time it started to feel like a mechanised object. My vision cropped out the rest of her and all I was aware of was her balloon-like expanding and releasing. I slipped into an automatic rhythm, anticipating the rise and fall, lulled into a repetitive cycle. After a while Coconut shifted her position, curling her body around and breaking the surface of my observation, before finding her resting place again. My treatment of the footage replicates this perspective, the image zoomed in, close to her breathing body. The video is projected at large scale to fill the wall of the gallery. The audio track, pieced together from recordings of Coconut purring, is played loudly, filling the space. When I watch the video at the gallery, it is easy to forget that I am watching Coconut, the patch of white fur fluctuating in and out feels neutralised in this public space, it no longer feels intimate as it did when I watched her at home. A few people ask me if it's a real cat, or some kind of fake fur apparatus. The work reduces Coconut to an undulating furry surface, it is depersonalised and almost clinical. The video was an experiment really, I wanted to see how the footage might create a kind of abstracted experience of a cat. I was interested in how my gaze and the frame of the camera could reconfigure Coconut and what might be read in the installed footage through qualities of scale and composition.



Fig. 19 ⁸⁶



Fig. 20 ⁸⁷

During my 'cat period', I became pretty consumed with the whole situation between Coconut and I, and followed other artists who were equally obsessed with their cats. Carolee Schneeman's film *Fuses* (1967)⁸⁸ is a seminal work in the lineage of her career and her use of 'cats as a medium.'⁸⁹ Carolee Schneemann's cat Kitch seemed to enjoy hanging around when Schneemann and her husband James Tenney were making love. Schneemann noticed Kitch sitting close by and purring while they were together, inspiring her to make a film that included the gaze of the cat, a kind of

⁸⁶ Tara O'Conal, *Untitled*, digital video, Blindsight Gallery, (image credit: Andrew Curtis), 2017.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*, 16mm film, 1967.

⁸⁹ Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve, "'The Cat Is My Medium': Notes on the Writing and Art of Carolee Schneemann," *Art Journal Open*, July 2015, accessed on 30 October 2019, <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=6381>.

third eye.⁹⁰ Filmed and edited by Schneemann, *Fuses* features herself, James Tenney her husband, and their cat Kitch. Schneemann critiques modes of sexual representation in film, developing a female eroticism that sits in contrast to pornography. She conceives the film as shot through the eyes of the cat, the observer whose view of human sexuality is free of morality. *Fuses* explores the sexual act that is not driven by a sequence of events or linear plot. Instead, sex is shown as a continuous and cyclic dynamic through the actions of Schneemann and Tenney, and the gaze of Kitch the cat.

Anne Carson in her text *Eros: the bittersweet* (1986) builds a discussion of 'triangulation', a structure that she uses to examine the dynamics of romantic desire.⁹¹ Through Greek mythological literature, Carson analyses the paradoxical figure of the triangle, formed through the presence of two lovers and a third element of interruption.⁹² It is through this triangular form that Eros occurs. Something must pose as a potential interference in order for amorous feelings to ignite. I feel as though Kitch the cat might be this third element for Schneemann and Tenney. Kitch's watchful eyes hover, a presence that disrupts the expected course of lovemaking.

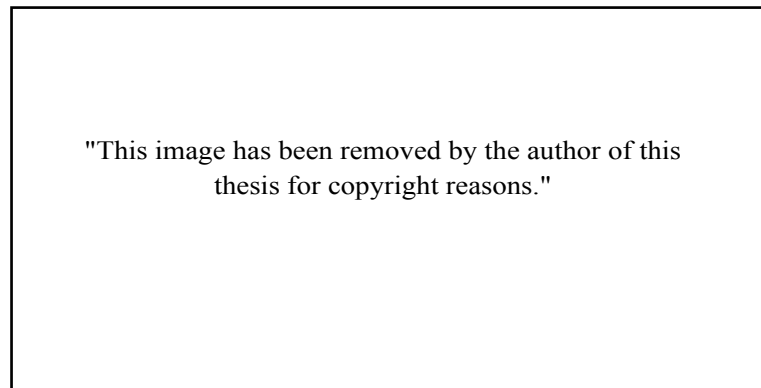


Fig. 21⁹³

As the length of time that I am single grows, so does my desire for feline companionship. I feel this particularly when I'm at home on cold winter nights typing my thesis. I imagine a cat curled up on my bed, or on my lap, purring. Mum reminded me that a cat would try to sit on the keys, but I don't care, I think it would be cute if they sat on the keys.

My allergic housemate is the third figure in the triangle, the paradoxical figure keeping my desired cat and I apart. One night I enter a flurry of internet research, trying to find the least allergy inducing cat on the market. Upon discovering the hypoallergenic Siberian cat I flew into a wild back and forth email dialogue with a breeder located in Queensland. They were keen for me to have a Siberian cat and I was keen to have one. I requested a sample of Siberian cat fur so I could put things to the test.

⁹⁰ Goodeye, "The cat is my medium."

⁹¹ Ann Carson, *Eros: the bittersweet*, (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 65.

⁹² Carson, *Eros*.

⁹³ Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*, 16mm film, 1967, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDMdsMOBTvw>.

A couple of weeks later the samples arrived in a hand addressed enveloped. I opened them up excitedly, to find two portions of fur, compressed together and flattened into irregular forms. One is slightly larger than the other. The larger mound is a light silvery grey and white, with dark grey streaks. The smaller mound has pale ginger and creamy tones. The samples are different to what I had expected. I had imagined the fur to be in tufts, with many fine individual strands of hair. But these things are quite solid, with a shape and form. Presumably the strands of hair have been molded together by the breeder, to ensure they don't float away and become a part of the atmosphere. Or attach to someone's jacket.



Fig. 22⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Tara O'Conal, "Siberian cat hair samples", 2019.

- *Feminism*

I'm in favour of allowing the inevitably fragmented viewpoint of a singular person such as me to serve as a kind of yardstick measured against other yardsticks . . . we have to bring contradiction to life, keep making the effort to argue in the midst of experiment, arbitrary feelings and perceptions, and doubt.

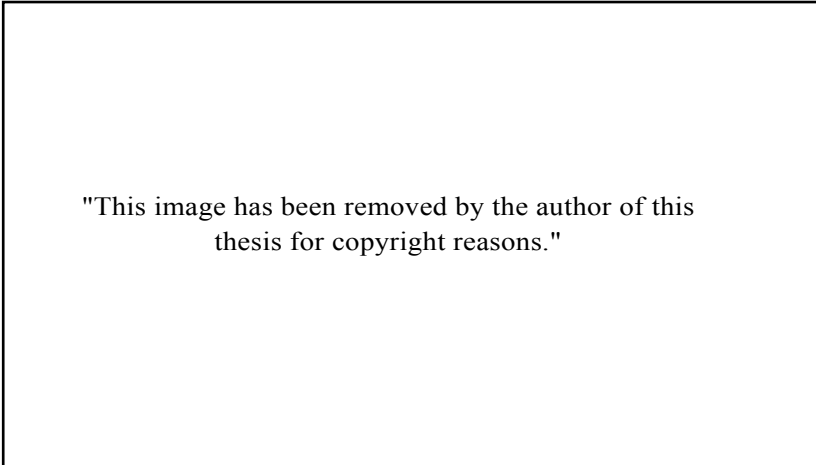
- Jorg Heiser⁹⁵

It's Wednesday night and I've just arrived home from work. The sharehouse that I live in is quiet and still. I feel a pang of loneliness, something that can occur in the evening, the time when families and partners might ordinarily share a meal. I remember my mother's recent words to me 'it's important to eat well, especially when you are on your own.' I think of my grandmother, now eighty-five, a woman who has lived on her own for a long time. She had three partners when she was younger, just as I have now had. I am quite similar to my grandmother in some ways and a part of me has feared that I might follow the same pathway - to have three partners and then live as a single woman for the rest of my life. I remember a news article I read the other day talking about women being invisible in their forties, the women in the article had chosen to see the bright side of things, a mentality I find hard to share. But I'm getting in too deep here, and I pull myself back to the surface, to the present - I am single and childless but I'm not forty yet. One of life's joys is putting on comfortable clothes, a dressing gown and slippers at the end of the day. I heat up some pasta and finish off the last drop of red wine. My friend has recommended that I watch an interview between Mary Kelly and Rosalyn Deutsche, she said it was 'like a quick injection'⁹⁶ that made her feel better about things.⁹⁷ This sounds like just what I need to go with my pasta. The first thing that strikes me about Mary Kelly is her impressive hairstyle, something that the internet confirms she has maintained for over thirty years. Ok, I'm sorry, I'm not trying to perpetuate the objectification of women, I promise. The reason why I'm actually writing about her now is because she really hit the nail on the head with what I think feminism is good for, and how it operates in the world.

⁹⁵ Jorg, Heiser, quoted in "All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art," *ART&RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol 2. No. 1. Summer 2008, accessed on 15/10/19, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/heiser.html>.

⁹⁶ Nina Gilbert text message to Tara O'Conal, 15/10/19.

⁹⁷ "Mary Kelly in Conversation with Rosalyn Deutsche: Live from the Whitney," Youtube, 1 hour 36 minutes, viewed on 18/10/2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_8NCVnSnGA.



"This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons."

Fig 23⁹⁸

Kelly describes feminism as a ' . . . disposition, not even a set of practices, which you could say is taken from film, like the long take and a different sort of sense of duration that's more diegetic.'⁹⁹ Here Kelly describes a 'disposition' over a 'set of practices' in order to communicate that feminism is a way of *being* and not an activity that can be measured. The feminist disposition, like the long take, creates a space for the expression of subjectivity and invites speculation, indeterminacy, and malleability. The extended duration of the long take allows time for the viewer to move through layers of comprehension, and to attune to the subjective framework of the image. Kelly refers to the value of the 'cumulative meaning' that builds through the long held durational image.¹⁰⁰ The real time experience of the long take implicates the viewer's physical presence, bringing the body into the *felt* space of the film. This approach devalues the totalising hierarchical relationship that traditionally exists between the viewer and the work of art, giving the viewer agency as an active component of the work.

What Kelly terms 'pathological masculinity' has found ways of seeping into even the most liberal discourses, not least within the debates of the art institution.¹⁰¹ It can feel tenuous to work through a tone or a sensibility, to locate oneself through a disposition, and the concreteness of 'objective truths' can threaten to overshadow. Going into bat for an approach that is so contrary to the foundations upon which 'the institution' was built can be a weary task. Explaining how my work has social and political value through the poetics of my disposition can feel how I imagine it might feel to teach someone a new language. Though claims of progressive feminist or queer methodologies resound, the societal desire to compress, shorthand, sloganise, identify and territorialise continues. I quietly wave the flag for the social and political resonance of the poetic gesture, with Akerman's 'long take' and Mary Kelly's 'feminist disposition' in my corner.

⁹⁸ Mary Kelly, in "*Mary Kelly in Conversation with Rosalyn Deutsche: Live from the Whitney.*"

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

The domestic and the everyday are fields that have often historically (though not exclusively) been attended to by feminist artists. These are contexts through which the marginalised in society have found a voice, within the spaces that are immediately and democratically accessible to them. Having not personally experienced the 'ideal moment of maternity,'¹⁰² I instead relate the domestic to the sense of confinement that I have felt through mental illness, being single, being poor, and being an introvert. But that is just my subjectivity. Bringing attention to the domestic as a context for art leads to what Kelly terms an 'undoing of mastery,' where the ubiquitous, ready-made and reproduced hold equal footing with what may traditionally be termed a 'work of art.'¹⁰³ This concern speaks to Walter Benjamin's view that the function of reproduction enables the democratisation of artistic process and art objects, perhaps destabilising the traditional value of the virtuosic.¹⁰⁴

Kelly talks about the 'armour' of pathological masculinity, which serves 'as a shield against vulnerability (through Lacan's concept of the ego as a shield).'¹⁰⁵ The exposure of the personal in a work of art requires a certain distance from the ego, in some ways. I think of Robertson who films herself smoking, drinking and talking about being a forty-seven year old woman without a man to impregnate her.¹⁰⁶ She seems, in this moment, to be the anti-thesis of the shielded surface of pathological masculinity, and this vulnerability is what really makes her work *work*. Robertson utilises the residue of daily life, recording the layers of domestic material that form the context of her work. Mary Kelly is interested in the residue of domestic life in her work, often sourcing her materials through her home environment. Rosalyn Deutsche discusses Kelly's use of 'lint', a material that features over several of Kelly's works.¹⁰⁷ Deutsche describes the lint as a residue that evokes both individual and collective histories, positing that the lint represents what has been filtered out of historic accounts.

As I move through this research project, I seem to be gathering a group (Akerman, Davey, Robertson, O'Conal), of single, women, filmmakers, who are also unwell, either physically or psychologically. Well, at least I'm in good company. I know Robertson had a cat, I'm not sure about Akerman? Davey has a dog. I *had* a cat, and now I really want another one. I think it's time for a beer.

¹⁰² Mary Kelly, in "Mary Kelly in Conversation with Rosalyn Deutsche: Live from the Whitney."

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Robertson, *Five Year Diary*, Harvard Film Archive, 1997.

¹⁰⁷ Rosalyn Deutsche, in *Mary Kelly in Conversation with Rosalyn Deutsche: Live from the Whitney*.

"This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons."

Fig 24¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸Google search page 'did chantal akerman have a cat',
<https://www.google.com/search?q=did+chantal+akerman+have+a+cat%3F&oq=did+chantal+akerman+have+a+cat%3F+&aqs=chrome.69i57.4907j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

- Romantic Conceptualism

In *Reel 26* of the *Five Year Diary* films, Robertson's tutor, Saul Levine discusses the balance between 'poetic observation' and 'chronological documentation,' a comment that speaks to the position of Robertson's work as it sits between artistic expression and documentary.¹⁰⁹ Her films bring together atmospheric moments and ephemeral observations while also structuring the order of everyday life. Images join together through collaged construction, cropped, layered and loosely stepping from one scene to another. Levine questions the impact that editing may have on the documentary style footage, and the conceptual shift that occurs when a 'more rational and analytic head' is applied.¹¹⁰ This relationship between rational thought and subjectivity is a concern examined through Romantic Conceptualism, a term coined by Jorg Heiser in 2002.¹¹¹ Heiser identified the movement, following a viewing of Andy Warhol's film *Kiss* (1964).¹¹² Impressed by the film's ability to illicit an emotional response in the viewer, through a minimalist conceptual framework, Heiser realised that conceptual artmaking:

- a) *doesn't have to neglect emotion to make a 'de-personalised', i.e. anti-narcissist statement and*
- b) *that is the case because emotions themselves have a conceptual side to them: they are cultural techniques of coming to terms with one's environment, whether productively or destructively.*¹¹³

In favour of the fragmentary, subjective and experiential, Romantic Conceptualism argues against the necessity of 'depersonalisation' as a precondition of critical conceptual art.¹¹⁴ Through the nuance of personal experience, the traditional didacticism of conceptual art is destabilised, opening up space for complexity, while still maintaining the rigor of interrogative conceptual thinking.

Robertson's work *Locomotion* (1981) articulates the concerns of Romantic Conceptualism.¹¹⁴ In this work Robertson performs a choreographed emotional breakdown in the film, displayed through a series of screaming gestures. Performing the symptoms of a breakdown she had observed in hospital, Robertson reenacts the trauma that she is familiar with through her own mental illness. A doubling occurs through Robertson's reenactment, as she intentionally revisits and re-intensifies her own trauma. *Locomotion* contextualises this intimate personal experience within the framework of minimalist conceptual art. The gridded blue tiles in the set draw on minimalism, formalism, and the conceptual device of the grid. Robertson performs an act of emotional and physical trauma, framing this experience through choreographed gestures. The viewer fluctuates between a *knowing* through intellect, that what they are observing is a performance, and an empathetic response of *feeling* that

¹⁰⁹ Saul Levine, in "Reel 26" of *Five Year Diary*, 1983, 8mm film.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Jorg Heiser, "Romantic Conceptualism," *Frieze*, 2002, accessed 20/10/2019, <https://frieze.com/tags/romantic-conceptualism>.

¹¹² Andy Warhol, *Kiss*, 1964.

¹¹³ Jorg Heiser, "All of a Sudden Things that Matter in Contemporary Art, An Interview with Jorg Heiser," in *ART RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol 2 No. 1., Summer 2008, accessed 20/10/2019, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/heiser.html>.¹¹⁴ Heiser, "All of a Sudden Things that Matter in Contemporary Art."

¹¹⁴ Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Locomotion*, video, 1981.

occurs as a reaction to the subject matter of the work. The tension between documentary and aesthetics is a condition at the core of my video works, a shared concern between Robertson's work and my own. This is not a question that I seek to resolve as I find the flux between documentarian reality and the poetics of subjectivity to be a dynamic of ongoing interest in my practice.

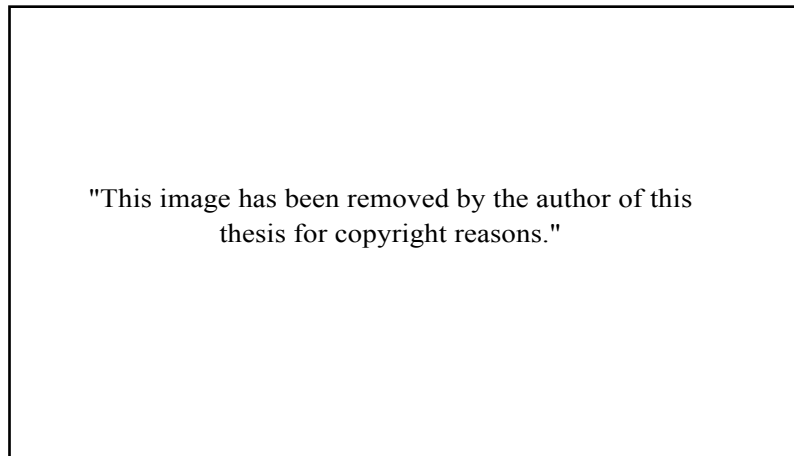


Fig 25¹¹⁵

'One short film was called Locomotion [1981]. It shows me against a blue wall, screaming and exhibiting the side effects of medication I had observed in the hospitals. The first real breakdown that I got on film was in 1982. I showed my delusions. I showed that I was afraid that root vegetables suffered, so I was going to take them back to the garden and replant them. You can see me getting on my big rain slicker and getting out the beets and carrots and onions and preparing to take them back, making sign language in front of the camera.'

Anne Charlotte Robertson¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Locomotion*, video, 1981, accessed on 18/10/19. <http://www.ocec.eu/cinemascomparativecinema/index.php/en/33-n-8-english/448-about-film-diary>.

¹¹⁶ Anne Charlotte Robertson, quoted in "About Film Diary: Anne-Charlotte Robertson", *Comparative Cinema*, accessed on 18/10/19. <http://www.ocec.eu/cinemascomparativecinema/index.php/en/33-n-8-english/448-about-film-diary>.

- *Nights in Rodanthe*

My mother gave me a copy of *Nights in Rodanthe* (2008) on DVD for my thirty-fourth birthday, a copy with an ex-library sticker on the cover, accompanied by a note saying "I hope you like the DVD, the girl reminds me of you. Please return to me when you have watched the film - I'd like to watch it myself."¹¹⁷ Mum also gave me a post-card sized painting, a portrait of a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes (which I later found out was based on a character of the animated movie *Brave*). Around eighteen months later I spent a two-week period staying with mum, with the intention of filming the reflection of the T.V. in mum's glasses. I had attempted to capture this footage previously, with much difficulty (difficulty with familial relations), and had decided, against all odds, to give it one last shot.

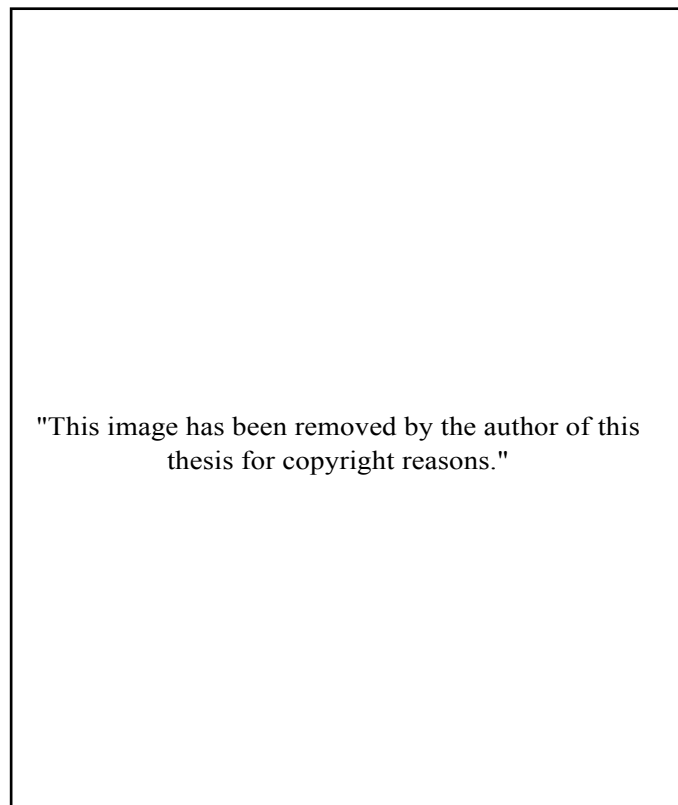


Fig. 26¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Marijana Mussell written correspondence to Tara O'Conal, October 2017

¹¹⁸ Marijana Mussell, *Untitled*, 2019, photograph.

Nights in Rodanthe, Film Synopsis:

'When Adrienne Willis (Diane Lane) arrives at the coastal town of Rodanthe, North Carolina, her life is in chaos. There, she hopes to sort through the trouble surrounding her, while tending a friend's inn for the weekend. The only guest at the inn is Dr. Paul Flanner (Richard Gere), a man tormented by a crisis of conscience. As a storm approaches the coast, Paul and Adrienne find comfort and a life-changing romance.'¹¹⁹

The critical reception of *Nights in Rodanthe* (2008) is limited to a review on Rotten Tomatoes, who describe the film as 'derivative and schmaltzy' and 'strongly mottled by contrivances that even the charisma of stars Diane Lane and Richard Gere can't repair.'¹²⁰ I hadn't thought to describe it in as many words, but I lean toward sharing the sentiment expressed. Redeeming features of *Nights in Rodanthe*: Richard Gere dies and right at the end there is a scene where a (herd?) of wild brumbies gallop along the beach, causing Adrienne Willis (Diane Lane) to collapse into the sand in shock with an expression on her face that looks like something between yawning and silently screaming. Mum loves the bit with the horses at the end, "they are just so beautiful," she says.¹²¹



Fig. 27¹²²

My concept for the video required me to zoom in close to the reflection on her glasses, and I set up a tripod in front of Mum's recliner chair. Pointed at her left eye, I focused the camera on the blurred coloured images washing over the reflective glass lens of Mum's spectacles. I zoomed right in, focusing on the tiny distorted rectangular image reflected on their concave surface. My attempts at making the video were fraught from the beginning. Mum didn't want me to move the T.V. or the recliner chairs. I took a long time setting up and when I had set up and we had finally begun to watch the movie, I kept pausing the movie to refocus the camera. Mum thought my concept was 'weird' and that anyone who wanted to watch my videos must be 'insane.'¹²³ Things got so tense that

¹¹⁹ Google synopsis, "Nights in Rodanthe," accessed 10 September, 2019.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=nights+in+rodanthe&oq=nights+in+ro&aqs=chrome.0.0j69i57j0l4.3332j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

¹²⁰ Rotten tomatoes, review of *Nights in Rodanthe*, directed by George C. Woolf, film, (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 2008), accessed on 10 September, 2019 https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/nights_in_rodanthe.

¹²¹ Marijana Mussell in conversation with Tara O'Conal on 15th June 2019, Adelaide, South Australia.

¹²² Tara O'Conal, *Untitled*, 2019, digital video.

¹²³ Marijana Mussell, in conversation.

we had to stop filming and take a break. We both agreed that things were not working. Mum pottered around in the kitchen and I looked at her through a magnifying glass, filming what I could see, aimlessly. The closest I could get to her at that time, I felt, was through this external magnification. Benjamin discusses the opportunities that are presented through the close-up view, describing the desire of 'contemporary masses' to view things "closely."¹²⁴ He writes:

*With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones . . .*¹²⁵

We took my Grandma for a drive to the plant nursery, and it was clear that things were amiss. Gran asked me if I wanted a present from the nursery and I asked for snail pellets. At the rustic style cafe at the garden centre, with Gran as mediator, nursing extra large coffees, we attempted to resolve our point of contention: my video work. Mum, it seemed, was unable to devote herself fully to a project that she couldn't respect, the main sentiment of this view being that my films were pointless and she couldn't understand why anyone would want to watch them. I said I couldn't work when Mum was getting impatient and cross at me every time I needed to pause the T.V., or rewind the DVD, or move the recliner. My Grandma demonstrated her expert ability to even-handedly support both parties without uncovering her subjective views beyond necessary measure. I was impressed. But despite these masterful skills, it seemed that no resolution could be found. Mum simply did not like my work, and this aesthetic divide was enough to cause her to desire to withdraw from the project completely.

I texted a friend from Melbourne, desperate for connection with the outside world. I felt hopelessly stuck, aimless, and now at a loose end in the confines of my parent's domestic realm, boredom was setting in. My overall state of being was perhaps best reflected in the figure of Adrienne Willis, who became the star of my video. Reduced to a barely recognisable disintegration of flickering multi coloured pixels, Adrienne is stuck forever walking up and down the beach at Rodanthe, doubling back and forward. The beach walk, intended as a moment of regenerating contemplation, aided by the poetics of the horizon, instead becomes a passage of liminal regression.

As I'm editing the footage of Adrienne, I drag the cursor back and forth, moving her figure backwards and forwards, caught in the up and down motion of a single step. I have zoomed in so closely that her body is now represented by a hovering collection of small dots, the dots reconfiguring themselves with each action. The process feels like a kind of filmmaking, where the footage is found through magnification, time structures, delay and pause. Benjamin elucidates

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 40.

these abilities of the camera, and of video:¹²⁶

One knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowering and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions.

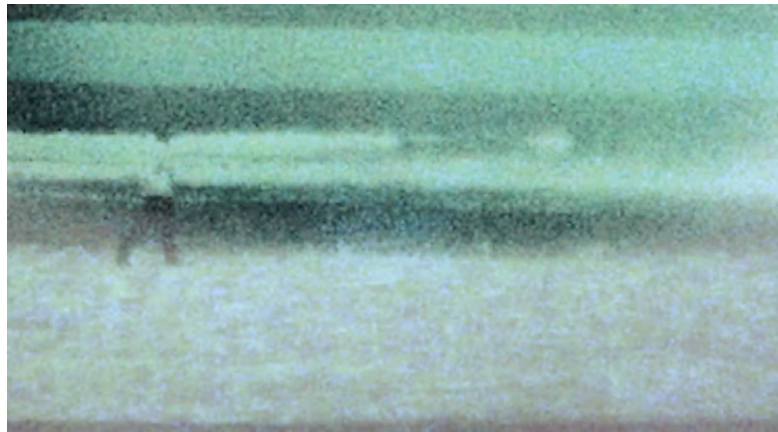


Fig. 28¹²⁷

After a few days reprieve, Mum and I found the strength to revisit the video situation. A contract was made: I agreed to put the T.V. and recliner back to their original positions directly after I finish filming, and Mum agreed to be more hospitable to the project. As we neared the end of the film, Adrienne, the main character, and her daughter are brought closer together, encouraged by the death of Paul. 'This is where the daughter reminds me of you', Mum told me.¹²⁸

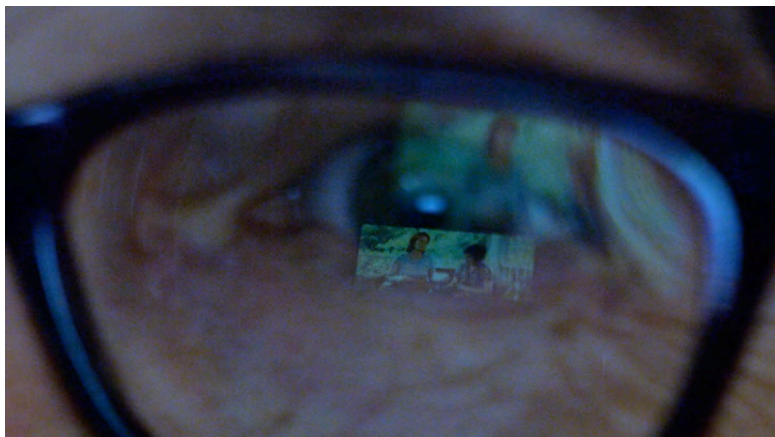


Fig. 29¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Benjamin, 40.

¹²⁷ Tara O'Conal, *Nights in Rodanthe*, 2019, digital video.

¹²⁸ Marijana Mussell "in conversation."

¹²⁹ O'Conal, *Untitled*, 2019, digital video.

- *Life is Boring*

I seem to be someone who is frequently gazing without purpose at the slightest glimmer of nothingness, a tendency that can be associated with the phenomenon of boredom.¹³⁰ Isis I. Leslie describes this behaviour succinctly in her essay: "From Idleness to Boredom: On the Historical Development of Modern Boredom."¹³¹ She writes:

*Boredom is defined as a sense of emptiness, that is accompanied by mad pursuit of and/or passive waiting for trivial, insubstantial stimulations and distraction that are ultimately unfulfilling.*¹³²

I find myself to be a perpetrator of the kinds of idle pursuits identified here, including, but not limited to, observing the relationship between an indoor plant and a venetian blind. Luckily I am not alone, boredom I feel seems to be a common emotion.

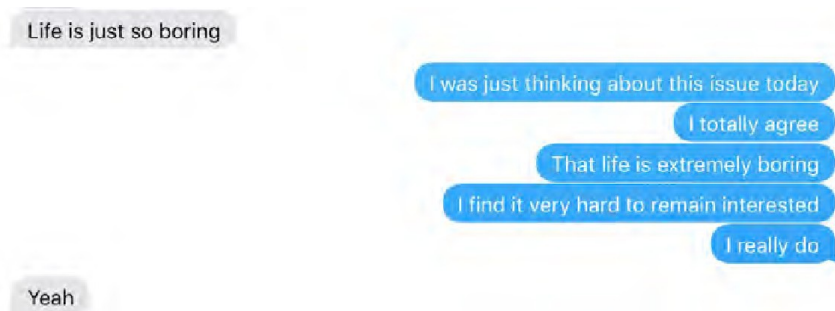


Fig. 30¹³³

Apparently, as Benjamin claims, 'boredom began to be experienced in epidemic proportions during the 1840s'¹³⁴ Benjamin then argues that 'there is no longer any place for boredom in our lives,'¹³⁵ putting this down to the decline of pre-modern activities such as 'weaving and spinning.'¹³⁶ He states that 'boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience' and that this is becoming 'rarer and rarer.'¹³⁷ He might feel comforted to know that his prediction in fact did not come into fruition and boredom remains alive and well in contemporary society. I can testify that, though not necessarily a delightful experience, boredom has led me to outcomes in my practice that I would not have arrived at had my life wound up being more fulfilling.

Boredom is an emotion that can be understood as a negative state, though it could be generative to consider boredom as a quality of time. The temporality of boredom is discussed in the Matthew Boss's

¹³⁰ Isis Leslie, "From Idleness to Boredom: On the Historical Development of Modern Boredom," in *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, eds. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 35-61, p. 38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Text message correspondence between Tara O'Conal and 'friend', July 2019.

¹³⁴ Walter Benjamin in Carlo Salzani, "The Atrophy of Experience," in *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, eds. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 127-154, p. 130.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

article "Metaphysics and the Mood of Deep Boredom: Heidegger's Phenomenology of Mood."¹³⁸ Using Heidegger's analysis, he describes boredom as a 'phenomenon with an essentially temporal character . . . For boredom is a mood in which time becomes suddenly conspicuous.'¹³⁹ The temporality in Heidegger's analysis is 'the kind of time revealed by "deep" boredom in distinction from the "clock-time" of everyday life.'¹⁴⁰ In boredom, time feels isolated, discreet and separate from the world. During a period of time spent in hospital, Isa Genzken created a series of images titled *Hospital Photos* (1991).¹⁴¹ She says of the works:

*'I was totally bored and so I just took my camera and took some pictures of myself. Out of boredom. I only realised afterwards that this work was something special . . . And I used the clinic as a studio and started taking photos. And then I felt better. Just because it let me do something.'*¹⁴²

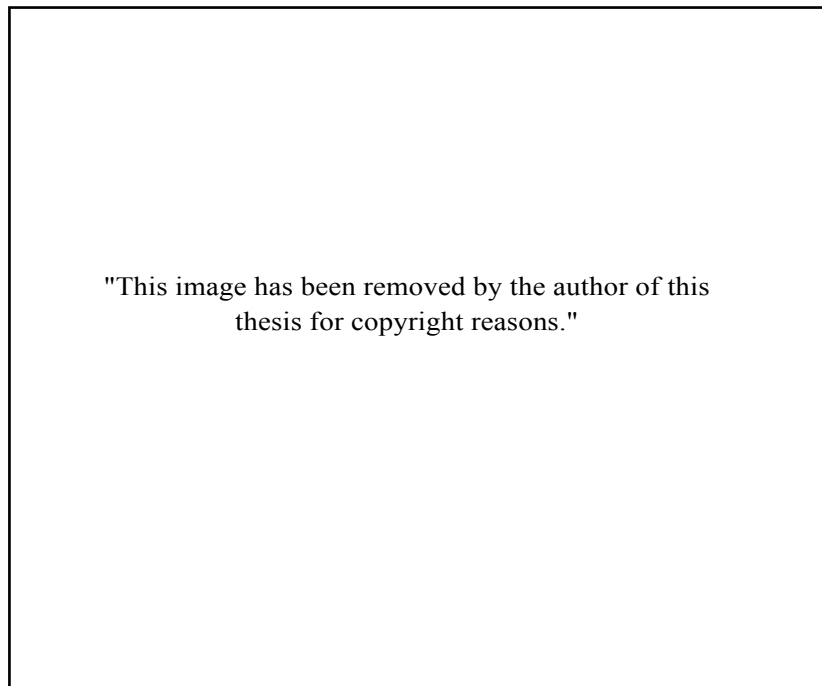


Fig. 31¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ Matthew Boss, 'Metaphysics and the Mood of Deep Boredom: Heidegger's Phenomenology of Mood', in *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, eds. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 85-107, p. p. 90.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Isa Genzken, *Hospital Photos*, 1991, gelatin silver prints.

¹⁴² "Isa Genzken—A conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans." (interview) *Camera Austria*, 2003, no. 81, pp. 7–18, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Isa Genzken, *Hospital Photos*, 1991, gelatin silver prints, in A conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans." (interview) *Camera Austria*, 2003, no. 81, pp. 7–18, p. 14.

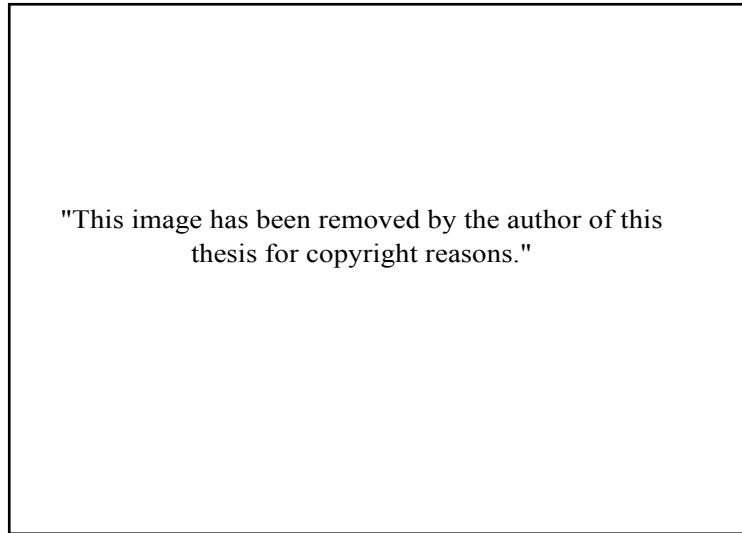


Fig. 32¹⁴⁵

Just as I took to the camera (out of boredom, delirium, angst), and filmed the leaf in my bedroom, so did Genzken and Anne Charlotte Robertson. Robertson attests to the therapeutic qualities of film making saying:

I believe in film being necessary every day. Monet did his haystacks and I have done the gazebo in the backyard. This winter I was so depressed, after getting out of the hospital and being put under a whole lot of restrictions, I was taking pictures every day of the gazebo in all kinds of weather.¹⁴⁶

As I write this thesis now I have been in bed for around a week, maybe more? I'm losing track of days. Punctuated by going to work at the library every couple of days, this 3x4 metre room is my world. Sometimes I go to the kitchen to get food, or to the bathroom. I wish I could see haystacks, but the closest thing I have is the pile of clothes that has taken the shape of a mountain on the floor. Every surface is covered by residue, debris - things are accumulating. I wonder when I will reach the point of inspiration that Robertson and Genzken speak of?

¹⁴⁵ Genzken, *Hospital Photos*, 1991.

¹⁴⁶ Scott MacDonald with Anne-Charlotte Robertson, Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2. Interviews with Independent Filmmaker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

- *Something's Gotta Give*

Mum and I are watching T.V. again. She is sitting on the recliner and I'm on the leather couch. I try to film the reflection in mum's glasses but she says it's creepy and makes me stop. It's a choice between *Dancing With The Stars* and *Something's Gotta Give* - a romantic comedy directed by Nancy Meyers, starring Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson. I choose the latter figuring anything's gotta be better than *Dancing With the Stars*. Mum bought a large but cheap T.V. if you get too close everything is broken into pixels. It's quite impressionistic. For some reason (boredom?) I decide to film the T.V. with a macro lens. I'm curious to see what things will look like if I get really close. Watching the plot unfold through a small framed section of the telly, I quickly come to hate Jack Nicholson's character Harry.

Something's Gotta Give, Film synopsis:

Harry Sanborn (Jack Nicholson) is a perennial playboy with a libido much younger than his years. During what was to have been a romantic weekend with his latest infatuation, Marin (Amanda Peet), at her mother's Hamptons beach house, Harry develops chest pains. He winds up being nursed by Marin's reluctant mother Erica Barry (Diane Keaton), a successful, divorced New York playwright. In the process, Harry develops more heart pangs - the romantic kind - for Erica, an age-appropriate woman whom he finds beguiling. However, some habits die hard. When Harry hesitates, his charming thirty something doctor (Keanu Reeves) steps in and starts to pursue Erica. And Harry, who has always had the world on a string, finds his life unraveling.¹⁴⁷

I am reminded of Anne Carson's triangle again, and her discussion of Sappho's fragment 31. This poem illustrates a triangular figure comprised of 'lover, beloved, and that which comes between them.'¹⁴⁸ The third component (in this case the Keanu Reeves doctor character) 'plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates . . .'¹⁴⁹ Referred to as a love triangle in popular culture, this tension is required for Eros to emerge.

Around half way through the storyline a storm brews. A trope of cinema, the storm is familiar as an interruption to a plot that often creates an opening for romance to bloom. This storm is no exception. While walking on the beach Harry and Erica notice a flash of lightening and quickly find themselves caught in heavy rain. They make a dash for the stairs that lead them back up to Erica's Hamptons mansion, the storm erupting violently behind them. Things seem ominous but I have a feeling that it's just the kind of electricity that Harry and Erica need to fall in love.

¹⁴⁷ *Something's Gotta Give*, Nancy Meyers, film (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures Industries Inc. and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. 2003), DVD.

¹⁴⁸ Carson, *Eros*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

It's been raining for days now, a welcome sound to fill the silence of my writing. Looking at the weather report it's due to rain all week and a lightening symbol on my phone indicates a storm ahead. I wish I were in a mansion at the Hamptons right now, it seems like the ideal location for writing - and there's always the possibility that this filmic location might encourage the alignment of some kind of storm-induced triangulation.

- *Awkward Sex*

Notes on Blue begins with a scene of Moyra Davey in the kitchen taking off her bra from under her t-shirt. Davey reads:

*I began with a first note to myself, I made a list but I'll start in the middle. Blue Ruin, the one minute movie shot on an outdated film stock about a woman at the end of her day, threading her bra out from under her t-shirt, while pouring shots of gin from the freezer.*¹⁵⁰

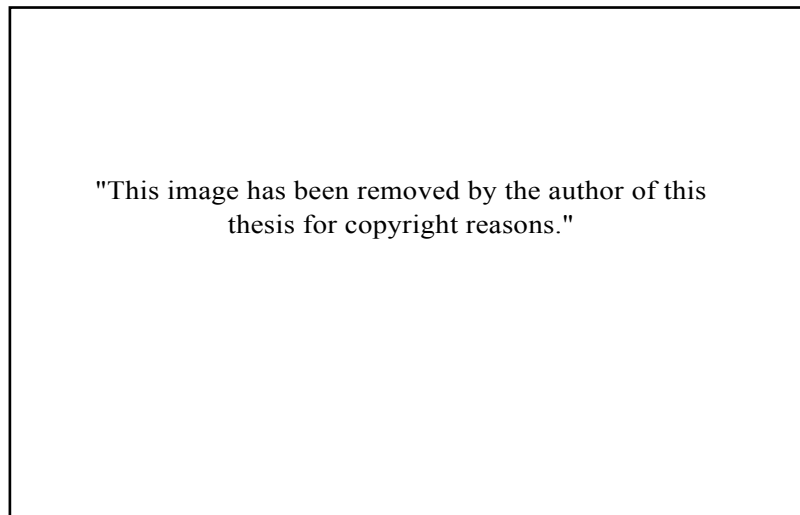


Fig. 33¹⁵¹

I watch this opening scene over and over again, trying to take a screenshot of the moment when Davey pulls the bra out from under her armpit. I like this moment because it feels awkward and reminds me of the pulled thread on the bra cup in my video *Something's Gotta Give* (2019).¹⁵² The video is made up of footage that I filmed from the movie *'Something's Gotta Give'* (2003).¹⁵³ To make this work I filmed a small portion of the screen through a macro lens, filming the whole movie through this little close-up piece of the screen. I hadn't noticed the pulled thread in the original movie, it was only when I was watching the macro footage that I saw it.

¹⁵⁰ Davey, *Notes on Blue*.

¹⁵¹ Davey, *Notes on Blue*.

¹⁵² Tara O'Conal, *Something's Gotta Give*, 2019, digital video.

¹⁵³ Meyers, *Something's Gotta Give*.

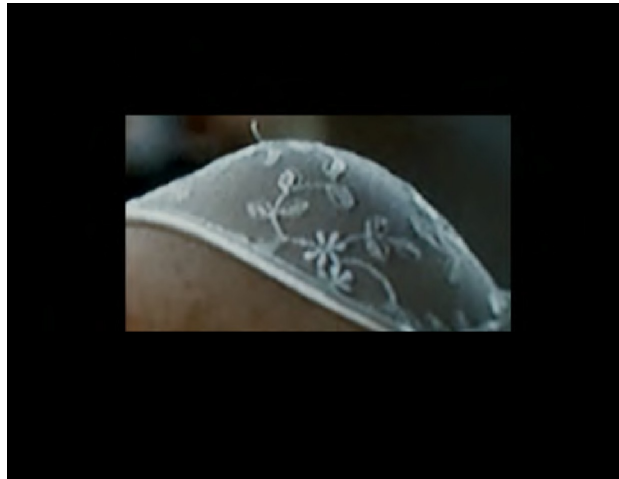


Fig. 34¹⁵⁴

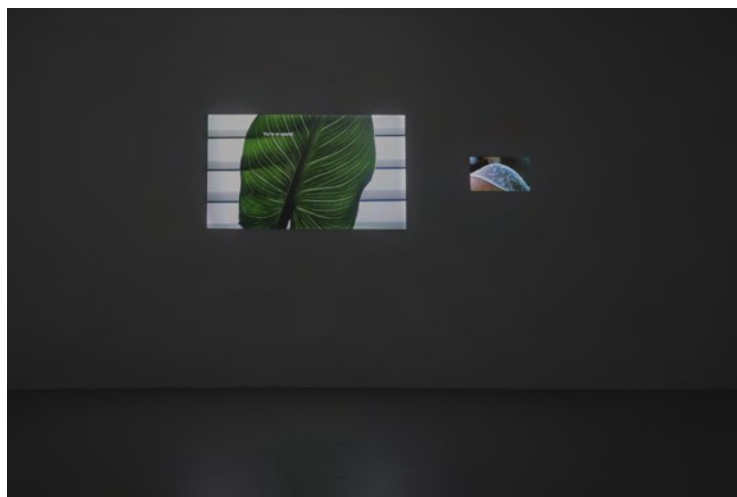


Fig. 35¹⁵⁵

I wonder if they noticed this when they were making the film. It's funny, it's like awkward sex. It's how awkward being a woman can be. Even the word 'woman' seems awkward these days. 'Woman' is all sorts of awkward things like periods, bra straps and feminism. Female seems more svelte. Moyra Davey's bra strap and Diane Keaton's pulled thread remind me of Tracey Emin's work. Female is much cooler than woman, but when I look at Tracey Emin's work I think that maybe 'woman' could make a come-back. Emin has traditionally used awkward sexuality as content in her works, and this continues in her more recent drawings. I Google 'Tracey Emin' and find lots of photographs of her, amongst images of her work. She's so famous. I look at the difference in shots from twenty years ago to now. She has her boobs out a lot, in both past and present Emin. This stands out to me, though I feel a bit stupid for mentioning it. She looked cooler in the past, but I admire how she seems to have matured into a well- rounded and thoughtful woman. This is what I perceive from interviews and photographs. She talks about being single for the past seven years,

¹⁵⁴ O'Conal, *Something's Gotta Give*, 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Tara O'Conal, MFA Completion installation view, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, 2019, image credit: Aaron C.V. Rees.

marrying a rock, and about love. Art is amongst these things, it's not distant or discreet.

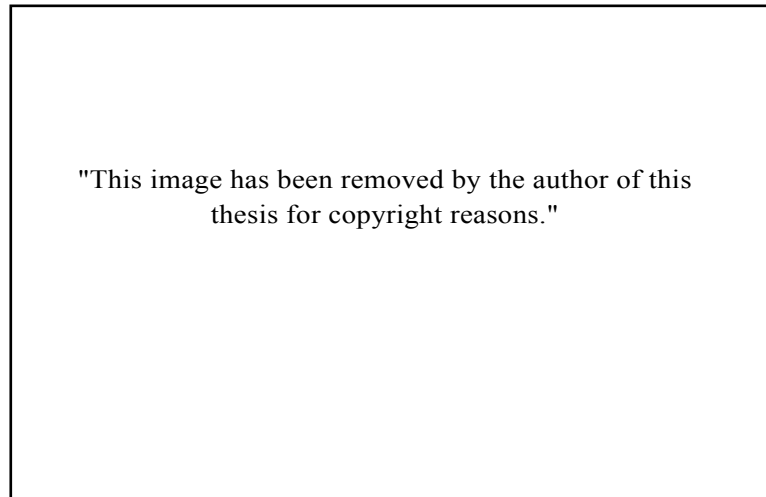


Fig. 36 ¹⁵⁶

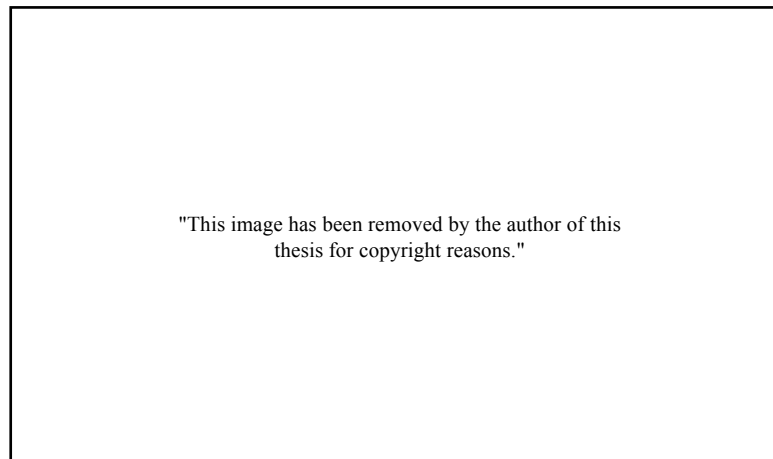


Fig. 37 ¹⁵⁷

Emin's drawing *'Terribly Wrong'* shows a woman's open legs and vagina with liquid coming out of it onto the floor. It says 'SOMETHING'S WRONG,' the stuff coming out of the vagina is presumably the thing that's wrong. The image makes me think of a messy period, post-sex fluids, miscarriage, abortion, the grotesque stuff that happens with women's bodies. It's a play on Gustave Courbet's, *The Origin of the World*, (1866), which shows a pristine looking vagina as a kind of heavenly opening of some sort.¹⁵⁸ The painting looks pure, untainted, a straight up unadulterated embodiment of desire.

¹⁵⁶ Tracey Emin, *Terribly Wrong* (1997), Monoprint on paper, 58.2 x 81.1cm

¹⁵⁷ Tracey Emin: Gustave Courbet's "The Origin of the World," video still, accessed 5 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIRNBWBwyO>.

¹⁵⁸ Courbet, Gustave, *The Origin of the World*, Oil on canvas, 1866.

Emin's drawing is complicated by accident, it looks like something has spilled, spewed out and broken. There's a difference in what female sexuality feels like between the two works. In an interview Emin is asked about the meaning of Courbet's painting. She talks about the painting as a representation of desire and a celebration of female sexuality that is 'real' and not pornographic.¹⁵⁹ I guess I can get behind the work not being pornographic to an extent, I mean, the nude female body itself needn't be pornographic to be sexual. But I can't escape the fact that the woman's upper body and face are covered by a sheet and are out of the frame. There's a sense of the female body as an object that is kind of reductive. Celebratory, yes I guess so, but of what? Of the cunt as an object? Tracey Emin talks about men wanting to bury their heads in Courbet's pussy, but do they want to bury their heads in Emin's pussy, with all that stuff spilling out of it?¹⁶⁰ Women still find periods a bit embarrassing and sex with periods is something people are still getting used to. My friend told me that some guy wouldn't have sex with her when she had her period. What a dick, I said.

On the internet I see that Tracey Emin is selling her Miami Beach Condo. The condo looks kind of boring actually, everything is very white and looks expensive. This surprises me a bit, though kind of not because I can see that Emin has settled into life a lot more these days and I guess that goes with a boring white interior. She's designed a map for the London Tube. She's even moving back to her home town of Margate because of 'humility and understanding', following the death of her mother.¹⁶¹ There are photos of her celebrating her forty-ninth birthday with 'celeb friends', and a picture of her with Fergie, the Duchess of York who I note looks like she hasn't aged a day in 20 years. The guy Tracey went to the BAFTAS with looks like a creep.

Sitting alongside Courbet and Emin in my internet browser is an interview with Wolfgang Tillmans. The interviews with Emin read very differently to interviews with Tillmans. He talks with distance from his personal life, whereas for Emin her art and life are inseparable. Tillmans talks about using tape to stick his photos to the wall as an act of purity.¹⁶² I like this economy in his work, and it's a service to his work that he has the capacity to be absorbed in such things as the purity of fixings. Emin says she regrets revealing so many personal details about her life early in her career, saying it's been hard to come back from those things.¹⁶³ Tillmans on the other hand, expresses disinterest in his own signature of presence, instead leaning toward the photographic document as an object that is read through the subjectivity of the viewer.¹⁶⁴ Tillmans says that his work is 'completely counter to the social media views of photography showing everyday items and places.'¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Tracey Emin: Gustave Courbet's "The Origin of the World," accessed 5 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIRNBWBwyO>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Tracey Emin reveals she's not had sex in six years as she opens up about being "permanently single," *The Mirror*, 9 October 2017, accessed 10 July 2019, <https://www.irishmirror.ie/showbiz/celebrity-news/tracey-emin-reveals-shes-not-11310880>.

¹⁶² "A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans," 2016, accessed 6 July 2019, <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/article/a-conversation-with-wolfgang-tillmans>.

¹⁶³ "Tracey Emin says she 'raped herself' by giving away too much about her life as she revealed personal details through artwork at the start of her career," accessed 5 July 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-6666559/Tracey-Emin-says-used-art-discuss-rape-MeToo.html>

¹⁶⁴ "A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans."

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Rather than accentuating the primacy of the personal, Tillmans is interested in the different meanings that the viewer applies to an image.¹⁶⁶

This is a pair of sports pants that can be imbued with different readings. They could be erotically charged. They could be looked at as a genre painting of drapery or as a fetish object. I don't want to say, "look these are my pants."

Wolfgang Tillmans¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ "A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans," 2016, accessed 6 July 2019, <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/article/a-conversation-with-wolfgang-tillmans>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

- *Is this my life?*

It's Thursday 31st of October, 10:57 am. I am in bed (this is probably a given at this point) and have arrived at the final chapter of my thesis. I wonder how to approach this point of departure. If only I knew how much the 'reader' hated me by this point, it might lead me in the right direction. Whether to reinforce the wounds I've already inflicted? Or attempt to apply a bandage in the hope that I might stop the bleeding? Conflicted at which pathway to take I decide to just start writing, forging ahead with thoughtless abandon. Anne Charlotte Robertson's diary entry title from age eleven 'Is this my life' seems a fitting headline to the final thoughts of a thirty six year old single woman, living in a sharehouse, without a cat.

I am eating a bowl of blueberries and yoghurt and a bag of crisps, the same things I ate for dinner last night. I had a weird dream that my supervisor was with my mum and they were cooking for a dinner party event at which we were to view a special edition of the Australian classic *Wake in Fright* (1971).¹⁶⁸ Mum would not let me make a chocolate cake. I think back over the past week and feel a sense of dread. Quite like the main character John Grant in *Wake in Fright*, I feel as though I am caught in a kind of nightmare. My bedroom might as well be located at Broken Hill for all I know. I feel like there's a drug crazed lunatic doctor lurking just outside my door. The weather is predicted to reach thirty-three degrees today. I've opened the window a little to remind me of the world outside, and I feel the hot air wafting in ominously. I would like to attribute this dramatic landscape entirely to the undertaking of my thesis, but there's more to the story than that:

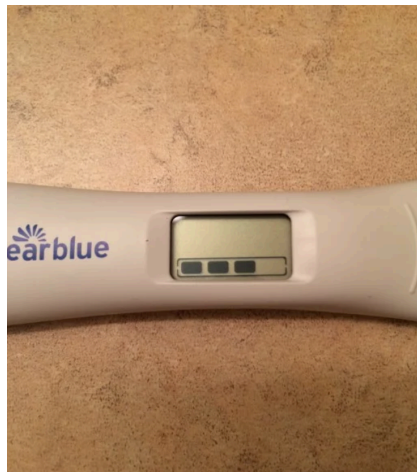


Fig. 38¹⁶⁹

I must have missed the memo on pregnancy tests going digital, an advancement that I'm sure would not have surprised Benjamin at all. Is this my life? It's all I can think of as I near the finish line of this document, an experience that feels not unlike how I imagine Rosemary to have felt upon giving birth to the devil's baby in *Rosemary's Baby*.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ *Wake in Fright*, Directed by Ted Kotcheff. (Australia, 1971), film.

¹⁶⁹ Tara O'Conal, "Clear Blue digital screen", 2019.

¹⁷⁰ *Rosemary's Baby*, directed by Roman Polanski, (USA, 1968), film.

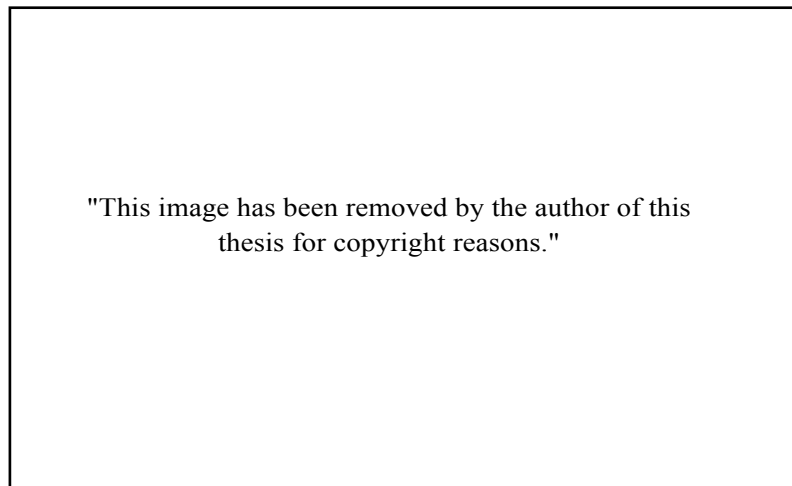


Fig. 39 ¹⁷¹

I had kind of resigned myself, not unhappily, to eventually moving back in with my mother in Adelaide and making melancholic videos for the rest of my life. Anne Charlotte Robertson's films would not have had the same punch had she been happily surrounded by loving children. I suppose there's still pre and post natal depression to keep an edge to things though, and I mustn't forget the challenges of single parenting, in fact the situation is riddled with the kind of angst that makes for a decent long take. Knife in hand, I stand, poised and ready to lunge . . . at what exactly, I am not yet sure. I eat another crisp and the sound of the crunch is so loud I wince. I've become so delicate, I'm sick of my own complaining. I can't stand the sound of myself anymore.

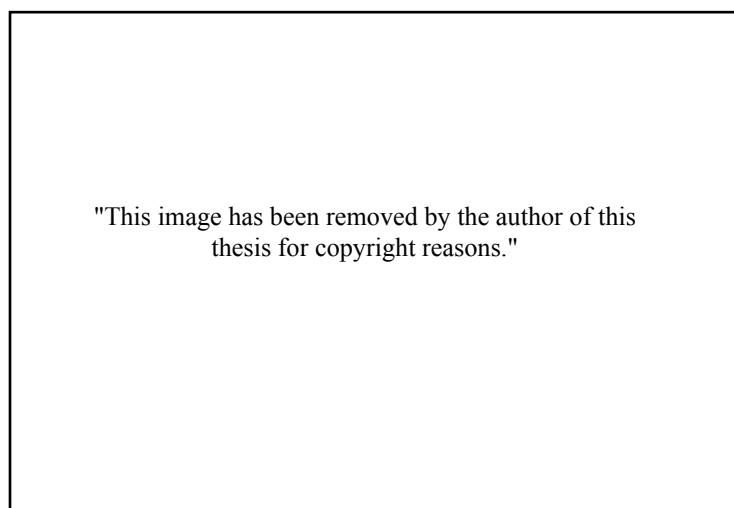


Fig. 38¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Polanski, *Rosemary's Baby*. 1968.

¹⁷² Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Five Year Diary*, 1983, video still

Final Installation, Victorian College of The Arts, Graduate Exhibition, 2019.

All images credited to Andrew Curtis, 2019.

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Fig. 5 digital video, various dimensions, 3 minutes duration, projection

Fig. 6 digital video, various dimensions, 38 minutes duration, LCD screen



Fig. 1

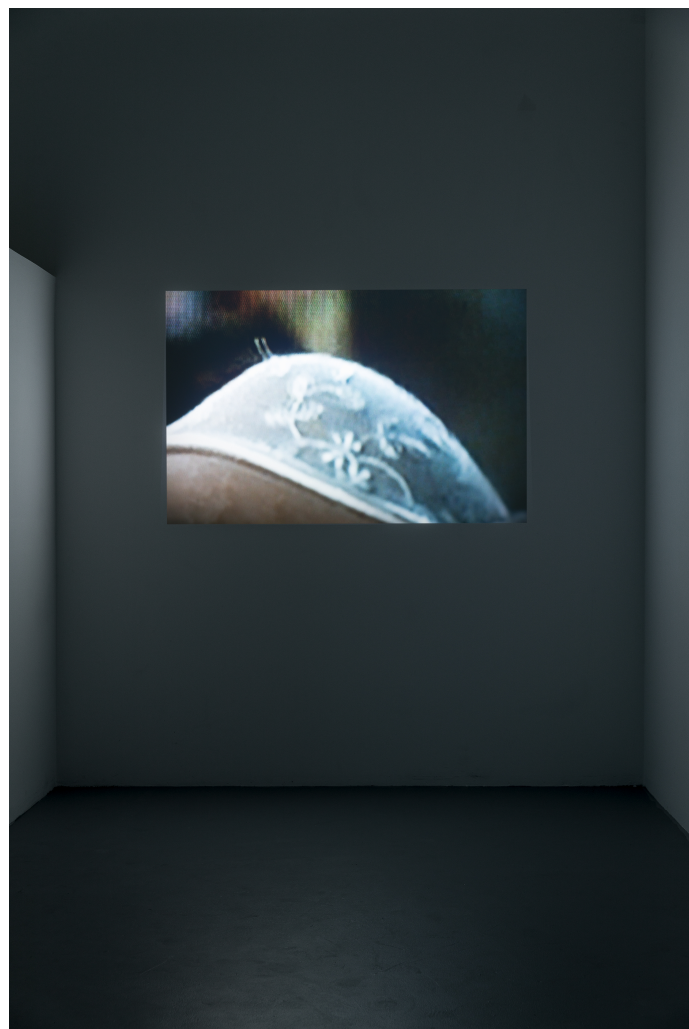


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

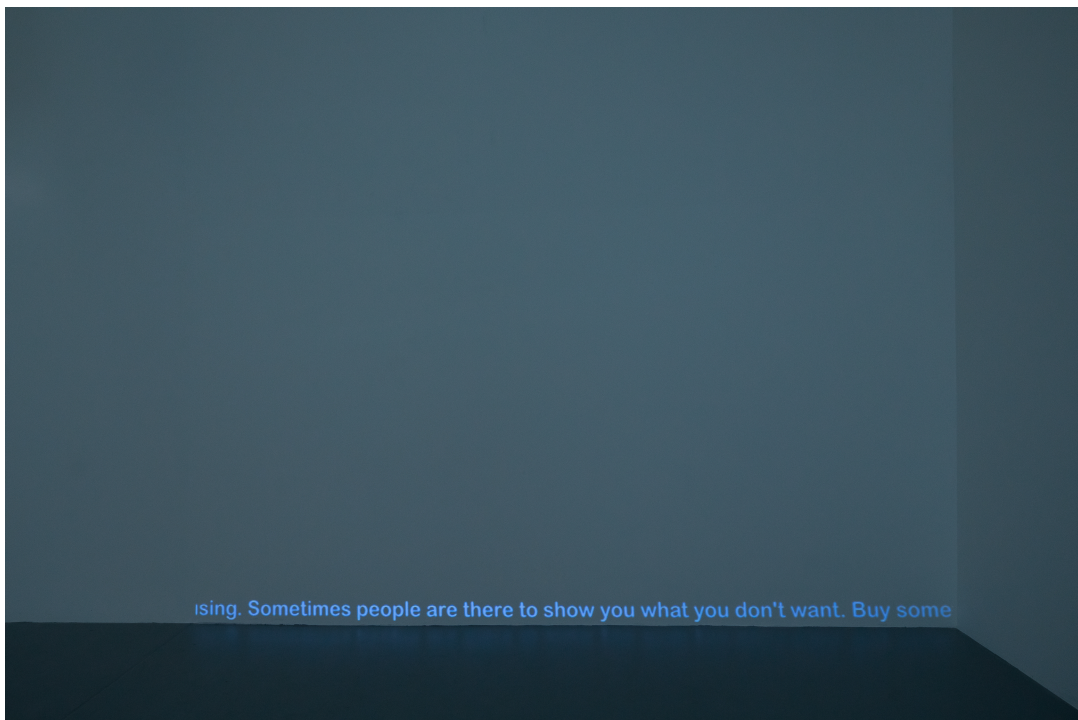


Fig. 4

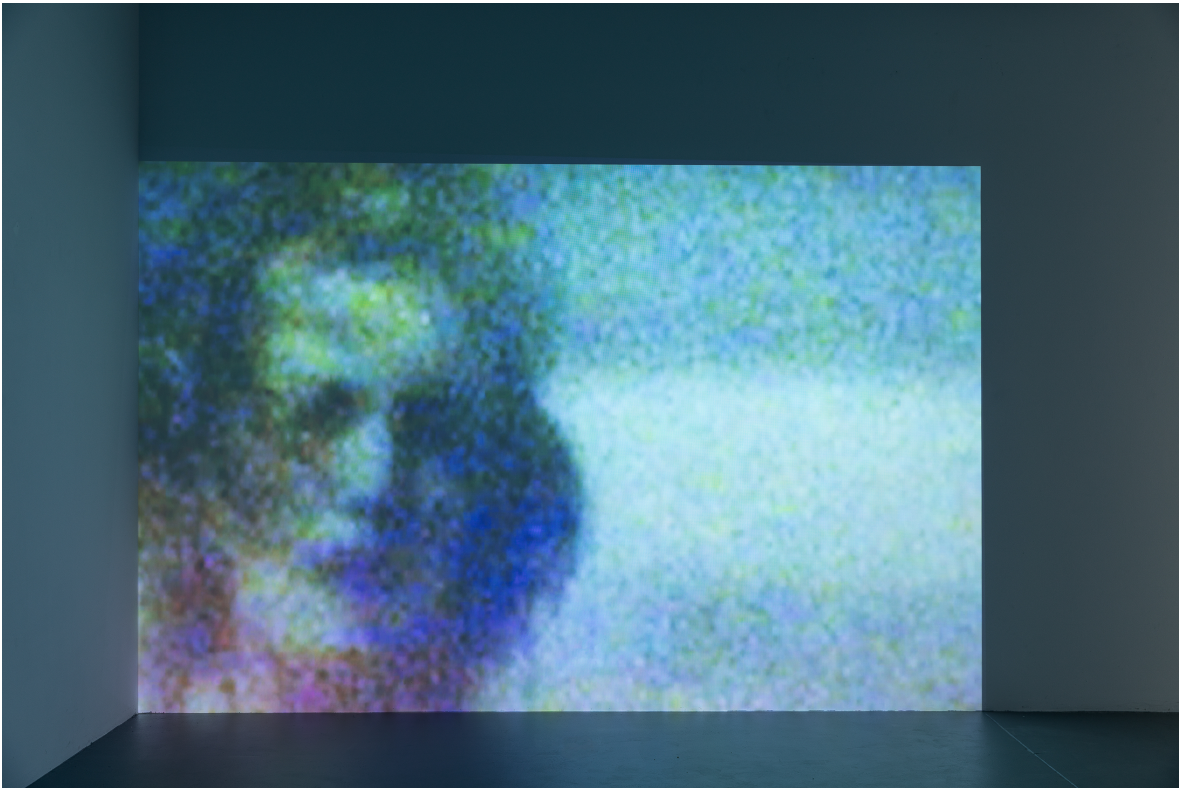


Fig. 5

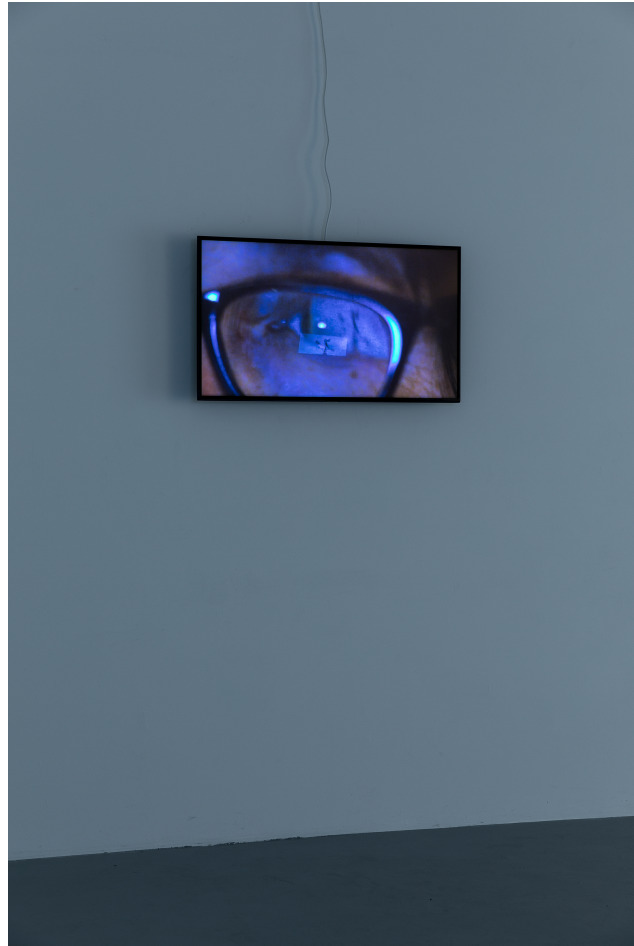


Fig. 6

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