

(im)possible futures and (im)probable pasts

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

Signed

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Abstract

This research project explores ideas around the storage and transmission of memory, myth and experience. The concept of an impossible community, one that exposes personal and historical narratives through physical presences is considered in relation to the possibilities that occur when the two collide. Without channelled intervention the project cannot exist. Through a physical negotiation a portal is opened into the present. The latent is brought into being. The question arises, how can a site of maximum energy mergence be both identified and occupied?

Intrigued by this transformative potential of presence; the project is rooted in my ongoing negotiations, collaborations and performative interactions with local subcultures. It is my intention to imbue audiences with a new communal mythology – a multilayered 'Chinese whisper', tales of supernatural lust, anxiety and a desire for (im)possible futures and (im)probable pasts.

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Introduction

This research project pursues an extended engagement with the intersections of real and imagined experience. Through my collaboration with performers and performative communities – including psychic mediums, barbershop quartets, friends, family and strangers on opposite ends of the world – I seek to both form and negotiate narratives, which span across time zones. Since my return from a year long postgraduate exchange at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), School of Fine Art in Pittsburgh, PA in August 2012, the project has grown into a globe spanning collaboration, linking sites across oceans and disparate communities, that are in essence both real and imagined.

In this exegesis, I will explore ideas around the storage and transmission of memory, myth and experience, key concepts and theories that are influential to my art making. My work and projects are driven by process, by which I mean that they are purposefully open-ended and responsive, and it is through the central themes of physical and metaphysical displacement, desire, and a longing for guidance or inclusion that I build and curate experiences that are, in themselves, similarly open-ended and malleable. In my work, I am focused on embracing uncertainty, and on pulling out the proverbial stick-in-the-sand, in order to let both change and chance swirl around me. This is addressed through an exploration of role-playing, translation, the embodiment of desire through performative play, fiction and belief in the supernatural. Throughout this analysis, I negotiate between historical fact and traditions of myth and storytelling, moving accordingly between two modes of delivery and understanding. In my artistic work, I see myself not only as a teller of stories, but as a curator of experiences, a role which forces me to analyse the conflicting threads of fact and fiction in any story, but especially those that I myself try to tell. In order to theorize both the separations

and the connections between fact and fiction, I use storytelling, objective description, and theoretical analysis.

Negotiating Fact and Fiction

My work prioritises a responsive approach, allowing both intuition and speculation to guide the process of discovery. The emphasis is firmly on the process of (self)-discovery, either to do with ideas of understanding or of something making sense in the realm of everyday logic. This process of unearthing – which consists first of locating points of personal fascination, and then immersing myself in that fascination, no matter how illogical – is as fundamental to the work as the eventual endpoint. Our experiences and memories, I believe, are clusters of compromising and forever clashing systems of logic and belief. Within my practice, I am interested in occupying the overlaps and liminal spaces within these systems. Such liminal spaces interest me in their ability to embody both fact and fiction; as I see it, spaces which require the simultaneous compromise of both logic and belief, have the potential to yield fascinating interrogations of both of these modes of thought. I furthermore choose to see myself as both an occupant and intermediary in these spaces, negotiating and translating their meaning, even while I am creating that meaning through my own participation. A spiritual 'medium', for example, embodies many things: a medium is an intermediary between the physical and spiritual world, or the space between galaxies for instance, but also functions as a human receiver (and sender) of communications transmitted via an invisible source.

II. Scouting Heretical Alignments (July 2013)

An example of working within a liminal space was explored in my project *Scouting Heretical Alignments*. This was created as part of *Transforming Topographies*, a large-scale project developed for *The Lab* at Auckland Art Gallery by AUT Visual Arts and Spatial Design for the 5th Auckland Triennial. Together with artist Mandy Thomsett-Taylor and Natalie Huggard, President of the New Zealand Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums, the work operated as a one-off performative event that occurred between 7 and 10am – before the art gallery opened – on the first day of the 21-day project and habitation in *The Lab*. The event also generated a video work, which was then presented on the final day of *Transforming Topographies* in *The Lab*.

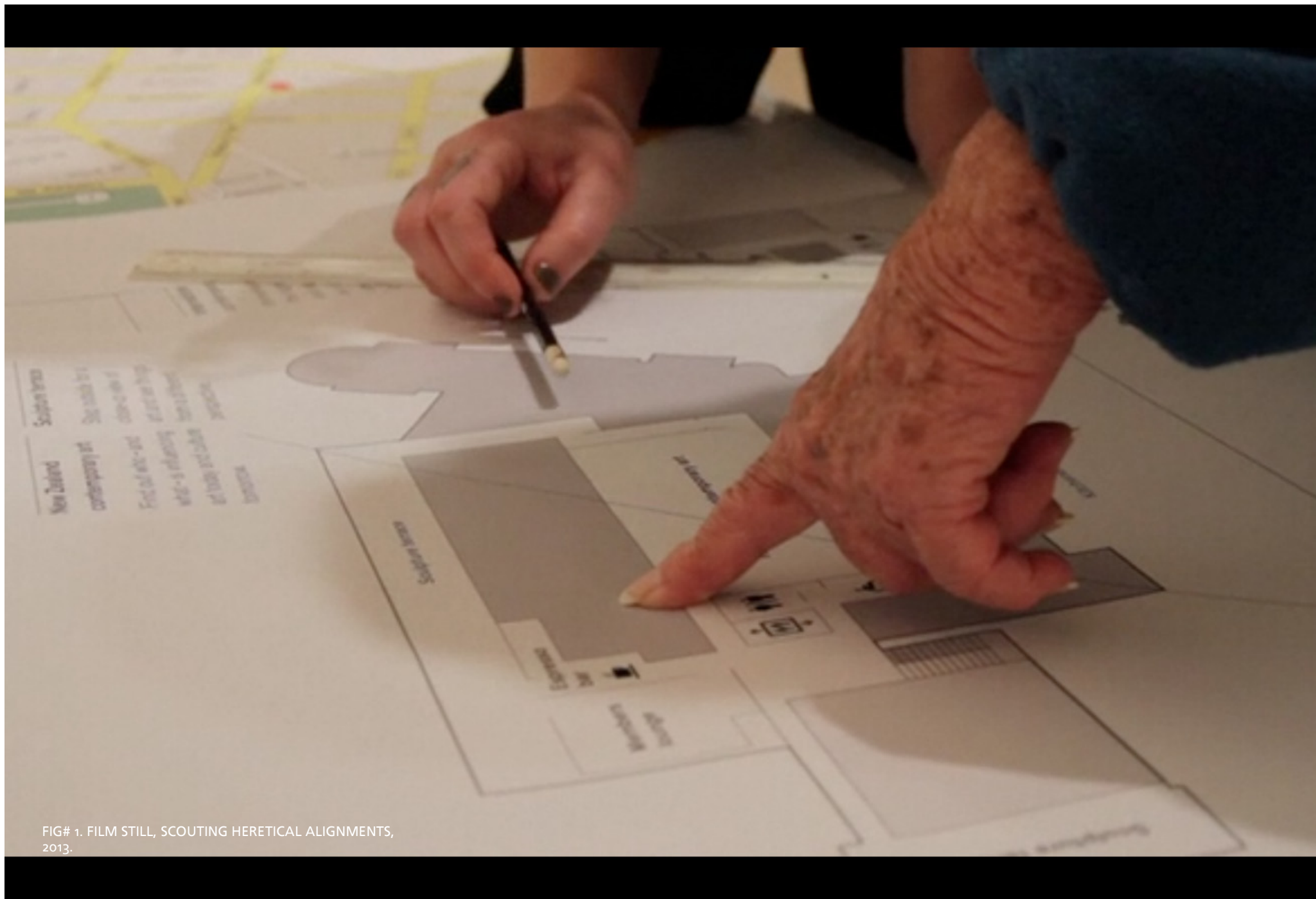
With *Scouting Heretical Alignments*, the aim was to map the ley lines that run through the building footprint of the Auckland Art Gallery. Ley lines are an invisible web of energy that criss-cross the terrestrial landscape; almost like the human acupuncture meridians that define the body's energy field, they exist in an intricate and precise matrix. Where these 'ley lines' intersect, an energy eddy or vortex occurs, which is often referred to as the 'earth chakras' or power places on the earth's surface. These power places are seen as electrical switch points or energy transducers spread around the planet, all intersecting and tuned to particular electromagnetic frequencies, somewhat like a crystal radio. They locate and chart particular sites on the earth that are invested with power. Using dowsing rods and a wooden pendulum to identify the ley lines that ran through the site, we sought to locate both the positive and negative energy fields and to mark them out with string and tape, as an act of live drawing. Our aim was to shift the energy; negative energy lines would be directed away from the building, whilst positive energy lines would be pulled in towards an identifiable and exact site

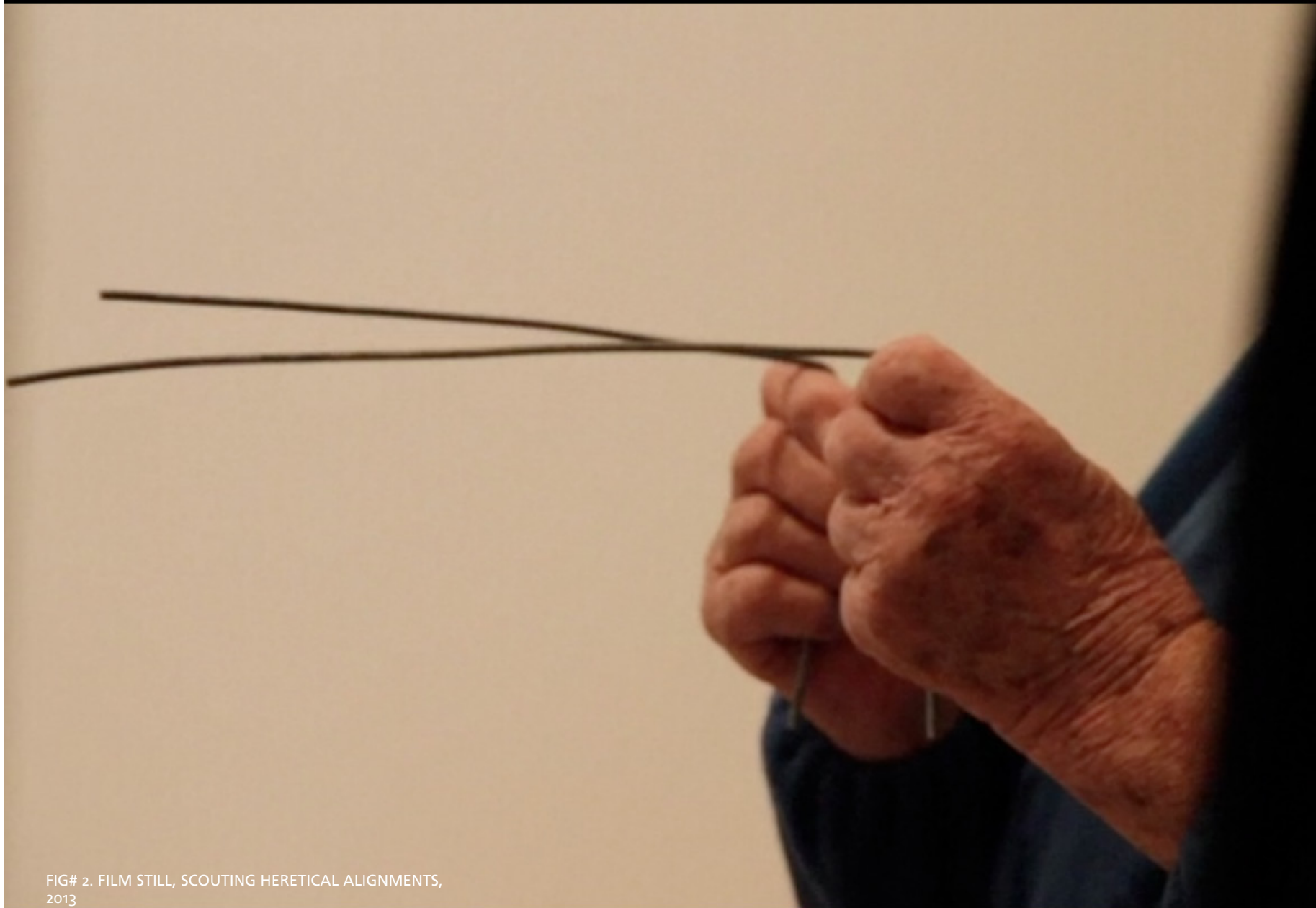
within *The Lab* space.

Scouting Heretical Alignments ruminates on the concept of an impossible community, one that exposes historical narratives with physical presence into one space, and then wonders about the possibilities that may occur when the two collide. It is through direct human engagement and intervention that enables the conversation with the past to occur in the 'now'. This occurs successfully when a Medium helps to negotiate the liminal space existing between the distant and the here. Without channelled intervention the project (event) cannot exist, its energy lays untapped, residing in a state of dormancy. Through our physical negotiation of space a portal is opened into the present. And the latent is brought into being.

Creating Story

A large component of *Scouting Heretical Alignments* involved examining more thoroughly the use of process as both methodology and concept. By curating a situation whereby a particular set of elements are placed within a space and then left to unfold, I relinquished some control over what might happen, instead letting the work reveal its self through its process and action. I also wanted to ponder how the residue of the event – left on the floor of *The Lab* space in the form of tape x's on the floor – and the story or possible stories attached to it, could encourage people to renegotiate their understandings of that space. But above all, I was fundamentally interested in building a good story, for both myself, and as a means of promoting a narrative around the event to serve as a starting point for *Transforming Topographies*. By creating a story that would exist within the space of the project, I saw myself playing an active role in the process of myth-





FIG# 2. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS,
2013



FIG# 3. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS,
2013

creation. So, while the x's were left in the space, no explanation was given to aid in their interpretation, causing gallery visitors and staff to entertain their own speculations.

Storytelling is a vital part of comprehension and living awareness, and sensing that stories would be told anyway, regardless of whether or not they were true, I purposefully divulged specific information to encourage alternate interpretations, encouraging the possibilities brought about by prompted story creation. The materials used to 'mark' the event (tapings) were specifically patterned in response to the performance itself and configured in a way not to be confused with random markings found in the gallery. In terms of materiality, the marks themselves became a live representation of the event, or a residue of action — and an embodiment of the energy sources within the space. A tangible live drawing that made unseen forces visible. Once an energy point is identified, you become aware of all other possible energy fields within the site. Identifying select areas within the considerable scale of the gallery emphasizes their weight and relevance. The marks become the surface point into real space and time. They become the proof continuum of life within the narrative.

Documenting the Event

As the event unfolded over the course of the three hours before the gallery was open to the public, it was recorded by Joe Jowitt. The ensuing video was then edited and reinstalled as a looped video projection in The Lab for the duration of the last day of the project — in the same way that the event had created an entry into the space, the projection acted as an endpoint to *Transforming Topographies*



FIG# 4. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS, 2013.

and a revealing of actions past.

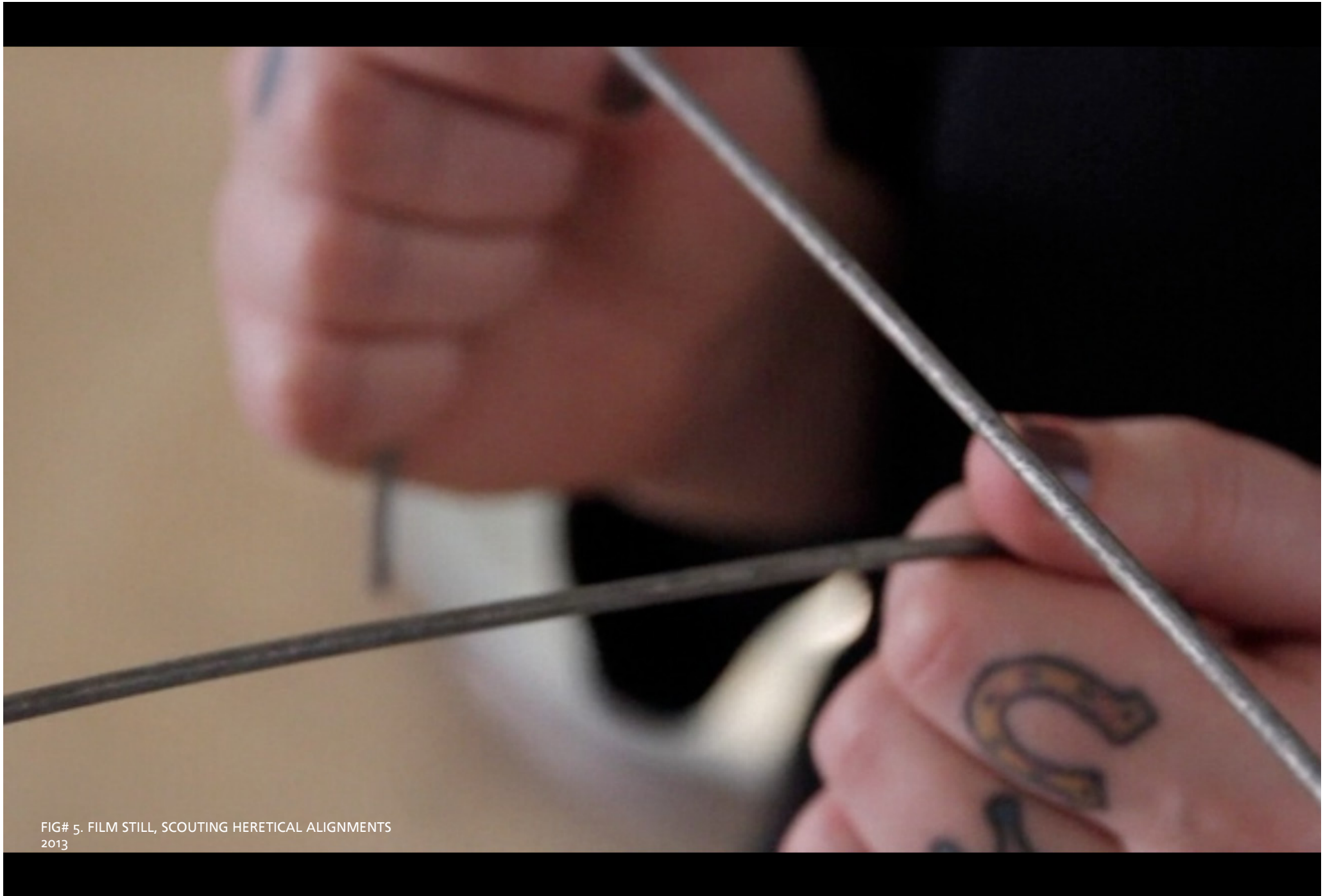
In producing the video work, I sought to instil feelings of curiosity, confusion and mystery by not offering straightforward explanations. The work begins with selected contextual footage that identifies the site and to some extent our intent; it also includes the voice of Natalie Huggard as she begins to map the ley lines available in the building. However the dialogue fades quickly and is replaced with a kind of soft soundtrack almost resembling meditation music. It is built around tight shots that focus on the actions of our hands and tools, along with parts of maps, the floor and energy space, as well as the action of locating these with the tapings. The process of documentation was never intended as illustration but rather as a component of the work, which is why the decision was made for this film to retain its cryptic tone and mirror the mystery of the event itself. I wanted the video to be able to carry itself, and exist both as an extension of the narrative whilst still offering some insight into what had occurred. I wanted to capture and communicate the residue of the event – that of action and energy, but without the kind of explanation that might prevent viewers' imaginations from creating their own stories and myths about the event.

The site of the overall event was additionally important, as the ley lines revealed energy fields relating back to chapters in the specific history of Auckland Art Gallery and the land upon which it resides. In some instances, even before the building itself existed there. This brings me back to my premise of looking to craft experiences (by which I mean building and experimenting with a new skill, like dousing) that are rooted in impossible communities – that is, real communities that have existed in the physical site's pre-European past – through connecting those histories and stories to the ones created by the experiences and imaginations

of contemporary viewers in the gallery. Through observing the video component living communities were invited to read, feel, and experience the site in an imaginative, impossible context; linking their present and very human experience to any number of other similar, abstractly invented human experiences.

I saw my intentions with this work as comparable to New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell, in his work *Gateway to the Etheric Realm* (2011). In this piece, Mitchell utilises methods that draw on the professional skills of an enlisted pagan witch to cast a spell that maps and defines a designated space, described by Mitchell as a process of "'kneading together of two perspectives'.... the first is 'what we feel/we know' through empirical... The second is an activation of 'what we can't know' through employing that which is philosophically and epistemologically problematic. This is exemplified in my use of magical thinking, conjuring and spell making." (Mitchell, 2011, p. 8).

Mitchell's work, *Gateway to the Etheric Realm* (2011), is physically existent as "a repeated and interlocking metal structure delineat[ing] a field of activity, in which a witch has worked during installation to open a gateway to the etheric realm. Trace elements are found on the ground – the residue of the spell-making process. The spell is deactivated during de-installation." (Mitchell, 2011, p. 42) One might note conceptual similarities between our two practices: we are both operating at the thresholds of the rational and irrational, the visible and invisible. I, however, am less focused on defining a space and more on working to *reveal* a space – the revealing or unearthing of a space is itself my conceptual method.



FIG# 5. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS
2013



FIG# 6. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS,
2013

Methods

Dousing rods react to water; both primary and secondary, primary water moves straight up and secondary water runs in a stream. Primary water is important to occult and Spiritualist beliefs in channelling power; but the practice of dousing has also long been used as a way to find water for wells. Ley lines and energy fields are linked to this underground water. Pendulums are used to ask Spirits questions about the energy and to receive knowledge around the type of energy being encountered.

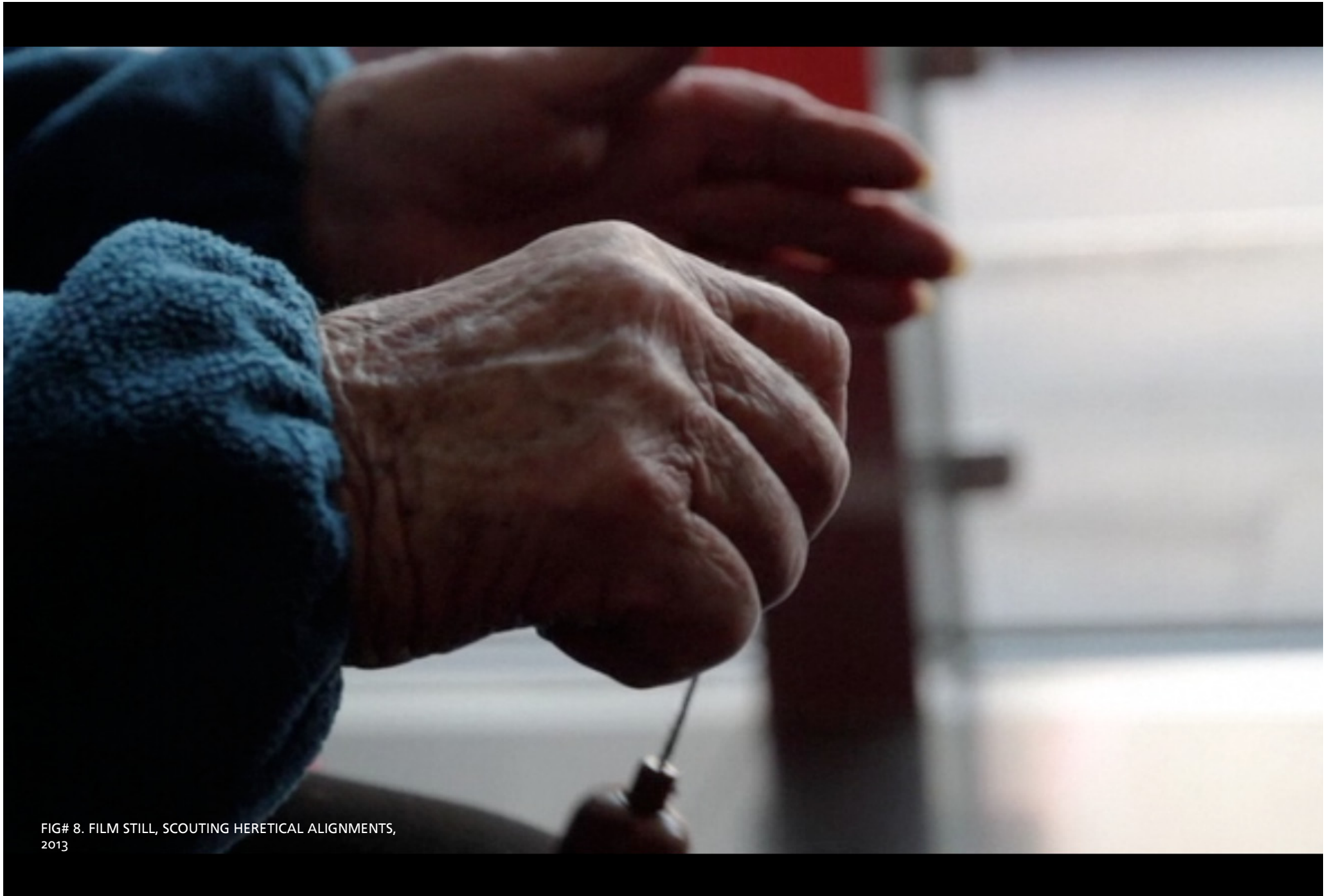
Though the project's initial impetus was to perform an expulsion of the negative energy contained in the space, with the aim of creating an optimum emergence of positive energy in its place, ultimately the goal was to connect, through direct inquiry, with the actual energy of the space. Doing this requires first identifying the negative energy and then clearing it from the site. Once a negative point is determined then a series of questions must be asked to ascertain its historical significance. If the inquiry reveals a particular occurrence that has created the energy then it can be cleared through another series of inquiries that requests the release of the negativity from the space. The process is intuitive, based on an instinctual response between a tangible and intangible energy force. For the purposes of *Scouting Heretical Alignments*, the taped marks were positioned on the point of inquiry to signify the residue of each event.

Public buildings, in particular, contain variable energy levels that are both current and residual, they are multi-layered. due to scale of the building we quickly discovered it was not possible to cleanse the entire space of the negative energy. There are simply too many layers due to the persistent ebb and flow of people and objects that contribute heavily to the complex matrix of energy and history within

the site. This was one of the reasons the event had to occur in the early hours, to avoid energy interference. The other was to create a zone appropriate for this kind of event to take place, reasonably unpeopled. The optimum time to experience tranquility in the gallery was early in the morning, prior to opening hours, whilst the gallery was still closed and had had the night before to settle and neutralise. It is for this reason that our small team of intrepid spiritualist scouts set off from the Pak n'Save carpark in Mt Albert at 5.30am, to be escorted around the Auckland Art Gallery by a bemused security guard.



FIG# 7. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS,
2013.



FIG# 8. FILM STILL, SCOUTING HERETICAL ALIGNMENTS,
2013

III. Otherness, Foreignness and Lily Dale

This research stems from my experiences of foreignness – of living as an outsider and understanding myself as a transient observer of a given community's rituals – which is what occurred while I was based in Pittsburgh, PA from the Fall of 2011 until the Spring of 2012. Throughout my stay, I encountered a vastly different array of communities, from banjo clubs to a barbershop quartet to a historic American fraternal order and social club called the Elks. Likewise during this time, I interacted with the Spiritualist community of Lily Dale. Located in Chautauqua County, New York State about an hour outside of Buffalo, Lily Dale is the home of the Modern Spiritualist Movement. During the summer months the atmosphere is almost theme park-like, a kind of spiritual Disneyland, where anyone seeking communication with the afterlife or just 'proof' of the continuity of life can pay a fee at the gate, enter the grounds, explore and participate in the paranormal.

Despite only having 275 year-round residents, the town receives over 22,000 visitors a year, making Lily Dale a bustling hub for the spiritually aware, or spiritually curious. Services available include; medium workshops, public church services and private readings. Additionally, the site was the long term, if not original home to the now-famous house of Kate and Margaret Fox, the founders of the Modern American Spiritualist Movement.

Ron Nagy, a local historian and spiritualist guide who lives in Lily Dale, details the history of the community in his book *Spirits of Lily Dale* (2010). Nagy cites an 1869 *New York Herald* report on the greater region of Western New York and its extraordinary history (which I cite here at length for the sake of historical context)

One remarkable fact is again brought before us in this gathering of idealists and fanatics, and that is, that Western New York is the birthplace, home and refuge of the wildest theories and of all the isms that spring up to agitate society. Abolitionism, which has cost so much blood, brought upon us such a

stupendous debt and jeopardized our republican institutions, grew up to be a mighty power there. Mormonism and its author, Joe Smith, were born there. John Brown was from that region. Communism at Oneida, on Lake Erie, and at other points spring into life and flourishes only in that part of New York. Bloomerism [feminism] sprung up there. It was at Rochester that the Fox family commenced their knockings and laid the foundation of modern Spiritualism. Indeed, there is hardly a phase of socialism, communism, religious fanaticism, political theory or agitation or of infidelity that is neither born or receives its growth in Western New York ... Western New York is a rich country naturally, is central, and once again certain isms were started there followed another as a natural consequence until that region became a hotbed of them all, and of every new one that springs up. The only way to treat them is to let them alone, unless they become dangerous to the morals or of peace of society, and they will die out in time through the progress of intelligence and march of a higher civilization. (New York Herald, 1869, qtd. In Nagy, xiii-xiv)

The author of this specific article, who is not named, blames the region of Western New York for a wide range of social ills – everything from communism to feminism. His eventual conclusion, that this region is better off "let ... alone," speaks to the way that the Lily Dale community, even now, seemingly chooses to isolate itself from the rest of the world. In my experience, there is a sense of deep, insider pride, and of elitism, in this community. This close, feedback loop of insider knowledge and repeated storytelling helps to explain the myths that survive about the community, its history, and its conceptual origins. This kind of proud isolation also helps to explain how Lily Dale residents – and the wider spiritualist community, all around the world – continue to uphold the tenets of spiritualism in spite of challenges made to those beliefs, and in spite of the movement's history, much of which indicates traditions of manipulation or perhaps sleight of hand and trickery.

The Fox sisters, for instance, who are still credited with inspiring the Spiritualist Movement and belief systems, were notoriously revealed as frauds in 1888, and subsequently discredited by believers and non-believers alike¹. The Modern American Spiritualist Movement, flourished in their wake, with the relocation of the sisters' original house from its foundations in Hydesville, NY, to the newly formed spiritualist camp of Lily Dale lending its weight. The sisters' story is still considered a fantastic hoax by some, and absolute truth by others: the interesting thing to me is the fact that the Modern American Spiritualist Movement didn't need the Fox sisters in the end, and that it was the myth they created that propelled the future of the movement. A town, in the form of a shrine, was erected in their honour and true believers continue to pilgrim there for, as Nancy Stuart notes,

Whether sceptic or believer, few Americans have been able to ignore the phenomenon known as spiritualism — the belief that spirits can communicate with the living, usually with the help of certain sensitive individuals called mediums. During the last half of the 19th century, some Americans believed that the strange rapping's heard in early séances were a spiritual telegraph, the otherworldly equivalent of Samuel F.B. Morse's new invention ... the religious and social movement inspired child mediums, outraged American clergymen, infuriated scientists and, at its peak, attracted more than 1 million American adherents. (Stuart 2006, p. 55)

¹ In 1848, when Kate and Margaret Fox were 12 and 15 years old, after a series of disturbances and strange noises in their family home in Hydesville, NY, they were discovered to be communicating with the afterlife. Or, at least with a man they called 'Mr Splitfoot'. Kate and Margaret Fox built a fantastically dubious career on the belief that a series of rappings were in fact, messages from spirits beyond the grave. With their much older sister Leah managing their careers, they enjoyed a life of considerable fame, conducting séances for the rich and curious.

However in 1888, Margaret Fox publically admitted the hoax and revealed their creation of the so-called rappings to the world. By this point though, the strength of myth was in full force, and although she then tried to retract her confession merely a year later, there were already hundreds of 'true believers'. For such people, the character crucifixion of the Fox sisters only proved to feed the strength of myth. Within five years, both sisters died in poverty and a haze of alcoholism, shunned by both their previously adoring public and spiritualist "community" alike.

Visiting Lily Dale

In October 2011, I first visited Lily Dale. I initially went there with the intention of making a video documentary work. On the one hand, it was an exercise in trying to gain a deeper understanding of my journey and time in America. On the other, it was propelled by a desire to uncover the idiosyncratic character buried beneath and behind all that surrounded me in this new land. Admittedly, these efforts were not wholly inspired by an authentic belief in a spiritual medium's abilities. Rather, my intentions were authentic and my focus was to unearth a great story.

What happened during my trips to Lily Dale was that my perceptions of "real" experience shifted. During my meeting with the Medium Gerta Lestock, I had what I can only explain as a very real spiritual experience, an experience that highlighted the significance of the space between perception and actuality. Literally, the opposite of my expectations proved true; my video equipment failed me, and while I was unable to take away solid material for my next project, I instead took away what felt like a real and strangely authentic experience. In direct relation to the various projects I had in production in Pittsburgh, this was a pivotal moment. Through my interactions with Gerta, I began to comprehend the significance of *insider* experience; I had approached the situation with familiar, yet detached interest, and now found that in order to continue, I had to fully immerse myself in an authentic experience, the very context of which itself might be *inauthentic*. Theorist Julia Kristeva discusses the notion of the stranger within each of us, and the strangeness we feel when confronted with certain issues, symbols or people. In this context, she describes the self as "a lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 269). This speaks

to my own sense of suspension; initially between two sites – the United States and New Zealand – now internalized. Strangeness, otherness and mystery are vital components of the self, and of my work.



FIG# 9. LILY DALE, NY, USA, 2011



FIG# 10. LILY DALE, NY, USA, 2011

Childhood Experience

My own childhood was similarly characterized by interactions with spiritualism and astrology; I was always, to some degree, surrounded by the ideas of spiritualism, even though I was not always consciously aware of them. I was for instance, raised by parents who had embarked on their own spiritual journeys as young adults; meditation was the norm, as they were both followers of Maharji, a Guru originally based in India. Likewise, when I was 15, my mother worked for a psychic hotline². She had a phone shaped like a pair of bright red lips in her bedroom, and when it rang she would stop whatever she was doing and transform into 'Jane'. We would be drinking tea after dinner when the shrill ring from the red lip phone interrupted us. And though we would joke that the bright red lip phone gave the whole performance an air of absurdity, like an early go's sex line, we would wonder, what the person at the other end would think if they could see this theatre?

Drawing from my childhood experiences, I have for the past two years been invested in explorations of both the spiritual world and our ability to access it through Spiritual Mediums. Here, my narratives are heavily influenced by my grandmother, Noleen. She was an artist and had both a wild imagination and a dramatic disposition; she was also the subject of my video work, *Zinnia Elegans*, 'Red Sun': A Conversation with Noleen and Phoebe (2011).

² Her name was Jane. For \$4.95 a minute you could call her and inquire about your future, ask for advice on love or guidance in making a tough decision about your job. She would always answer your call and she would always have an answer. I remember she often worked the Sunday night shift; we would be drinking tea after dinner, eating biscuits watching David Attenborough's Our World on TV when you would hear the shrill ring from the red lip phone.

Always letting it ring a few times, Mum got up and slowly moved from one room to the next, switching masks, from Mother to Psychic. Her voice would change as the performance began. Sometimes I would follow her, lay on the bed and listen to one side of the conversation, sometimes intently, often stifling giggles until I was shooed away. Friday and Saturday night shifts were the worst, Mum would often be hosting a dinner party in one room while incredible loneliness and desperation called in the other. "I've been having a relationship with a married man for ten years, he said he is going to leave his wife this weekend, will he do it ... ?"

Some people were just looking for love, some wanted to know what colour they should paint their house, others wanted advice on money, most were people living on society's fringes that just wanted someone to talk to. A running dialogue in our house centred around the most absurd callers and to this day continue to be the topic of family conversation and storytelling. When 'performing' as 'Jane', Mum constantly experienced this shift between the absurd and the frighteningly real, the two butting up against each other. Questions about what lotto number should be played this week, to callers with mental health issues or addiction, women caught in the throws of domestic violence. None more confronting than a reading with a woman of whom she suspected to be crazy, a repeat caller – the kind that could not afford the calls in the first place – whom would tell wilder and wilder stories of her rural life and the abusive man she shared it with. One night 'she' called wanting to communicate with her daughter who she said had been murdered by the step father the evening before. She asked Mum whether or not the man would be convicted and sent to jail, or come back to her. She said she still loved him. Assuming this was more tall tales and a cry for attention Jane dished out the usual advice and hung up the phone. It wasn't until the next day when she was reading the paper and saw the case of the murdered child that she realized the women, although obviously crazy, was in fact telling the truth.

These people were looking for an audience, often on the fringes of society. It can only be assumed they felt something in the anonymity of the phone call that made them feel safe, a community they could reach out too. In the same way, a place like Lily Dale operates as a haven for Spiritual Mediums, often ostracized from normal society or seen as freaks, there is safety in their numbers. Attraction to a semi-gated community like this, the outsiders or "others" become insiders in their constructed world and we in turn become outsiders or "the other" when we pilgrim there seeking spiritual enlightenment or to communicate with the dead.

Zinnia Elegans, 'Red Sun': A Conversation with Noleen and Phoebe, 2011



FIG# 11. VIDEO STILLs SEQUENCE. ZINNIA ELEGANS, 'RED SUN': A CONVERSATION WITH NOLEEN AND PHOEBE, 2011. LOOPED VIDEO PROJECTION, 6:55 MIN,

I inherited my grandmother's passion for telling tales and for making up other worlds. She often, for instance, spoke of fairies, goblins, and things that others would tell you didn't exist. For example, the skeletons of leaves would be 'fairy wings' shed from real fairies. She had this amazing ability to get you to do mischievous things, usually with an element of unruly or bad behaviour. This blur of fiction and non-fiction acted as a form of therapy for my grandmother, and it shaped my childhood in turn ³. I apply this same method of negotiating between fiction and non-fiction to making art. I am a hunter and gatherer, accumulating and assembling both experience and speculation. Through liberation, appropriation, and recycling of story – both mine, and those of the strangers – I collect and transform material gathered into artworks. I see stories as lurking beneath the exterior of the everyday – sometimes, even, beneath the exterior of the story that's being told. Assembling, repackaging, and transmitting stories was likewise the inspiration behind *A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town* (2012), the first project which derived directly from my experiences at Lily Dale, and my desire to retell and reshape the story of that experience.

I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, Noleen Thomsett, growing up as a child. We would adventure along the beach, through the bush and up the track to the duck pond near our house, making up stories and collecting trophies, like remnants of dead bugs and frogs that had been flattened on the road, which she would add to her paintings.

She had this amazing ability to get you to do really mischievous stuff; there was always an element of bad behaviour, irrepressible mischief and naughtiness; harmless much of the time, but always with an element of danger. As I grew up the fairies and goblins came too - I always knew that they were make-believe, but with them came a new perspective on our shared shenanigans. For example, I was always enthralled by my grandmother's amazing makeup collection, vast and colourful. I must have been around 10 years old when I realized what the 'Tester' stickers on all of the products actually meant: Noleen had 'pinched' everything, from sample counters. Styled beautifully, she had an air of being quite posh, but in fact she 'hunted and gathered' from anywhere she could. Stories and 'stuff' included, these were her survival

skills. Orphaned at a young age, her childhood was traumatic by anyone's standards, and Noleen created kinder worlds that she could exist within. Such a rebuilding of reality served as a tool for escape, and stacking fictional layers onto her world and history became a kind of habit, to the extent that, in the end for her, there was no one true story. This blur of fiction and non-fiction acted as a form of therapy for my grandmother, and it shaped my childhood in turn.

We tell and re-tell the most important stories in our lives, and as we grow older, the edges of these stories blur – they reform and reconstruct our lives. The experience of growing up in an environment where our shared history was constantly shifting felt, at times, like an attempt to make the truth more palatable by making it less truthful. My grandmother willingly invested herself in the idea of 'other worlds', little elves lived in the walls of our house and would sometimes, steal your property. In her eyes, everything talked and spoke and communicated – the universe, nature, people both living and dead – all you had to do was notice and listen.

Accordingly then, my grandmother believed in and spoke openly to spirits: their faces appeared in light bulbs – faces that could be recognized in old family photo albums. The idea of life after death was treated as a given in her household. She negotiated with the dead constantly; we would spend afternoons wandering through cemeteries reading the names on headstones and attaching our own tales to the resident of each grave, each one more dramatic or more tragic than the last. We would pluck the old broken ceramic rose wreaths from the graves, asking permission as we went, and these would be reconfigured into elaborate centre-pieces for the dining table.³

V. A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town (Spring 2012)

The project that came out of these overall experiences – with being foreign, with living in Pittsburgh, and with my spiritualist encounters at Lily Dale – was titled, *A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town*. I worked with a Barbershop Quartet to craft a performative artwork that would allow audiences to experience – though maybe not *live*, or precisely *know* – my experiences with the spiritualist community at Lily Dale.

Studio 4: The Barbershop Quartet

I first met Studio 4, the local Pittsburgh Barbershop Quartet choir line comprising of Keith Harker, Nathaniel Fessler and Harrison King III, at the Pittsburgh Banjo Club. The idea of working with the quartet to turn the transcriptions of my spiritual session with Gerta at Lily Dale into barbershop quartet songs was conceptually and structurally exciting, particularly the idea of four voices merging to tell one story. The process of writing the lyrics was by far the most testing. The Quartet had a natural desire to make sense of the text provided, to make a story. I, on the other hand, knew that the multi-layers of the many stories already contained in the text and their confusion and slippage between past, future and present was the more cogent factor. I wanted to push the boundaries of what could be understood through the words, to emphasize the absurdity of some of the conversations about life — in the form of a cake metaphor, whipped up and dished out alongside talk of a spirit guide called George, or some very solid relationship advice. The intersection of tone, the shift from the ridiculous to the vulnerable is what I ultimately wanted to reveal.

I was also inspired by other works that seek to create experience with the

variances and textures of sound: Janet Cardiff's sound installation, *The Forty Part Motet* (2001), for example, uses 40 high fidelity loudspeakers positioned on stands in a large oval configuration currently installed in the Fuentidueña Chapel at the Cloisters in Upper Manhattan (2013). The 14-minute work has been described as "transcendent" within the intimate space of the Cloisters; the sound of 40 different voices, from 40 different unseen or invisible people permeates and fills the space, yet moving around the room intimates the experience of listening to each individual as an unaccompanied voice. I feel that sound, or presence through sound, becomes sculptural. In this instance, each individual voice emitting from the separately installed speakers, work together to redefine and reveal space. Previously presented in a more neutral gallery setting, the churchlike gallery space, in this case, conjures a tomb-like feeling containing the ghostly presence of the individual participants generating an immersive viewer experience.

With A Ventriloquist Cowboy ... the work developed in conjunction with the Barbershop Quartet, I was also aiming for a sense of absurdity, relating to the original material (psychic readings) that the lyrics were drawing upon. The final lyrics produced a song that was 'fantastically absurd' and sometimes alarmingly poignant, often revealing intimate details and moments of my own vulnerability hidden amongst the seemingly nonsensical verses. I chose to use song lyric generating software, created by fellow MFA graduate student at CMU, Craig Fahner, which was designed to generate new love songs out of multiple lyrics of already existent love songs. I, however, used the software to generate lyrics from my transcriptions. The software re-contextualised fragments of the psychic readings, allowing them to become more intertwined and dissociated. This paralleled the experience of having a spiritualist reading, which is often



FIG# 12. A VENTRILOQUIST COWBOY WALKS INTO TOWN,
2012

similarly laced with confusion and overlap, as the Medium can jump between communicating with different spirits and talking of past lives. The actual effect of this intersection of past, present and future versions of a subjective truth is disorienting. By employing this randomised element into the lyrical development of songs, I intentionally tried to heighten the distortions of both memory and experience within the material as well as recreate an element of absurdity and uncertainty for the audience (see lyrics in Appendix #1). Using this software, a total of 10 songs were generated, which were then performed by the Pittsburgh Barbershop Quartet in a one-off performance event titled, *A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks into Town 2012*.

The Barbershop Quartet managed to learn three songs in time for a performance at 'Extra Fancy' 2012, a postgraduate show at Bakery Square. Designed as a one-off performance for the event within the space, I built a large 7x14 foot white rectangular frame, housing sixty 60-watt light bulbs, and mounted it on the wall. This object (sculptural prop) operated as a kind of wall stage or frame for the performance. In this project, I was not so much creating a living community as enacting a hypothetical one, allowing viewers' suppositions about what they were witnessing to create a sense of communal disconnect, removing them from their immediate surroundings while, at the same time, suggesting other possible, or impossible contexts for that experience.

The process of creating *A Ventriloquist Cowboy* ... led me to question and investigate the systems and possibilities of interaction and exchange within the particular community that my work creates. Context evolved to become content, concept and method. My methodology is thus rooted in the process of making, and making is for me, a way of working through these propositions



FIG# 13.A VENTRILOQUIST COWBOY WALKS INTO TOWN,
2012.

VI. Truth, Storytelling, and Story-hearing

Through stories told and received, I have sought to locate experiential 'truths' through the lens of other people's realities, and to explore the breakages between life and fiction, experience and performance. *A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town*, attempted to highlight subjective truths and 'real' experiences, using lies, hoaxes, randomness and absurdity. Thus the act of storytelling is fundamental to my art practice. I aim to share, interpret, embellish as well as contextualise experience – and in doing so, create a parallel experience for the viewer. An experience where they are asked to play a part, or give a little of their 'own' in the viewing of the work. I want to place them in a space, which activates their participation and necessitates a contribution as an audience, rather than remaining a passive viewer.

Embellishment

Historically, storytelling is often embellished by the very nature of its re-telling and distribution – expressing events and retelling narratives is common across cultures. I would argue that, in the development of community; myth, story, and song provide a common context that inspires a sense of belonging whilst both recording and passing on a 'version' of history. Embellishment is a recurrent theme in my work as both concept and context. I want to trick people through my stories – just a little. I want to leave them wondering what is real and what is fable. Thomas King puts it bluntly when he says, "The truth about stories is that, that's all we are" (King, 2005, p. 2). His statement resonates with me – it is, in fact, the basis for King's book *The Truth About Stories*, in which he organises his discussion around this premise, repeating this phrase at the beginning of every chapter, and at the end of an ever-metamorphosing story about how the Earth floats in space

on the back of a turtle. King tells us in this story that,

...each time someone tells the story, it changes, sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details, sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's in the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the telling's of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away. (King, 2005, p. 1)

In King's *The Truth About Stories*, it becomes clear that a story can change and shift according to the variables built into its re-telling – variables such as narrative voice, sequence, and the perspective of the storyteller. My own experience within this research project has shown me that this is exactly the case. When you relate a story to others the same kinds of changes occur: the world may still be on the turtle's back, as King says, but the scaffold around that central point shifts and transforms.

The Supernatural

In *The Sympathetic Medium*, author Jill Galvan discusses the idea of 'supernatural lust' (Galvan, 2010, p.6), which is essentially a fascination born from fantasies of power and control. In the late nineteenth century, female Mediums were used as 'vehicles' for encounters with the supernatural, and often 'served' men in this manner, fulfilling an almost sexual desire for such contact and experience. A Medium, through her communications with dead or otherwise non-existent persons, is uniquely able to transcend both space and time. In the nineteenth century, a period that saw the birth of wonders like electricity and telephone communications, the transcendence of time and space was both a mystery and a reality. For me, Galvan's use of the term 'supernatural lust' appeals to a desire to

both embrace mystery and to understand reality, to explain the unexplainable, however mundane, for example, how a telegraph works.

Accordingly, technology plays a pivotal role in the shaping of my practice. Whilst visiting and working in Lily Dale, I started to record my personal 'readings' on an audio device. Afterwards, immersed in the process of listening and transcribing, I found that I was always chopping the story up into 'manageable sections'. This process itself is akin to a game of Chinese whispers, not dissimilar to Omer Fast's work *Talk Show*. In this project – part of Performa 09 – Fast "combine[d] the familiar childhood game of *Broken Telephone* with the confessional talk show format" (Fast, *Talk Show* 2009). I, too, am drawn to processes of live storytelling that highlight the slippage of memory and fact. Eventually, stories have a way of taking on lives of their own, in the same way that our minds amass layers of memories over time, regurgitating them at will and in no particular order.



FIG# 14. OMER FAST, TALK SHOW, 2009.

VII. Gathering New Material

On returning to New Zealand in August 2012, I felt I needed new guiding narratives for the generation of work. In my search for new stories, I contacted the Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums in Auckland, and after attending a few of their meetings, found myself on the path to becoming a member and perhaps even a Medium myself. The Spiritualist Mediums group were fascinated by my experiences regarding Lily Dale as a kind of spiritualist Mecca. They wholeheartedly accepted the stories about the Fox Sisters, and would 'give anything' to experience the place and site sacred to their beliefs. Yet the members of the Foundation, and the brand of spiritualism they practiced, struck me as both smaller, more specific, more serious, and as very different from the kind of spiritualism I had witnessed in Lily Dale. In realising this, I have also come to understand that I felt somewhat let down by the reality and intimacy of their spiritualism. It was not sensationalised. In Lily Dale, I had been somewhat enchanted by my own feelings of outsidership; there, I was only permitted to take what was given, and I had limited understanding of the workings of my own spiritualist awe. I enjoyed the sensation of not having control, of being forcibly suspended in a state of curiosity and disbelief. In fact, I became hooked on that feeling. This realisation was a key turning point.

1848-1957

1848-1957, a large-scale installation work was an experiment in the suspension of disbelief, and also an attempt to secure a trajectory forwards - so that I could, in fact, move forward past my intimate connections to Lily Dale. I realised, in my attempt to do just that, to move forward, that my previous work *A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks into Town* was unique in terms of its time/place execution, and

that it was also specific to my relationship with that community. When I returned to New Zealand, I had to face the fact that you can't relocate and restart such feelings any more than you can relocate and restart a specific community.



FIG# 15. 1848 - 1957,
2013.

Impossible communities

It is my view that places like Lily Dale, and the communities of believers who keep those places alive, are story factories. The insiders in these places, the faithful, live through the continued recreation of the stories that make their lives meaningful. The residue of my experiences of specific places like Pittsburgh and Lily Dale remained as a core approach, a means of negotiation, development and research within the overall project. As I became increasingly invested in the local spiritualist community in New Zealand via The Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums, it occurred to me that this itself was not exactly the community I was searching for. I became interested in my own desire to create impossible communities with real niche communities in New Zealand – localities and populations that might exist outside the confines of a specific place or time⁴

⁴ Thomas Keating, in his book *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*, 1999, talks about the cross-cultural and religious experience of the human condition, and our constant search for answers outside of ourselves. "All the questions that are fundamental to human happiness arise when we ask ourselves this excruciating question: Where am I? Where am I in relation to God, to myself, and to others? These are the basic questions of human life. As soon as we answer honestly, we have begun the spiritual search ... the search for ourselves. God is asking us to face the reality of the human condition, to come out of the woods into the full light of intimacy with him. That is the state of mind that Adam and Eve had, according to the story, before their disobedience ... Sometimes it helps to turn to a story from another spiritual tradition; in juxtaposing the two stories, we may get a new insight. Here is a Sufi tale that is also about the human condition."

"A Sufi master, according to Keating, had lost the key to his house and was looking for it in the grass outside. He got down on his hands and knees and started running his fingers through every blade of grass. Along came eight or ten of his disciples.

They said, "Master, what is wrong?"

He said, "I have lost the key to my house."

They said, "Can we help you find it?"

He said, "I'd be delighted."

So they all got down on their hands and knees and started running their fingers through the grass. As the sun grew hotter, one of the more intelligent disciples said,

"Master, have you any idea where you might have lost the key?"

The Master replied, "Of course, I lost it in the house."

To which they all exclaimed, "Then why are we looking for it out here?"

He said, "Isn't it obvious? There is more light here."

We have all lost the key to our house. We don't live there anymore. We don't experience the divine indwelling. We don't live with the kind of intimacy with God that Adam and Eve reportedly enjoyed in the Garden of Eden and the Sufi master seems to have enjoyed before he lost his key." This analogy is useful to me in realising that certain aspects of my practice have in fact become the intent within this project. These things, the personal for example, have turned themselves around and become important methodologies. The house in the parable represents happiness, and happiness is intimacy with "God" or with oneself. Keating goes on to say that "Without that experience, nothing else quite works; with it, almost anything works. This is the human condition - to be without the true source of happiness, which is the experience of the presence of God, and to have lost the key to happiness, which is the contemplative dimension of life, the path to the increasing assimilation and enjoyment of God's presence." What we experience is our desperate search for happiness where it cannot possibly be found. The key is not in the grass; it was not lost outside ourselves. It was lost inside ourselves. That is where we need to look for it.

As a result, I started working on two projects; on the one hand, I began to envision an installation and performance piece that might channel the energies, interests, and beliefs of a specific community, but in a non-specific space (*Scouting Heretical Alignments*); and I also started working on plans to return to the United States, to Lily Dale, and to an additional new site (Hydesville, NY). Specific to the Modern Spiritualist Movement, I saw this as a site that might allow me to relive some of the feelings associated with my early encounters with the phenomenon experience at Lily Dale.

So, I went back to Lily Dale and more importantly to Western New York, the region previously described by the anonymous *New York Herald* author as “hotbed of isms” (qtd. in Nagy, xiv). Travelling to Hydesville became an exercise in both frustration and restriction. We drove for six hours through torrential rain and thunderstorms to finally arrive at the site, which I’d only seen through (and what I soon realised to be manipulated) photos on the Internet. The Hydesville Memorial Park, built on the site of the Fox sisters’ original house, stands on the corner of a rural intersection just outside the town of Newark, NY. Though the Memorial building is complete, the grounds around it are a jumble of mud, gravel and dead plants. I’ve been told that the organizing foundation, the Nationalist Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC) is in the process of creating a beautiful garden in the surrounding area of the building with meditation paths and places of reflection. But on the day I arrived, in the rain, it looked more like an abandoned construction site caught in the space between its own reality and its potential.

The site itself is highly restricted, cut off from the public, and it felt strange to have travelled all that way to see something encased in a large glass structure.

Expectation did not meet reality. I could see the famous “false wall” where the bones of ‘Mr Splitfoot’ were once located and according to the Fox Sisters, stashed away. Wet and windy outside, the inside foundations of the original cottage, sheltered and separated from the elements, were dry and dusty looking. I was struck by the separation of the two spaces, inside and outside, and the barrier between the two. The bizarre, restriction/protection effect of the new building seemed comparable to looking at the Pope mobile – a supposedly holy, spiritually thing encased in glass, and thus void of its effective function, even for its believers.

Upon returning to Lily Dale, which I had decided would be the last time, I wanted to see new mediums, to bring freshness to the conversation I had hoped to enact in this work. This time around, however, the AUT Ethics process required me to disclose project-related details; I told the Mediums about the project ahead of the session, explaining that I was an artist and about the nature of my artistic research. I told them where I was from, my purpose at Lily Dale, what I was planning to do with the collected material, and my interests in and attempts to learn mediumship. This disclosure unavoidably influenced a lot of what the Medium told me, and hence became a barrier to my ability to experience the session authentically, especially post-event. My belief was suspended.

That too, however, proved to be an important learning experience and a significant waymarker in the research. I no longer trust anything that occurs at Lily Dale, or indeed any conversation that happened in that space. I realise now that whatever you offer to a Medium, that they will take that and run with it. It is not dissimilar to what a viewer brings to an artistic experience – that ‘known’ information is likely to colour and mutate the story you later tell about that experience. Either way, it’s a story of production.

Hydesville, NY



FIG# 16 - 18. HYDESVILLE, NY, USA, 2013

Curating Experiences

With the work, *1848-1957*, I aimed to construct connections between my experiences in Hydesville and New Zealand through the re-enactment of a charged, or meaningful space. The work's title refers to the years that the Fox sisters' house stood in its various incarnations; during this time period it was repeatedly burned down and rebuilt a total of three times, and is now sitting in the aforementioned glass case in Hydesville, NY. Wanting to create my own monument or shrine to the sisters in a way that might relate to experiences at Lily Dale or Hydesville, I used 100kgs of rock salt to trace by hand a scale model replica of the floor plan of Fox house, crafting a site-specific installation that existed for only eight hours (see Figures 15, 19, 21). I also wanted to consider the ways in which material could be used and employed to activate a given space and control the way people enter and interact with that space. I was interested in enacting or suggesting the experience of a possible site for a community, connecting an actual existing site to another distant, logistically fraught site, as a means of drawing a line between the two communities contained in each.

The main three components of this work were the primary medium itself (salt), the supporting document (a postcard) and the "channel" as I want to call it – that is, the story. Creating this work began with a desire to use mapping as a way to graphically articulate the Fox sisters' historical home, which still functions as the site and embodiment of the Spiritualist movement in the United States. Stone foundations are all that remains of the actual building, and these foundations hold the story that perpetuates both myth and belief. A legend was furthermore physically embedded in the structure of the house: a skeleton was purportedly discovered within the foundation walls in 1848, and this event helped to locate

the house as the birthplace of Spiritualism, elevating the sisters to an iconic status as supreme mediums.

Salt, too, has a long history of use in purification and protection rituals, and has often been used by spiritual mediums. The use of salt was, in my project, a significant attempt to elevate the map of the house into a sacred, liminal space. The line of salt speaks to symbolic theology, mysticism, currency and survival. I used raw, unprocessed rock salt because it exists in its natural state, whereas iodized table salt speaks to process, consumerism and consumption. By removing these connotations, the material represented itself in its purest form. This allowed the history of salt to emerge and become part of the conversation beyond its use within spiritualism and the occult. Salt has, for example, been used as a healing agent, a preserver, a corrosive, as well as a currency for hundreds of years, but ultimately it is a requirement for human survival. It is a trace element, and without it the balance of life is at stake.

I wanted viewers to experience the Fox sisters' house in proportion, but I wanted those proportions to be at once apprehensible and, likewise, dubious. The installation itself articulated the abstract nature of the house's foundation, with its irregular architectural layout. It was necessary for the viewer to embody the space and digest its aura. The power of the work relied on viewer immersion. The life-size scale meant the viewer was forced to cross a threshold and integrate with the work. The entrance to the space operated like a small portal, an access point into this larger, other world.

Decisions regarding access to the work centered around mapping and atmosphere. The darkness, the shaft of window light, the reflective nature of the salt all stimulated various senses of inquiry. Viewer reactions were cautious and

1848-1957



FIG# 19. INSTALLATION VIEW, 1848 - 1957
2013

projected a feeling of respectful contemplation of the work's overall material impact. However this was mixed with uncertainty as to how to negotiate the space as they became acutely aware of the impact of their own presence on that space.

The small postcard on the back wall of the space contained an old photo of the house. Printed on the back of the card was "1848" – the year when the Fox sisters first made contact with the spirit supposedly residing in the walls of their house, and thus jumpstarted the modern Spiritualist movement. The postcard also listed two other dates, 1910 (the date the image was taken) and 1848-1957 (the lifespan of the house itself), though none of these dates, or their meanings, was explained outright. The postcard operated as a memorial plaque and, in conjunction with the salt foundation, provided a connection to a distant, imagined space that might allow a narrative to unfold slowly for the viewer.

Myth, Memory and Experience

My earlier work focus was both subject-specific and location-specific, focusing on objects and sites that I saw as potentially imbued with meaning. A series of photographic works that I produced as part of the exhibition *Me And My Mum*, 2010 - *Philomel Crescent 2010 and Family Room, 2010 (See figures)* – emphasized the possibilities of space in featuring essentially empty but possibly meaningless spaces, like 1950s and 1960s suburban-style homes, which had either been emptied, abandoned, or else prepared for re-sale. With these works, I was interested in creating 'sets' for the spaces in question, and imagining how these spaces might be hypothetically utilized or invested with meaning through the power of aesthetic suggestion.

From this work, I transitioned into a fascination with the nostalgic qualities of memory, myth and experience itself in my MFA studie ⁵. My grandmother's lies and embellishments, for instance, became the basis for many of my stories; this, combined with a conscious desire to rebuild layers of action on top of my own history meant I was always trying to get at the 'telling of it' from a different angle; one that is, questionably, less truth, more opaque. By relaying narrative, you enable it to transform in its telling from individual memory to communal myth, from version to version, creating its own fluid text.

⁵ I grew up in a world where excitement lay in uncovering something new within something old – garage sales, thrift stores, vintage fairs; we hunted for treasure. When rummaging through a thrift store you should always check the pockets of garments, because it's amazing what you may find: money, hand-written notes, or an old photograph. Deceased estate sales were always exciting. I found it fascinating to wander through what was once somebody else's life, somebody's everything; notches on doorways could be seen, having once tracked a child's growth; faded wallpaper stencilled the remembered shape of a wardrobe that once stood guard over its family for lifetimes, never leaving its post; abandoned bedrooms of children long since grown up and left gaping, empty and vacant. Slowly, as if spiralling in on itself, doors close and rooms are abandoned, dust gathers and memories fade. Lives become smaller; by the time a house's residents leave this world you could feel the history wafting gently around one central room, a comfy chair, a television, a lamp, a lifetime lived. These are the kind of places where we would find treasures. Both of my parents are artists and collectors, and I grew up surrounded by vintage clothing, art, and 1950's and 60's collectibles. They also collected kooky stuff – old dolls made from shells, kitsch knickknacks, crocheted blankets. At the same time, though, they surrounded themselves with fine art, an impulse that I can liken to the hunter-gatherer habits of my grandmother. Finding something that had been cast aside – a piece of art that no one wanted or thought worthless, or an infant's linen christening gown from the 1920s – turning it around in order to reveal its value (and then maybe sell it for a price that matched that value) was part of their way of life. This too, was part of a process of liberation for them. I, in turn, developed a strong nostalgic aesthetic from a young age. My early photographic work involved searching out original 1950s and 60s houses to use as locations. I leaned heavily on the aesthetic appropriation of nostalgia. It occurred to me that an object's importance becomes elevated through nostalgia – it, in fact, becomes worth more when it is part of a nostalgic, idealized past. The same can be true of stories.

The writer Marcel Proust, in his famous *In Search of Lost Time*, considers the power of both memory and nostalgia. He describes “an exquisite pleasure” invading his senses,

...something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, and mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. (Proust, 1992, p. 1).

To Proust’s description of ‘love’ I would add lust – memory and nostalgia can be physical, visceral experiences, and can take over your entire body in the process. With memory, this kind of experience often refers backwards, and there is a desire to unlock the experiences of the past. What interests me though, is the way that nostalgia triangulates the past with both the present and the future, creating a present of emotion and feeling that allows you to project a foreseeable future. That’s why Jonah Lerer, in his interpretations of Proust, argues for the ability of nostalgia to both remember and to create – to look forwards and back at the same time.

This is the irony of nostalgia: it remembers things as being far better than they actually were. Proust, at least, was acutely aware of his own fraudulence. (As Proust put it, ‘the only paradise is paradise lost.’) This wasn’t his fault: there simply is no way to describe the past without lying. Our memories are not like fiction. They are fiction. (Lerer, 2008, p88)

My very first visit to Lily Dale was, for instance, the rawest, most pure experience I was able to take away from that place. It fulfilled my hidden and unconscious

desires for “supernatural lust,” and it became, in light of what I could not take away from it (physical “proof” in the form of recordings, etc.), a purely physical memory. I remember – vividly, still – the emotional responses and physical sensations that I experienced then, though this is perhaps the work of memory, which as Lerer notes, can manipulate us into believing in true experiences that were never true. I have invented solid, definite experience where in reality, there was likely only suggestion or allusion. That’s why, in all three of the works discussed here – *Scouting Heretical Alignments*, *A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town*, and *1848-1957* – I wanted to offer *suggestions* to my audience that might, in turn, become solid experience: I wanted the audience to struggle to make sense of what may not make sense, and (hopefully) become convinced in the end.

VII. Conclusion and Final Project

In developing the project *Scouting Heretical Alignments*, I wanted to experiment in expelling a space's negative energy using spiritual channeling, cleansing and healing rituals. This process is one of spiritual inquiry, which seeks to dispel negative energy from a space. The 'space' in that case was the whole of Auckland City Art Gallery, (July 2013) with a focus of *The Lab* project space in particular. As that performance unfolded it became clear that the scale of the energy of the larger space was too strong, and that through this process of discovery, the project's focus shifted into smaller more manageable spaces within the original whole. As an extension of that shift, the next phase of this research project worked to identify a particular space within the St Paul's Street Galleries I and II as my final exhibiting space, and then to examine the complex matrix of energy within that space with the objective of manipulating and shifting it. The process is intuitive, based on ongoing instinctual responses between a community of tangible and intangible energy forces.

My final thesis work consists of an eight-week durational performative work beginning on Friday 20th September and commencing at the end of the Thesis show (on Saturday 15th November). Performances are developed as a series of events through conversation and participation with the Spiritualist Foundation on a weekly basis within the delegated exhibition space, whilst the space itself is kept clear and free from all unwanted and negative energy.

The first part was designed with the intention of locating and delegating the optimum space for the work within St Paul Street Galleries I & II. I brought Natalie Haggard (Treasurer of the New Zealand Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums) who I had worked with on *Scouting Heretical Alignments* into the gallery space, and we worked with the energies present in the galleries, identifying and bringing forth

both positive and negative energy aspects. We wanted to pinpoint the optimum space for this work to exist in, a space which might be ideal for developing a series of events and performance. Taped markings were positioned to identify the point of inquiry (on the floor) and to signify the residue of the event of navigating and negotiating that space.

Once again, my focus has shifted towards the considerations of a space that deliberate the concept of an impossible community – this time however, one that is less concerned with exposing historical narratives and is, instead, more focused on personal narratives and physical presence within a space. Through human engagement and spiritual energy intervention, I am working to enable a conversation to unfold and occur for a duration in that space.

With the continued participation of Natalie Haggard, and possibly other foundation members, I am once again mediating within the liminal space that exists between these (im)possible futures and (im)probable pasts. This occurs once more as mediumship serves to navigate between the liminal space existing between the energy and the physical space. Channelled intervention means that the project can not only exist, but can also unfold and develop as an ongoing durational performance, culminating with the final thesis presentation. The development of this performance relies not on any identifiable endpoint; rather, the work itself exists in the unfolding and unearthing of process. I see each performance or event as both generating and dictating the next story, the next facet of the myth.

Resisting Language

Putting this experience into language goes against the grain of what my practice is about. Language, I want to argue, is not a mechanism that serves my practice well, and instead, I find myself necessarily resisting language in order to make my point heard. In many ways, the singular mechanisms of language work against what I am trying to achieve. I see my art as necessarily concerned with the speculative nature of this enquiry. It is a constantly developing exploration of esoteric methodologies, one where both the power of thought and the power of intent reign. To pin it down with language – words such as *process*, *method*, *approach*, *systems*, and *modes of practice* – are incongruous with not only my personal outlook on these concepts (method, practice), but also incongruent with the Spiritualist Mediums' method and practice. Thus, the words I have chosen to use are for the sake of my being able to talk about it, not to explain or in my mind adequately position it.

I am not trying to be definitive; instead, my intent is to be true to these ways of practicing. There is an understanding, respect and trust that goes with engaging with these professionals; therefore, to talk about it as process undermines the intent of what they do. When I started this final work on the 20th of September, I activated and entered that zone, 'I'm in it and I'm going to ride it out, regardless of where it spits me out at the end'. That is the work. I recognise that this is also the first time that I have completely let go, because of the way that this situation has been set up; the work's power sits within my ability to relinquish control, to lean into it and trust that 'what will be, is what will be'. I am now active within the work, operating from this position of intent, which has aligned me with the spiritualist philosophies of practice. A process of recognising that this is something

bigger than me, is something that I have to release myself to and be a part of whilst it unfolds, freeform.

Improvisation and Confronting the Personal

This final project also embraces improvisation – hence its performative nature. The points of beginning and ending is something that has become interesting to the project, the actual idea itself of where something begins and ends. That's why the final work has started on this date, with this event, with the idea that this will become the starting point and determining factor for what comes next – and the fact that these beginnings and endings not being defined is really relevant. Ultimately, I think that the *process* underpinning my work in this final project relates to a desire to be present in the moment, and also a willingness to ask for 'what I intend' to come forth. There is a huge trust in that: *I have to have a willingness to trust*. That factor is key; it's a factor that's being treated as a material component in this project. What I've come to realise is that this trust, or willingness, has become a material factor, and it has been unfolding in the form of my confrontations with the personal. "The personal", I think, has always been present in my practice and was the starting point of my work and of my journey towards receiving and completing my Masters degree. With the video work, *Zinnia Elegans Red Sun: a Conversation with Noleen and Phoebe (2011)*, an intensely personal work, the personal played a varying, somewhat sublimated roll. At this stage though, it has almost become method. I now find that personal circumstance has created a core essence to this project and it has meant that I am left trusting these external esoteric practices. The project as a whole has always been about searching for something, seeking knowledge, seeking an answer.

VIII. References

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Photo: Artist

Fig 25 & 26

Mitchell, D. Gateway to the Etheric Realm, (2011)

Radiant Matter II, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand Powder-coated steel, spell, spell materials

6000 mm x 6000 mm x 3250 mm

Photo: Bill Nichol

Fig 27. Philomel Crescent, 2010. Ctype photographic print.

Fig 28. Family Room, 2010. Ctype photographic print.

Appendix

#1 A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town (2012), lyrics.

Song version #1

Nate: Is that a positive thing? Is that a positive thing
My hearts in two places. Hmm. your dead people
Their love will peak
You started laughing so loud. And the answer is yes
Yes yes defiantly it has
That your not weak
Who died what happened in march
More playboy is he, or a cowboy

Harri: How it will affect you
This gentleman, who's the gentleman
Understanding of what you are
We'll get the puzzle rolling yeah I'm booking a flight
Oh so you really want. Is he like old or young?
Do you find people in bars? No nono not at all.
Oh wow I love it.

Keith: Ok ok that's who came
This is your question Holli
Feel somebody with a prayer
Do it does that make sense
Feel somebody with a prayer
Times to remove these blockages

Nate: He's ready to get the message
Yes yes defiantly it has

Keith: And your character and I was
That make any sense to you
Be parents that come forward ok
Or if he was young
Ancestors that are from Ireland
Yes yes defiantly it has
Whatever if it in the air
Ok something about a brother

Nate: Will soon reach a positive thing
A big sense of this period

Song version #2

Nate: And the answer is yes
Is that a positive thing
And abundance we thank you god
Cowboy walks in
Decisions too far in advance
Gentleman, who's the gentleman
It sort of painting a feeling
But I finish here in May
Cause all of the inside beauty
Believe very little in chance.

Harri: Oh no no not at all
So what do you like cake
Yes yes defiantly it has
In a car accident or. White caps, a nurses cap
That's a point of information, Ok cause she is not good
Easily does that make sense sorry do you like cake
Oh wow I love it, thank you god, thank you god

Keith: Work it all laid out ok.
Understand how you can place
Then you'll get the message
That your not weak
Ok the month of April
Then you'll get the message
I feel like its very stable
Just one fine line

Nate: To be parents that come forward
And that was another Holli

Keith: Like it's the First World War
Allow me to explain them
I'm sort of painting a feeling
That you are not weak
I'm sort of painting a feeling
You make around this period
When you started laughing so loud
No need to be sad

A Ventriloquist Cowboy Walks Into Town, 2012



FIG# 20. FILM STILL, A VENTRILOQUIST COWBOY WALKS INTO TOWN, 2012

Five songs originally preformed on March 31st 2012 in Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

Audio collected over 8 months of communications with spirits and spiritualist mediums residing in the town of Lily Dale, NY, USA, a semi gated community and the home of the Modern American Spiritualist Movement. Recorded audio transcribed and composed into five songs performed by a local Pittsburgh Barbershop Quartet choir line comprising of, Keith Harker, Nathaniel Fessler and Harrison King, III. Also exhibited as 30 min, looped video

1848-1957



FIG# 21. INSTALLATION VIEW, 1848 - 1957. 2013

Rock salt, post card, wood.

100kgs of rock salt traced by hand onto the floor in a scale model replica of the floor plan of the basement of Fox Cottage . Site specific installation work conceived as a reaction to the experience of my journey to Hydesville, NY, USA in April 2013.

Pokarekare Ana, Billboard, 2011-2012



FIG# 22 & 23. POKAREKARE ANA, BILLBOARD 1 & 2, PITTSBURGH, USA, 2011-2012

Series of billboards posted between September 2011 and May 2012 in Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

POKAREKARE ANA
NGA WAI O WAIAPU,
WHITI ATU KOE HINE
MARINO ANA E.

FIG# 24. POKAREKARE ANA BILLBOARD 1,
PITTSBURGH, USA - 6/1/2012

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

FIG# 25. GATEWAY TO THE ETHERIC REALM (2011)
DANE MITCHELL

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

FIG# 26. GATEWAY TO THE ETHERIC REALM (2011) (DETAIL)
DANE MITCHELL



FIG# 27 . PHILOMEL CRESCENT, 2009.
C-TYPE PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT.



FIG# 28. FAMILY ROOM, 2009.
C-TYPE PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT.

beyond the ultraviolet, beyond the infrared

Eight week durational performance leaving energy residue: 20th September to 16th November, 2013

I. List of Events

Unknown Beyond This

Good As Gold

Fluctuating Planes

Please Give Me A Yes

I Ask For This Space To Be

You don't know John Cain?

How Are You?

There Was No Shroud of Secrecy

The Rehearsal

The (re) Conjuring

It's Moments Like These We Need Minties

There's No Way To Forestall What Can't Be Fathomed

Visible and Invisible Vibrations

I Did Ring You But No Answer Yet

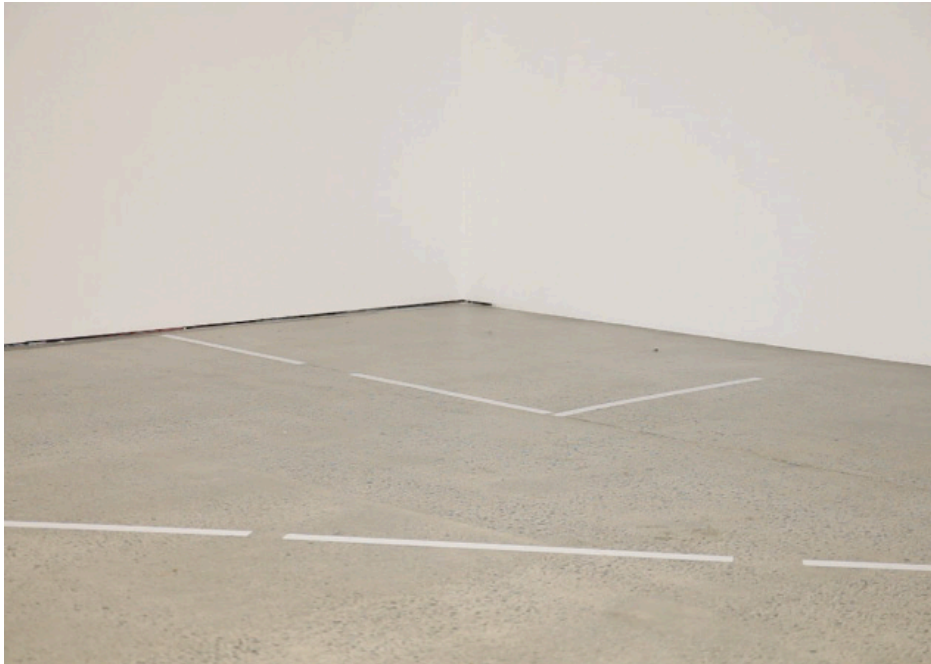
Hearing The Negotiation Of Space

II. Exhibition Instalation View

Figures 1 to 18

Eight week durational performance , two chanel video and sound installation, risograph printed document, collection of five.

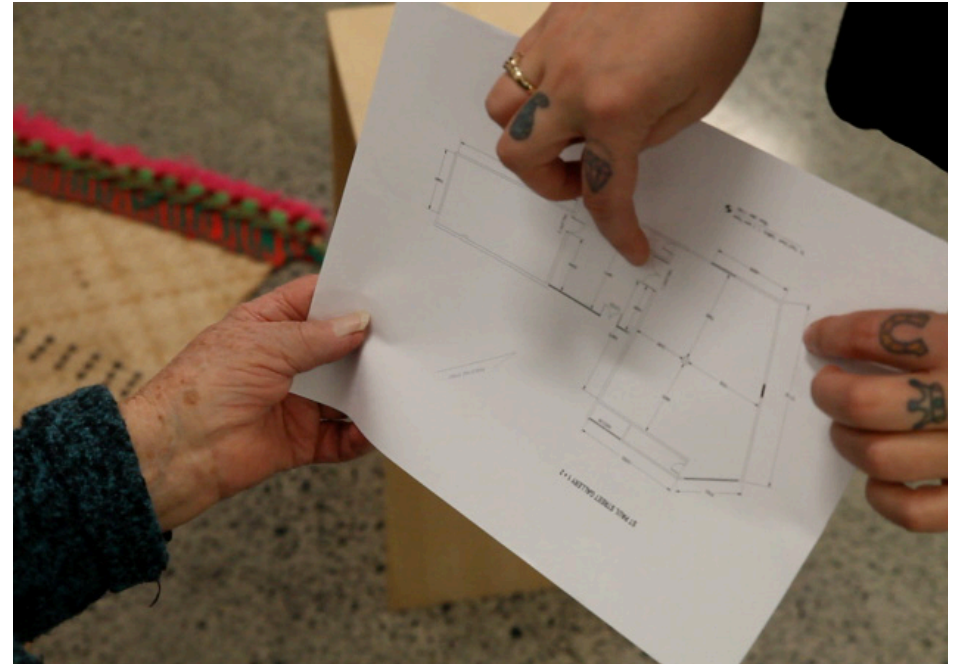
Unknown Beyond This



Event: Demarcation of space. Spiritual channeling and clearing practices used to locate and delegate a space for the work to exist within St Paul Street Gallery.

20th September 2013 at 10:00am for a duration of 3 hours.

Participants: Artist / Natalie Haggard (Treasurer of the New Zealand Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums)



"We are all energy and we are much greater than we think we are", that's what Natalie tells me when we get out of the car. I ponder this as we work. I think about an action dedicated to the chance that somewhere in the distance of the unknown we might make contact. We work with the energies already present in the gallery, seeking to identify and bring forth both positive and negative energy aspects, to pinpoint the optimum space for this project to inhabit. I mark out these unseen intersections with vinyl tape, drawing and visualising the negotiation of space. Then we break for tea.

Good As Gold



Event: Healing performed, energy shifting and clearing work done by Natalie Haggard on Artist in designated space.

20th of September 2013, at 11:15am for a duration of 4 minutes, 30 sec.

Participants: Artist / Natalie Haggard

After we had tea I proposed that perhaps we could further investigate our find by seeing if there were any 'super spots' of energy mergence within this site. But on re-entering the taped off space Natalie turned to me and said, "Holli you've ruined it!" I must admit I was taken aback and of course I asked her, "How?" She muttered that I was holding too much negative energy and said I needed some work. When Natalie placed her hand on my shoulder I felt a tingle, she shuddered and sighed deeply. "Right," she said, "well until you're cleared off this 'bad stuff' you don't have a hope in hell of keeping this space positive for the next eight weeks, so lets get started."

Fluctuating Planes



Event: Map the optimum energy spaces within the designated site with the aim of finding the most concentration of positive energy.

20th of September 2013, at 11:45am for a duration of 15 minutes.

Participants: Artist / Natalie Haggard

I'm feeling much lighter at this point, quite giggly to be honest, but also eager to get back to the job at hand. As I watch Natalie swinging her pendulum I think to myself, I like the phrase fluctuating planes... and when I look at the tape on the floor, a floor divided by a crisscross of lines, I see lots of other surfaces that one could possibly inhabit for a time.

Please Give Me A Yes



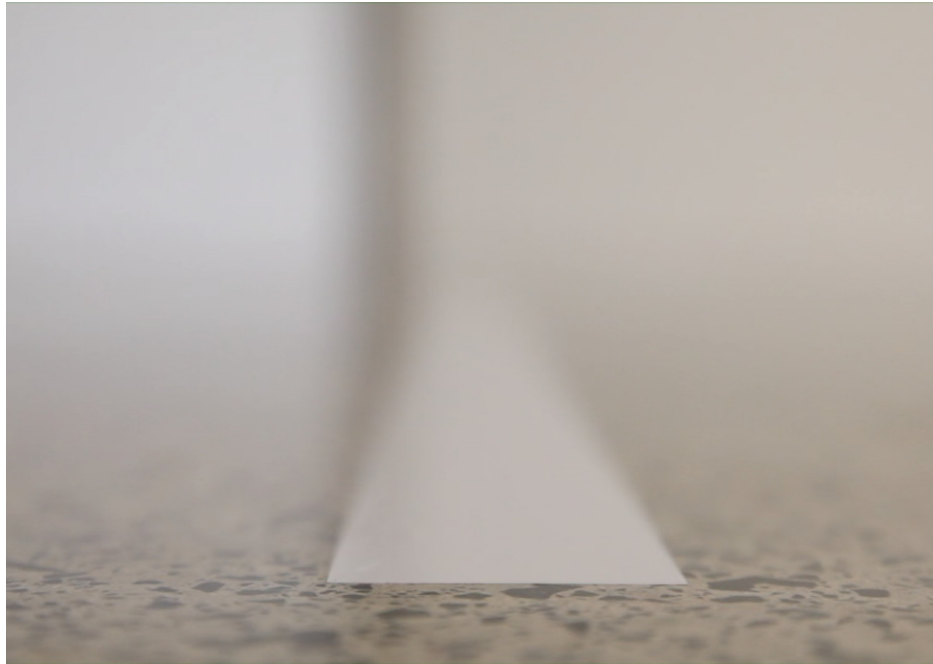
Event: Balancing and connection, pendulum work done by participants to connect the artist to the space.

20th of September 2013, at 11:30pm for a duration of 15 minutes.

Participants: Artist / Natalie Haggard

Natalie gifted me one of her pendulums back in June of this year, it's made of European Beachwood, coated with red lacquer and hangs on a pure silk cord. It feels warm and worn. It's an excellent tool, some people say it reacts with the subconscious and higher conscious minds to give physical movements, but Natalie asks spirit. Everyone has their own positive and negative swing, or yes and no. Mine always wants to go sideways, which makes Natalie laugh.

I Ask For This Space To Be



Action: Daily clearing of negative energy and intensification of the positive.
21st September 2013, at 8:00am for a duration of 1 minute. On going.
Participants: Artist



Natalie told me to ask for the space to be cleared of all unwanted and negative energy everyday. I thought I might do it in the shower each morning so I don't forget.

You don't know John Cain?



Event: NZ Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums meeting at the Ley's institute, Ponsonby.
Healing performed by Natalie Haggard.

24th September 2013, at 10:00am for a duration of 3 hours.

Participants: Artist / Natalie Haggard



Natalie rang me last night and said that I should come to the meeting early so we could do some work up at the foundation. When I got there we ended up having a long conversation about the events of the week before and how I was feeling now. I told her that immediately afterwards I had felt really terrific, I had felt a release. But that over a few days I had felt it creep back in, I said I wished there was something to swallow that would rid my soul of this ancient fear. She gave me a book called, 'You don't know John Cain?'

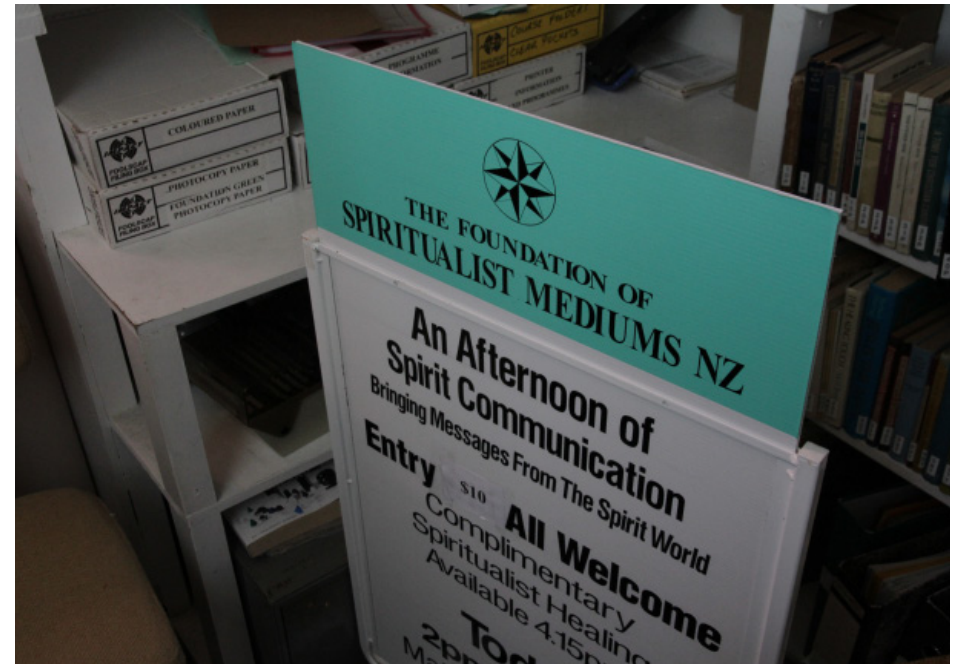
There Was No Shroud of Secrecy



Event: Open meeting at the NZ Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums at the Ley's institute, Ponsonby. Presentation by Ruth Wildish on the 'road to mediumship'.

1st of October 2013, at 11:00am for a duration of 2 hours.

Participants: Artist / Ruth Wildish (President of the New Zealand Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums) / Natalie Haggard



Ruth gave a great talk today. She told us about Helen Duncan, a Scottish medium and the last person to be imprisoned under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735, and about the spirit guide White Eagle. We also talked about the importance of research and evidence, which I always find interesting. Sometimes it seems to me like it's the subjective truths in the smudged bits of experience that people seek, they are more real but also slightly more intangible. I don't normally eat the biscuits at the foundation meetings, but today I had a pink hundreds and thousands one. As I ate it I thought: a series of conversations is what needs to happen.

The Rehearsal



Event: Song/sound preformed in space as an examination of sculptural sound, energy and space.

16th of October 2013, at 7:00pm for a duration of 1 hour, 30 minutes.

Participants: Artist / Maugapaia Ropeti-lupeli / Elijah Taulago / Lilo Asiata / Pene Ueta

By the time the guys turned up I had thought myself into a corner about what it was I wanted them to sing, what words to give them. We had been having a lot of discussion about using certain words to fill the space and make sound sculptural, Elijah was showing me how he does Tibetan throat singing and beat boxing, then they sung Ain't No Sunshine and I got goosebumps. We ran through all the different Pacific Island national anthems, Pokarekare Ana, and some Motown. I realised that I just wanted them to bring themselves to the space, their energy. I wanted them to leave a residue. I can see that it's not about asking them to sing something, it's about negation and chance.

The (re) Conjuring



Event: Move in day at St Paul's Street Gallery, Natalie Huggard realigns the energy of the space, clearing all remaining negative energy and harnessing the positive.

1st of November 2013, at 10:00am for a duration of 15 minutes

Participants: Artist / Natalie Huggard



Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender, I don't really know where 'here' is but I see what Natalie sees, the thousands that were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colours our vision. A religious experience in a way, kind of like tourism.

It's Moments Like These We Need Minties



Event: Morning tea and conversation between the artist, Natalie Huggard, Ruth Wildish, Alison Bruce and Mandy Thomsett-Taylor.

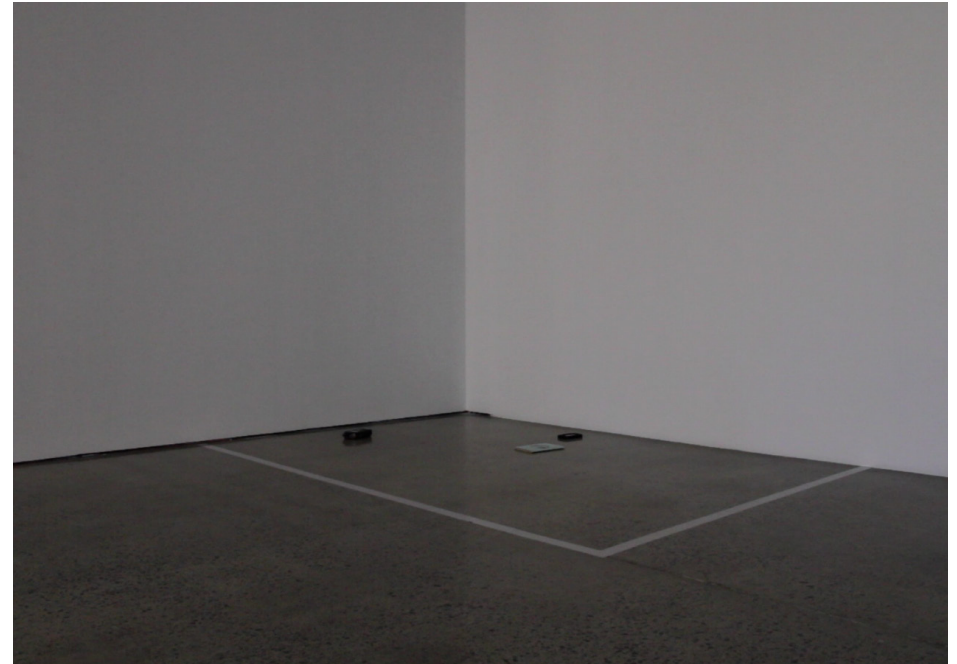
On the 1st of November 2013, at 10:15am for a duration of 1 hour, 30 minutes.

Participants: Artist / Natalie Huggard / Ruth Wildish / Alison Bruce / Mandy Thomsett-Taylor



Morning tea was great; scones with cream and jam and asparagus rolls. Ruth is 87 but she giggles like a little girl and tells long, winding stories that have a tendency to leave you somewhere other than where you thought you were going. As the stories unfold we approach a threshold of perception, brightness and intensity. I sense that it's closer to us than ever, I sense that we inhabit the same air. I haven't been sleeping very well and towards the end of the conversation I felt really overwhelmed by emotion, I realise I'm operating in a suspended state of presence and panic, an imaginary vertical space. Then I was distracted by the asparagus rolls.

There's No Way To Forestall What Can't Be Fathomed



Event: A conversation between the artist and Alison Bruce
4th of November 2013, at 1:00pm for a duration of 1 hour.
Participants: Artist / Alison Bruce

I wanted to engage in a conversation in the space with Ali, I have known her my whole life but it was chance that brought her here. We talked about the vastness of space and the immensity of energy, and of risk. We talked of risk.

Visible and Invisible Vibrations



Event: Song/sound preformed in space leaving energy residue.

4th of November 2013, at 7:30pm for a duration of 2 hours.

Participants: Artist / Maugapaia Ropeti-lupeli / Elijah Taulago / Matini Tamamasui / Pita Tuiaki / Pene Ueta / Nathan Petesa / Lilo Asiata



Tonight's energy changed in pitch and quality, there was both a rhythmic urgency and sustained sound. The sentiment was expressed not so much in words and actions as in vibrations. I am able to grasp them.

I Did Ring You But No Answer Yet



Event: Email from Natalie and distance channeling.
11th November 2013 at 9:00pm for a duration of 2 minutes.
Participants: Natalie Haggard



Natalie couldn't make it in today but she sent me an email about the distance channeling she had been doing, it said...
"Hi Holli, I haven't heard from you and didn't get the email you were going to send me. I did ring you but no answer yet. I was unable to come today to do what you asked me but...
Your site is clear and protected from any outside negative influences etc. I drew a picture of the site and room and virtually did what I do clearing houses from home.
Your site has all the good vibes it should have and is protected from any negative or other foreign influences from other exhibitors as well. Sorry we couldn't catch up but it wasn't meant to be. Blessings and Healing".
I missed Natalie's call because I was trying to harness something, but that was fine, she already had.

Hearing The Negotiation of Space



Event: Exhibition opening night, sound performance in demarcated space.

13th November 2013 at 8:00pm for a duration of 20 minutes.

Participants: Artist / Maugapaia Ropeti-lupeli / Elijah Taulago / Matini Tamamasui / Pita Tuiaki / Pene Ueta / Nathan Petesa



Tonight's energy took hold of the space completely. Pitch took an unexpected turn, peeking around the corner and opening the door to a colour of sound I had never seen before. Its timbre was unique, I had no words; all I could do was watch and feel the colour of noise.



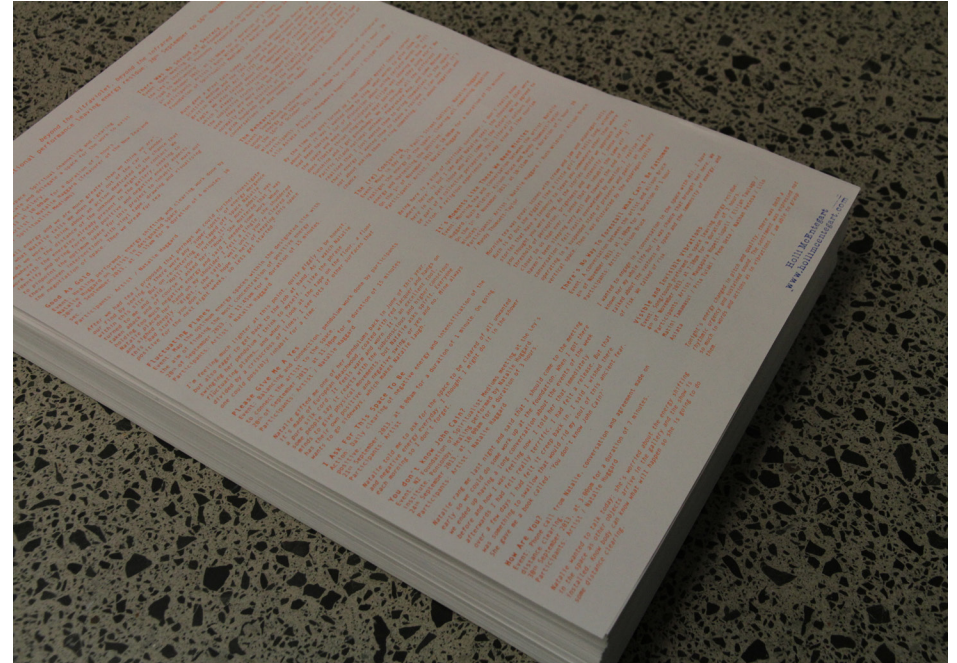
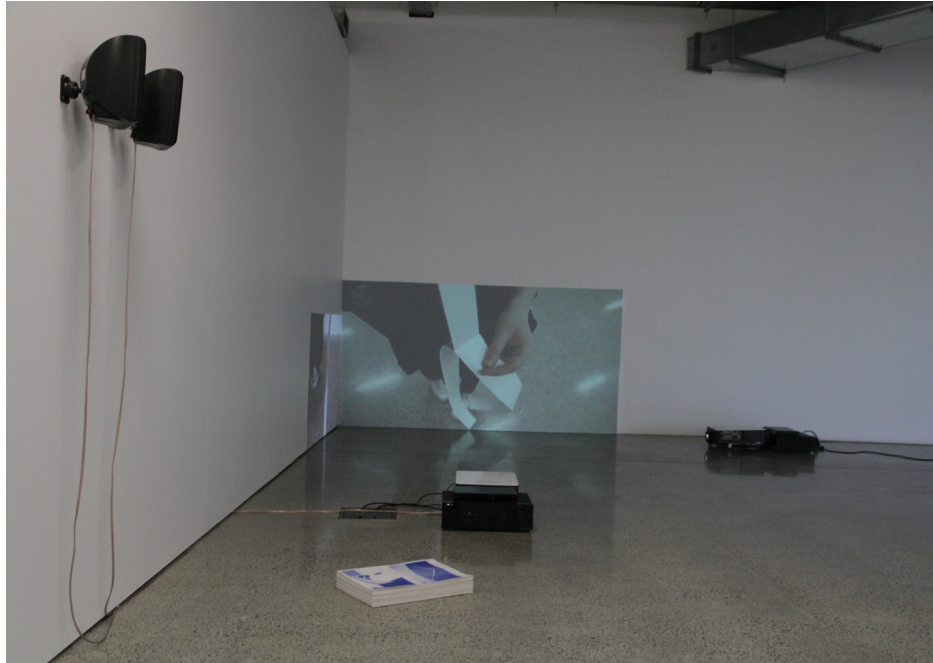
FIG# 1. BEYOND THE ULTRA VIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW



FIG# 2. DETAIL, BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013



FIG# 3 & 4. RISOGRAPH PRINTED TAKEAWAY DOCUMENT, COLLECTION OF FIVE.
INSTALLATION VIEW, 2013



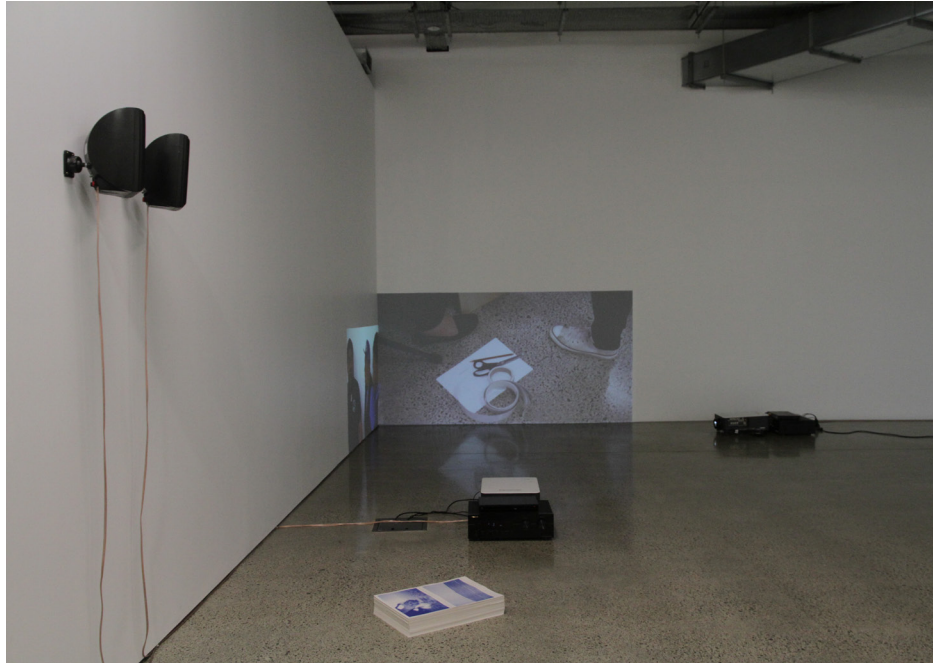
FIG# 5 & 6. RISOGRAPH PRINTED TAKEAWAY DOCUMENT, COLLECTION OF FIVE.
INSTALLATION VIEW, 2013



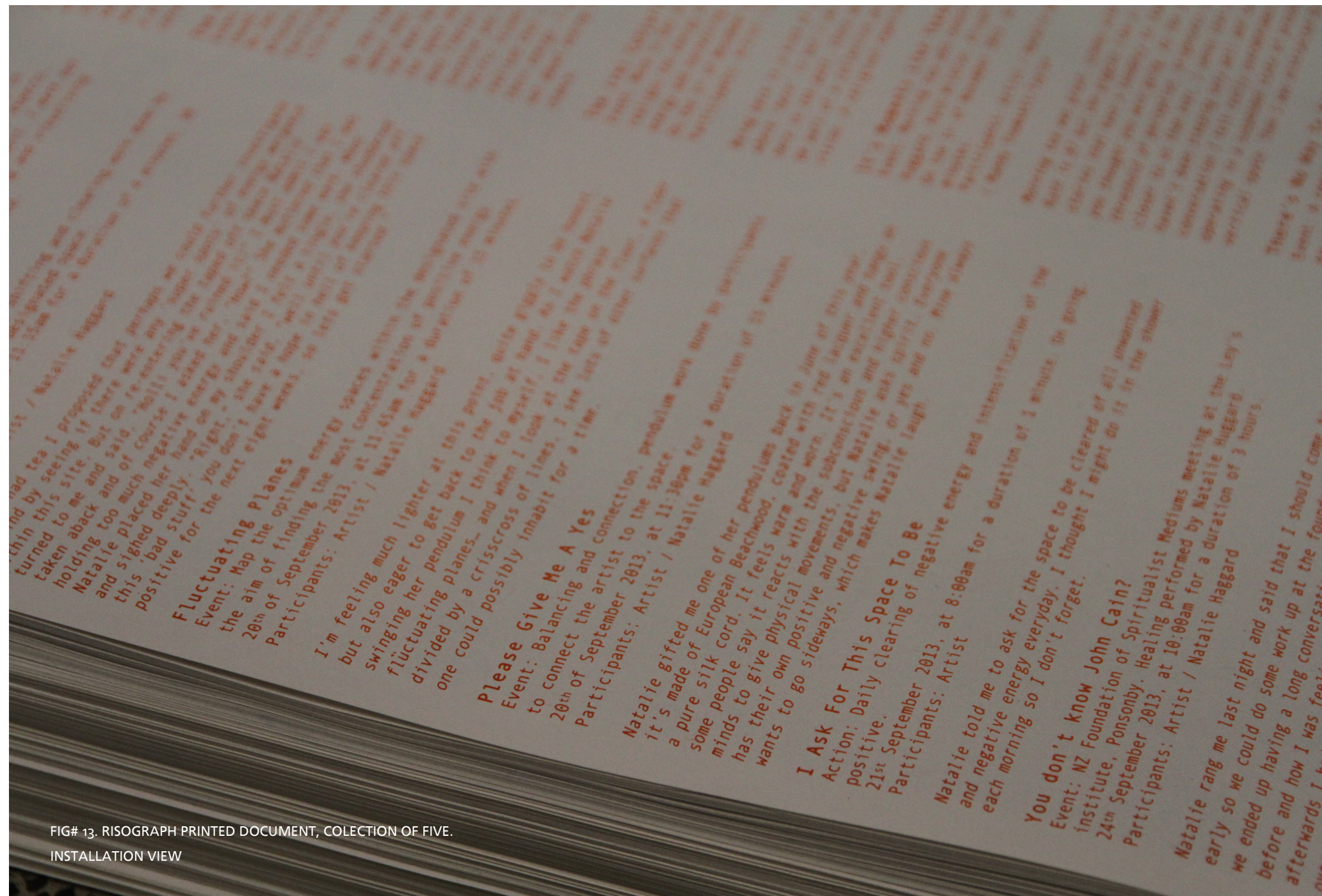
FIG# 7 & 8. DETAIL. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW.



FIG# 9 & 10. DETAIL, BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED,
2013



FIG# 11 & 12. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW.



FIG# 13. RISOGRAPH PRINTED DOCUMENT, COLLECTION OF FIVE.
INSTALLATION VIEW



FIG# 14. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW



FIG# 15. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW



FIG# 16. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW



FIG# 17. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW



FIG# 18. BEYOND THE ULTRAVIOLET, BEYOND THE INFRARED, 2013
INSTALLATION VIEW