

**The Inner Distance:
An examination of Cyborg, Disembodiment, and Literature**

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A thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington
2018

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Art + Art History + Design

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ABSTRACT

Katie Schroeder: The Inner Distance:
An examination of Cyborg, Disembodiment, and Literature
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My research and work explores disembodiment and the effects of being cyborg and archived within contemporary society. Through video, object, and atmospheric presence the work pushes boundaries between the physical and virtual. Considering contemporary technology and living, I examine how the connection to one's self has changed. This examination results in work that describes negotiations between the mind and body¹.

I apply 1990's cyborgian theory, current writings on virtual culture, as well as Classical philosophy and literature to generate concepts about identity and the body. My research runs parallel to society and personal development through technologies: specifically those that encourage a state of simulacrum². Through duplicating myself, I represent a decaying physical self in tandem with a thriving virtual self. A virtual identity is fluid, which allows my work to display particular traits of human identity using media,

¹ Disembodiment within this thesis does not discuss the neurological disorder, instead it is a branch of psychological splitting of the consciousness from the body.

² Simulacrum: an image or representation of someone or something. Within this writing it takes into consideration Jean Baudrillard who claims four types of simulacra:

- “1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”

Gilles Deleuze's concept of simulacra deals with “the copy” and its capability to render new situations. The continual copying will eventually lead to an entirely different being.

The copy is further broken down into anything manufactured and mass produced also looked at as replication and trompe l'oeil aesthetics. The overall understanding of the copy through both Deleuze and Baudrillard is a supplement for reality that has the capability to become separate from the original's reality,

technology, and other sources to create context around traits such as vulnerability, voyeurism, and brutishness.

Through exploring my own representation, I aim to express the lack of conformity to my body and identify the space between physicality and digital archiving. My work creates internal dialogue that is visually executed through literary and theatrical vocabulary, cinematic vignettes, GIFs, layered objects, and media.

This thesis will discuss the distance between the consciousness and the body through cyborgian theory. In an attempt to measure and recreate the space between the body and the mind these pieces exist both physically and virtually. The interpretation of this distance and the understanding of replicating myself within a spectrum of disembodiment will be supported by theories written by Donna Haraway, Hiroki Azuma, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deulze, and Jean Baudrillard.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to Amie McNeel, an incredible force of nature and a professor who not only taught me, but learned with me.

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Introduction:

My work is the moment of alignment between the body and consciousness. Through the process of making machines, stages, and projected media, my work forms a dialogue which draws from classical ideas of identity development. I use new technologies, such as autocorrecting algorithms, projections, and generated code, to describe the schisms between historic and contemporary being. I question how intimacy with the Self is developed in a society where our landscape is more readily described as a multitude of databases.³

Databases and my personal plurality form my understanding of stage and character. The characters in my work are archived versions of myself which are then placed within a physical object, which represents the body. Through taped borders, lenses, and atmosphere, I play with narrative to evoke intimacy, isolation, and self-awareness. This narrative uses my identity as a pliable material while exposing my own inability to feel connected to my body. A Longing for embodiment emerges within this work through the acknowledgment of the distance between mind and body.

Setting the Stage:

“This isn’t a science-fiction dream: everywhere it is a question of a doubling of the work process... a wizardry of work, a trompe l’oeil, a scenodrama (not to say melodrama) of production, collective dramaturgy upon the empty stage of the social.”
Jean Beaudrillard

³Database refers to *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, Hiroki Azuma, (location 870), Azuma considers society to have changed from a traditional model that includes a grand narrative to a Database Model (within Azuma’s writings he speaks specifically on the Otaku’s relationship to narrative being solely consumption based which places the typical real world narratives into a distilled format of character traits). The database model is related to the reading up model where language is broken down into the following flow: letters, words, groupings, sentences, narratives. Azuma argues that this same line of thought is implied through queries within databases. This means that human desires are run through a similar model with the break down of whats consumable into data that is individual parts. This ultimately addresses an accumulation of archived material (specifically data) which then becomes searchable and multiplied.

My work exists most readily in the timeframe of hypermodernity⁴ or super-modernity. This existence is ruled by the relationship of technology and biology harmonizing and the acknowledgment of their equal standing. The physical machines and accompanying media within my work become interlocked, each holding attributes the other could not. This delicate balance that plays on desperation and clumsy physicality, while housing sophisticated video work, addresses the body's alienation within existence.

The understanding of what a Human *is* can be readily defined by symmetry and body, but human existence is more abstract. Hypermodernity allows both biology and technology to exist within an art and social context. I derive my understanding of the figure and mental landscapes from that duality.

Any archives⁵ I produce use self derived data. Auto-correcting algorithms, video, or html code, is how I define the term "digital" in my practice, and how the data is collected. These collections accumulate by consistent short footage and images generated from myself, as well as collecting from the algorithms I used everyday like the auto-correcting algorithm on my phone. Machines or systems that pair with the archives give way to the cyborgian nature of the sculpture, suspending it in a figure dependant on technology in order to act. The use of technology in works such as *Encounter with a Cyborg* (fig. 1, fig.1.5) or *COPAL* (fig. 2, fig. 2.5) references science fiction or machines that are suspended in fantasy. Through a filter of fiction and reality, my work becomes self portraits that negotiate my own form and how it has changed through virtual disembodiment⁶.

My interests lie in communication and archived information becoming facets of identity or completely autonomous on their own. When I allow my archived body⁷ to be

⁴ Hypermodernity or super modernity is a stage of society that focuses on technology and biology within the scope of sociology. This expands to the understanding of cyborg and the commodification of current cyborgian living and morality. Please See *Hypermodern Times* that focuses on Lipovetsky's take on the hypermodern condition for further context.

⁵ The impulse to quantify oneself is now an integral part of culture. Nora Young examines the role of the archive and how the archive shifts social dynamics and in itself becomes autonomous. Young claims there are now negotiations between the virtual body, the mind, and the physical body in *The Virtual Self How are Digital lives are Altering the World Around Us*.

⁶ Virtual Disembodiment is a branch of disembodiment that focuses on the coded body, such as an avatar and the exchange between what this thesis qualifies The Self (in Cartesian Dualism this is considered the Conscious). This leaves the physical body "docked" and disregards its existence on many levels, creating another facet of disembodiment..

⁷ Referring to *Terminal Identity*: "The artificial mind becomes a body on its own (albeit a noncorporeal one), rendering the human superfluous once more" (Burkham p.16).

projected into space, my understanding of virtual disembodiment⁸ becomes visualized. The archived self then becomes split from the physical self. This split is seen through timed blinking and breaths. The archive's limitations are set and nothing new can be gained. This artifice creates a particular self that is both me and not me. With that understanding, we can substitute the term archive with terms like copy or replica.⁹ This self-induced simulacrum is often associated with Azuma's theories on the shift in the world's understanding of the human role, now known as the grand non-narrative.¹⁰

This shift into grand non-narrative creates an path for the individual in society, e.g. a lack of an American Dream Narrative. The individual's call to duty is unclear due to a contemporary privilege in a data driven society that allows cognition to choose multiple paths. This same mode exists in video games where restarting, saving, or reloading are options. Due to the nature of databases¹¹, our database-driven society maintains a record of our prior selves. The speed at which identity can be downloaded and deinstalled is faster than physical changes in the body.

Because of this, one's identity becomes at odds with the body, sometimes only performing in spaces that the body doesn't have literal physical representation, e.g., the internet. This exposes itself in my work as the characters, but more often references things beyond role play such as classical literature and embodied emotions.

As the individuals allow themselves to be archived through digital media and online platforms they begin to assume multiple personas¹², duplicating themselves each

⁸ "There are two particular ways that the virtual body is frequently discussed: the disembodied essence of a person's mind in cyberspace and the consequent representation of a person's identity as a virtual body in cyberspace. The 'disembodiment' discourse focuses around allowing the mind to wander" *Body, Self, and Technology* by Murray, CD & Sixsmith.

⁹ This is a reference to Moe-elements in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Hiroki Azuma, (location 991). A classification of specific elements that were then mass produced within multiple characters to appeal to mass audiences. This creates commodified character types that are copied to fill a particular role within narrative (here it is specifically a reference to Japanese anime and manga).

¹⁰ Grand Non-Narrative refers to *Otaku Japan's Database Animal*, Hiroki Azuma, (location 904). This term describes the deterioration of what we consider to be the American Dream, which then is supplemented with fiction to pacify the lack of societal narrative.

¹¹ The deterioration of narrative is implying the ability for a mass amount of information to be stored but as queries are entered into spaces such as *Google* or *Yahoo* the answers to the questions regularly shift depending on word choices, advertisements, or meta-tags. Azuma implies that our media, culture, and internal dialogue is now based off of the shifting answers we receive in database systems. The answers are always unstable because of the constant incurrence of data and monopolization for the listing order of the information received.

¹² *Otaku Japan's Database Animal* associates plurality with the need to meet the demands of a database. Constantly reconfiguring the Self for the situation at hand. *Me Myself and Us* implies

time they press save. My work explores the glass box that is held around the most intimate part of my identity, one that is the most pure form of me, yet is inaccessible. It gives my archive a sense of authority and independency from my own body that in turn separates me from my own reflection. The encouragement of fluidity has actually succeeded in separating me from myself.

The Character of Cyborg and Systems:

“Our best machines are made of sunshine, they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum and these machines eminently portable, mobile... People are nowhere near so fluid being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence.”- Donna Haraway

This quotation is a reference to the idea that human is cyborg and how cyborgian theory plays into validating 21st century notions of intimacy and self¹³. To clarify, the hero's journey most often refers to literature that arches in trials and errors that develop the character. Understanding the psychological plane as narrative allows an individual to recognize themselves as the protagonist to their own perception. My work aligns most readily with the understanding of the cyborgian narrative¹⁴. The archived self is suspended in a housing, which implies the presence of a body. This split is rooted in Western philosophy and contains a narrative of its own, a journey back to embodiment or a permanent rupture from the body. Much like the hero's journey having a specific role

we have set characteristics that do not change, but minor ones that can. These have the potential to totally alter what the Self is initially considered to be.

¹³ Donna Haraway cites the cyborgian narrative, in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, starting in the early 20th century with contemporary medicine and war. “By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality (digital versus physical), the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (p 150).

¹⁴ Cyborgian narrative from the perspective of Donna Haraway: “A cyborg is cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (pg. 149). By being a part of a fiction one assumes it has a narrative. Within the *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Chapter 8) Haraway describes the narrative as a freeing one but also identifies key issues with the cyborg: “The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity”. This leads to a continual narrative of internal dialogue questioning the accuracy of reality and the accuracy of the Self being represented.

within developing a male dominated society, the cyborg plays a particular role in disembodiment.

The split of the identity and the body, as discussed in Cartesian's idea of the cartesian-split¹⁵ as well as Descartes mind-body dualism, dates to the mid 1600's. The individual qualities of the Cyborgian split is its ability to deal with virtual reality, and its coded self, versus the physical reality. The introduction to Cartesian Dualism and its relationship with technology happened within early computer theory¹⁶. This slippage between human and technology as well as the body and the mind addresses the virtual disembodiment. I discuss the navigation between those three elements addressing my own internal isolation, and multiplicity that is implied in a fluid identity.¹⁷

Self-actualizing has never been without its trials, but examining specific trials within the digital plain has shifted both the vocabulary and flexibility around labeling the Self and the process by which this happens. Personal experience backed by sociology trends pointed out by writers and theorists such as Donna Haraway and Hiroki Azuma, lead me to examine my own fracturing.

A cyborg's conflict is internal. The focus within a typical cyborgian narrative is the pressure that attempts to strip the coded self from the housing; this pressure oscillates between external and internal pressures. This internal conflict is also a huge part of the hero's journey. Many examples of this start with a character's call to action that includes trials in order to come to moments of truth or self clarity. With the cyborg there is more a sense of shutting down and escapism that happens¹⁸. This cyborgian split and its relationship to disembodiment gives my work a sense of separation. Through using the Self as a pliable material I view my sculptures as separate splits that, much like the archives, are me but are not me, which gives the work plurality.

¹⁵ Cartesian Split and Mind Body-Dualism is a set of philosophy theories that questions the relationship of the body and the mind. It changed Western thinking to view the body as a separate entity rather than the mind and body as a whole.

¹⁶ See Katherine Hayles *How we became Posthuman*

¹⁷ Fluid identity implied in *Me, Myself and Us*, Brian R. Little (p.46) discusses the idea of "Free Traits" which are unfixed personality traits that can be bent depending on the situation. This fluidity is used within the work where these "Free Traits" are isolated and exaggerated.

¹⁸ Referenced specifically to *Serial Experiments: Lain* (1998) discussed in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from origins to Anime*, Christopher Bolton:

"A young girl who delves into an online virtual reality called "The Wired," eventually comes to suspect that she is an entirely virtual being" (location 253).

Donna Haraway describes the cyborg in *A Cyborg Manifesto* as a freedom from many labels and binaries within the 1990's. My work nods to that fluidity but also holds tight to the increased disembodiment¹⁹ experienced today. The cyborg is particularly concerned with virtual disembodiment and disembodiment from the post-industrial revolution where the body was objectified as a machine and valued for its resources. This vocabulary manifests in my own installations that are systems of identity.

I explore contemporary self-actualizing through a certain type of self portraiture. Nothing relates to the physical being except for the archive. The housing I create is often bulky and relational only to the figure as a container seen in works such as *Windows 98* (fig. 3). This creates a system for not only how I actively participate in my own reality, but also how I can characterize myself within multiplicity: often as a system looking outward. I take the label of machine and relate myself readily to it. Thus, my work is cyborgian by nature, just as I am.

Literature and New Narratives for Cyborgs:

These systems are individual characters and can also be placed in stories and narratives that are beyond self-rupture. This intimacy has been seen in pieces such as *Romeo and Juliet* (fig. 4) and *Catfishing Julius Caesar* (fig. 5, fig. 5.5), where I examined narratives beyond internal conflict to expose contemporary notions of intimacy and relationships. *Romeo and Juliet* is a gesture of two mice painted with caution orange connected via a singular cord, implying the intimacy that can happen within virtual spaces. *Catfishing Julius Caesar* was a compressed reclining figure created from a tv set in the corner running a looped video, a silver pillow, and a drop cloth blanket. The video displayed a screen capture of a chatroom where I played three different characters. Changing from tab to tab, I explored the intimacy between my other selves and the idea of betrayal within a virtual space.

Cyborgian systems are also a place of female power, and sexualization. This empowerment through technology and female form often went through a sexualization

¹⁹ Disembodied theory as it relates to technology and escapism. Discussed by Simon Penny's essay *Enlightenment*, in terms of technology, specifically VR, "reinforces the Cartesian duality, replacing the body with a body image, a creation of mind, as all objects in VR are a product of mind. As such it is a clear continuation of the rationalist dream of disembodied mind, part of the long Western tradition of denial of the body."

and fetishistic filter before it was an accepted heroin. Like most classical literature the cyborg still relied on the male gaze to accept its authoritative purpose²⁰. My work purposefully removes the physical figure and opts for a housing more similar to the way we understand a printer: a plastic shell around the internals.

The systems exploit my own relationship to body and consciousness that refer to narratives beyond the cyborg as well. *Soliloquy* (fig. 6, fig. 6.5) is a system that looks into the moment of rupture, which uses Oedipus Rex's rupture within the play as a source. It distills the narrative to the greatest point of action: when the body and the *assumed* Self are at odds. There is an implied desperation to understand the context of one's own identity in relationship to the physical body it is being represented in. With Oedipus' rupture becoming a spectacle as he questions his relationship to those who surround him, I identify that desperation as a point of disembodiment.

Soliloquy is suspended in that rupture and search as a representation of intrapersonal communication²¹. This is reiterated through the representation of the eye and inner eye as sight and senses relates to Dualism. The inner eyes are the archive, searching the internal structure, while the outer eyes break down into the two types of lenses: the convex outer lense that relates to the shape of the eye and the side lenses that flip and magnetize imagery. This intrapersonal communication within the piece creates its autonomy. It is presenting its own anxiety and is performing the highest point of rising action. The work is a visualization of internal searching and questioning the legitimacy of the Self. It reveals a hollowness and a crystallization of what can be considered past interactions or interpreted as void attempts of self-actualizing. Taking cues from Oedipus Rex and subverting the character into a cyborgian self-portrait exploits the narrative that happens within myself: a negotiation of identity that is both personal and related to otherness.

²⁰ Referencing Moe-elements within *Otaku the Japanese Database Animal*. Seeing that Moe was mainly driven by men's fetishistic desires which drove them to consume more anime. Thus there is now an established pattern of a female body that sells in a database driven society. It is a re-contextualization of the same body and the same characteristics.

²¹ A psychological term for the narrative that runs in the head. This also includes multiplicity, holding multiple voices of reason within a mental space. Discussed in *Me, Myself, and Us*, Brian R. Little, (p 204, 210) the idea of reinterpreting personality and constructed realities deals directly with changing one's internal dialogue.

The Projected Self and Internal Monologues

“The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name arkhe. But it also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it.” -Jacques Derrida

The continuation of narrative and character stems from a need to understand the Self and the body. In my work the self-portraiture stems from archiving; filming short bursts focusing on actions that range from brushing my hair to blinking. I am voyeuristically watching my own body in an attempt to subvert a disembodied state. These actions are repeated and describe me not only to the audience but also to myself. The act of recentering²² into the body also deals with the realization that I am alien to it.

The documentation of my body seen in pieces such as *Apogee* (fig. 7, fig. 7.5) and *Perigee* (fig. 8) center around particular moments which focus on the eyes or emoting. The archives capture moments that the body is split from the consciousness or moments of embodiment. By abstracting the face I look for tells in the mouth, the brows, or the eyes, that give way to the particular relationship this state has to the physical body which is then manifested into objects.

Hunting for small moments among the video and then multiplying those clips creates a new timeline. This new copy splits and is a limited version of myself, a singular expression of abstract moments of being. This copy performs for me by navigating physical objects or housing. However, the copy is not me as it lacks my roundedness²³, memories, and trauma. The tension between the physical object's compatibility and the copy becomes representational of abstract human conditions that are both personal and separated from me.

The Body and the Prop

The body shelters the Self from reality, a simulacrum that exists internally. Within my work the body is represented as a “machine prop.” This means the object maintains the façade of machine while protecting the internal self which is digitally archived media.

²² Recentering or the act of becoming Embodied.

²³ This refers to a literary term for round character. A round character typically develops through the plot and is complex. It does not hinge on a singular characteristic and the narrative is dependant on the character's ability to change.

The physical objects are bulky and act as an anchor to reality. Sometimes the objects attempt to capture the Self; in works such as *Apogee* (fig. 7, fig. 7.5), this is seen as a net that is cast into the gallery space to hold the video archive. The inability to capture the Self creates tension between the container or object and the video.

The physical objects are props which holds true to the literary nature of this work. Creating the façade of a machine, or container, the objects lack a sexual magnetism in the forms. These objects are abstracted from science fiction and then placed in space to perform as barriers for the archived self. The human aspects of the machines are dependant on the size in relation to the archived self and moments of change in the atmosphere, e.g., fog, light and bubbles. The work reinterprets what we consider to be a machine to present an aesthetic that is dependant on low-brow choices, suspending the machine in a tone of desperation in order to communicate what each archived self is meant to.

The Self is inextricably tied to the physicality of the body and although there is a point when the Self can reject from the body it is never fully a separate entity: they are tied together through a spectrum.

The separation of the body and the mind does not have to imply violence, which has been persistent in the history of Dualism. My work removes the violence through and empathic understanding of the body. Disembodiment can become a defense mechanism, and with that defense the body has to be maintained as a barrier between the Self and reality. The body can however become a source of confusion and much like the machines, it is a prop for what the Self identifies as. This guise questions genuine interactions between the body and the Self as well as body's interaction with others.

The tension created from a lack of self-intimacy and a longing for alignment is a point where I describe the consciousness mourning for the body. Contemporary psychology pushes for re-entry into the body, or in other words, to become Embodied. However, although there is a longing between the two the tension that pulls them apart is the rejection of reality for the simulacrum inside one's head. An example of this tension can be seen in *Phobos and Deimos* (fig. 9) which uses the entire gallery as a body while the virtual self orbits in and out of the architecture. The body's mass is planetary in this work and the selves orbit that mass. The understanding of body in other works address the surface tension of the bodies border being the border between the Self and reality.

My practice addresses this tension and works both with it and against it. During points of alignment that are unforced, such as *Perigee's* (fig. 8) breath being reciprocated by the bodies in the space, the bubble machines are fleeting and rewarding. A moment of comfort within my own skin is exposed and celebrated, but more than likely not permanent.

The Role of Reflectivity and Linear Borders:

The body has barriers that are less physically defined. I understand these pieces as figurative self-portraiture, while acknowledging that these works only represent select parts of myself which are simultaneously me and not me. The virtual selves that describe disembodiment become their own negotiations. Since they are, by nature, autonomous, the space they command also has a need for “personal space”. They require a border that reaches beyond the physical objects and characterizes them within the viewing of the piece.

Often the denotation of personal space exists through visual lines that are set to mimic caution lines used in factories or parking lots. The denotation of where the machine lives and the space it is meant to occupy describes the reach of the body. It places the viewer on the stage with it and dictates the narrative. In particular, the lines that are laid around machines are meant to evoke a sense of caution or potential for bodily harm; it also provides a specific space for people to navigate around the machine. In traditional understandings of disembodiment there is also a question of losing the figure's idea of spatial awareness²⁴. The lines on the floor anchor the machine and the audience's bodies to the space, allowing the digital and conscious aspects to float and become ethereal elements.

Reflective material is used within these works to refract the Self within certain pieces, something seen within *Apogee* (fig. 7, fig 7.5). The reflection reiterates the distance between my own being and the sculptures. Once split from my body the archived or virtual self reflects on selected aspects of the actual me, whether it be

²⁴ By leaving the body the ability to understand the space that exists around the body leaves as well (commented on again within *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams* when examining *Serial Experiments Lain*)

moments such as *COPAL* (fig. 2, fig. 2.5) where it reflects a sense of vulnerability or *Soliloquy* (fig 6) where it reflects on losing one's identity. The reflection or refraction exists to represent an abstraction of myself and my emotions.

Concluding

Examining the relationship of the body and the mind leads to questions of contemporary intimacy, self care, and continual societal corruption. My work examines the distance between the body and the mind without pursuing a full embodied or disembodied experience. This split is a necessary coping mechanism in contemporary society, and although dualism exists, my work considers this to be another spectrum of living. Another point of fluidity within our bodies is the need to protect the mind from the reality of the body and the world in which it exists. The body itself has become simulated through archiving and although a sliding scale of disembodiment exists, how the self finds its way back to the body has become reimagined through technology. Through an understanding of the timed inhales and exhales my work phases between being both virtual and physical; mimicking myself, being me and not being me.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: *An Encounter with A Cyborg*, 2017



figure

Figure 1.5: *An Encounter with A Cyborg*, Video Still, 2017



Figure 2: COPAL The Cryogenic Tank, 2017



Figure 2.5 COPAL: The Cryogenic Tank, Lens Still, 2017

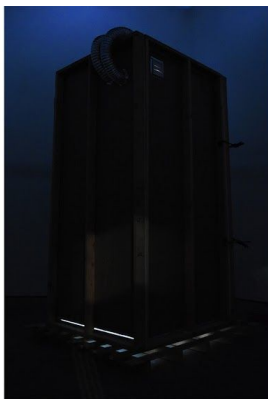


Figure 3: *Windows 98*, Performance Stills, 2017

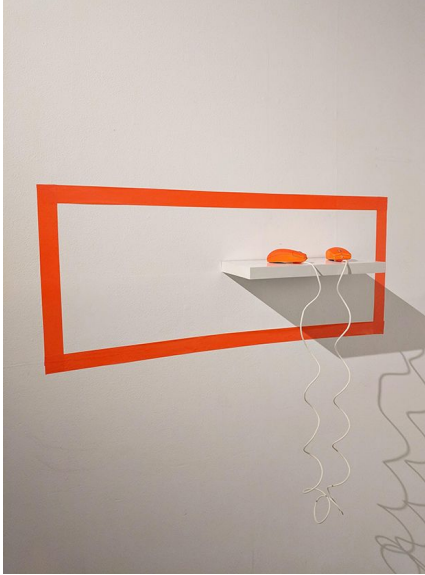


Figure 4: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2018



Figure 5: *Catfishing Julius Caesar*, 2018

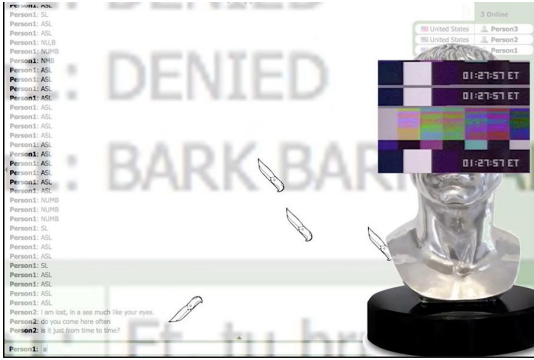


Figure 5.5: *Catfishing Julius Caesar*, Video Still, 2018



Figure 6: *Soliloquy*, 2018



Figure 6.5: *Soliloquy*, Video Still, 2018



Figure 7: *Appogee*, 2018

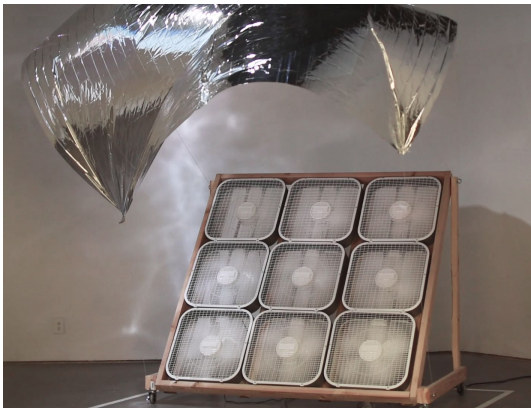


Figure 7.5: *Appogee, Object*, 2018

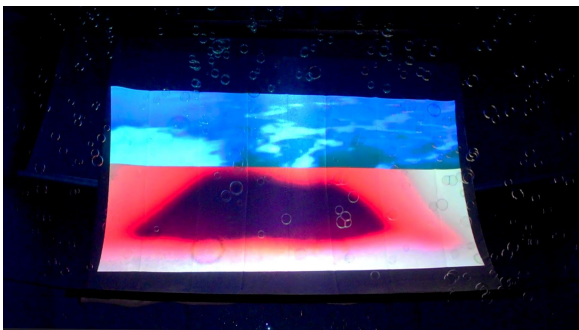


Figure 8: *Perigee*, 2018

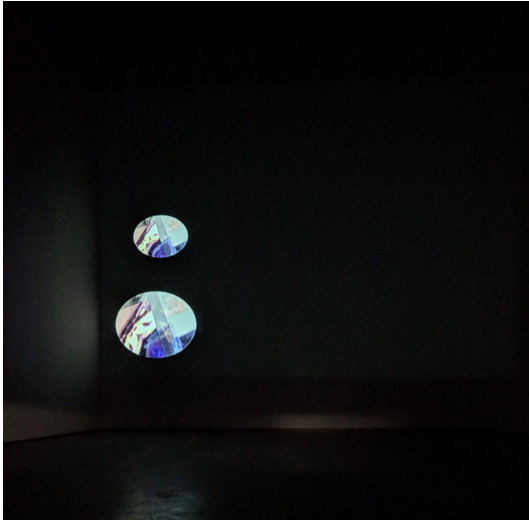


Figure 9: *Phobos and Deimos*, 2017

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