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From the Television

Kevin Cartwright, 2017.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Abstract

On the Television is presented as an immersive digital video installation that seeks to draw the viewer into the dreamlike world of the televisual. Images derived from iterative practice-based works create metaphorical foci for sociocultural archetypes and a politic of the personal. Drawn from a biographical context and primarily relying on the visual icon of the balloon, this work tests the viewer's relation to the realm of the digital screen, and offers an alternative vision for a mass media of the individual.

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“The digital medium’s distinguishing features certainly constitute a distinct form of aesthetics: it is interactive, participatory, dynamic, and customizable, to name just a few of its key characteristics. However, the art itself has multiple manifestations and is extremely hybrid. It can present itself as anything ranging from an interactive installation with or without network components, virtual reality, software written by the artist, purely Internet-based art, or any combination thereof” (Paul 67).

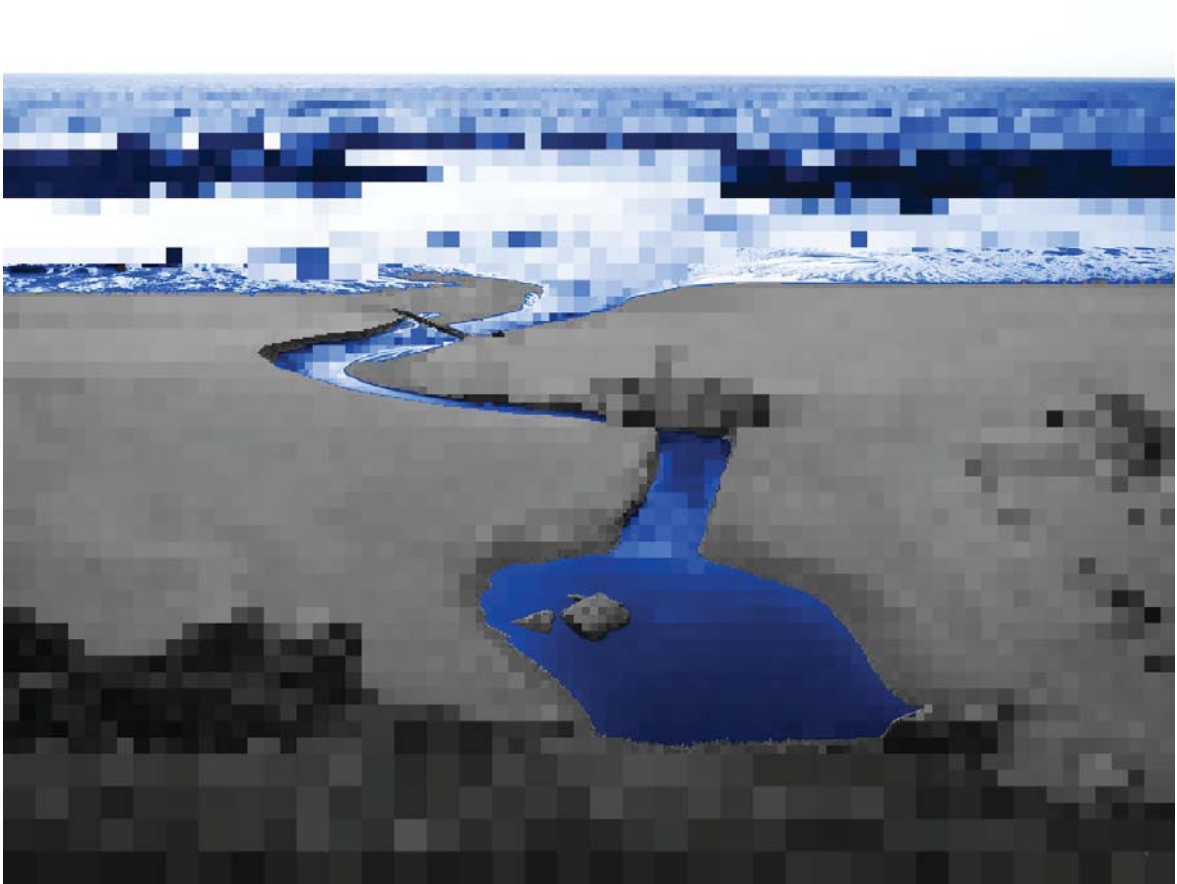


Fig. 1. Kevin Cartwright. *Te Hapu*. 2016, Digital Image.

Introduction

I find myself paralysed by the failure of truth to dominate popular culture; yet I can't personally say where the truth lies. This paradoxical condition is, I believe, a shared modern condition in the Western world, partly brought about by the explosive rise of digital media. As a video producer, I have spent years developing a professional relationship with documentation, and thus some form of truth, but if pressed to explain my understanding of the world I would fall back on repeating things I have read or heard from various sources. What is the crux of this crisis, does it influence cultural producers; and to what extent should it be allowed to exert this influence?

I have always been mesmerized by television, and cinema. There is something special about the construction of images for the screen that creates a common frame of understanding, and there is a deliberate visual language used in their construction. The screen itself, myriad in form and location, has a special power that dazzles and hypnotizes. In my own work I strive to produce images that exist within this mental space. If I am successful in doing so, I believe that the work will be able to translate my ideas more effectively to a wide audience. My work draws on television and cinematic conventions to find familiar ground with its audience. The specific ideas I am trying to relate through the work revolve around the role that media play in our social self-perceptions.

In my work I hope to test the limits of this production, of the veracity of documentation, and of sight and perception; in the interest of gaining a greater understanding of the state of modern visual communication. This work is personal, and relates to my own relationship to media and culture; but hopefully there will be ideas or findings that resonate with others.

The primary thread of my inquiry follows a feeling of tension: a felt sense that pressure and stress are inherent materials of communication and shared culture within this global, interconnected network of exchange we call media.

(See fig. 1) We are staring into the maelstrom, and the non-human world of chaos and disorder within has no shape and no inherent position. We find our personal positions in relation to the boundary place between these worlds. There are also powerful forces outside of us that work hard every day to set the tone of this positioning; corporate forces whose influence on culture and media are undeniable. If there has been an enormous amount of erosion of what constitutes cultural work in the public sphere, can we find honest independent ways of expressing the form of our own lives?

The boundary place between our physical world, and the abstract conceptual world of images and culture has now largely settled onto the "screen." This flexible, multiresolution display-place is not specific or defined by a global standard. There are a myriad of mechanisms that can produce a digital display; from traditional cathode ray tube box screens, projection surfaces, multitouch smartphone screens, organic LED displays and more. Numerous manufacturing standards, computer systems and design forms dictate a vast constellation of screens that present images in slightly different ways. Mostly, however, these differences are elided, and we tend now to view screen images as a family of visual culture that is easily accepted and consumed in a variety of settings.

Over the course of my Master's degree program, I have sought to make work that moves me toward the establishment of a position in relation to this ubiquitous corporate production, to the vast variety of paid-for media and corporatized social messaging. As a visual artist, I use documentation (text, video and photography) as material in constructing a more complete expression of my personal views and experiences. It has been necessary for me to establish a coherent picture of the current state of visual cultural production, the history of media art, and the rise of hypercapitalism to understand our present binary crisis, through my artworks and research. It has also been necessary for me to establish a place for myself in relation to the screen; the boundary place where ideas are projected into reality.

I believe that how we dream is how we make art.
I dream in pictures.

My life as an artist is tied to my life as a dreamer; to a life of seeing and watching. My work comes from a childhood spent in front of the television, and a fixation on the transmission of ideas and images. This thesis examines the changing landscape of visual art within the context of digital media and the production of artwork within global hypercapitalism. This overarching social narrative is underpinned by a personal history of relation with mass media images. I will try to give a succinct picture of the work I've done over the course of this MFA, from a period of open experimentation with form and perception through the production of digital prints, to a more directed course of image-making to begin to construct my own televisual language; the process of pursuing my degree has been exploratory and iterative. I have tried to create works that arise from questions generated by my own artistic process, skills and techniques; and have further tried to let those experiments lead me towards understanding this personal language.

I am interested in creating works that test the viewer's' response to constructed image, and that foreground the material presence of the viewing plane in a way that forces an evaluation of the experience of viewing. What I seek is a new language to describe our shifting relational positioning with mass media, one that provides the viewer with a personal reference point in relation to the 'screenic' world.

Post Digital Media Arts

When examining our historical situation, one is struck by the turn towards the computational in many aspects of life. There have been numerous claims to epochal shifts from the post-industrial society, the technotronic society and the knowledge-based society, to name just three. Equally, with the introduction of softwarized technical systems, it is sometimes claimed that we live in an information society (for a discussion see Berry 2008). While numerous definitions exist, we now appreciate that around us algorithms running on digital computers mediate our lives by creating and re-presenting a world that appears more comfortable, safer, faster and convenient – although this may paradoxically result in our feeling more stressed, depressed or drained of meaning” (Dieter 21).

The term Post Digital seeks to describe those artworks and cultural products which have come about after the mass proliferation of digital technology. The term allows for acknowledgement of the great impact this technological shift has had on cultural producers. I consider my own art to be Post Digital, and I seek to create work that is responsive to our current technologically mediated social discourse. I am interested in how our conceptual relations have shifted from being interpersonal to being internetworked, usually as a result of abstraction of communication via screen devices. Above all, with my art I wish to establish a language grounded in the present moment, to begin describing ways of seeing that reflect our current cultural situation.

Digital media seeks to take control of how we perceive our surroundings, both physical and social. By hijacking what we expect and understand from our visual senses, and using established conventions of vision digital media have found new and seductive pathways into our personal spheres of understanding about the world around us. Examples of this mode of hijacking include bus stop adverts, billboards, the presentation of landscape photographs that suggest relationships between geographical phenomenon, portraits of people or life-scale imagery in human scale referents, and fake

visual 'objects' that appear optically real (like buttons, web pages and text documents). Rather than reject this new form of media (which we may actually be past the point of being free to reject given its currency and ubiquity), we should seek to better understand it, and to foreground it. This involves producing strategies for co-existing with this material.

In order to produce work that reads in continuity with mass media, I seek to embrace the digital image in my work. I find it necessary to consider how creative output sits in relation the rise of mass media, as well as screen based fine art. Mass media is the environment in which I have matured as a visual thinker, and its presence within my dreams and memory is an essential element of my work.

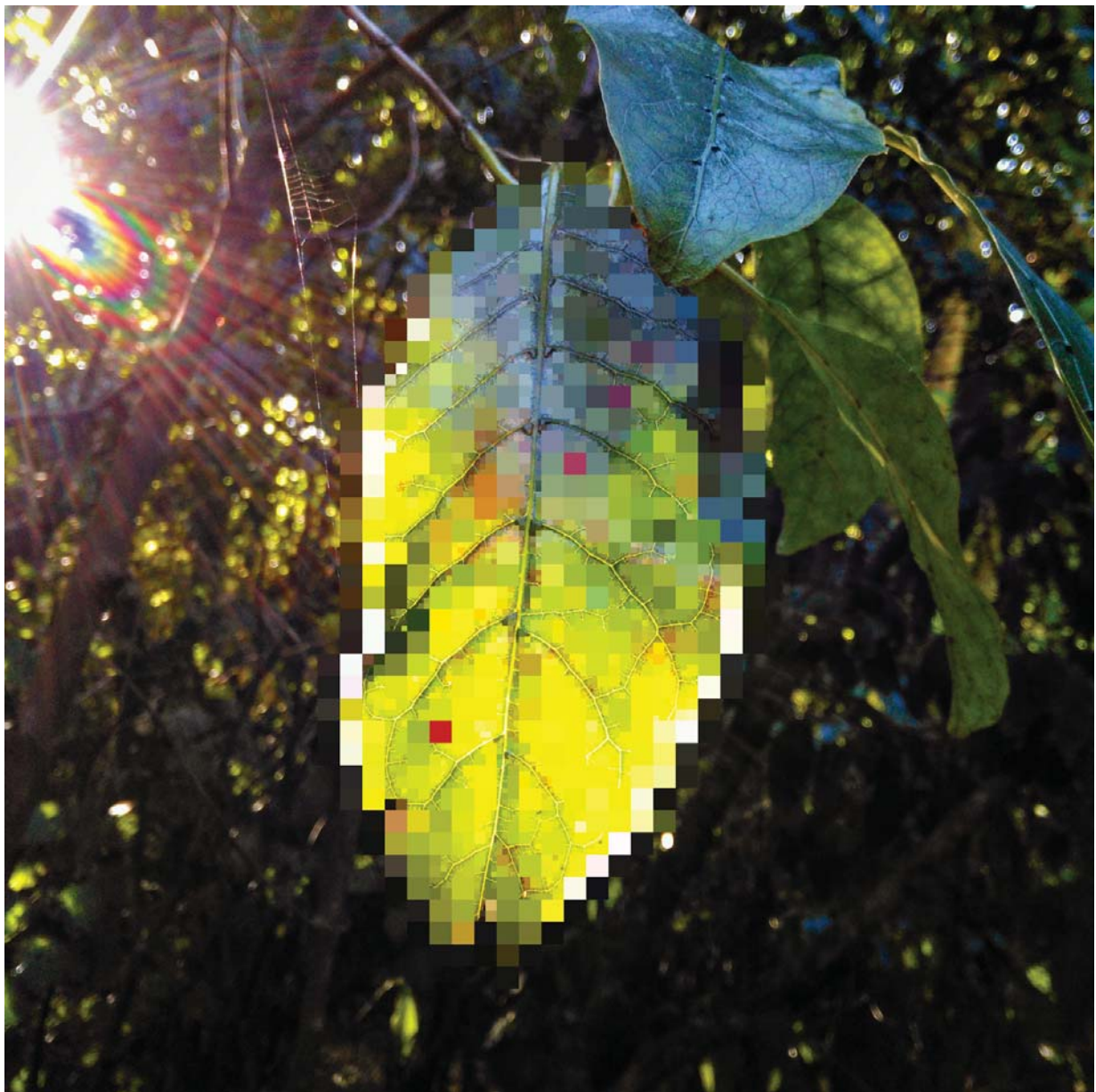


Fig. 2. Kevin Cartwright, *Zealandia*. Digital image. 2016.

In Digital Art, art historian Cristiane Paul places the early origins of media art with the artists of the Dada, Fluxus and early conceptual art movements, who experimented wildly with just what sort of materials and works could be considered art. She specifically describes the rise of a focus on concept, event and audience as being crucial moments in the future foundations of digital art. Paul argues that this has created space for the possibility of art that is 'instruction based,' rather than physically made; and further asserts that this art by instruction is the essential nature of digital art: "The importance of these movements for digital art resides in their emphasis on formal instructions and in their focus on concept, event, and audience participation, as opposed to unified material objects" (Paul 11).

(See fig. 2) In creating digital art, we are not really manipulating anything with physical corporeality, there is no tangible material at play; rather we are providing a highly-abstracted set of instructions to a computer, and the computer is responsible for converting these instructions into output. The artist works at best one step away from the act of manifestation, often many hundreds of steps based on the nature of the computer system they are using. A modern computer processor understands instruction sets in what is called 'machine code', a binary language that provides simple functions for the processor to perform (for example, change a single bit of memory from one value to another.) This machine code is controlled by a low-level language called 'assembly code,' which provides a single level of abstraction to issue binary commands in human-readable code. This language is then abstracted again into higher-level languages, which permit more human readability and convenience. The end result of these levels of abstraction is an application, which permits a user to manipulate information on the computer into readable forms, and to create digital media without providing direct instructions to the computer (Bentley 74).

The digital artist, therefore, is most like the conductor of a symphony; issuing instructions, suggestions and gestures that are translated by a host of complex systems into something readable by the viewer. This represents a departure from more traditional forms of visual art, like painting, drawing or even printmaking. As I approached creating the digital drawings I made during my first year of the MFA, I was very conscious of the tools I used, and the layers of programmatic abstraction that followed each instruction I issued to the

machine. This pattern of mark-making perhaps bears more in common with crafting skills like sewing or tapestry weaving. Paul asserts that what the digital process exhibits is a discontinuity with reality, and that '[digital art does] not by nature require a physical object to 'represent' and [is] not based on a principle of continuity with a real world" (Paul 47). Although digital impressions may not have corporeal materiality, there are material traces through the work, signatures of time and attention left by the artist.

Art Theorist Lev Manovich takes us further into the binary realm, speaking specifically about Digital Art in "Post Digital Aesthetics", asserting that all art has lost the specificity of media, that cultural works have transitioned to the realm of software, and that all 'users' of visual media are practicing something he terms "information behavior". This shift has changed us from artists and consumers of art to users within a flattened hierarchy of digital information exchange. How can we measure the value of different culture objects in a popularized environment? I believe that rethinking our relation to one another as makers and consumers of cultural work, as users within a global network, may be a better, more democratic model of artistic representation than traditional concepts of gallery or museum centered production.

It is film that Manovich principally credits with beginning the process of erasing the artificially-imposed 'barriers' between media, bringing the cultural landscape into an ever more flattened shape, separated more by notions of 'popular' versus 'crowdsourced' creators. Lev describes how television and video really started to splinter media in important ways; particularly in the distinctions between the mass medium of Television, and the art medium of Video, whose divisions seemed to fall mostly between questions of distribution. He believes that these methods "became more important criteria in distinguishing between media than the distinctions in material used or conditions of perception. In short, sociology and economics took over aesthetics" (Manovich 14). Extrapolating this trend forward, Manovich considers the sociological scope of work to be a defining element in whether something that is produced in a medium originally intended for mass consumption can be considered 'art' or not. In my own work, I consider the relationship between viewer and screen to be an essential element of the final work, and I remain interested in how this dynamic is informed by the personal screenic life of the viewer.

An important question to consider is what makes digital images and videos different from traditional photographs, films, paintings and illustrations. There is absolutely nothing new or extraordinary about digital visual systems of encoding, processing or consuming. Critical to understanding this requires stating the absolutely non-revolutionary nature of 'the digital' itself to begin with. Florian Cramer names the digital nature succinctly, by making a number of analogies with technologies or modes we don't traditionally consider to be digital: 'Digital' simply means that something is divided into discrete, countable units - [for example] the fingers (digits) of one's hand - which is where the word 'digital' comes from in the first place; ... the keys of a piano are a digital system. Floor mosaics made of monochrome tiles are digitally composed images" (Post Digital Aesthetics 18).

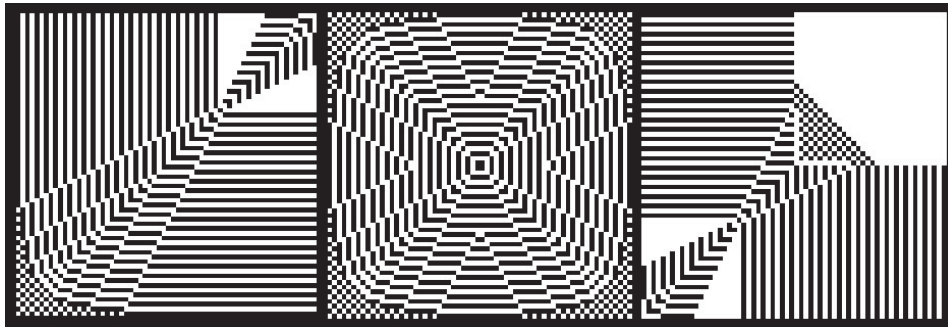


Fig. 3. Kevin Cartwright, *Procedural 010*. 2016, Digital Image.

(See fig. 3) What *is* new about this digital mode is the wide scale multiplication of this seemingly simple technology, coupled with ever-shrinking, blazing-fast multithreaded silicon processors, that have enabled a myriad of new windows and portals to open in places that were traditionally closed: our desktop writing machines, our telephones, bus stop adverts, billboards, the back seats of taxis, and even traditional television screens. What has come through these portals mostly is a flood of images, and new ways for users to mediate and moderate those images to suit their own individual preferences.

Digital media, and the ways it easily blurs culture and popular culture, seems to have signalled a sweeping change in expressive production, but not necessarily anything as dramatic as the 'death of art.' Writing about the newfound impotency of actors before the camera, author Luigi Pirandello had this say about the *then new* technology of film: "The film actor feels as if in

exile - exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence ... The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera" (Benjamin 9).

The passage feels touching to me, reading it today, but for opposite reasons than the original author probably intended. Though Pirandello writes passionately about the death of theater, as I read this passage I feel subconsciously sad for the loss of my own visual agency as an artist in this modern 21st century. Now that the tools for creating powerful and arresting images have been made more widely available to a democratically representative slice of people on Earth (excepting those too impoverished to participate, who will be joining us soon [see the furor over Facebook in India to understand how these changes may sweep the landscape of places like Sub-Saharan Africa, or even the Indigenous Americas, where internet adoption has so far been quite limited, but which is being 'colonised' by telecom media conglomerates already]) we can ultimately hope to expect a more democratic process of visual dreaming and thinking to unfold across our shared media spaces.

This is necessary, because the last few decades have seen a steady change of media from the broadcast paradigm into the narrowcast, or personal form. Rather than passive consumption of *mass media*, traditionally exemplified by analog television service, the blockbuster formula of film release or terrestrial radio programming; the general trends seem to move toward personal, social media produced by the *masses themselves* on platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat. What interests me specifically about this dynamic is the way that audience expectations of screen-based works shift as a result of this expansion of authorship.

This expansion of authorship evolving to include a seemingly ever-enlarging slice of people can only be seen as a positive sign of growth in our collective global media maturity. This raises the foul specter of corporate control, however, since increasingly those shared digital platforms we have made

to host these discussions have become entirely controlled by for-profit companies, whose motives act in opposition to those of our own, for those special purposes we have found for art and expression. As an example, I have written my entire MFA coursework using Google Docs, a free software application for personal digital file management that is also one of the critical input organs for Google's advertising revenue engine. One needs only think about recent conversations about privacy and censorship ongoing in the vital political sphere of western data politics to understand why this could be a problematic change in what constitutes personal risk.

There have been many analogies drawn between our present time and the period when painting was developing alongside the newly emerging medium of photography, in the Modernist age. If anything, we might say that the crises of our time are even greater in scope for the sensitive creator: "It is possible to feel at certain times like the painters must have in the nineteenth century, intrigued that the hand-eye coordination they had practiced for years could be so easily transcended by photography. Now it is not only a form of hand-eye coordination that is being supplanted but the primacy of the eye itself" (Ritchin 76). Through all of these evolution of media; from traditional 'hand' arts like painting and drawing, to the 'information behaviour' and Post Digital Art of our current time, what has mattered and been found compelling is the vision behind the work, and the intention of the author. It seems to me entirely evident and elementary to take the same position as Lev Manovich, to agree that the cultural space where we are headed seems to place less emphasis on the importance of a work's originary media, but places more importance on the intention and 'vision' of their transient assembly, as the viewer experiences more works in the pluralistic, mosaic world of digital images.

As composited, multi-dimensional digital works become an increasingly common part of our visual field, as an artist I wonder how these increasingly sophisticated modes of visual consumption change the expectations of the viewer. I consider my own experiences in front of the television during my life to ground the work I produce, and to inform its visual language. My desire is to create work that exists plausibly on the screen, that reads as equivalent to broadcast media, while offering alternative viewable fictions. I have followed a practice based approach to making work, one which allows the symbols and images I manufacture to live their own lives across many works.

This is similar to the broadcast method of establishing brands and product identities, and it is my hope to comment on this process through the work going forward.

An important element of making screen-based work that directs the viewer inward and presents a culturally seamless vision of the world is finding the right scale. For inspiration, I look to the work of artists who create immersive video installations. My work draws on those periods of fugue-like immersion in television worlds, and I desire to create art that evokes the feeling of losing oneself in the visual field. The screen is a primary presence in the work, and I remain captivated by it, and want to place that captivity front and center for the viewer.

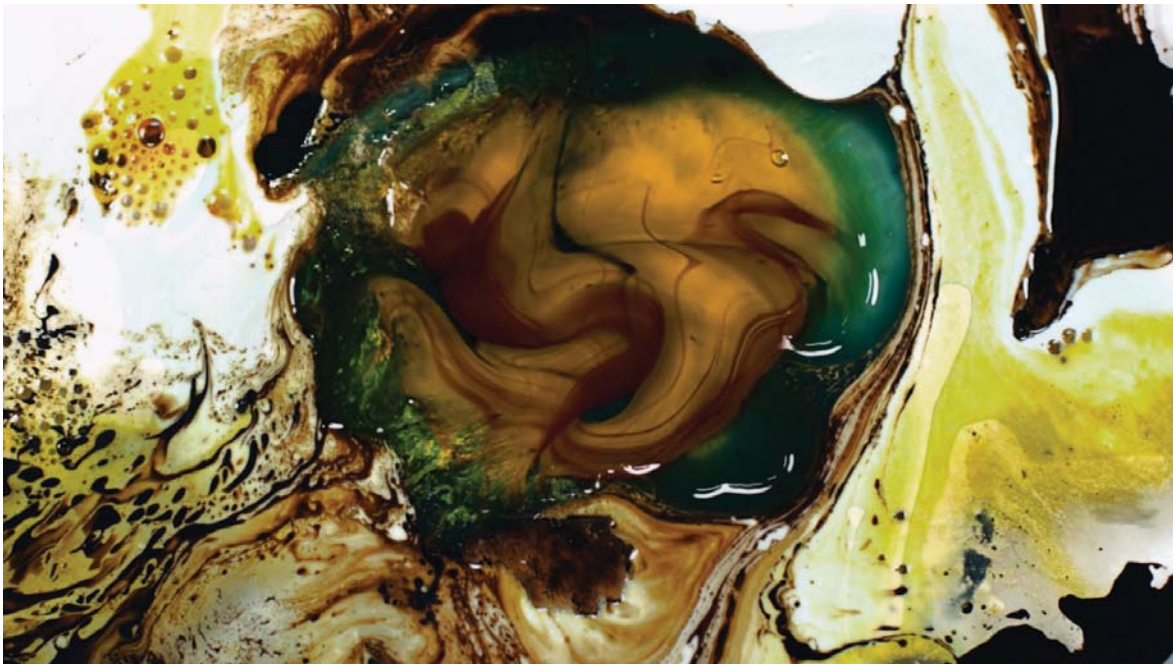


Fig. 4. Rose, Rachel. *Everything and More*. 2015. High-definition video, color, sound; 11:33 min.; with mylar, PVC, and carpet. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

The American video artist Rachel Rose is a primary influence and reference for my use of the screen. She has produced a monumental work of disorientation and confused reference called *Everything and More*, (2015) originally exhibited at the Whitney Museum's Kaufman Gallery (see fig. 4). In this work, the viewer enters a large darkened room, and is presented with heavily-constructed video images built around documentation of astronauts training for weightlessness, as well as a myriad of found imagery. The linkage between the weightlessness training of the astronauts, and what is achieved through the careful manipulation of the image, sound and architecture of the space creates a palpable feeling of disorientation and spatial confusion. In this way, Rose is using the medium of video to induce a feeling of disassociation that draws the viewer into an experiential undoing of learned relations to moving image.

Unnerving distortions of picture serve to question our spatial understanding of what is being seen, and the scale and position of the video image within the gallery works to further produce a great questioning of the physical, 'real' foundation of reference for understanding these moving images. In this way, the work participates in a wider conversation around the role of digital media and video in our collective cultural discourse.



Fig. 5. Kevin Cartwright. *Breaker Bay*. 2016, Digital Image.

(Fig. 5) "Beyond mirrors and windows there is another analogy to the photograph... In the digital environment a new kind of photograph emerges, neither mirror nor window but a mosaic. It allows for multiple pathways leading to new avenues of exploration - a hypertext. Like Alice's mirror, the hypertextual photograph can lead to the other side, whether to explore a social situation or to create an image poem. The photograph is no longer a tangible object, a rectangle resembling a painting, but an ephemeral image made of tiles." (Ritchin 70)

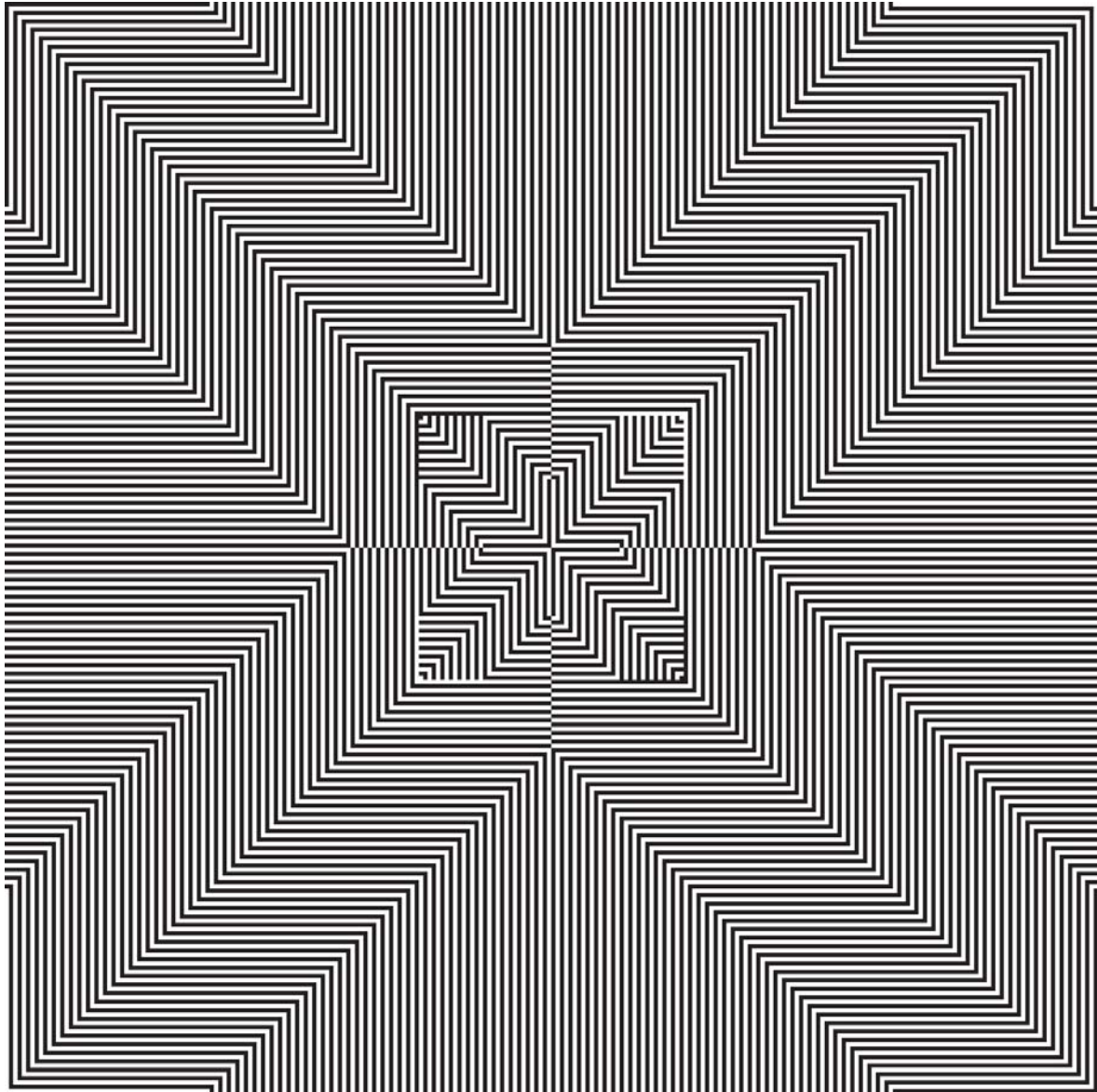


Fig. 6. Kevin Cartwright. *Procedural 111*. 2016, Digital Image.

Television / Conduit

Hence, through planned motivation we find ourselves in an era where advertising takes over the moral responsibility for all of society and replaces a puritan morality with a hedonistic morality of pure satisfaction, like a new state of nature at the heart of hypercivilization" (Baudrillard 13)

"In contemporary visual culture, which perhaps still enjoys a certain hegemony, the major technical currents no doubt contribute to existing screen cultures of the digital TV, home videos, movie theatre projections, high-resolution advertising, and the displays for stationary computers. At the same time, though, digital visual culture approaches ubiquity via a quite complex technocultural variability and dispersion -- that is, by having its technical and cultural phenomena become at once larger, smaller, four-dimensional, mobile, and more ambient.

...

This trend already suggests some of the ongoing dynamics of a well-nigh omnipresent visual digital culture, but the visuality of a [ubiquitous computing] culture, if any, is perhaps still a rather open question" (Ekman 3).



Fig. 7. Daniel Von Sturmer, *Camera Ready Actions*. 2014, Installation, Young Projects Gallery, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

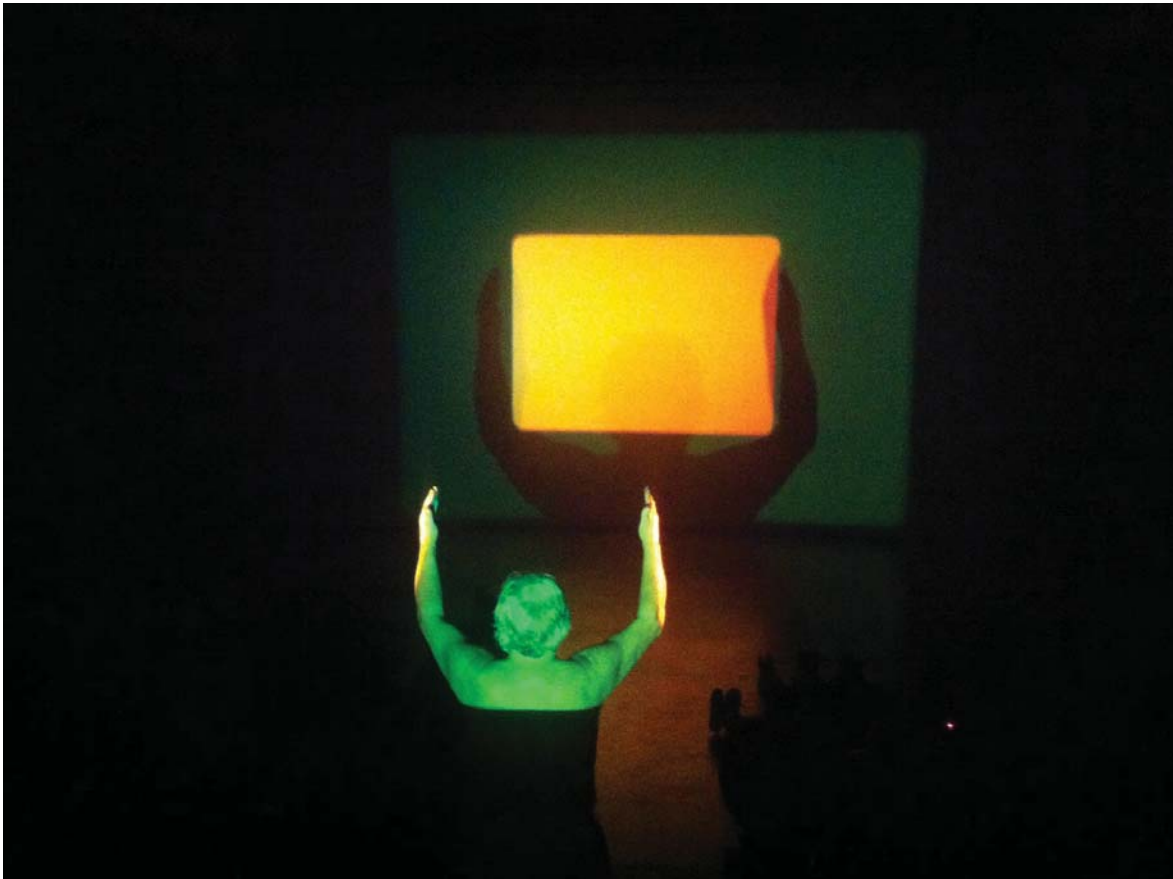


Fig. 8. Malcolm Le Grice, *Horror film I*. 1971, Performance with slide projector, two film projectors.

The first thing about television that I loved was that I had control over what I saw. There were at least seven channels that we could pull in over our roof-mounted antenna; which was mounted on a thin rod high up in the center of our roof, which looked out over the dry brown desert. I remember once that an owl sat on our chimney, and that if you walked out to the back of the yard you could see the owl, and I wondered if he would make a home and stay with us.

When you clicked between channels on the television set, there was a loud pop, and the channel button would change. The lighted plastic indicator would show which channel you selected, in Tucson you could get channel 4 (NBC), channel 6 (PBS), channel 9 (KGUN), channel 11 (FOX), channel 13, and maybe a few others. We got to know the schedules of the channels really well, such that if you turned the TV on at the right time, and it was set to the right channel, you could catch a show that you were familiar with, almost every night. The local newspaper, the Daily Star, ran listings of what television shows would be on, and there was a weekly or bi-weekly supplement that

came with the newspaper, which was the 'TV Guide.' It featured a red television set logo, with the words TV GUIDE inside, and usually a promotional image for a TV show. Most often there would be lots of poorly written articles about different shows and the long running plots of soap operas in the guide. We always had a TV Guide sitting on the coffee table, and I always read through it.

My Mother started watching Star Trek The Next Generation with me, when I was in primary school; and it became a really important part of our relationship for a long time. We watched the entire seven season run of the show together, and I vividly remember the sadness I felt watching the last episode with her, which was called 'All good things,' and featured the omnipotent long-running semi-villain 'Q,' who was an alien being that knew everything about our universe and freely travelled through it, often returning during sweeps week to torment the crew of the Starship Enterprise with issues of complex moral calculus and fiendish comedy acting. After the series ran its course, and began its perpetual rebroadcast in syndication, we watched 'Deep Space Nine,' the next Star Trek series. 'Deep Space Nine' followed the lives of Starfleet officers stationed on a remote space station; it was innovative because instead of setting the show on a spaceship which could freely travel the galaxy, the crew was sort of stuck on a stationary base to which things came and happened. We watched this show for years together, my Mother and I.

My personal construction of time, the past and my growing conception of the future was bounded by the framework of television shows; episodes, TV specials, and nightly news broadcasts (See fig. 7). The individual faces of news anchors are like plastic sculptures in my brain, their names and voices instantly recallable to me. The news *was* the world, and it was through nightly broadcasts on television that I learned about far-away places like Bosnia, Russia, Europe and South America. Mostly there were dangerous people and wars in these places, and I learned that the whole world was a frightening place and that we were lucky to be Americans in the Clinton years.

This was a kind of visual dreaming that came when I laid back on my orange corduroy pillow and just watched, and forgot who I was and what had happened to me that day, and watched as much of life coming from the screen as I could. These were images and scenes of the whole universe, cut together

to music with advertisements in between. The 'real world' around me felt less real, and less important than what I saw behind the glass. I didn't know what it was but it seemed important, and I listened as well as I could. The things that I saw, and the things that were told to me by the characters on the screen was the truth, and shaped my world to fit what I learned there. (See fig. 6)

I mentally assembled these fragments and images into a coherent story, which spooled out from the television broadcast station daily in a continuous stream of ideas. I believe that I constructed a model of society and community built upon the screen; the transmission of pictures and sounds became the heartbeat and soul of the entire world, which I was privileged to be aware of. It felt personal, meaningful and charged with infinite potential. If there was a place for making art that could uplift the world, this was it.

Simultaneous to my immersion into television and analog broadcasting, I became introduced to computers at a very young age. My Father is a video producer, and has written several trade books on the subject, and so required word processing and desktop publishing. My family was very early to adopt a home computer as a result, and nothing could have been more fascinating to a child already primed to lose myself in the screen. Despite the similarities, the difference between a computer and a television is immense: while the television is a passive appliance, the computer is infinitely mutable. Instead of laying back and watching the screen, you are required to grab the keyboard and begin to discourse with the machine. Here finally a dream became realised: the world beyond the screen is open to input, to alterations and whims of fantasy. I was invited to reach inside the screen to alter the program, and give instructions to an ever-willing servant behind the glass. (See fig. 8)

If television was a transcendent stream of ideas and dreams for me, the computer represented something quite different. It was a secret world that existed only for me. I was uniquely able to dive inside, and to learn how to open up this special box to find all of the worlds buried inside. What I didn't know then is that everyone who decides to use a computer can have the same experience, which is what makes computers so powerful. There are varying degrees of control we can take over these machines, and varying levels of instructions that are required to interact with them.

There is an appealing quality to the shift from broadcasting to personal computing, and when taken together, along with other visual delights such as video game consoles, digital calculators and cameras, I was fully absorbed into the world of multi-media. The fundamental unit of this hypnotic world, of television and video, and to an even greater extent now the Internet, is the moment of attention. All that is asked of us by this technology is that we look at it, and pay attention to it. In this way, the screen becomes a place of personal engagement with a pluralistic entity, whose mission is to take our attention away to another place. The fact that is most often done with an agenda, with a purpose to modify our beliefs, desires and dreams of normalcy, doesn't obviate the power of this media. There is a chance that we can take on the methods of engaging with this conduit of dreams, and redirect the ideas of the mass audience towards a more perfect world. One where the emotions and desires of the many become focused on the act not of tension and pressure, but of relief.

I certainly became aware of this conduit during my growth into adulthood, and through receiving a liberal arts education, and through studying the very media that mesmerised me, I was able to understand what its purpose was. Through observation, I began to shift my attention from the surface of this vast shifting membrane, deeper into its core. I pushed my perceptual awareness farther inside the world of origination, into the world of illusion and deception that constitutes the first inch of reference behind the screen. What lies beneath the conduit is a world of untruth, deception and manufactured deceit, which arises from the nature of what the screen is, and how it works. The screen can never show us something real, only a heavily edited and carefully selected portion of the real.

A funny thing happened during my second year of study. I had become fascinated by the digital conduit, by this atom-thin boundary between the real and the unreal, and I started making more and more work on the computer. I found after a while, through hard work and regular art-making that I had passed through this membrane, and appeared on the other side, looking from within the fictional space outward, through this glowing window onto the real world beyond. I had fallen inside this fictional world, finally, and found peace there.

Balloons

“Wonder was the grace of the country. Any action could be justified by that: the wonder it was rooted in. Period followed period, and finally the wonder was that things could be built so big. Bridges, skyscrapers, fortunes, all having a life first in the marketplace, still drew on the force of wonder. But then a moment’s quiet. What was it now that was built so big? Only the marketplace itself. Could there be wonder in that? The size of the con?” (Trow).

Something spontaneous happened to me when I started working with video again after taking a brief hiatus to pursue digital drawing. Balloons began appearing in my dreams and then eventually, out of necessity my art. I was seeking some kind of perfect symbol that I could use, and make work around, and I believe that is why the image of the balloon came to me. A balloon is a toy, something you generally inflate for a child’s birthday party; but a lot of very serious people talk about economics, the law and real estate by referencing balloons, so it can be a very complex symbol. A balloon holds an enormous amount of power inside, I need only mention popping a balloon with a needle for you to imagine a great loud ‘POP’, and feel the air on your face, and maybe the snap of the latex.

The balloon can fly. I like this image, of an object that we know has a ‘lift’ to it, a metaphorical ability to rise into the sky, forever. This image has utility in films, literature, economics and politics, precisely because we all carry a physical memory of a balloon filled with helium, and the magic of it’s skyward pull. But the balloon has other properties: it is delicate and thin. If you blow your breath into the balloon too many times, it will shatter the air with explosive force, and rain down fragments of latex.

There was a moment in my life when the television ceased to be an object in the room, and became instead a conduit for ideas. This conduit, an atom-thin membrane between our world, and the pure world of fantasy, disappeared and became a fountain of light. This marble window glowed with an inner power, projecting its energy and influence into my life. All I knew was the light from inside the machine, and the light became a source of dreams. When this happens to you as a child, it changes you, and makes you perhaps more aware of the source, but less aware of its influence. I am consumed by the awareness of 'watching,' of processing information and a reflexive need to analyze and interpret what is being shown to me. Once I became aware of this conduit, I felt a need to take control of it. Is this an inevitable condition for a consumer of images? Is there something inherent about the extensibility of video that leads to the desire for more control?



Fig. 9. Kevin Cartwright. *Circus*. 2017, Installation.

(See fig. 9) This work is a prototype for an exploration of the nature of screens, visual dreaming, and the aesthetics of mass media. This conduit serves as an interface between our world, and the constructed world of the unreal. The work consists of a rear-projection screen and a projected composite video image. The moving image is a composited falsehood, a construction; an experiment in a series of works using the metaphor of the latex balloon to stand in for content, political messaging, and a plethora of social economic archetypes.

Where broadcast television emanates from a central point of ideology, my video work strives to be closer to a personal conversation between the artist and viewer. Central to this exchange is the conceptual place of the screen. I chose to locate the critical edge of this work along the face of the screen, and also where the viewer stands in relation to it.



Fig. 10. Kevin Cartwright. *Amicus certus in rei incerta*. 2017, Digital Image.

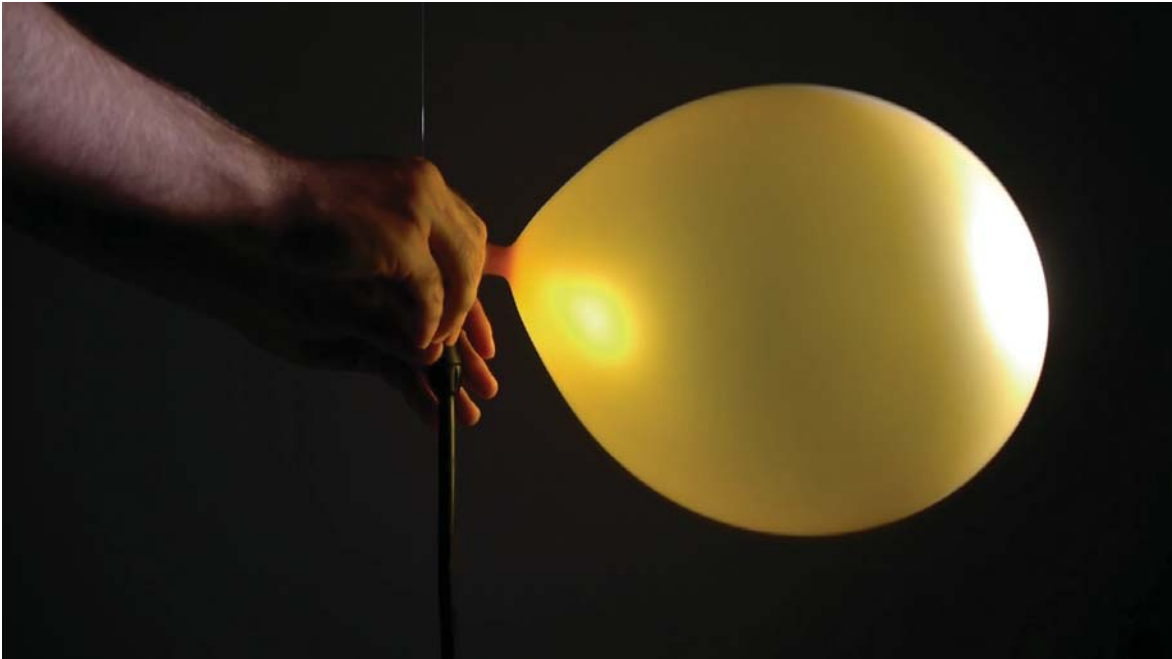
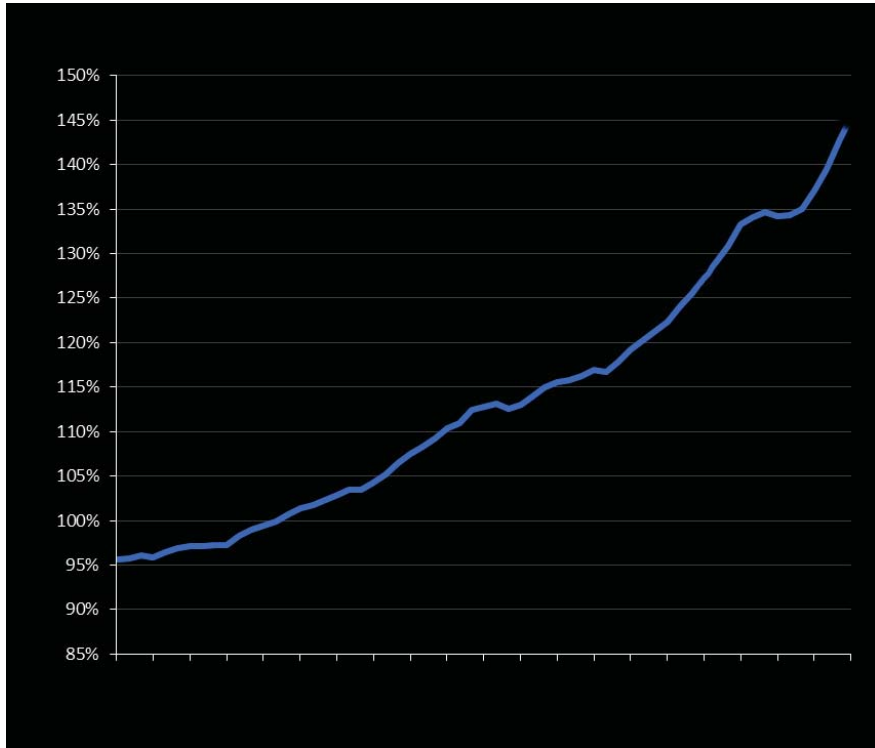


Fig. 11. Kevin Cartwright. *Asset Bubbles*. 2017, Digital Video Still.

The major hallmark of the most recent global financial collapse, caused by financial corruption and economic malfeasance in the housing sector, has been the statement that it was just extremely complicated. The single take-away for most people, who perhaps lost enormous amounts of savings, money or investments; was that it was just too complicated for most non-financially literate people to grasp how the conditions changed in the finance industry to bring about this collapse. (See fig. 10)

The news of the 2008 financial rupture came to us collectively primarily through the medium of television. We watched live imagery of Wall Street as traders, lawyers and journalists scrambled to present the story of first Bear Stearns collapse, then a general collapse and bursting of the bubble of Wall Street itself. Through it all was a narrative that captured the rise and fall of financial markets as a social inevitability; this had occurred before, and would surely occur again. The important fact was how the markets would respond, how stocks would be traded, how value would dematerialize and who was responsible for allowing this to happen. There had been a growing tension in the system that until the moment of explosion had been explained as an inherent property of finance. After the bubble burst, it was a shock, an unforeseen occurrence that took the world by surprise. Surely, as the system pressurized and grew there should have been some indication that we were experiencing was actually not normal, that it was leading towards a moment of rupture. (See fig. 11)

This anxiety can perhaps be captured within a symbolic system, to be safely repeated and consumed at will. If it is possible that visual media is implicated in the manufacture of anxiety and tension, images on screen could be used to generate opposite emotions, to relieve and release pressure.

If visual media is responsible for the manufacture of anxiety in the world, I propose that media can be a tool to capture and encapsulate this anxiety as well. In the meeting place between worlds, new visions can be made to reset the feedback loop of excess and consumption.

Capitalism feeds on human insecurity, and the images produced in the name of selling products have depersonalized us all, building feelings of isolation and inadequacy. As an artist, I feel it is my duty to respond to this immoral use of imagery; to produce images that decouple our response to advertising.

I work in the same medium but with different goals: I seek to unify viewers, to provide the foundations for conversations and connections, to dismantle the machine of cause and effect between a grid of pixels and your credit card. When you see my images, I don't want you to feel that you need to buy something; I want you to feel that you have enough.



Fig. 12. Nicholas Mangan. *Limits to Growth*. 2016, Installation, Dowse Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand.

This ambitious, experiential work (see fig. 12) combines sculpture, photography and conceptual methods of relating ideas of value, commerce and history through a bitcoin mining computer rig, publications and printed photographs. The work draws on studies of the megalithic Micronesian Yapese Rai currency of Southeast Asia, and links that to the high-tech cryptocurrency Bitcoin. Mangan's interest in this project began with an exploration of what exactly comprised cryptocurrency, and through research and exploration of the concept he encountered fascinating connections to antiquity. Bitcoins are generated through complex computations of an algorithmic system that validates the currency; exchanges of bitcoin are tracked through a system called a 'block-chain.' As 'miners' run highly specialized computers to generate new coins, they consume enormous amounts of energy, and add their bitcoins to the world-wide ledger through network operations. The Rai stone coins of Yap were enormous stone discs quarried from remote islands and transported onboard rafts to the main island. In mounting these great projects to produce these great objects, individuals gained power and currency within society. The accounting for this currency system took place largely through oral storytelling; which mirrors the ledger system for cryptocurrency.

What I love about this work is the envelopment of the viewer, the creation of a monolithic state of potential through the use of video projection, sculpture and technology. At the center of this work is the creation of wealth through the expenditure of energy, and this playfully balances against the fabrication of limestone objects, anthropological phenomena, and human frailty.

In creating an exhibition artwork around this concept, Mangan draws a direct line between these complex systems of value and obligation, and in so doing throws into question our own ideas of value and exchange. Mangan installed a Bitcoin mining rig in the basement of Monash University in Melbourne. Using the bitcoins 'mined' by this rig, Mangan paid for the production of large photographs of Rai stone coins. The result is a meditation on money and finance that serves to project the viewer into a space of uncertainty about the underlying concepts behind our economy. I see many parallels between Mangan's works, which envelop the viewer in layered stories of technology, collapse and modernity, and my work. In a similar way I seek to create environments in which stories play out, drawn together by threads of practice and immersive digital imagery. While Mangan draws on history and social phenomena, I draw upon studio practices and the language of television.

If art is a way of looking at the world as it should be, or the world as conceived by artists; finance and economics are believed to be a way of looking at the world as it really is. But is it? In what way are our visions of the future, of what exists in the commons, and how economics and finance underpin our lives, influenced by media and the landscape of the digital? Under Neoliberalism, we have shifted from believing in inherent human relations to an obsession with market performance and economics.

In exploring the visual symbol of the balloon through these artworks, I have moved myself closer towards the source of tension, anxiety and release that has haunted me indirectly through mass media for many years. Although I have gained a feeling of control and mastery over these forces, this feeling is most likely an elusive deception. Through this process, I have begun exercising my fear and uncertainty of the loss of personal cultural agency through regular artistic practice. This series is not a culmination, but the beginning of a new stage of creative independence in my life. The child who matured in front of the television has begun looking back through the screen, out to the world, in a blind search for faith in the new forms of digital media.

Conclusion

Where do we now locate the sublime? Where do our cultural icons live? Did we know during the 1980's, during the Reagan years? Do we know now in 2017, the Era of Trump?

My work comes from a desire to pull the viewer into a place of dreams, to sit beside me, and watch the pictures on the television come streaming past. If there is tension there, if the viewer feels anxiety from the images, or reaches a state of peace, it is because this is how I feel when I look at the screen. (See fig. 13)

Assigning cultural meaning to works of art can be hard. The only time we seem able to point to great works as things of genius, or at least, things that are important, is after we look back on them through the distance of time. If it must be that we as artists remain in the mode of producing for too long without receiving good things back for our efforts of positive artistic production, we threaten to lose our senses, like the seer who receives visions from the sun as she goes blind.

Growing up in the secular Western United States of North America, in my youth, we had only one font of culture, knowledge and religion: the Television. Making reference to cultural works as touchstones of new visions is getting complicated in our present current cultural century. I believe that artists are the ones to point out this condition, and find a way out. In my own work, I strive relentlessly to find this way out, to find a way forward from being 'stuck' in an endless loop of commercialism and capitalist profiteering. Finance, economics, philosophy, even literature, have great power at directing culture, and pushing people in new directions based on the subconscious language of

desire, tension and release; but the visual artist remains alone in storytelling 'humanness' over the vast span of centuries.

With the explosive rise of digital mass media, our culture has found itself submerged in a ubiquitous soup of images, visual messaging and modes of seeing. I have been consumed, during this period of artistic production and personal discovery, with navigating this complex situation as an artist. My solution has been to seek out and create the means of forming a personal visual language that sits beside this great flickering stream of cultural dreaming. The common platform these languages share is the medium of the screen. This multi-work media installation is my attempt to present a possible vision for this platform, to build a common understanding toward a deeper conduit of shared dreaming and shared imagining. (See fig. 14)

Ultimately, it is an awareness of media that enables a member of this global cultural audience to perceive its power and recognize the influence of mass messaging over their lives. Just as I spent my childhood in rapturous passivity before the glowing screen, other people in this interconnected culture are absorbing messages and images daily. The medium of the screen has many things that make it powerful, its ubiquity, its clarity, its similarity to plausible reality, and its history as a medium of entertainment. It seems that each day the reach and seduction of this white noise radiates further and further into the dusty cracks of memory and mind. As the bits and pixels tessellate into ever expanding nets of dazzling glimmer, we must always remember to pay attention to ourselves as we lie in state, ever watching, consuming the light.

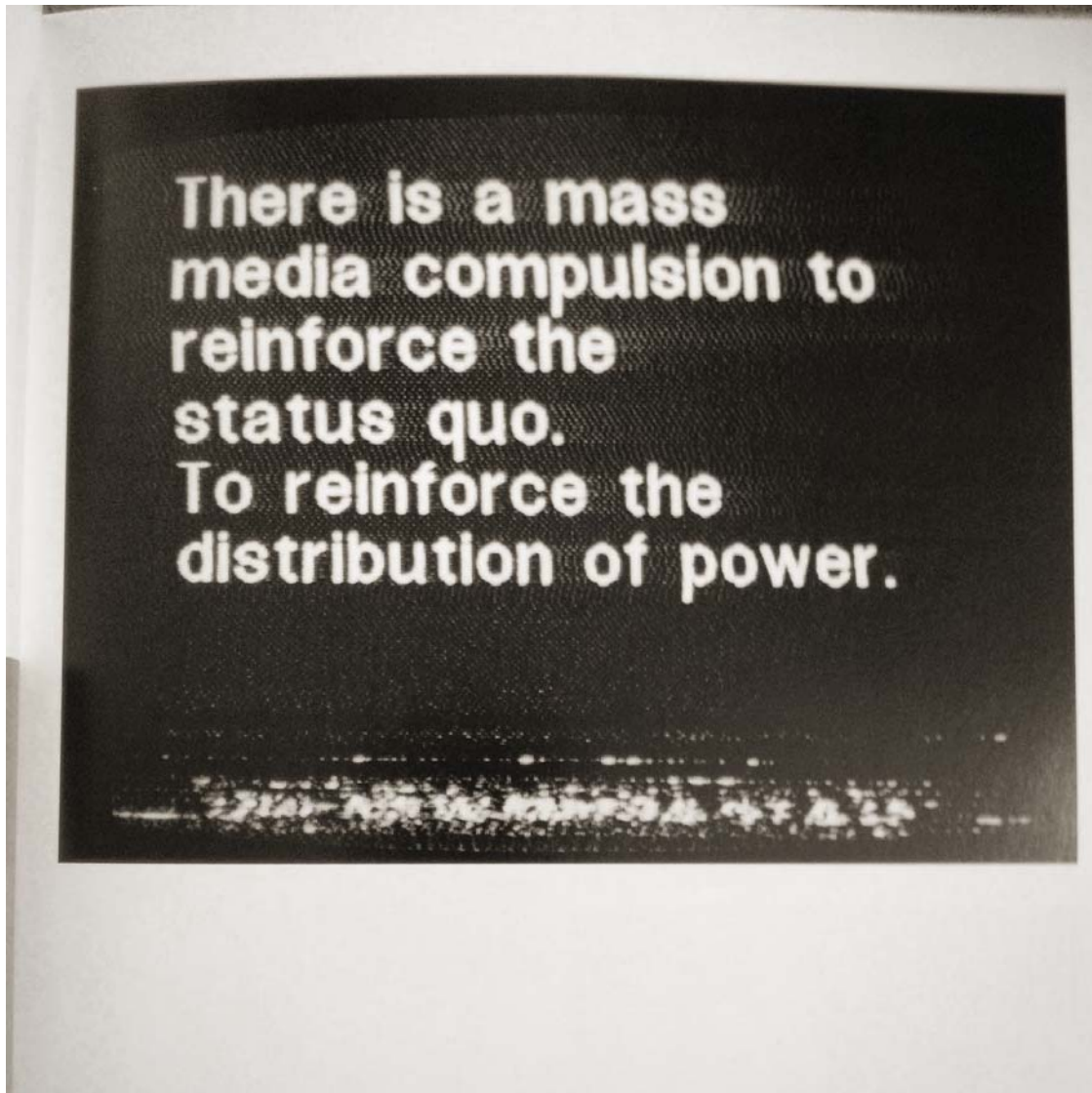


Fig. 13. Richard Serra. *Television delivers people*. 1973, Video, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.



Fig. 14. Kevin Cartwright. From *36 Views*. 2017, Digital Image.

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