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As always, profound love and gratitude to my parents Keith and Cathie and my brother Adrian - the points on my compass, always there, always themselves, but always available should I need help to navigate through times rough, smooth or strangely circular in nature.

# ABSTRACT

When we are buffeted by extreme external or internal forces, the self may splinter and spiral in a psychological maze of disengagement and lost sovereignty. This trans-disciplinary design project responds – operating between fashion, performance and film – and acts out Elaine Scarry’s contention that pain can be constructively re-made.

Functioning as a metaphorical problem-solving space where the textures of inner experience are explored, this project employs fragmented narrative and theatrical re-fashioning of the environment and body to attain greater social relevance. It asks how can we reconnect with the ‘sovereign self’ when our constitutional confidence has been eroded and how do we re-engage with the outside world once we have become psychologically estranged from it?

*The Interior Cinematic* utilises cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter’s formulation of the self as a ‘strange loop’, and Louis A. Sass’ explanation of the dissociative and recursive features of schizophrenia as a point of poetic departure for understanding the damaged and dissociated self.

The lost self may seem like an end - a *horrific* freefall out of normal life into madness and estrangement. But it is also a beginning; the pinnacle of sensory ascendancy - a *beautiful*, lateral, life affirming state. Through *The Interior Cinematic* I construct *an aesthetics of reengagement*: an affective pathway between these contradictory and overlapping existential poles, contending that the lost self can, in part, be recovered through a rediscovery of sensation. This work is informed by Julia Kristeva’s assertion that alienation is the kernel for empathetic re-engagement with others, as well as by Arthur Frank’s theory of narrative as a strategy to reconnect with the damaged self.

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## INTRODUCTION

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stands amused, complacent, compassionate, idle, unitary,  
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,  
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,  
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

**Walt Whitman,**  
*Song of Myself*, verse 4  
(Whitman, 2009)

There is a small but strangely rightful interstice between the words human\_being: a placeholder space the size of a single absent character, in this instance filled with an underscore so that you won't miss it. What is it that connects these two words? Is it a kind of electric charge or an existential tension? Are they drawn magnetically together or are they magnetically repelled? 'Human' seems to describe our physical reality: our form, genetics, our interconnectedness and our inescapable finitude. 'Being' seems loftier, about our sentience, our individuality and the infinite textures of inner life. From this alliance of human and being, is forged a singular self - a possessor of an interior universe. We human beings embrace the 'I' as our fundamental and permanent identity, the sovereign of our universe confident that, despite our ever changing surroundings, we will be the same person for the rest of our lives.

But, when human beings are buffeted by extreme external or internal forces, the self may splinter and spiral into a strange, psychological maze of disengagement and vacated sovereignty. The precious self may be lost. This design project takes as a topical focus the dissociative experience, shared by those who suffer from depression, depersonalisation and schizophrenia, and experienced by many as a response to emotional or physical trauma.

*The Interior Cinematic* takes its core inspiration and substantiation from, human rights and literary scholar, Elaine Scarry who, in *The Body in Pain*, contends that while pain is the unmaking of the body, creation is the making and remaking of the body. She believes that created artefacts are "fragments of world alteration" (Scarry, 1985, 171) and are encoded with an interior structure of projected sentience, a kind of "compassion made effective"(Scarry, 1985, 291). This trans-disciplinary project operating between fashion, performance, and film endeavours to act out Scarry's claims by re-making psychological pain and materialising it in a new socially useful form. It seeks to explore the potential of creative practice to operate as a language of, and about, affect; as means to foster constructive critical enquiry.

It asks, How can we reconnect with the 'sovereign self' when our constitutional confidence has been eroded? How do we abandon the Sisyphian<sup>1</sup> behaviours of the mind dissociated and disengaged? How do we re-engage with the outside world once we have become psychologically estranged from it? This work investigates how creative practice can be deployed to communicate and explore answers to these questions.

If mental illness and mental health; disengagement and reengagement; horror and beauty all identify the same negative and positive opposing points on a circular continuum. How might creative practice and its artefacts assist people to recognise this continuum, identify their location on this continuum, and migrate themselves between these poles? This project contends that the lost self may seem like an end - a *horrific* freefall out of normal life into madness and estrangement. But it can also be a beginning; the pinnacle of sensory ascendancy - a *beautiful*, lateral, life affirming state. Through design and making I construct, an *aesthetics of reengagement*, an empathic and affective pathway between these overlapping and contradictory existential poles.

This project utilises the ideas of, cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter who describes the self as a '*strange loop*', a kind of self referencing perceptual feedback loop (Hofstadter, 2007); and psychologist and scholar Louis A. Sass' who documents the recursive dissociative features in schizophrenia (Sass, 1992); as points of poetic departure to understand the deep and tangled dissociative self. It traverses the uncanny terrain of the mind dissociated and adrift, a place of frightening knowledge and contradictory possibilities.

This project contends the lost self, can, in part, be recovered through the rediscovery of sensation. That we can combat horror by regaining a forsaken or forgotten appetite for sensation in which the mind and body are un-self-conscious

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<sup>1</sup> "Sisyphian." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved December 1, 2009. <http://dictionary.oed.com> meaning "resembling the fruitless toil of Sisyphus; endless and ineffective." This is derived from Greek mythology in which King Sisyphus was punished for his misdeeds by being cursed to roll a boulder up a mountain face, only to have it tumble down the other side, and for this process to be repeated for eternity.

channels for the flow of everyday interactions that constitute lived experience. This work creatively champions the role of the creative arts to midwife a reawakening and re-feeding of sensation. The arts can speak directly to the senses and articulate connections within self and between self and other. Scarry has described how our encounter with beauty, stimulates a state of lateral transcendence, in which we are pleurably liberated from the centre of our own world. (Scarry 1999, 112-113) This project proposes that the dissociated self, on encountering beauty, may be dislodged from paralysing self awareness, and therefore that the simple pleasure of sensation becomes an opportunity for reengagement and re-association. It explores psychoanalyst and theorist, Julia Kristeva's allied notion that we are 'strangers to ourselves' and that our feelings of foreignness and alienation can become a kernel for empathetic re-engagement with others (Kristeva, 1991). This project contends that we may, in part, be freed from alienation with the simple heartfelt realisation that we are no less ordinary and no more extraordinary than any other creature.

An *aesthetics of reengagement*, questions and revises art theorist Christine Ross' term "aesthetics of disengagement", outlined in her book *Aesthetics of disengagement: contemporary art and depression*, in which she describes the work she sees emerging from artists who tackle the depressive/melancholic paradigm. She writes: "The aesthetic enactment of depression has set into play a rementalisation of the subject" (Ross, 2007, 182). While validating the depressive experience is a useful creative and empathic achievement, Ross champions the affectively and creatively banal, the repetitive and the negating as the singularly most valid artistic strategy in and of itself. I dispute these boundaries, which restrict artists to a passive and impotent role, limited in communicative scope and agree with reviewer Jan Baetens who states "One may close this [Ross'] book with the idea that the major challenge of tomorrow's art of depression (for depression is here to stay) lies not in the enactment of the new "negative" aesthetics of disengagement, but in a new "constructive" confrontation with the traditional aesthetics of perception, self, objecthood, and distance" (Baetens, 2007, 201-202). Accordingly, this project's aesthetics bears witness to the existential troubles we face, that I have faced, but dislodges itself from that ready groove and moves constructively beyond it.

My *aesthetics of reengagement* seeks to function as both a representational communication *about* affect, and as a communication *through* affect. *The Interior Cinematic* is a metaphorical problem solving space it functions like a philosopher's thought experiment. It employs imaginary scenarios to describe scenarios of the imagination. By doing this I am attempting to shift a seemingly abstract and insoluble problem out of the dark confines of the cranium and into an alternate and more productive and open setting. *The Interior Cinematic* attempts to resist prescribing the viewer experience. It breaks narrative content into vignettes and provides unexplained gaps for the viewer to project and personally contextualise what they see. This project uses the cinema as a 'mind's eye', the cinematic scenarios playing through it become experiential metaphors for the interior scenarios playing out in the human mind. I employ this cinematic interior and interior cinematic to spatialise or performatively 'act out' psychological states of disengagement and strategies of reengagement.

*The Interior Cinematic* operates across variety of mediums including costume, film, space and performance and narrative. Each of these design mediums offers differing characteristics and capacities that can collectively: evoke or shape memory, produce powerful and varied sensation, repack experience through creative abstraction, describe and transmit affect, communicate new meaning and understanding, and change perception. This work seeks not to dictate emotional response, but rather articulates aspects of emotion through a felt-vocabulary of formalised sensorial elements: time, motion, colour, speed, weight, sound. In this way, this project takes painful subjective experience and, through the introduction of sensory design elements, transforms it to achieve increased communicative traction and broader social relevance.

This project avoids taking sides in an ongoing internal debate between psychoanalysis and psychiatry, whereby - proponents of psychoanalysis charge psychiatry with the medicalisation of unhappiness and the proponents of psychiatry counter that psychoanalysis denies the proven physiology of mental illness<sup>2</sup>. Instead it draws from both disciplines and

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Ross is a proponent of the broader psychoanalytic view that all but the most serious melancholy/depression is of value to society and should not be medicated. Jacky Bowring and Eric Wilson express similar but less fervent views. For the broader psychiatric view that regards melancholy/depression as a potential pathology that should be assessed, and if appropriate, treated through medication and/therapy the reader is

offers an alternate and creatively-led approach grounded in my own lived experience and based on my belief in the empathic and affective transmission of learning and experience.

I bring to this project experience of prolonged and repeated clinical depression. I am therefore a citizen of Sociologist Arthur Frank's, '*remission society*': a dispersed, disparate and often invisible group for whom "the foreground and background of sickness and health constantly shade into each other" (Frank, 1995, 9). My experience of mental illness has made me a '*wounded story-teller*'; one who feels morally bound to constructively offer testimony to others of my own lived experience, and acknowledge the fellow citizens of this remission society and bear witness to our individual struggles. How might my experience of mental illness usefully contribute to the course of this project? I believe my experience has given me a level of first-hand experiential expertise about mental illness itself. It has enabled me to perceive the horrific experience within the broader context of normal life. Finally and most importantly it has made me want to positively assist in preventing the downward psychological spiral of others.

I can best describe my creative process as that of a *psychological auteur* and *metaphysical forager*. I bring to this project a 'mixed bag' of academic qualifications in fine arts and fashion, and professional experience in strategic design and branding. I am an *auteur* in the sense that I bring my self into my own work, and am a conflicted and collaborative fusion of subject, analyst, writer, designer, performer and director. I am a *forager* in that I scavenge and hoard wisdom from far and wide, in deliberate disregard of disciplinary boundaries and prejudices. Using these methods I am endeavouring to sift and retrieve learning, both autobiographical and universal, and transform it, through design, into a short film, an installation and this written document that will each soothe, pose questions and engage you, my audience, on its own merits.

By way of final introductory explanation, I would like to invoke Plato's ancient allegory of the *cave*, from Book VII of *The Republic*, in which prisoners are chained, facing the cave wall, unable to see the comings and goings of the real world that exists behind them. Instead the prisoners see the reflected light and shadows cast against the cave's interior wall,

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directed to the writings of Lewis Wolpert and Louis A. Sass.

perceiving this as real life and imagine no possible other. The conventional reading would suggest that a newly liberated prisoner would venture out into the sunlight and apprehend the essentialist world of the real exposing the fraudulence of the cave's world of flickering shadows. But I take another reading from the allegory: that to be human is to be forever chained to yourself and the provisional knowledge of today and to be human is to embark on a continual cycle of revelation, certainty, uncertainty, epiphany, erasure. I present to you my truth, not as an essentialist vision, but as the flickering of lights and shadows on a wall and hope that it will stimulate an erosion of old certainties and cast them in a new light within your own cycle of revelation.

Throughout the pages that follow, I discuss the theoretical and creative strategy at work in *The Interior Cinematic* project and the broader theoretical and creative constellation in which this project operates. I contextualise my creative practice with existing works from writers, artists, designers and filmmakers, and I unpack the textural and aesthetic tropes in their work and my own. This thesis is written as a complement to and extension of design work and it is structured into chapters that support the sequential narrative flow of the design counterpart.

Chapter One - *Myself talking around the self*, circles this project examining it from various internal and external perspectives. It discusses the use of narrative, medium and subjectivity in the work. It also discusses selfhood and the strange loop. Chapter Two - *Self as Horror* investigates the descent into disengagement. It analyses the chaotic features of that experience, and it discusses how the strange loop can usefully describe and explain them. Chapter Three - *Self as Beauty* makes a case that the self can be reengaged through sensation. It examines how alienation can be a starting point for empathy with others and how pain can be creatively remade into functional artefacts. This thesis concludes with a final reappraisal of the content discussed throughout and reflects on the design research process.



## CHAPTER ONE

# MYSELF TALKING AROUND THE SELF

“To be, in any form—what is that?  
(Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,)“

**Walt Whitman,**  
*Song of Myself*, verse 27  
(Whitman, 2009)

So many conceptual strands that run in and about *The Interior Cinematic* project are hard to isolate. Choose one aspect and it loops around to its opposite. As if positioned on a 'mobius strip', they flow imperceptibly into each other, each somehow supporting the other, each somehow depending on the other. This chapter endeavours to 'talk around' these issues and articulate and unpack these loops, strange and otherwise. I discuss the narrative within the work and meta-narrative about the work. I will provide an overview of the multiple positions I take simultaneously within this project: around the strange loop of self, inside the loop AND outside it, inside the story AND outside it, inside horror AND outside it in beauty. I discuss the form, function and relevance of performance, costume, ready-made items, film and language and their trans-disciplinary mix within the work. This will all lead, finally, to a discussion on the self, Hofstadter's '*strange loop*' model and it's potential for describing the experiential and existential texture of life.



**Fig. 1: Möbius strip**

*The Interior Cinematic* is not a syrupy fairy tale that smoothly connects the emotional, physical, philosophical features on the narrative route travelled. It is a narrative, via intimation, a story composed of conceptual and experiential fragments, with undetermined and undescribed space in between. These affective vignettes are connected by a circular propulsion and tied to each other through cause and effect. *The Interior Cinematic in Overview* (Fig 2), visually summarises, the projects looping structure, its component scenes, the relationship between scenes and the directional process of the work. We could circle round this loop hopping from one vignette to the next: *The Vacated Sovereign* > *The Abandoned Subordinates* > *The*

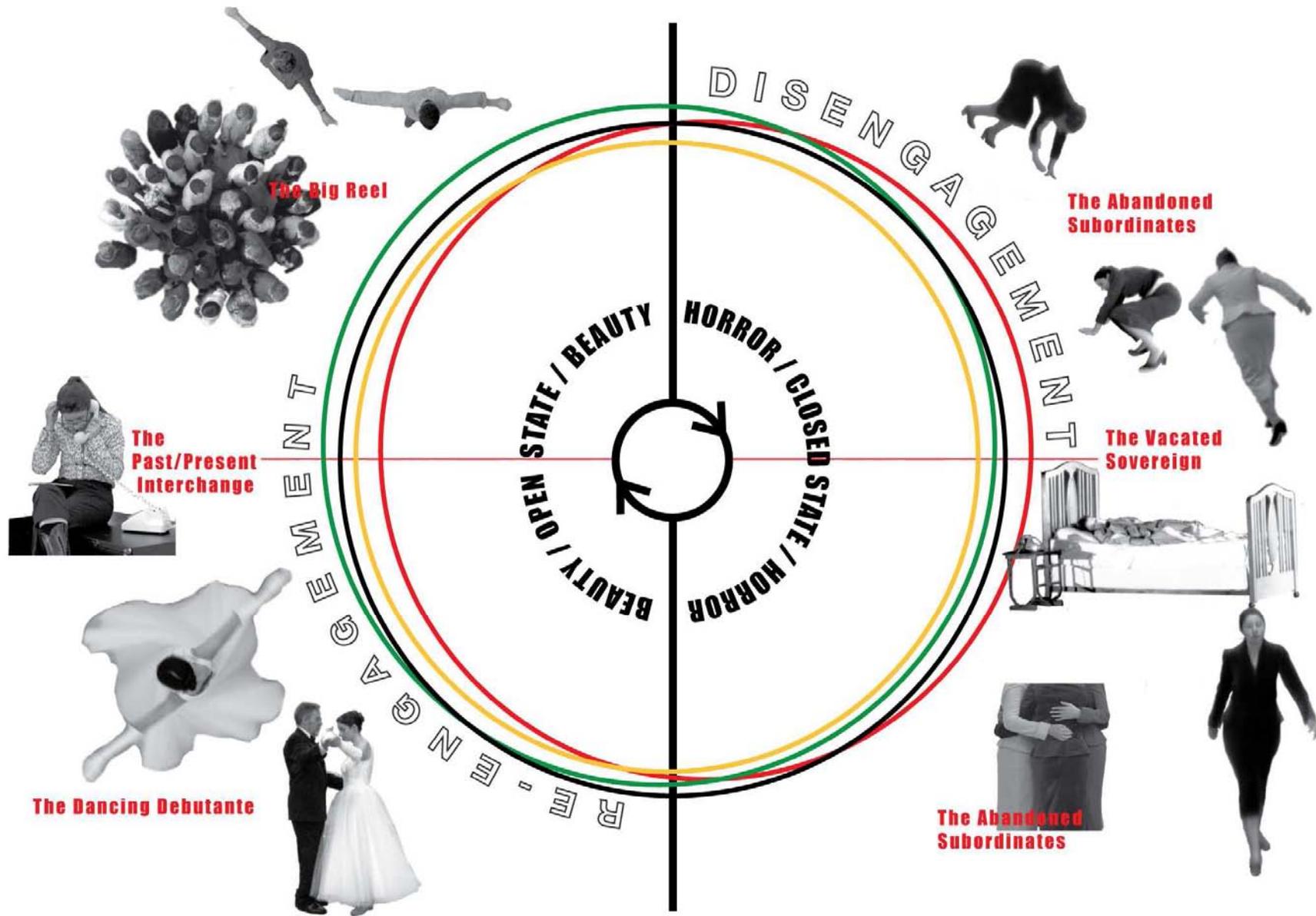


Fig. 2 *The Interior Cinematic in Overview*, Frances Benson (2010)

*Dancing Debutante > The Big Reel > The Past/Present Interchange*<sup>3</sup>. These scenes are like temporary stations on a circular track. But if we were to create a simple narrative that lapped this circuit, it would start: encountering an unspecified trauma, the self becomes disengaged from the surroundings that sustain it. Lower level subordinate survival impulses attempt repetitively and unsuccessfully to repair the self from within its closed state. The fractured and vacated self encounters external sensation, empathy, inter-subjectivity, which fuels increasing self-integration and the self is returned to its sovereign state. The self encountering an unspecified trauma...this circuit could reoccur ad infinitum.

The internal narrative within the work is shaped by ethical, theoretical and personal considerations that influence the work from the outside. Why is *narrative* a chosen mode of this design project? Because, according to Frank, self narrative can be a pathway out of psychological chaos. He has pioneered a theoretical framework that describes the stages and function of archetypal narratives employed by the seriously ill. He writes “The personal issue of telling stories about illness is to give voice to the body, so that the changed body can become once again familiar in these stories” (Frank, 1995, 2). So, to narrate your own story is a constructive act, an act of self repossession, an act of self empathy rather than self pity, and an act of empathic communion. Frank describes how narrative is a social action through which “we grope toward some unknowable vision of the good and virtuous, cutting and pasting stories, borrowing and lending on the way, we become communicative bodies” (Frank, 1995, 163).

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<sup>3</sup> These are working titles that help avoid confusion by enabling easy discussion of the scenes within the work.

Art theorist Jill Bennett annexes the term *encountered sign*, from philosopher Gilles Deleuze, to describe how creative works can instigate critical enquiry via the transmission of sensation, a kind of affect-led cognition. Imagery that works in this way “serves to register subjective processes that exceed our capacity to represent them. A substantive category of memory, but also of image-making, is instituted by this process – a category in which subjective experience is not simply referenced, but activated or staged in some sense”(Bennett, 2003, 28). So, in a successful design work, the work becomes a site of critical and emotional communion and a potential catalyst for altered thought and feeling; and thus meaning becomes a fluid collaboration. In accord with Bennett, curator Norman Rosenthal believes that creative arts have a unique capacity to elicit psychological engagement within the viewer, by speaking plurally to the “complex space” of self, acknowledging it as having “many compartments” which can house contradictory understandings of “horror and beauty, but also humour in all forms [...] dreams and nightmare [...] transcendence and metamorphosis and, above all, a sense of history and a sense of the present”(Rosenthal, 2000, 18).

Multimedia artist Christian Boltanski observes, “Every artist is basically telling something about himself. Everyone tells their own story, but it’s a tale which at its best will become someone else’s story. That’s why the message can’t be too precise; otherwise it’s not possible to project” (Boltanski, 2006, 48). This apposite observation describes the real danger of channelling autobiographical experience into art and design. This has been an ongoing ethical and creative consideration during this project, how close up, or far away from my own subjective experience of mental illness do I set the lens for the imagery of this project, in order to be authentic and engaging for me and others.’

There are many examples of artists and designers who have struck a successful balance between personal disclosure and broader social applicability. Designer Stefan Sagmeister fuses sincerity with whimsy in his book and objet d'art *Things I have learnt in my life so far* (2007). He combines personal aphorisms from his diary's pages with bespoke graphics, type treatments and various installational settings. Sagmeister writes "All of the maxims were meant exactly as written, and though some might be banal, they contained no cynicism or mockery" (Sagmeister, 2007, book T).



**Fig. 3 Stefan Sagmeister. *Things I have learnt in my life so far*. (2007)**

(top left) Book cover (top and bottom) *Trying to look good limits my life*. Billboard installation Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris.

French multi-media artist Sophie Calle tests out and occupies the seam between what is deemed 'public' or 'private'. She generates her art-practice from raw personal experience and transforms it through a range of creative and taxonomical processes. In her Venice Biennale installation and art book *Take Care of Yourself*, (2007) Calle creatively mobilises her own pain and confusion in the wake of a romantic break-up. Calle explains "the man said, 'Take care of yourself.' So I did, through my work. My answer to him was the sum of the 107 women's readings, not any single reading. Many of them responded in ways that I never would or could" (Chrisafis, 2007). Then "After a month I felt better... The project had replaced the man" (Neri, 2007, 2). Calle counters suffering with imagination and evocatively relocates her own experiences in the communal and universal, whilst not undermining the integrity of the personal experience that initiated the investigative process.



Fig. 4 Sophie Calle, *Take Care of yourself*. (2007)  
 (Left) Crossword puzzle writer, (Right) Venice Biennale Exhibition view.

In *The Interior Cinematic* I have attempted to creatively extrapolate the affective landmarks from my own experience and similar experiences described by those I have encountered in life and in literature, without abandoning my subjective voice, since the subjective voice is what enables me to speak with some integrity in the first place. This project has a history and pre-existing creative counterpart that bears out these assertions. In 1999, during the final year of fine arts degree, strongly influenced by profound but little understood feelings of strangeness, dispersal and loss, and believing this was a permanent change I constructed a multimedia installation, the *Red Thread* (1999), about entropy and decline.



Fig. 5 Frances Benson, *Red Thread* (1999)

So *The Interior Cinematic*, circles back and picks up stylistic and conceptual elements from the *Red Thread* and circles forward, propelled by new understanding and revises and remakes those past elements and that past pain anew.

Within the work of *The Interior Cinematic* I acknowledge my own 'mixed-up' *insider* and *outsider* status. In the film I have constructed a *Past/Present Interchange*. An imagined, though logically impossible, communicational channel between selves. One self is in the indefinite present and one self is in the indefinite past; they are connected to each other through the archetypal dial telephones of my childhood. From this vantage point I can, as both fictional 'sovereign self' within the film and real life 'sovereign self' Masters Student, maker and designer of this project, intervene in the passage of the past experience (and perhaps future), offering counsel and comfort to myself. The dialogue between these selves takes the form of a poem, a motif and verbal string that stitches these two selves and the changing scenes of *The Interior Cinematic* together.



I can help you because I am little older and a little wiser  
I have been where you are before  
You have to trust me

I am also, strangely  
a stranger to myself  
and a shark circling myself

(left: Present, right: Past)

Fig. 6 Frances Benson, *Past/Present Interchange* (2010) - images

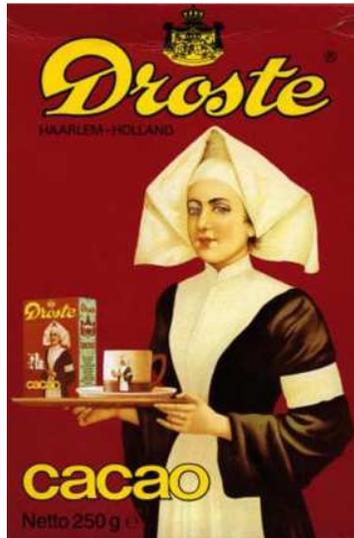
Fig. 7 Frances Benson, *Past/Present Interchange* (2010) - dialogue excerpt<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix One contains a complete transcript of the voice-over dialogue.



Fig. 8 Frances Benson, *Past/Present Interchange* (2010)  
The 'Present'



**Fig. 9. Droste Cocoa**  
Famous for its recursive packaging

Selfhood is by definition subjective and true objectivity is not possible. Self reflexivity implies a ‘bending back’ on self, and gives rise to, or suggests, a mise en abyme or Droste effect, where there is a continuous feedback loop between reflection and representation that tends to confuse the original and its’ simulation. The *Present* scene filmed in the Masters studio acknowledges and amplifies this condition. The viewer is invited into the projects’ inner workings, the general detritus of making and designing. But this does not simply deconstruct verisimilitude; rather it both simultaneously affirms and denies verisimilitude.

I try to engage an audience, whilst recognising that a viewer brings their own individual vocabulary of memory, experience and understanding to the work. In *The Interior Cinematic* I attempt to democratise the availability of affective experience, through multi-dimensional narratives and multiple mediums. I provide a spectrum of conceptual and affective ‘footholds’ for the viewer, by using and combining costume, film, space and performance to spatialise inner experience. Each medium contributes its own range of communicational and affective properties.

Fashion theorist Caroline Evans views the fashion designer as analogous to the DJ who can bring distant cultural, historical, and psychological detail together into ambiguous contact “as their paths run close to each other”(Evans, 2003, 9) creating “intimate connections between opposites – such as despair and optimism, beauty and horror”(Evans, 7). She borrows the metaphor of a ‘crumpled handkerchief’ from the writing of Lynda Nead, to describe this effect, where folds of the past can be turned over and revisited to “disturb and unsettle the confidence of the modern”(Evans, 20). It is precisely this psychological capacity that I attempt to tap into by using vintage garment silhouette and detailing because it taps into pre-existing associations and provokes a feeling of recovered communal memory, both strange and familiar, both artificial and

real, like an emotional prosthesis. In a similar vein I include items of domestic furniture because, borrowing words out of context from Walter Benjamin, I wish to utilise the “immense forces of atmosphere concealed in these things” (Giloch, 2002, 107), the weight and patina of a lived history.

How can the imagination “a complex space of many compartments” as described by Rosenthal (Rosenthal, 2000, 18), be represented? This project use three interior sites over four narrative vignettes to spatialise some of the conflicting and coinciding experiential realities of the dissociated state: There is the real life studio space occupied by me, the ‘*Sovereign self*’ in the present, in the making and contemplation of this work. The *Vacated Sovereign* exists in an alternate realm, isolated in a featureless nowhere space where time is retarded and gravity increased and the four *Abandoned Subordinates* occupy this space, but like the opposites sides of the same coin the *Vacated Sovereign* and *Abandoned Subordinates* can never meet. The Subordinates operate in this same space, but, according to different physical laws: time is uneven and sometimes accelerated and both time and gravity are unstable. Then there is the grand wheeling ballroom space of the everyday ecstatic, where we see *The Dancing Debutante* twirl back into life and self sovereignty and then into sublime and egalitarian insignificance within the communal, within the universal. Finally there will be one last interior space not counted in the above tally, the exhibition space, in this space all the interiors, stories, and design artefacts meet amongst cinematic flickerings on a wall.

*The Interior Cinematic project* explores and disrupts traditional filmic narrative by using the film medium and the cinematic experience as an extended spatial and experiential metaphor for the mind and the mind’s eye. Filmic images that are “just a flash of light on the retina that leaves no [outward] traces” (Ravenal, 2002, 16) are analogous to the imaginations endless scenarios and simulations. We *apparently* play these snippets in our internal ‘Cartesian Theatre’ of the mind, and our

homunculus' or little man watches the show. This is at least how it often intuitively seems (Dennett, 1991)<sup>5</sup>. We go to the movies; a far-off land of suspended disbelief, where the imagination is fed by images from the interior screen, the world

beyond the seductive cushioned seats, the darkened space and velvet curtains is forsaken...*at least temporarily*. This is the communal cinematic experience we all know. These metaphors are pertinent because those in dissociative, depersonalised, or schizophrenic states often describe their perceptual experience as like watching themselves remotely in a film. This evokes the early black and white film stills of Cindy Sherman who manipulated and challenged the reliability of communal memory. In photographs such as *Untitled Film Still #22* (1978) Sherman placed herself in the cinematic frame, casting herself as a nameless and unplaceable character from b-movies and film noir, an uneasy provocation of déjà vu and false recognition.



Fig. 10 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #22*, (1978)

The *self* is a theoretical battleground. Even across the mainstream sciences and philosophy of mind, who typically agree that there must be a materialist explanation of consciousness and selfhood, the “self concept is currently used in a manifold of rival senses and it is a simple fact that the concept connotes different things in different disciplines” (Zahavi, 2005, 1). New brain research and findings emerging daily from neuroscience, seem to further stoke subdivision and debate. Without becoming bogged down in a debate outside the remit of this project, I will refer back to the imminently reasonable

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<sup>5</sup> *Cartesian Theatre* and *homunculus* were terms employed derisively by philosopher Daniel C. Dennett to refute the Cartesian Materialist thinking that sought a point of ‘ultimate’ consciousness within the brain. His objection is that the *homunculus* ‘watching the show’, must have a brain, at the centre of which must be yet another homunculus, and so on, leading to an infinite regress.

definition of self offered by philosopher John Locke in 1689: “Self is that conscious thinking thing [...] which is sensible to or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends” (Locke, 2005, 39).

Douglas Hofstadter researches consciousness; his particular oeuvre is investigating and modelling formal, geometrical or mathematical patterns of human thinking, language use and creativity. In his book, *I am a Strange Loop*, Hofstadter attempts to answer the questions: *What is a self, and how can a self be produced from matter?* To do so, he utilises a pre-existing recursive mathematical model<sup>6</sup>; and contends that the self is a *strange loop*, a looping feedback system of self reference.

Hofstadter contends that the “‘I’ is an outcome and not a starting point” (Hofstadter, 2007, 284) and that our brain starts out largely “uninhabited” (Hofstadter, 290). He believes that the self forms as time passes and perceptual experience is accumulated, the self emerges and coalesces as an *epiphenomena*, a secondary and parallel phenomenon much like a rainbow emerges from the interaction of light and precipitation. Like a rainbow the self is a *pattern* and an *illusion*, Douglas Hofstadter writes “You and I are mirages who perceive themselves” (Hofstadter 362). Through “Level shifting acts of perception, abstraction and categorisation” (Hofstadter, 187), humans build up symbolic structures or patterns in the brain that influence behaviour, and in turn influence the development of those symbolic structures in the brain; this is the recursive looping nature of self. Put simply, “Human self perception inevitably ends up positing an emergent entity” (Hofstadter, 205). The self is therefore manifested through “the pattern of organisation, not the nature of the constituents [the physical substrate]” (Hofstadter, 288).

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically the two Incompleteness Theorems formulated by logician Kurt Godel in 1931. However, Hoffstadter is concerned, not with the mathematical proofs themselves, but how Godel proved them. Godel utilised a system of two way arithmetical mapping and recursive definitions and created “a set of whole numbers that would organically grow out of each other via arithmetical calculations.”(Hoffstadter, 2007, 130) It is this recursive, self-accreting mathematical model that Hoffstadter uses as a paradigm of selfhood.

Hofstadter believes that the strange loop represents a “profound [evolutionary] exploitation of physical law” (Hofstadter, 2007, 300). That humans developed large brains with an extensive range of perceptual capabilities, at some point in our evolution a critical level of sophistication was reached which enabled humans to turn their perceptual attention on themselves. Once humans became self-referential, they reached a “Magic threshold of representational universality [...and developed a] repertoire of symbols [that became] extensible without any obvious limit” (Hofstadter, 246). The strange loop of self was born and “falling for it has fantastic survival value” (Hofstadter, 292). Hofstadter writes that the “I” “does such a good job at explaining our behaviour that it becomes the hub around which the rest of the world seems to rotate. But this ‘I’ notion is just a shorthand for a vast mass of seething and churning of which we are necessarily unaware.” (Hofstadter, 362). This fuels the false *Cartesian Theatre* sensation that we are living inside our brains, which is aided and abetted by the ostensibly absent nature of the body which means, as phenomenologist Drew Leder has succinctly written, “I do not smell my nasal tissue, hear my ear, or taste my taste buds but perceive with and through such organs” (Johnson, 2007, 5).



Fig. 11 The mythological Ouroboros

The *strange loop* appeals intellectually, but also intuitively, since I have often felt the texture of life to be circular and not linear, as if I am on the end of the stylus needle travelling around a records grooves, accompanied by the uncanny sense that I have taken this journey before. One is reminded of the ancient Gnostic Ouroboros<sup>7</sup> symbol, the ultimate feedback loop, a dragon or snake swallowing its own tail and forming a circle, an ending and beginning, a devouring and a rebirth and perpetual transformation all in one. Aligned also are Nietzsche’s writings on the idea of eternal return, in which the universe has recurred and will recur ad infinitum. In the *Will to Power* he writes “If becoming is a great ring, then everything is equally valuable, eternal, necessary” (Nietzsche, 1967, 165). An essential feature to this thinking,

<sup>7</sup> Ouroboros. (2009). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved December 1, 2009, from <http://www.library.ebonline.co.nz/eb/article-9057736>

which owes a debt Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus<sup>8</sup>, is that there is no final state, instead all things flow and some things appear to stay the same only by changing. Nietzsche describes accepting the notion of eternal return as the “greatest weight” (Nietzsche, 1974, 273) since it could either transform or crush you. Eternal Return and other similar recursive theories open up a vast array of philosophically ambivalent possibilities, between expansion and reduction, between the beautiful and horrific, between life and death.

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<sup>8</sup> Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher active around 500 BCE. His key doctrines were universal flux and the unity of opposites. Graham, D. W., "Heraclitus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/heraclitus/>.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SELF AS HORROR

My body became a side of mutton  
and despair roamed the slaughterhouse

from *The Sickness Unto Death*

**Anne Sexton**

(Sexton, 1999, 441)

You or I might, in the course of a regular day, pass within a few feet of a crumpled, twitching person, head cast downwards, his eyes gazing into some indeterminate distance, who shuffles down the street staying always close to the safe, reliable vertical of nameless metropolitan building facades. Despite our uneasy momentary physical proximity, we might become aware that a vast gulf separates us from him. What is it, this weird existential gulf that posits him way over there, and you or I here, safely, in this *real* world? We sense that he is lost to us, but not necessarily to himself. We sense that he exists in, and is largely sustained by, the textures of his own interior universe. We also sense that, for him, the *objective* world of gravity, matter and other people has become but a blurry backdrop, perhaps forsaken, forgotten or simply eclipsed by the urgency and intensity of his own inner experience.

Whilst I may have once thought a 'vast gulf' separates the shuffling man from you or me, I do no longer. During the orbits of an ordinary lifetime, I think it is likely that the extremes of interior experience may, at some point, bring us into existential proximity to him.

The purpose of this hypothetical scenario is to act as both an introduction to, and illustration of, the complex and at times problematic core of being a human being, a self: that we are citizens of parallel, interrelated and sometimes competing universal territories. On the one hand we are citizen-sovereign of an interior universe the infinite subjective realm of imagination —this is the physics-defying experiential truth succinctly captured by Emily Dickinson when she wrote “The brain is wider than the sky” (Dickinson, 1997, 632)—and on the other hand we are a humble citizen of humanity, a participant, no more or less important than any other, in a shared universe.

This chapter explores disengagement focussing on the dissociative experience, an experience that is shared by or similarly present in a range of related but distinct mental disorders, including depression, depersonalisation and schizophrenia, and/or as a precipitative response to extreme anxiety, trauma, physical or mental illness. It unpacks the experiential textures and processes that lead the self into a lost horror state, and explores experiential process that begin to lead out of horror towards re-engagement.

If we are to follow the theory of Hofstadter, then the self is an epiphenomenon, a kind of elaborate illusion or projection which is an evolutionary bi-product of advanced perception. The 'self as illusion' raises interesting and unnerving possibilities, particularly in relation to existential disengagement. Illusions function through deception. To be tricked or taken in by an illusion we must be naive of it, or we must complicitly engage with it. Is the self constituted by our belief in its verisimilitude? What happens when we doubt the verisimilitude of self? What happens when the illusion of self is lost or damaged? It seems conceivable that disengagement could result if the illusion of self is lost. In this context, it is enlightening to consider that the words *hallucinate*, which is derived from the Latin *alucinari* means to "wander in the mind."<sup>9</sup> So, perhaps to ponder too deeply about the self actually abstracts the self in a manner analogous to digging under the foundations on which you stand. In a similar vein, Elaine Scarry writes that the vicious triumph of serious pain is that pain is "negation [...and] even though it occurs within oneself it is at once identified as "not oneself," "not me,"" (Scarry, 1985, 52) and it brings about an "absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of others" (Scarry, 4).

Louis A. Sass, a clinical psychologist and scholar, has written on the parallels between modernist creativity and the schizophrenic experience, but it is Sass' articulate commentary on the dissociative component of the schizophrenic experience that is relevant to this project. He describes the circular relationship between self reflexivity and dissociation, "As the patient's own strange sensations and thoughts attract his attention, this attention itself makes the sensations seem all the more distant, external and concrete" (Sass, 1992, 228). Sass sees Cartesian philosophy being unwittingly borne out in schizophrenic behaviour, "To know my own self is, inevitably, to multiply or fractionate myself" and "To perceive something is, ipso facto, to cast it outward, into the domain of the not-me that lies at the farthest reaches of experiential universe"(Sass, 75). These comments illustrate that, in some instances, the frantic attempt to constitute the self can actually undermine it.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Hallucination.' *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved 1 December, 2009. [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

One need not be schizophrenic to feel that one's mind and body are strangely disconnected or dissociated. There is a mind/body split attendant in the experience of depersonalisation and derealisation which are two common responses to serious stress, anxiety and trauma. To experience depersonalisation is to be a remote and divorced spectator numbly witnessing one's own actions, and is closely tied to the experience of derealisation, where the world seems artificial, distant and unreal. Then, there are more 'everyday' experiences of depersonalisation. We feel *déjà vu*, the eerie and illogical sense that a new situation is familiar and may have occurred before. We feel *jamais vu*, the eerie and illogical sense that something we are already acquainted with is new, strange or foreign to us. All these sensations are unnerving or uncanny, they pick and scratch at our constitutional certainty and reveal some primal vulnerability that we would rather not know.

In David Lynch's film *Inland Empire* (2006) we follow Nikki/Susan as she traverses her horrific psychological empire, an unstable void-space populated by her own elaborate fantasy and self deception. David Lynch tours us through unnerving and uncanny motifs as he fragments narratives and time sequence to present ambiguous and multiple readings. During the promotion of *Inland Empire* Lynch would cryptically quote from Vedanta scripture "We are like the spider. We weave our life and then move along in it. We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives in the dream" (Walker). By this he seems to infer, for better or worse, we operate in realities of our own devising.



**Fig. 12 David Lynch (director), *Inland Empire* (2006)**  
The psychological faces of Nikki/Susan.

In my own experience of depression, it felt as though my mind writhed, separate and yet trapped within a cadaver body. Kristeva elegantly captures the retarded physicality of the depressive experience when she writes, “Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation” (Kristeva, 1989, 3). Although I was aware that my experience was, firstly, not normal and, secondly, not affecting the reality of anyone else, it surely felt as tangible as any other experience I’ve ever had. Illness seemed to leach out of me and poison everything: gravity increased, colour became dirty and washed-out, time lagged and was stale and airless. These affective textures have been painted across the *Vacated Sovereign* sequence, where I lie catatonic, in a bed, a single bed, specifically chosen for its immature, goldilocks appearance. I am mired in a vast nameless nowhere space, we are aware that time passes through occasional changes in posture, and the surreal weed-like growth of my pyjamas that dwarf and overrun my body. This is the outer stupor that can barely contain the inner chaos.



**Fig. 13 Frances Benson, *The Vacated Sovereign* (2010)**  
The inanimate and the barely animate



**Fig. 14** Frances Benson, *The Vacated Sovereign* (2010)  
Lost in space and time



**Fig. 15** Frances Benson, *The Vacated Sovereign* (2010)  
Overrun by the inanimate

The schizophrenic paradigm illustrates how self-reflexivity and dissociation can cause a withdrawal from external everyday stimulus; such as physical sensation, interaction with others, the environment, and objects. This fuels further dissociation and withdrawal. According to Sass, patients become “Lost in the endless recursions of an isolated and abstract journey into the interior [...] what prevents them returning to a more normal existence [...] is an] inability to let themselves be caught in the ongoing flow of practical activity in which normal existence is grounded” (Sass, 1992, 240).



**Fig. 16 John Pilson, *Mr Pickup* (2000), video installation**

Such a scenario is reminiscent of the ancient Greek tale of Sisyphus, the mythical figure condemned to endlessly push a boulder up the face of a hill, only to have it tumble back down the other side. The Sisyphian myth is the embodiment of eternally postponed natural development and futile repetition. In John Pilson’s Video installation *Mr Pickup* (2000) we watch a lawyer attempt to gather together a bundle of paper files en-route to an important meeting. This apparently simple task takes on Sisyphian dimensions when the files slip out of the lawyers grasp and scatter and all repeated efforts to re-collect them only serve to complicate the task as yet more files slip and scatter. Over the duration of the video the lawyer becomes increasingly and entropically discomposed.

It begins to become apparent that the horror of the lost self seems to have a shape, a circular recursive, tail-chasing, Sisyphian, self-consuming shape. The lost self seems like the malignant offspring of Hofstadter’s *strange loop* concept.

Returning to Hofstadter's theory he states a *normal* self perpetually develops by "tampering with the vast unpredictable world of objects and other people [...that] sparks some rapid feedback, which[...]gives rise to a infinitesimally modified "I"; thus round and round it goes, moment after moment, day after day, year after year (Hofstadter, 2007, 186). The crucial point to note is that perceptual feedback is largely stimulated through contact with external sources such as objects, events and other people. Could it be that that the normal strange loop circuit could, by the introduction of trauma, illness and dissociation, somehow short out? It does not seem too much of a leap to conjecture, that, if the source of feedback is solely or mostly internally generated, then this circling process could somehow become a closed entropic loop feeding on itself, Like the Ouroboros eating its own tail but failing to be reborn anew.

In *The Interior Cinematic*, we see one suited subordinate self splinters into four, and each bustle off determinedly into a hazy grey intermediary space. I use these four suited subordinate selves to describe the confused and precarious state of selfhood when sovereignty has been vacated. The *Abandoned Subordinates*, are leaderless and unable to communicate with each other, they represent lower level survival impulses endeavouring to repair the *Vacated Sovereign*, the fallen self, from within. They move both purposefully and purposelessly, like the white rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland*. Initially the Subordinates seem focused and directed, but increasingly the figures make obscure, futile, and increasingly distressed attempts to communicate with the viewer, because as Frank writes "the body is not mute, but it is inarticulate" (Frank, 1995, 27). The *Abandoned Subordinates* movement also becomes erratic and agitated. Soon the floor on which they walk becomes unsteady and gravity unreliable because even the laws of physics and systems of representation become compromised by horror and inadequate to the task of re-presenting the experience. The subordinates are soon clambering over this untrustworthy terrain on hands and knees.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, people who have seen this footage have responded through affect by shivering, squirming and calling it "creepy", Bennett writes that the "squirm is a recoil, a moment of regrouping the self...the squirm lets us feel the image but also maintains a tension between self and image." (Bennett, 2005, 43)



**Fig. 17** Frances Benson, *Abandoned Subordinates* (2010)  
The self broken into constituent and competing parts



**Fig. 18 Frances Benson, *Abandoned Subordinates* (2010)**  
“Evres, tsum I” and “Evlos tsum I”: desperate but ineffectual bids to help the self.



Fig. 19 Frances Benson, *Abandoned Subordinates* (2010)

This is the self or selves “lost in the endless recursions of an isolated and abstract journey into the interior” that Sass describes (Sass, 1992, 240). This project uses a colour palette appropriated from medical humorism, and employs it as a visual metaphor for systemic malfunction, where the ‘whole’ body is broken into constituent and competing parts: Black =Melancholia, Yellow =Cholera, Green =Phlegm and Red =Sanguine. The *Abandoned Subordinates* wear suits of tactile velvet cloth and nostalgic 1950’s cut, in highly pigmented, semaphore-like shades, outward sartorial propriety that barely conceals unease and anxiety. Perhaps this upright finery is some kind of coded self seduction. I use the word ‘seduction’ in two senses, firstly as being narcissistically captivated by one’s own self, and secondly, in the sense intended by the original Latin *seducere* - “lead away” or “lead astray”<sup>11</sup>: the self as a lure into trouble or the unknown.



Fig. 20 Frances Benson, *Spilled Life*, exploratory photo exercise (2009)

Frank uses the term *chaos narrative (or anti-narrative)* to describe the nightmare state of unceasing torment experienced, by the seriously ill, when all hope of restitution with the old self has been exhausted (Frank, 1995). The notion of a self as dissociated self-consuming loop corresponds to Frank’s concept of the *chaotic body* cleaved from its surroundings “a feedback loop is initiated: chaos stories erect a wall around the teller that prevents her from being assisted or comforted” (Frank, 102), and “In the chaos narrative, consciousness has given up the struggle for sovereignty over its own experience” (Frank, 104). However the spiralling psychological freefall of disengagement can only be recast as a struggle for sovereignty,

<sup>11</sup> ‘Seduce’ *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved 1 December, 2009. [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

when the individual acknowledges that they are caught within the chaos and that sovereignty has already been lost. Frank writes of the chaotic narrative: “This horror is a mystery that can only be faced, never solved” (Frank, 1995, 112).

In an interview playwright Dennis Potter described his television play *The Singing Detective* (1986), as “a detective story about how you find out about yourself” (Potter, 1987). Phillip, the play’s protagonist, begins at “a starting point of extreme crisis and no belief [...] and pain” and must contend with “all the shapes, all the half shapes, all the memories” that have psychologically trapped him in order to regain sovereignty over his life. Potter describes the sovereign self as “the self beyond or behind all those selves that are being sold things” but acknowledges the inherent difficulty of creatively articulating sovereignty: “It is the most precious of all human capacities [...but] almost impossible to talk about since you are bumping against the very rim of communication” (Potter, 1987).



**Fig. 21 Dennis Potter (writer), *The Singing Detective* (1986)**  
Phillip's journey through half shapes and memory

*The Singing Detective* brilliantly shows how the mind can be a deep, tangled maelstrom of nightmarish half shapes. But Potter also illustrates that catalysts for transformed understanding can be found through even modest interactions with people and objects outside the self, if only you could let the world flow in. And, it is this flow between interior and exterior that can return the mind, back to its rightful locus, as a fecund source of dreamings, reflections and imaginative problem solving. This flow enables perspective so that one can comprehend oneself with a new existential depth of field, finally registering the psychological whirlwind in which one had been trapped, but unable to see. You are the only person able to

take ownership of the messy, contradictory mind-body totality that you are and this chaos “must be accepted before new lives can be built and new stories told” (Frank, 1995, 110).

Facing and owning what is painful, dark and ugly about yourself is difficult, but it is also validating and liberating. Eric Wilson writes of the possibility of transformation stimulated by melancholy “Gazing within, I realise that I am ultimately alone in the world, that no one can live my life for me...At this moment, when I am stripped of the familiar, I get in touch with what is most intimate: I am *this* person no one else” (Wilson, 2008, 43). In an alternative strategy of sober self-embrace Nietzsche wrote “I have given a name to my pain and call it 'dog': it is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog—and I can scold it and vent my bad moods on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives” (Nietzsche, 2000, 174). Beyond the black humour we see Nietzsche constructing a new relationship with contingency: *You are not just any pain, you are my pain and I will own you and not deny you.*

New Zealand artist Ronnie Van Hout adopts a methodology with similarities to Nietzsche. Van Hout has made a career of simultaneously pillorying and validating himself. In *Ersatz* (2006) a Van Hout mannequin kitted with gumboots and toupee raises a fist to the heavens in defiance or frustration. Are we to assume that ‘ersatz’ refers to the fake figure, the fake hair, the fake sentiment or is the artist himself confessing he feels like a faker? Van Hout has stated "Humour is about self-consciousness. Making fun of yourself implies an intelligence. Which is integral to art production as well: Humans are makers of things"(Matthews, 1997). According to Mikhail Bakhtin to laugh in the face of fear is an act of catharsis able to reduce the



Fig. 22 Ronnie van Hout, *Ersatz* (2006)

grip of those fears. “For it [laughter] knows no inhibitions, no limitations” (Bakhtin, 1985, 90) and “does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it” (Bakhtin, 122-3).

In *Strangers to Ourselves* Kristeva makes a similar contention, that converting weird and troubled feeling into irony is a legitimate psychological strategy: “To worry or to smile? Such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts” (Kristeva, 2002, 289). Kristeva writes, “By recognising our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me. Hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (Kristeva, 290). So, she suggests, we can draw from our experiences of depersonalisation as a kind of empathic wellspring that can enable us to better understand other people. This boon of empathy is echoed by Frank when he quotes the post World War One writings of Albert Schweitzer “Whoever among us has learned through personal experience what pain and anxiety really are....no longer belongs to himself; he has become the brother of all who suffer”(Frank, 1995, 25).

## CHAPTER THREE

### SELF AS BEAUTY

“The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising  
from bed and meeting the sun “

**Walt Whitman,**  
*Song of Myself , verse 21*  
(Whitman, 2009)

In this chapter I examine the latent potential and possibility for positive transformation of the lost self. Although being lost to yourself is horrific, to *find yourself* enables you to *lose yourself* again, *but* in a new way. You can surrender yourself, allow the self to become a transparent aperture for the flow of everyday interactions that constitute normal human experience. How can the self be drawn out of the interior and into the world? By utilising our senses, and through reconnecting with the embodied pleasures of beauty, communion and emotion. Johnson writes that “Meaning grows from our visceral connections to life and bodily conditions of life. We are born into the world as creatures of the flesh, and it is through our bodily perceptions, movements, emotions, and feelings that meaning becomes possible and takes the form it does” (Johnson, 2007, ix). This chapter will examine how the creative arts can respond productively to such human needs with artefactual “fragments of world alteration”(Scarry, 1985, 171) and how creative arts can consummate new understandings between self and other, self and the world, self and the infinite.

*The Interior Cinematic* is **not** meant to serve as a glib and rosy advocacy of unstinting happiness and superficial prettiness, it is a modern day *memento mori*, an intimate and compassionate offering to those who may find themselves receptive to it. In a poetic passage Scarry writes of the parallel between “the woven gauze of a bandage”, where “its delicate fibres mime and substitute for the missing skin”, and the role of clothing to protect the body and provide a secondary skin; a “kinship verbally registered in the words “dress” and “dressing”(Scarry, 1985, 281-2). This project is an offering, a kind of salve and dressing, from a *wounded storyteller* presented to viewers on the hope that those who wish will consciously or unconsciously pocket these affective and aesthetic fragments away in memory available for future retrieval should a need ever arise.

This project is about the friction and tension between opposing pressures that produce possibility and expansion in the interstitial space between. It therefore sits within the tradition of Romantic Irony, which acknowledges conflicts and complexities which strikes a precarious balance between the sublime and the melancholic, between attachment and detachment, between imagination and reality. I could take as a succinct conceptual symbol of Romantic Irony, a single pearl from my mother’s string, and roll time back to its former aquatic life as a particle of grit that became a catalyst for

something beautiful and enduring. In my own case melancholy is part of my shadow and is therefore inseparable from who I am, but it is also my particle of grit, oftentimes I loathe it, sometimes I am grateful for it, and occasionally I cherish it for the beauty it allows me to witness. Wilson writes that melancholy “fosters fresh insights into relationships between oppositions” (Wilson, 2008, 149).

We are all subject to the uneven pressures of genetic inheritance, body chemistry, environment or misfortune, experience. As discussed in the previous chapter, these factors can conspire to cause some to experience an altered inner landscape that is unfamiliar and unpleasant and this in turn can compromise the constitutional confidence that usually keeps one feeling whole, centred, and like ‘me’. When someone feels fragmented, unsteady and not like ‘me’, it seems to cause a downward spiral accompanied with responses of self absorption, self neglect and social separation. Unfortunately those responses entrench the problem, rather than helping to resolve it, and this starts to implicate the victim in their own suffering. From my own experience of mental illness, to move from self loathing, pity and estrangement to self compassion is a most difficult, but most necessary challenge. It means forgiving yourself for causing yourself harm and accepting and nurturing yourself in your broken state. It is the poetry of Michael Leunig, a fellow sufferer of depression, that I discovered this most succinct evocation of self compassion:

Come sit down beside me  
I said to myself,  
And although it doesn't make sense,

I held my own hand  
As a small sign of trust  
And together I sat on the fence

(Leunig, 1996, back cover)



Fig. 23 Frances Benson, *Abandoned Subordinates* (2010)  
Self reconciliation

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry writes that our encounter with beauty, no matter how modest, is always expansive and “act[s] like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space [...up...] ladders reaching towards the beauty of the world” (Scarry, 1999, 112). Beauty is almost everywhere one chooses to cast one’s eyes: “It is as though beautiful things have been placed here and there throughout the world to serve as small wake-up calls to perception, spurring lapsed alertness to its most acute level” (Scarry, 1999, 81). Similarly Simone Weil has mused that “Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul” (Weil, 1987, 135).

We watch as the *Abandoned Subordinates* crawl towards one another, connecting, regrouping, reconciling and coalescing. A new form of self emerges, The *Dancing Debutante*, the self recovering and its sovereignty. The *Dancing Debutante* is a positive and celebratory metaphor for a philosophical and emotional *coming out* and *owning up*, a growing into maturity and understanding, and of rejoining ‘The Dance’. I designed and constructed a 1950’s styled debutante gown, and paired it with my mother’s pearls in a dance with my Father. My Father becomes an expression of communion: how I am connected to and supported by others, of how we are all connected to and supported by others.

An inspiration for this scenario came from Kierkegaard who wrote “All I have is my life, which I promptly stake every time a difficulty appears. Then it is easy to dance, for death is a good dancing partner, my dancing partner” (Kierkegaard, 8, 1985). It is this eyes-wide-open embrace of one’s own finitude that is a catalyst for a kind of dynamic and beautiful expansion. Wilson employs dancing as a metaphor for the individuals place within the cosmos and writes, “You realise that the richest moments in life are these junctures where we realise, in our sinews, what is true all the time: the cosmos is a dance of joggled opposites, a jolted waltz” (Wilson, 2008, 78). This shift between spatial settings communicates new openings and new possibilities. We move from the tired industrial spatial setting the *Vacated Sovereign* and the *Abandoned Subordinates*, to the *Dancing Debutante who* debuts in an epic ballroom space, expansive and brightly light.



**Fig. 24** Frances Benson, *Dancing Debutante* (2010)  
Life as a dance of 'joggled opposites,' of singularity and interconnectedness



**Fig. 25** Frances Benson, *Dancing Debutante* (2010)  
Spinning out of self and into sensory ascendency



Fig. 26 Testing out the first dress toile for movement and appearance

The Debutante spins away from her dancing partner and spins in to her own orbit. To spin reminds us of the simple childhood pleasure, in which gravity and motion propel the body away from its usual bearings into a giddy and euphoric sensory state. Spinning becomes a strange looping pathway between pleasure and pain, being and becoming and between change and repetition. This spinning motif inevitably also brings to mind the dancing rituals of Turkey's whirling Sufis who spin to attain a connection with God, to experience a spiritual rebirth and to channel the earthly and the divine. The *Dancing Debutante* scene is about reconnecting with sensation, but it does not represent a covert desire to regress to some nostalgic and unattainable vision of uncorrupted childhood. Instead it moves towards an adult innocence, what Eric Wilson describes as, "*dynamic innocence*" (Wilson, 2008, 94). This is a dynamic innocence that acknowledges contingency, complexity, difficulty but remains open to, and able to seek out, those rare moments when sensation snatches us from the burden of being.

The spinning debutante dissolves into the final choral movement, and so the single protagonist dissolves into an egalitarian group state. This is a major sideways paradigm shift. The protagonist becomes an embodied *lateral figure*, to use Scarry's term, equal amongst other embodied *lateral figures*. This *Big Reel* is where the 'I' as a constituent of 'We' is explored. The *Big Reel* is a group of individuals dressed in their own clothes, moving with their own posture, pace and in their own way who responded actively and empathically to my call to participate, collaborate and be part of something bigger. The *Big Reel* acts out a range of circular and rotating motifs on a communal scale.

We experimented with choreography that variously placed: all in the centre, and all outside the centre. We face towards to the centre and away from it, we move to and coalesce in the centre, we disperse and move out from the centre and become more visibly individuals once again. We move from this large universal orbit and spin in individual orbits. The visual poetry of the aerial camera angle means that the lens suggests and captures a symmetry and order, a unity of humanity of which we would normally be unaware. The *Big Reel* becomes the revolving earth, the turning wheel, the carousel on which we all travel day by day. This scene uses visual effect as an existential framework; it underlines the associative nature of humanity, the forming of physical, social and experiential connections between people. This is a necessary component in the strategy to combat the isolation and estrangement of the depressive or dissociative experience.

Both Johnson and Scarry express this concept of lateralisation, of being shifted sideways, away from the centre, and becoming a *lateral figure*, within the ebb and flow of the universe to feel as if we are truly centred. Johnson writes “If we are inescapably and gloriously embodied [...] then our spirituality [...] must involve a capacity for horizontal (as opposed to vertical) transcendence, namely, our ability both to transform experience and to be transformed ourselves by something that transcends us: the whole ongoing, ever-developing natural process of which we are a part (Johnson, 2007, 14). Scarry describes how our encounter with beauty leads to a ‘transcendent decentring’, “we find that we are standing in a different relation to the world. It is not that we cease to stand at the centre of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand at the centre of our own world.” and soon “some more capacious mental act becomes possible: all the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding and advancing the self [...] is now free to be in the service of something else” (Scarry, 1999, 112-113). Thus to let sensation flow through us is to be liberated from the paralysing tyranny of self consciousness and self awareness.

As I indicated in the first chapter, there are gaps between the narrative vignettes I offer. For example I do not specify what kind of trauma may instigate disengagement, and nor do I catalogue events or behaviours that will be a catalyst for re-engagement beyond the most broad and universal brushstrokes of empathy, self acceptance and sensation. These fuzzy gaps exist because I feel I have no right to fill them, or I simply do not know how to fill them without being, prescriptive or



Fig. 27 Frances Benson, *The Big Reel* (2010)



Fig. 28 Frances Benson, *The Big Reel* (2010)

documentative and therefore flattening the work in the most reductive sense. By way of explanation I could return to Christian Boltanski's statement mentioned previously, "Everyone tells their own story, but it's a tale which at its best will become someone else's story. That's why the message can't be too precise; otherwise it's not possible to project" (Boltanski, 2006, 48). So I extend to my audience these interludes that they must flesh out and fill in and make sense of for themselves: "For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent...Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art" (Dewey, 2005, 56).

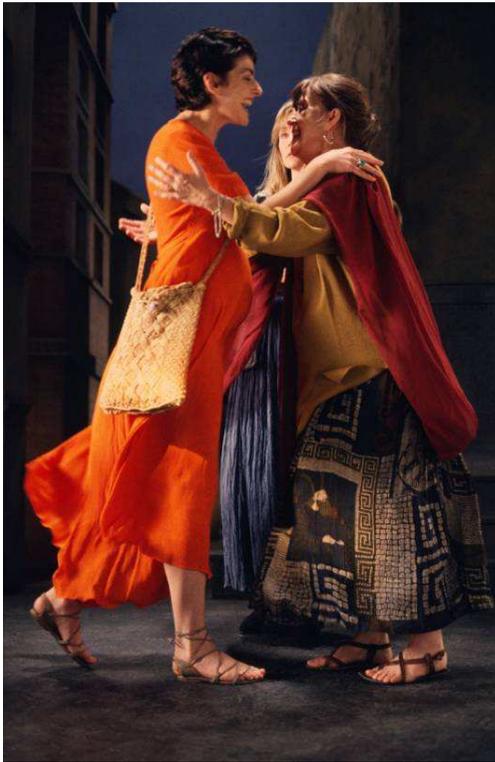


Fig. 29 Bill Viola, *The Greeting* (1995)

In Bill Viola's video installation *The Greeting* (1995), we watch three women come together, two in an embrace, the high speed film, and sharp slow motion playback magnifies and makes palpable the nuances of love, touch and intimacy which are part of an everyday interaction. Viola's work is a modern reworking of the Italian Mannerist painting *The Visitation* (1528-29) by Jacopo Pontormo, which shows the biblical meeting of, a pregnant, Mary with her cousin. Viola's *The Greeting* supplants religious archetype with modern social archetype. Viola said he was thinking of the "The poignancies of the goodbyes and greetings [...happening] every moment in every airport around the world" (Viola, 1997). In this way Viola's work is also a *memento mori* "the souvenir of a fleeting life that is the ambition of even the lowliest snapshot" (Rosenthal, 2000, 14) and brings to us a new understanding of the richness experiential exchange received via our interconnections with others.



**Fig. 30 Frances Benson, *Drawing of potential exhibition layout* (2010)**

The exhibition of *The Interior Cinematic* will be installational in the sense that the body and consciousness of the viewer will become located inside the universal domain of the body of work itself. Olga M. Viso, writing about Spanish artist Juan Munoz, likens the installation to a theatre space, it “constitutes a [...] “common beholding space” – a space the artist can demarcate in the world where the ordinary rules of activity are suspended and replaced by strategies of observation and interpretation.” Like a theatre the “artist can reduce the confusion of phenomena into an ordered whole” (Benezra & Viso, 2001, 169). The viewers of this creative work will be invited into the virtual, psychological interior of the cinematic. They will also be invited beyond the screen and ‘behind the curtain’ into the parallel

physical bodily interior of *The Interior Cinematic* artefact and into the sensory fragments of the making process.

There is etymology linking *conscience* and *consciousness* both derived from the Latin *conscientia* which means “moral conscience” and “shared knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> To be human is to enter shared experience. As Hofstadter elegantly puts it, we humans are “are curious collages, weird little planetoids that grow by accreting other people’s habits and ideas and styles and tics and jokes and phrases and tunes and hopes and fears as if they were meteorites that came soaring out of the blue, collided with us and stuck” (Hofstadter, 2007, 251).

Frank writes: “The body-self whose foreground is dominated by threat is unmade, but unmaking can be a generative process; what is unmade stands to be remade” (Frank, 1995, 172). Those who are wounded story-tellers can narrate their way out of a *chaotic body* and into a *communicative body*. An aligned sentiment is offered by Marina Warner, the historian

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<sup>12</sup> “Consciousness.” Wikipedia. 1996. Retrieved December 1, 2009 from <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

of folk and fairy tales, who states "Stories do offer a way of imagining alternatives, mapping possibilities, exciting hope, warding off danger by forestalling it, casting spells of order on the unknown ahead" (Warner, 2002, 212).

Similarly, Scarry believes pain is a fundamental human catalyst for artefact creation, she argues that humans will characteristically respond to relieve pain, firstly by imagining how pain might be ended and secondly by converting the imagined into the real by constructing objects to alleviate pain. She writes "The shape of the chair [...is the] shape of perceived-pain-wished-gone. The chair is therefore the materialised structure of a perception; it is sentient awareness materialised into freestanding design" (Scarry, 1985, 290). I apply Scarry's reasoning to mental pain, extracting learning from my own painful dissociative experience, and remaking and materialising that experience in an entirely original form. *The Interior Cinematic* may not have the universal applicability of the chair, but this project shares the chair's shape of *perceived-pain-wished-gone*.

Scarry champions those who imagine solutions and then implement them through the creation of artefacts. Designers and artists, along with many others, add to society, and create for themselves and for others and therefore improve our world. I feel that she is addressing me personally when she writes "the human being who creates on behalf of pain in her own body may remake herself to be one who creates on behalf of the pain originating in another's body" (Scarry, 1985, 324). Neuroscientists use the novel term *qualia* to describe the irreducible sensory quality of, say, redness. The contention is that the intensity of qualia helps enable us to maintain the proper distinction between perception and conception: that we are experiencing life and not hallucinating (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1997). Perhaps the creators in this world can midwife and marshal this sensory encounter in order to speak to the total embodied person. After all, "beauty always needs to be found through new revelations. This is what artists as seers and inventors of visual metaphors have always attempted" (Rosenthal, 2000, 14).

My insight for those who are dissociated and disengaged is that in order to reconnect and regain embodied meaning you have to go forth and eat the world, qualia by qualia, even if you have no will and no appetite. As Wilson punchily states, “He must hug the world hard, experience its beauty and create beauty” (Wilson, 2008, 131).



# CONCLUSION

“I and this mystery here we stand.”

**Walt Whitman,**  
*Song of Myself, verse 3*  
(Whitman, 2009)

Scarry has written “The advantages of material culture over a culture of belief are difficult to overstate [...] the objects of imagining, though individually moderated into fragmentary artefacts, are collectively translated into the structures of civilisation”(Scarry, 1985, 172). This design project has embraced and acted out this belief. Scarry describes a tool as “an altered object [...]and a] record that prevents action from having to be endlessly repeated [...]and] continually re-enacted” (Scarry, 1985, 175), if this is true, then this project aspires to be like a tool or toolkit that prevents the Sisyphean behaviours of the dissociated mind from being endlessly and unnecessarily repeated. *The Interior Cinematic* functions as a metaphorical problem-solving space, a workshop where the experiential textures of disengagement and reengagement are performatively acted out and played through. This project has focused on developing a *collection* of narrative fragments or affective vignettes that articulate these experiences, experiences that otherwise go un-described or under-described in society.

Nietzsche wrote “Whoever commits to paper what he suffers becomes a melancholy author: but he becomes a serious author when he tells us what he suffered and why he now reposes in joy” (Nietzsche, 1986, 342) This follows the evolutionary direction of my own design research, that started but soon moved beyond, formally communicating the depressive experience as a singular creative endeavour towards articulating an *aesthetics of reengagement*. Early on in this project a critical decision was made to steer clear of the conceptual and emotional instability of an extreme ‘poker-faced’ irony. Instead *The Interior Cinematic* assumes a nascent relationship between subjective and the communal, between truth and possibility, and commits itself to this empathic task. This decision has meant moving towards an increasingly open, active and contextualised form of making and thinking, seeing the synergies that exist on the horizon and moving outwards towards them, and in this way attempting to embrace the full and active potential of the creating experience, of becoming more serious and holding nothing back, of *facing the fear ...of failure or ridicule...and doing it anyway*.



Fig. 31 Frances Benson, *Working drawing/project map* (2010)



Fig. 32 Frances Benson, *Working Drawings*, (2010)

While this project may have been conceptually-led, it has been very significantly shaped by ideas emerging ‘in the moment’ in creative practice, oftentimes these ideas have located the path of least resistance, the most direct route to affect. The trans-disciplinary scope of this project, meant that I needed the help of others to film and edit, which meant I became the director of their and my own efforts. But, I deliberately eschewed the ethical and communicative complexities of employing an actor, and became my own performer; this meant I was also able to implement fundamental changes at the ‘coalface.’ So making *The Interior Cinematic* has been characterised by both ‘top down’ or strategic and ‘bottom up’ or tactical creative forces.

During the iterations of filming I veered away from expressing emotion that was too physically specific or obvious, since it felt contrived and jarred the works intrinsic pace and flow. I have had to shoot and reshoot scenes more than once, in order to secure the look and feel that felt right, felt appropriate. I pondered and grappled as to how I could visually and performatively express the Sisyphean behaviour of the dissociated mind, but through creative experimentation the *Abandoned Subordinates* evolved into something far simpler, quirkier and more elegant than I had originally imagined. Filming the *Big Reel* was a massive logistical task that involved many participants, a large film crew, and in the final iteration, involved filming from an industrial cherry-picker. Yet, after all the planning and expense, the *Big Reel* turned out uncannily as I imagined. In the *Vacated Sovereign*, the pacing and motion had to be tested iteratively, and the light quality and colour balance had to be carefully determined as initial technical choices contradicted the retarded physicality that I was seeking to communicate. Such are the creative machinations that occur in the background of any creative practice. It seems appropriate that this project, a work centred around communicating affect, necessitated that many decisions had to be *felt* through and tested out. It is appropriate too that in a work about the strange loop of self, the feedback loop of the design research process is the force that has shaped it.

*The Interior Cinematic* acts as an alternative to Ross’ ‘aesthetics of disengagement’ because it resists making, as an act of emotional infliction whereby the feelings of the maker are transferred to and duplicated in the viewer to promote understanding. I would like the viewer to come to understanding on their own terms and in their own way. So, I aspire to a

kind of poignant tonal ambiguity that fosters felt responses of uncanniness, uneasiness, whimsy, curiosity, wistfulness. These are fluid and open-ended thinking-feelings that I hope will provoke curiosity and critical reflection in the viewer. I make available abstracted affective fragments of the disengaged experience as a strategy to potentially augment the emotional and cognitive vocabulary of the viewer so they have a subtext for identifying and understanding that dissociative experience, in advance of any potential future experience.

This project contributes to knowledge by drawing together concepts from different theoretical disciplines, and by identifying, developing and highlighting the poetic and structural resonances between them in an original way. It also adds to a new, but growing body of literature that perceives creative practice, from a broadly phenomenological orientation (Bennett, 2005; Johnson 2007; Scarry 1985). Bennett, who writes about the communication of trauma memory in art, believes that creative practice should be understood as a *transactive* or *generative* process, defined less by the communication of predetermined meaning, and more by the transmission of embodied affect, in which critical meaning is yet-to-be-determined (Bennett, 2005). She believes that the value of such creative practice is that by using formal innovation it endeavours “to find a communicable language of sensation and affect” which can “register something of the (original) experience” of memory (Bennett, 2005, 2).

Terrence Rosenberg, who writes and lectures on critical practice in design, has described how ‘poetic design research’ finds a balance in the opposing pressures of *centripetal* (stabilising and inwards) and *centrifugal* (destabilising and outwards) forces. (Rosenberg, 2000) This project is about navigating oneself between the opposing and experiential forces of horror and beauty, and has been characterised by ongoing wrangling between the opposing pull of; thinking and feeling, mind and body, concept and practice. The initial research cast a large net over many different disciplines - as is proper for a project that discusses the self, dissociative experience, personal transformation, aesthetics and empathy. But ultimately the design of this project has been about spinning that research creatively with film, performance, costume and narrative into a circling emulsion that is not easily categorised.

Kristeva has discussed how dissociative-type experience leads to a “destruction of the self”, and how it is up to the individual as to whether this experience endures as a lived horror, or whether it becomes a catalyst for future transformation: “an opening to the new” and an “attempt to tally the incongruous” (Kristeva, 2002, 287). I would add that it is up to the individual *as long as they perceive that they have a choice and decision to make*. There are, of course always, *openings* towards the new, but given the potential difficulties an individual may have in interpreting the emotional and experiential syntax of their ‘destructured’ or dissociated self, they can be difficult to find, recognise and understand. This projects’ task has been to actively illustrate the affective processes that lead to and from these existential cross roads.

Hofstadter has observed a social prejudice against feedback loops; and maintains that many people think devising feedback loops “seems to be dangerous [...] tempting fate, perhaps even to be intrinsically wrong” (Hofstadter, 2007, 57). Perhaps this is because the feedback loop expresses something fundamentally accurate and fundamentally unnerving about human experience. Similarly the French term *mise en abyme*, designates a recursive or reflexive visual or literary play, but revealingly, *mise en abyme* literally translates to mean “into the abyss”<sup>13</sup>. But as the writing of Hofstadter, Sass, Potter and Nietzsche, as well as the art of Pilson and Van Hout indicate, the recursive, the *strange loop*, the Sisyphian cycle and eternal return have fundamental relevance to all lived experience, but particularly to depersonalised, dissociated and depressed experience. I have travelled through and round this nightmarish loop, and I feel it needs to be explored, articulated and understood.

Over the course of this project I have endeavoured to balance the personal and universal, although of course subjectivity remains and I hope it offers poignancy and power. The course of this project has felt like a circular experience, sometimes the intensity of my own research has brought me to my knees, sometimes in the midst of some creative revelation I have soared (or perhaps danced) above all too. But I have mostly come to reside in a balanced state of renewed curiosity and

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<sup>13</sup> “Mise en abyme” *Google Translator*. (French to English). Retrieved 1 December, 2009. [www.translate.google.co.nz](http://www.translate.google.co.nz)

appreciation that I am 'part of it all'. As poet Bill Manhire aptly muses "I live on the edge of the universe like everyone else, sometimes I think congratulations are in order" (Manhire, 1991, 19). Here here!

To return to Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave:' could it be that one cave and one truth open out into the next cave and next truth and so on and so forth? This project contends that this orbital movement between one truth and the next is a fundamental process of becoming. What is definitive becomes provisional; life is a perpetual comingling of past, present and future. Nietzsche states that to endure the idea of eternal return entails finding "new means against the fact of *pain*" and "*the enjoyment of all kinds of uncertainty, [and] experimentalism*" (Nietzsche, 1967, 546). This project has been about exactly these things. It has been an experiment about embracing the uncertain certainty of life's contingencies, pain, isolation, estrangement and finding new means to frame, redirect and recreate them in a positive, sharable outward form.

The exhibition of *The Interior Cinematic – beauties and horrors from the strange loop of self*, the one-year Masters of Design project necessarily concludes this creative investigation. But of course creative work is a continuing process and not a final destination. The broader idea of articulating an aesthetics of *reengagement* or an *aesthetics of effect*, seems to have a gravity and prescience that warrants deeper and more enduring investigation than I could ever achieve in a single year. So perhaps this cave opens out into a new cave - my pathway into future design research and practice.

## **APPENDIX ONE**

### **DIALOGUE FROM THE PAST/PRESENT INTERCHANGE**

## PRESENT

Hello, it's me

Are you there?

I am worried about you

I sense that I am losing you

I can feel that you are slipping away from me

I can help you because I am little older and a little wiser

I have been where you are before

You have to trust me

You have to listen to me

Trust me

I understand you

Let go, let me carry you

Let me patch together your broken pieces

## PAST

Hello?

Oh, it's you.

I can barely breathe

I can hardly move

Numbly drawn backwards through a strange loop

I am also, strangely

a stranger to myself

And a shark circling myself

The universe has moved inside my head

I have been dispersed into the outer reaches

I can't escape myself

I can't hold myself together either

I forgive you

I forgive you for what you have done

I forgive you for what you haven't

Whatever you are

You are mine

Lace your fingers through mine

I dance with you

And with all others too

We ride together

On this giddy carousel

Tasting

Touching

Feeling

Beginning and ending and beginning again

And so it happens

That, I leave myself and I forget myself

Then I find myself here

And I am so grateful

I take your hand

I toast to you

And all others too

A greedy speck riding on the coat-tails of the cosmos

Watching

Smelling

Breathing

Beginning and ending and beginning again



## **APPENDIX TWO**

### **THE INTERIOR CINEMATIC INSTALLATION**

**IMAGES FROM THE MASTERS OF DESIGN EXHIBITION, MASSEY UNIVERSITY,  
FEBRUARY 2010.**



**Fig. 33** Frances Benson, *The Interior Cinematic, Installation (2010)*  
Installation view - exhibiting the interior



**Fig. 34** Frances Benson, *The Interior Cinematic, Installation (2010)*  
Installation view - exhibiting the cinematic.



**Fig. 35** Frances Benson, *The Interior Cinematic, Installation (2010)*  
The Interior Artefact



**Fig. 36** Frances Benson, *The Interior Cinematic, Installation (2010)*  
Artefacts of the Interior

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