

**IN SEARCH OF NO-SELF:**

AN INSTALLATION EXPLORING RELATIONS BETWEEN NOTIONS OF SELFHOOD, TRANSCENDENTALISM  
AND SUBLIMITY

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**2006**

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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 and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.”

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Maria O'Connor and Frances Joseph for their well-informed support and enthusiasm for my project. I also like to thank the Off-campus Programme Co-ordinator, Dale Fitchett, for her support and dedication to the off-campus distance programme delivery that in turn enabled me to undertake this MA (Art & Design) successfully. I would also like to acknowledge the support of EIT for the use of their facilities and ongoing support for my training and development as an artist.

I also want to thank my fellow students Yoka Van dyk, Lee Morgan, family and friends: Robert Maher, Beryl and Michael Maher, Sylvia White, Toni and Gwen Bauerfeind, and Nicole Schmidt.

I would like to thank you for your wonderful energy and encouragement without which, this thesis would not have been possible.

Further acknowledgements go to those who act as collaborators in some way for the production of this art installation. Those people are:

Joshua Schmidt: animation artist for the work on the Movie entitled '*Quantum self*'.

Mike Forsyth: Lighting

Mark Howden: Sound

Keith Kolver: Zorb provider

Sponsorship & support: Zorb Company, Rotorua

## Title

In Search of *No-self*: An installation exploring relations between notions of selfhood, transcendentalism and sublimity.

## Abstract

This thesis examines two major arenas of enquiry. Firstly it explores the notions of selfhood, via a critique of Modernity's subject. This is considered through the frameworks of both deconstruction and Buddhism's *anatta* theory of *no self*.

Through installation practice, theories of the sublime and transcendentalism have been activated in order to provide the viewer (who becomes an interactive participant) the possibility of experiencing *no-self*. 'No-self' is a philosophy and state of being from the Buddhism's *anatta* theory, but I do not espouse here such a purity of *no-self* being in terms of only this theory. Rather, the project merges western post-structuralism's deconstruction with *anatta*, as there are many coincidental moments that translate well in terms of the installation's aims.

This project interconnects three inter-related levels of research:

1. A critique of 'Modernity's Subject' via particular post-structuralist thinkers, with respect to the notions of selfhood.
2. A comparison between the embodied self, as defined by post-structuralism as 'non-entity', and the Buddhist's *anatta* theory of *no-self*
3. An investigation into an installation practice of the sublime, situated through sensual stimulus. This allows the "viewer" to experience both sublime and transcendental states.

## Introduction

### *In Search of No-self*

'Modernity's subject' places an emphasis on the individual who is born-free. This liberty is a freedom uncontaminated by forces of power, ideologies and Monarchical rule. It is a being in a world that is self-governed and able to enter into the social-contract. Democracy and capitalist enterprise are also characteristics of Modernity's ideals of freedom. This project, at its heart, seeks to align itself with those who have questioned the stability of Modernity's subject-hood. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the 'will-to-power,' Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious drives, and Karl Marx' critique of the capitalist modes of production have all made significant impact, through their different modes of enquiry into the undoing of this stable self. This project is indirectly indebted to, and in acknowledgement of, the significance of these three thinkers who have questioned further, the conditions for our being in the world. From this existing platform the project predominantly relies on post-structuralist thinking (Derrida and deconstruction), and its coincidental moments with Buddhism's *anatta* theory of *no-self*.

The project is relentless in its probing and it's questioning of the concept of a stable self. Western frameworks of thinking (which has predominated in western metaphysical philosophy since classical Greek times), have meant we have inherited a dominant system that desires a self that is stable, fixed, pure and uncomplicated. Notions of a truth that is fixed, un-shifting and correct, are a legacy from both metaphysical presence, and the natural and human sciences. It is based on this premise, that I believe that as a Western woman, I have been socialized into believing that my identity is both static and pure. This is a notion that I find untenable. By repositioning my identity into a Buddhist framework, and by finding links with post-structuralism, this has allowed myself to reject the notion that my individualism and identity is permanent and unchanging. Instead, I have embraced the Buddhist notion of *no self* existing, and the correlation to post-modernism and post-structuralism.

Following on from a critique of Modernity's selfhood by utilizing both deconstruction and Buddhist *anatta*, is a review of literature that frames notions of selfhood and informs the underpinning for the studio practice.

The installation entitled '*In Search of No-self*' provides a journey through an idealized notion of selfhood —one could almost suggest these are overly-determined, highly constructed, social-narratives of our self in the world. These initial dominant codes for reading the self are, of course, intentional as a way of mesmerizing the participator and "starting" them off on a journey that is linear, fixed and secure. The work then begins to engage the participator via exposure to stimuli that is not easily decodable and that suggest a self *just* in some kind of state of existence. This is the work activating deconstructive ideas that then coincide with an encounter with the Buddhism's *anatta* state of *no-self*. The work aims through such a procession to activate both states of transcendentalism and sublimity.

The installations methodology incorporated many actors and agents in the conceptualization and technical activation of this project. This intention grew from a desire to work collaboratively as I sought to challenge my own preconceived biases around both the concept driving the work and the ideals of installation practice. I felt it was an important process to promote a disengagement of self and allow a more rhizomatic or spontaneous evolvement of the work to take place. It allowed me to clarify and acknowledge the multiple approaches to a work. Under the umbrella of deconstruction I was able to experience different readings of its being and thereby work integrally.

Deconstruction provokes a key idea of the undecideable. As we are surrounded by multiple conceptions at the edge or limit of our being the 'undecideable', is a state of being where there is always something to be decided.

This project employs a multi-faceted engagement, utilizing many decisions from various sources. The fact that they have been made one way and not another, leaves open the absence (the trace) through the presence of many other potential approaches and



manifestations. This work lives, like its collective-spirit desires, where on-going and uncertain other is desired and responded to. It offers an environment conducive to an experience of altered transcendental states of being via the sublime.

The exhibition is documented and this will be included as a digital CD version in the final bound thesis that will be housed in the AUT University library. The grading for this thesis is to be based on an 80 % practical (the installation) and 20% written (exegesis) weighting.

## CHAPTER 1: PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORKS — CRITIQUES OF THE *SELF*

### **Section One:**

#### *1.1. A Critique of Western Modernity via Post-structuralism*

The following writing is a synopsis that refers to how Modernity's subject (selfhood) is framed by ideals of fixity and truth inherent in the free-born individual and internalized subject. These notions lead to the concept of 'the inner self'. It is this foundation of having an 'inner self' I simply could not hold to. Rather, I have strongly aligned myself with key post-structuralist literature (selected here). Supporting the post-modernist stance this section builds a critique of Modernity's selfhood, concluding in the correlation I see between post-structuralist thinkers and their intersection with the Buddhist theory of *no-self*.

Taylor (1989) summarizes three moments leading to the formation of the modern self which he refers as 'the inner self'. Taylor traces the inward movement to selfhood firstly through the Augustinian heritage that sees inner reflection bringing us closer to God. Secondly from Montaigne, the inwardness is advanced to recognizing particularity or a more individual self. Thirdly the legacy of the Stoic conception of 'the inner will', to make a total commitment, reinforces the notion of the self as 'having an inner.'

Clymer (2002) suggests further that the independent self, able to make its own choices, emerged more fully in the Enlightenment (the inception of Modernity's) which saw the autonomous essential self triumphing over internal hindrances to achieve self-knowledge and autonomy. I agree with Clymer who saw this notion of self as a fiction created in the service of cultural goals.

Ponce de Leon (1998) stated that; the individual self, possessing an inner stable reality and able to control the outer passions, underwent substantial revision in the nineteenth century through the influence of Romanticism. The founding father of Modernity was in this respect

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with his critique of contemporary civilization and discovery of a primal, "un-spoilt" existence of self in nature. With an emphasis upon emotions and passion as "un-spoilt" and slowly upgraded, the individual self emerged as having the ability to choose identity and develop selfhood. (Mikhail Epstein 1996)

Similar to Clymer, Ponce De Leon sees the autonomous self, that could promote its own development, was a bourgeois ideal to reinforce the notion of the balanced character that was beneficial for governing a nation. This so called 'essential reality' was further developed with Nietzsche (will to power) and Freud, in the sexual drive and in the power of the unconscious. This highly constructed notion of selfhood as the authentic, higher, essential reality, found in an inward search separate from cultural systems, was to dominate western modernity's understanding. This metaphysical presence was to undergo massive deconstruction in the later 20th century through the critiques of postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists. The work of philosopher of (bio)power Michel Foucault, French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard and deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida, have given rise to much skepticism concerning the grounds or foundations of modernity's self.

Arons (1999) so succinctly commented on this 'established foundation' when he described the essential self as a construct embedded in language, culture and history. For some postmodernist theorists, (to which I adhere) the unchanging inner self, able to be accessed and discovered, was just such a construction. It did not actually exist outside context. I agree with Connie Zweig (1995) who commenting on this 'non-existent self' with the pronouncement "the self is dead", understood the huge controversial effects this would have upon the very ground in which our belief of selfhood is understood. And, so I would hasten to add it is vital that such a critique has occurred. Deconstruction is a practice that reveals weakness in systems; revealing its blind spots and overturning ground that has once been perceived self secure.

### *1.2. Buddhist anatta theory of 'no self' coincides with post-structuralism as 'non-entity'*

The Buddhist *anatta* theory of *no-self* is a rejection of the notion of western concepts of personal identity. In Buddhism; the self is an illusion - a creation of the mind. Hence, from a

western perspective, we immediately acknowledge this as an undoing of Modernity's dominant Cartesian legacy that had privileged the mind/body split. This is where the body was subsumed and negated under the mind's dominance for knowing.

Self in Buddhist *anatta*'s terms, is not an innate substance. James Giles (1993, p.185.) noting Buddhist theory suggests that "self is only a mode of language and" He goes on to say;

*"..that 'Self' or 'I', according to Buddhism, are merely expressions, or terms of speech. That is, although we may use words like 'self' and 'I,' we should not be led into thinking that they actually refer to something, for they are but grammatical devices."*

This type of critique of the concept of self housed in language is common to the ideas of post-structuralism. It was Martin Heidegger who suggested language is the '*house of being*' (1977). Jacques Derrida further investigates exactly how our being has been structured by language. Heidegger sensed that being in the world has its essence in communication, i.e. language is the condition of our being to be able to communicate. Derrida attributes language (its grammar) with suggesting our being in the world is coincidental with the external structures of language. Psychoanalysis has possibly a stronger coincidence with Buddhism with respect to how the self has been systematically structured by language and finds its identity secured in the masculine realm of the Symbolic (language).

Psychoanalyst and theorist Julia Kristeva (1993), describes selfhood as a 'subject in trial.' Through a process of separation and rejection, the subject breaks with the symbolic identity (realm of language) in order to find the lost semiotic identity (the pre language stage). Kristeva sees uncovering language in this semiotic space as instrumental in the trial by which the subject both oscillates and identifies other unstable diverse selves. From this perspective, Kristeva's 'subject' is searching for a 'semiotic chora', in which experiences are freed from the constraints of language. This concept has strong resonance with this project — with respect to a kind of *freedom* inherent in the idea of 'no self.' 'No-self' is therefore, a state in which I am not self conscious. The 'I am' has dissolved. Furthermore, Kristeva's notion of 'semiotic space' holds a strong resonance to the inter-connectedness of Buddhism's state of bliss. One could think of our state of being inside the womb — it is pre-language. Although Kristeva's 'semiotic space' is *outside* of the Symbolic paradoxically it can only be experienced

when one encounters the Symbolic language system. We have no conscious memory of this state. Perhaps, our body relates through desiring inter-connectedness, and this is a potential pre-language memory. Furthermore, it is a state that does not separate selves out, i.e., there is no separation between mother, creator, life-force and baby:

*'..The infant can not recall the experience of being a human baby because it never was a human baby. It was only a pre-linguistic animal incapable of generating verbal data which is susceptible to later conscious recall.'* Paul Ableman. (2000, p. 36.)

Ableman's comments are not unlike Kristeva's chora where the subject is not a subject of self-awareness. Although, Kristeva's chora is a space that has encountered language. Mabbett (2005,p.205.) offers a comparison between Derrida's deconstruction and Madhyamaka Buddhism:

"Both avoid any claim about a determinate reality. The notion of Buddhist Naagaarjuna's 'voidness' means neither, 'nonexistence,' nor 'falsity'. The void is rather unreal, or lacking substance. A phantom or a projection could explain better the non determinate reality. The result of the insight can perhaps be described as a stepping aside from existence and inexistence; it is the place or condition that is presupposed by the possibility of either existing or not existing."

Similarly, deconstruction seeks to take an object of thought and show it for what it is, allowing its inconsistencies to discredit it. Derrida's sense of a reality steps aside from itself. "Deconstructionists" do not argue absolutely that things do not exist. The deconstructionist practice points to the impossibility of finding original and ultimate reference for our words. What words succeed in referring to, consists of traces, and these traces are traces of traces. (Mabbett , 2005, p.207.) goes on to say:

"...the 'presence' of the things supposed to be designated by words or other signs, always retreats. There is no presence or svabhaava; there is only absence, and the real nature of things we seek to define must remain forever indeterminate."

"A fundamental doctrine of Buddhism is that everything is relative. Nothing is intrinsically real but exists only in relation to other things. The Buddha formulated this notion through the doctrine of 'dependent conproduction', pratiityasamutpaada. According, things must be understood in relationship to

their dependence with each other. There are no absolutes, everything is conditioned by causes.' ( Mabbet , 2005, p. 208.)

Things exist, only relatively. Deconstruction converges at this point with a radical relativity. No text exists outside relative meanings or traces of meanings.

“No element,” says Derrida, “can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each element ... being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system.” (Mabbet , 2005, p. 210.)

Both philosophies deconstruct the concept of the self. To cite Buddhist monk Nagasena quoted by James Giles (1993, p.187.); “ultimately there is no person at all to be found.” All our attempts to define are only conventional usage or names. The constituents of the self are merely prapa~nca, projections. What is this 'ceasing'? Perhaps it is a sort of absence, but not a nonexistence.

“The Deconstruction’s concept of 'self' as a 'knowable identifiable entity' is only given reality or substance, through language and language turns out to be relative.” (Mabbett , 2005, p. 205.)

“Self, which can now be seen to be an epiphenomenon, a construct, indeed is a projection or prapa~nca;” (Mabbett 2005,p.210.)

Deconstruction employs a special type of contemplative thought which is similar to the Buddhist deconstruction. In conclusion, although both philosophies have been derived from vastly different cultural contexts, with significant differences, there is a convergence at their framework. Post-structuralism and Buddhism both surmise the self as a construct or an irrelevance.

Whilst there are these coinciding moments between Buddhism and deconstruction this project has found a slightly stronger resonance with the Buddhist notion, because it offers a blissful way of relating to the irrelevance of selfhood. This project acknowledges ‘self’ as irrelevant. The freeing of a subject from the bondage of language to a pre-linguistic space is, in part, the initial access point for this installation work. However, it is deeply understood that any viewer/participant (if successful) will go through ongoing points of negotiation —that is, the work asks each individual to let go of a self that they are all very familiar with. Indeed, this

degree of trust between the viewer/participant and the work evokes a sense of transcendentalism and a sublime state. It is therefore now important to introduce this most critical register of the sublime. I acknowledge that the project is designed to activate a degree of horror and induces a sense of being overwhelmed on the basis that I have asked one to let go their highly constructed sense of self — at this edge there exists what we have come to understand as a sublime state.

## Section 2: On Sublimity

### 2.1. The term 'sublime'

The term 'sublime' was introduced by Longinus (1989) in the first century and then developed by, among others, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The project relies, mostly, on a particular Kantian notion of the sublime, whereby Kant proposed an existed disruption between a subjective encounter and the determinant reconciliation. That is, the Kantian sublime is not found in objects or imagery; rather, it is a process by which we contemplate nature or ideas. The sublime is the consideration of the fearful from a position of refuge that reason offers. This consideration involves two progressions, from dread to pleasure.

In Kantian terms in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790 translated by James Creed Meredith) the sublime is constituted as a disharmony between our faculty of understanding and our faculty of intuitions. A disharmony happens when we apprehend something for which our cognitive processes have no gauge to bring what we encounter into a universal concept. Hence, there is the feeling of dread which is commonly associated with the sublime, a disharmony of the faculties. The sublime has two stages: initially there is a dread in the dissonance of understanding and intuition (the mathematical and dynamical sublime)<sup>1</sup> and the second stage is the recourse to our faculty of Reason. This is the capacity to be able to contemplate the infinite, for example the Idea of God. We recognize in this second moment, a harmony between reason and intuition, which converts the dread into pleasure. Such aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> 'mathematical' - if our ability to intuit is overwhelmed by size (the huge building) - or 'dynamical' - if our ability to will or resist is overwhelmed by force (e.g. the storm). 'dynamically' (things that have a magnitude of force *in relation to us*, particularly our will).

judgment is for Kant, reflective judgment, which means a subjective judgment resulting in a feeling of pleasure or dread.

An example of a dynamical sublime would be the sensation of awe and horror one felt when the Twin Towers in the USA collapsed. Faced with the immensity of the moment one could not reason what was really happening. A gap exists between the subjective judgment, and determinant judgment. Sadly, the resulting logical stage brought a furthering dread as one comprehended the terrorist action.

This project interprets the extremity of losing Self as a sublime experience. It is the uncertainty of not possessing a stable Self —a universalized concept ‘Self’ (belonging to Modernity’s subject). — This loss is experienced as a sensation that is overwhelming and amounting to the terror contained within this structure of the dynamical sublime.

## *2.2 Sublime as an access to ‘No-self.’*

There are some differences between the way Kant defines sublime and the aims of this project. The emphasis Kant relies on is Reason’s capacity to rationalize sublimity. This clearly emphasizes the mind’s control over the body. In contrast, this project relies on an embodied encounter to experience and process the sublime (an embodiment that reveals the irreducible alterity of the self, discussed on page 18). Kant’s process of converting immediate insight into a cognitive understanding holds reliance upon determinant judgment. In contrast our logical faculties endeavor to define, and rationalize what we have just experienced. This leads to the process of change, whereby the nature of that original encounter or experience changes. The result is a sense of security, as one identifies and classifies the fearful or unknown experience.

Kant promoted Reason as a means to encounter or rationalize the sublime. Emphasis in my project however, is placed on an experience that encompasses more of an integration of bodily sensation and mental capabilities. This aligns somewhat with more contemporary notions of the subjective encounter espoused by cultural theory. It takes into consideration the post-structuralist central framework which dismantles binary thinking that promotes a ‘naturalised’ hierarchy. (Binary thinking is partially a Cartesian legacy that privileges mind



over body). Notions of the sublime, inherit a traditional discourse that privileges the proper or the capital (or the security of an “I” that can rationalize itself absolutely). This traditional discourse, holds within it the cornerstone of modernity: a self-sufficient universal subject. In this respect the project holds more resonance to the *feminine sublime*, (Freeman, 1995)<sup>2</sup> whereby unlike the traditional sublime, the feminine sublime accepts the affiliation of both pleasure and gain, or life and death, as a means to dissolve self. In this way the sublime sensation of disorientation sets up a participator’s enjoyment —(a relation of between-ness) — a pleasure that finds resonance with transcendentalism<sup>3</sup>.

In contrast to Kants’ determinant judgment, my aim in the final stage of the art project’s interactive installation, has been to intentionally postpone a conclusive determinancy. A postponement, which is aligned with Derrida’s primary deconstructive notion of *différance* (Derrida, 1982). The action of making interpretations is always a process. It is like being in a constant state of limbo, where meaning *differs* and *defers* at the same time (the performance of the deconstructive neologism *différance*).<sup>4</sup>

The journey of this installation via the mechanism and structure of sublimity, desires to enact a loss-of-self. An encounter that aligns within deconstruction’s *difference*, and advocates an irreducible alterity in relation to our being in the world. This understanding of our human experience sits outside the comfort zone of modernity’s legacy. When we reflect upon an overwhelming experience, under Kant’s logic of determinant judgment, we become *self-aware*. However, it is this emphatic understanding which is experienced in the first stage of sublimity that levitates, or transcends momentarily beyond and above cognitive processes. I

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<sup>2</sup> This concept of the feminine sublime is from Barbara Claire Freeman, who in her book *The Feminine Sublime* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995) discusses the work of earlier theorists of sublimity and their wary approach to what was excessive and threatening to the stability of the subject. The feminine sublime is an encounter with the incalculable alterity of the other. The feminine sublime here is not to be read in the paradigm of ‘femininity’ that reflects the traditional gender binarism. Instead, ‘femininity’ is to be read as a marker of irreducible difference, represented by such French feminist voices as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (and thereby can be read across Kristeva’s radical thinking with respect to the semiotic chora mentioned in this exegesis earlier).

<sup>3</sup> Lonergan’s notion of *transcendence*. Transcendence is defined in terms of the sublation of metaphysics or; to goes beyond being. This going beyond being and into “relatedness”. The term “relatedness” or “interconnected” I want to use in this context as in the sense of linking, being connected to whatever is the Other beyond ordinary sense data.

<sup>4</sup> The deconstructive neologism *Difference* —a term made from bringing together these two words/meanings).

am attempting to prolong this perception. I understand this as an open space whereupon a transcendental state of 'no-self' is possible as an experience.

The emphasis is taken away from cognition, and permits other forms of being in the world to emerge. This process further holds its relation to what is named an extended altered state of transcendentalism.

Through the installation, my aim is to prolong an engagement with a loss of stable self —to keep the integration of body and mind in a state of alterity where any fixed meaning is lost and meaning is irreducible, always differing and deferring. The installation provokes the participator to encounter the linear state of our logical being through dominant modes of representation (This is described in more detail in the documentation and methodology sections). This is the initial stage of the installation's experience. In doing so, I have deliberately set up a highly constructed question process for the viewer. My intention is to encourage the participator into considering the logic of the singular stable self.

The dominant elements that play out this scenario of highly constructed representations of stable individual self acts also to induce a kind of claustrophobic sensation (beginning of phase two) —and, it is this transformation from feelings of knowing/certainty to claustrophobia that activates an experience of a self dismantled (sublimity). One of the most dominant modes of representation is the spatial sphere, which holds just one person at a time.

The first phase of the installation is viewing the sphere from the outside. It is intended that the participator will interpret the sphere as a womb enclosure, the external as infinity and that what they are about to experience is a simulated pre- birth location. In the second phase of the installation the participator is now enclosed within the sphere, and there are images projected onto the outer-surface. These highly constructed images signify origin and birth. In the third phase of the program the dismantling of selfhood is suggested through sound and lighting.—feelings of intensity loom and a type of disorientation is intended. As a result a 'loss-of-self' takes place and an encounter with the initial stages of sublimity is activated, felt as an arousing of unease and a building sense of terror.

In the final phases of the installation, attempts have been made to hinder the logical modes of understanding. This has been a process of distancing the participator from the more dominant codes of representation, through a heightening of all sensory modes of encounter. It has intentionally been activated to postpone determinant judgment — i.e., Kant's closure on the sublime — and it is perceived this closure would default as it would only induce *self-awareness*.

This installation expects the Kantian's process of reconciliation to happen — after all it is an art-work that will have its conclusion, its finish. That is, the participant will leave the enclosure and return to the world as they know it. It will be a brief encounter that has, a highly constructed sequence - a beginning, middle and end point. What the presentation seeks to do is to enable the participator to remain in a heightened impending sensation of fear. The subject will 'at last' fall into its final phase facilitated by the construction of a calming atmosphere. This has been constructed with subjective judgment —a feeling of knowing and control. This could be conceived as the project's conceit. This is because the project is a simulation of sublimity rather than the authentic unpredictable encounter. The context of reading art is always an entry into something outside of conventional codes for reading selfhood. At this stage, the presentation suggests that there is pleasure in this abstract environment because it is not easily classified. It is expected that once the *show* is over the subject will immediately try to contemplate what they have experienced. When applying determinant judgment, the subject has an opportunity to understand the pleasure there is in one's own connectedness to the infinite. In this sense the viewer/participator has two opportunities to experience the infinite. That is; the blissful mediated transcendental state and the surmised logical contemplation.

This project seeks to provide a mode that will enable the viewer/participator to disengage from easily categorized, or coded frameworks regarding selfhood. It further seeks to open up a space for a participator to engage with notions of transcendental *no-self*. In the context of the dynamic sublime, the movement of pain to pleasure can occur when one encounters terror in relation to losing the security of a known selfhood. In being so one encounters the abyss, where a self's presence does not take priority (a movement away from the metaphysics of presence). The emphasis is shifted from specular (sight-dominant economy)

and moves into an embodied economy. The abyss, it could be said, is manifest in our imagination.

### *2.3. The Abyss that is the Sublime*

Lyotard suggests that by virtue of self being infinite, the self is 'unpresentable' (Lyotard, 1991) However, to suggest that selfhood does not exist by not representing it is not enough to generate the sublime or transcendentalism. The gap (or abyss) between what is happening (in our subjective judgment) and what we cannot comprehend (our determinant judgment) is the sublime. It is this temporal event or location that induces the experience of the sublime. Selfhood, which we cannot create, or fix, is the sublime. The sublime is the gap, which makes evident the impossibility of representing the presence of self. The felt sensation of 'absence' is the key to the sublime. It is the very searching to find *no-self* and the impossibility of ever finding "it", that is the thing we here acknowledge as the Self akin to sublimity.

### *2.4. The practice of sublimity*

My practice has moved with and also away from Kant's sublime. (refer to page 14-16) I am exploring a contemporary notion of the sublime through Jean-François Lyotard writings. As Lyotard explains, a difference exists between the modern and postmodern sublime:

"... modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (2004).

According to Lyotard the sublime is the feeling that indicates the limits of reason and representation. It is an experiential state, and not of suggested matter. It is a feeling and no image or absence of images can represent adequately our encounter within the world. The notion of adequacy is a default term which is deliberately used, as it suggests we need security otherwise our life would be lacking. I am suggesting that this adequacy is not lacking but an irreducible excess of being in the world. There is simply too much that engages our senses, through representation. This has been the dominant mode for securing experience. Even though my installation relies heavily on representation, it was my strategy to employ an

excessive sensory experience, whereby one sense does not dominate over another. In this way, an experience of being is 'unrepresentable.' The effects I present are therefore, in some ways, not the sublime *no-self*. They are the means (an artwork — as a form of critique of Western aesthetics) by which I create an environment, or production of the sublime experience:

“Any representation which either through absence, or the apparent generation of a space between the imagination and the actual can present the sublime sentiment.” (Lutzker, 1997)

However, one could also add that it is precisely in this domain of art and artifice that our imagination reveals its infinite nature and, where it gives reason its infinite task. To quote again Emily Lutzker (1997): “The sublime dismantles consciousness divulging the limitations of reflected judgment opening up altered states of being.” Anthony David sums up well how the practice of sublimity can be used when he wrote: “Essentially, the heuristic function of the sublime is to expose reflective judgment” (2004). Further, in terms of how I perceive aspects of the sublime I would like to make reference to Joanna Zylińska's sublime. Joanna's feminist questioning of the economy of proportion perpetuated by what she termed as 'the masculine tradition of the sublime.'

“Unlike the traditional sublime, the feminine sublime, as I see it, does not domesticate the object that might be a source of threat. Instead, it accepts the relationship of both pleasure and pain, or life and death, and the potential dispersal of the self. The term 'the feminine sublime' does not stand for an encounter with the magnificence of mountain peaks and 'piling-up clouds' - as it did for Burke and Kant - but rather for a meeting with the incalculable alterity of the other” (2001).

My alignment with this notion of the feminine sublime and the alterity of the other is highly influential and thus, significant with the project that aims to experience *no-self*.

An installation could be considered an open-ended work rather than a finite work of art. By this I mean an installation has the opportunity to create an event. By way of inviting the participator to negotiate through a number of emotional and mental states the work becomes an experience. Among the types of participation my work is a process that requires a certain amount of trust by the viewer. This permits their emotional involvement in constructing an

experience for the participator so that it depends on their individual response and casts the subject in a role that is not quite performer, but certainly more than a passive viewer.

## CHAPTER 2. DOCUMENTATION & METHODOLOGY: PRACTICE-BASED WORK (A METHODOLOGICAL DIALOGUE)

### 1.1. Overview

During the first year my emphasis was on studio practice, investigating ways of re-presenting notions of *selfhood*. This was carried through the practice of mediation via computer-rendered and reproduced printed imagery. The importance of this experimentation lies in understanding the *self* as an entity which is always undergoing mediation and representation. By the end of the first year the practice-based research explored further relevant imagery through projection. Projection became an interesting phenomenon for playing with the notion of mediation, representation and the virtual. I started to realize that projection had multiple dimensions for undoing static notions of selfhood and therefore it became a more coherent practice for the critique of Modernity's notion of self. I also explored animation as a way of undoing the static, and adding movement and more questions around the spatial-temporal experience that encompasses our more embodied experience of life. By applying the theory of sublimity, as a way of exploring the relationship between the sublime and a potential access to *no-self*, the year's research concentrated on implementing these aims through projection, animation and installation practice.

An important thread has been to test how corresponding theoretical frameworks (post-structuralism, deconstruction and the Buddhist 'anatta' concept of *no-self* in an attempt to discredit concepts of (Modernity's) selfhood) are demonstrated in my studio art practice.

On reflection it has been interesting to observe my studio practice progress since the first year of the thesis. Initially, I tended to *illustrate* ideas through mediums of two-dimension. The work has shifted from a 2-D dimension to projection. The former imposed restraint due to its more static expression. This content gained its reference from a techno-aesthetic that anticipates a type of sci-fi genre. I intended to rely upon, a traditional mode of representing images, resulting in the final "printed" works on paper. Regardless of whether the works were painted or computer generated prints, the images tended to default into static representations

that easily fell into definable modes (genres and their disciplines) for reading. An installation and projected art practices have their discipline specificities, however, offer a more interdisciplinary approaches that mesh well with my concept for “undoing” static notions of selfhood.

### *1.2. Art practitioner informing the work*

My first inclination towards projection was inspired by the work of an American installation artist Tony Oursler. His projected installations interested me on two counts. Firstly, he blurs the boundaries between disciplines and discourses of video, sculpture and sound, specifically through his use of projection. I found the way he projected onto actual sculptural works an interesting reading that disrupted the static form of sculpture and the future (moving) possibilities for engaging in them. In this respect my thinking around projecting onto a spherical 3-D form, rather than on the more traditional 2D surface, opened up potential sites for interactive engagements across disciplines. This spatial dimension with sound wrapped around could enhance the sense of an event rather than a more passive viewing of 2D images. Secondly, Oursler’s approach interested me on another level notably how it explores questions of psychosis and disintegration of personality. Clearly the potential for activating the viewer as participant that led to some kind of disorientation or displacement of self was pertinent for the aims of my project.

At this stage of the project I could already visualize a possible gallery exhibition. That is, if I were to exhibit static 2-D printed works, I realized that I would be setting up a separation or partition between the viewer and the work that I found problematic. However, with installation work that involved projection and moving image I saw the potential for providing the ‘viewer’ with a more embodied experience whereby the work could transform the ‘viewer’ to participant. At this stage, interactivity started to become an important agent for the success of the project.



### 1.3. Representation as it relates to Lyotard

My sensitivity towards the more traditional notion of representation, is aligned with Lyotard's response through his notion of re-presentation (or the 'un-presentable' which is discussed earlier on page 17.) This is where the world is into binary and hierarchical modes of being i.e. static subject/object relations. Representation is a mode of classification and has a legacy from Modernity. We see it as an approach to define something, to depict it in such a way as to *represent* it. This method of defining (via the 2-D) has had a contrary effect on my work. Instead of opening the project up and releasing it from empirical grounds where conviction is proven through ocular speculation, this type of representation would limit the work to a viewer a set readings or definitions. It is not so much that the viewer would necessarily find this or that reading in the work that concerns me. Rather, it is the way of being in the world where the viewer is motivated to find closure to meaning that problematises the aims of the work. Setting up the interactive embodied and participatory installation seeks to overcome this way of perceiving the work. The work seeks to prolong or suspend this kind of closure.

Poststructuralist theorist Charles Jencks (Popper. 1993, p. 181.) describes Modernism (as distinct from Modernity but is certainly characterized by its legacy) as favoring simplicity, uniformity, order and rationality. Whereas, a Postmodernist art and design approach can be described as having multilayered readings and this permits an audience multiple entry and exit points for their interpretations. I can reflect back and see that my own practice in the early stages of the Masters reflected attitudes akin to the modernist values, particularly with reference to its illustrative or descriptive representational mode. Clearly, my passion for the concept of *no-self* is borne from wanting to extrapolate my own practice from this too neatly binarised logic of representation. And so, I realized this had a large effect on undermining my poststructuralist sentiments.

#### 1.4. Tracking the development: Images and analysis

As an example of this undermining I have selected a digital print rendered in Photoshop entitled *Evolve* that was created in the first year of my thesis (figure 1). The subject matter of the work was an attempt at representing an idea of ‘selfhood’ in transition to suggest a kind of transformative quality to our being. It evoked notions of evolution/transfiguration. However, because it neatly categorized the self through a representation of an actual human form — i.e. the most recognizable coded form for saying what the self is and what “looks” transformative rather than participates in other sensory experiences of transformation — it defaulted to a fixed notion of self going through change. Further, the ethereal qualities are also too easily codified in an image of metaphysical representation. This was an obvious contradiction as representing notions of *no-self* result in the very representation of a self affirmed by a category of seeing ‘no-self.’ Being in a state of ‘no-self’ paradoxically cannot be seen but rather is an experience. And this is why I have emphasized in the sublime section that the installation art-practice is in part a highly constructed catalyst for experiencing *no-self* —or for at least anticipating the possibility for experiencing our ‘identity’ as something that shifts radically away from Modernity’s legacy.



(Figure 1) *Evolve* Digital Print 80 cm by 80 cm  
First year of thesis.

### *Intuitive image making.*

Eventually I learnt how to reconcile my modernist tendencies that had been imbued in me through my art education and other forms or discourses that formed my identity, and my newer post-structuralist and Buddhist frameworks for repositioning self(hood). The discourse of the sublime has come from a traditional masculine and metaphysical legacy. It held within its condition possible new ways for approaching it via both post-structuralist deconstruction and Buddhist anatta theory. However, to describe further my process (in respect to extrapolating myself from those ingrained modernist tendencies) another pertinent example should be given. I identified that certain ways of representation closed down my project I then began to investigate working in a more abstract expressionist approach. This approach is similar to a number of influential twentieth-century Modernist artists working with notions of 'sublime art'.<sup>5</sup> American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman believed that 'sublime art' could emerge through the physical act of painting and imagery that directly 'appeared' —i.e., a *formal* image. This kind of *direct action* has the facility to connect emotionally and subconsciously with the painter/viewer. This process of intuitive (unmediated) image making, interested me. However, I later realized that some inherent contradictions existed between my new post-structuralist and Buddhist frames and modernist *abstract expressionism*.

When I employed this process between creative intuitions an immediate insight occurred, which enabled a connection that was transcendent and perceptive. This became autobiographical, creating personal dialogue between perceptions, thinking and making. By following intuitive hunches and promptings these painting opened up a new type of personal interpretation. This resulting introspection created an intimacy with my own work. An example of this work can be seen in the image (figure 2):

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<sup>5</sup> The Modernist movement had a number of artist interested in the sublime. In 'The sublime is now', written in 1948, Barnett Newman described his investigations into the sublime as; "Reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the Absolute emotions. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man or life, we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. " The relationship of the sublime with spiritual and transcendent experience has been of interest to a number of influential twentieth-century artists working with abstraction. American artists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman established a 'sublime art' that could directly connect with states of emotion and consciousness through the physical act of painting and the imagery that was produced.



(Figure 2) Entitled *Deconstructing self*, acrylic on board 90 cm by 125 cm  
An intuitive painted image created on the 25 September 2004

The above painting, Entitled *Deconstructing self*, (figure 2) together with other works of this period, illuminated personal associations and processes that helped negate my figurative and illustrative modernist tendency (while remaining akin to Pollock and Newman). It shifted my perceptions closer to the postmodernist excess of multiple entry and exit points for reading the work. These intuitive paintings were useful for revealing and consolidating my own feelings for the larger concept of another way of being, i.e., that undid fixed notions of self. At the same time I felt ambivalence because the works were too intimate and personal, and for this reason they had their own auto-biographical component to them. Even though, a viewer could not decode this auto-biographical element, it did not sit comfortably with what this project was ultimately attempting. What was significant from this exploration was my awareness that intuition was unlocking an altered state of consciousness. Deciding the process itself was worthy of further examination I discarded the need for a 2-D work and revised the forwarding methodology.

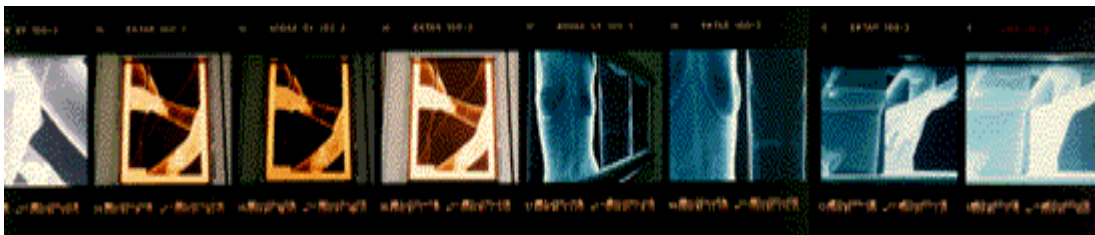
The critical conflict I have with abstract expressionism (particularly deconstruction) is that these artists and their movement are driven by the former qualities of the work itself. For the deconstructionist, form was replacing content or becoming content. It is this kind of binary switch that still holds in place a hierarchy for reading the work. That is, the power still exists in how one decodes the work. Although form sits as the dominant expressive medium, and content is subsumed into the form. Certainly, *abstract expressionism* is an act of deconstruction in some way but gets lost in the modernist trajectory of the avant-garde.

I began questioning around the possibility for creating a way for others to experience an altered-state. Newman had claimed his paintings opened altered states of consciousness for his viewers. However, this relied upon the assumption that the viewer would feel what Newman intended. Newman thought transcendence might have occurred by an absence of form. My construction is that through excess of form(al) qualities, a viewer could then automatically feel a state of transcendence. However, the contradiction was that the reading of the work resulted in rational thought not transcendental experience. It was rational, in part because it was 'new' and this led to a sensation around the movement. This very categorization resonates with Lyotard's sentiment that modern aesthetics of the sublime, 'permits the 'unpresentable' to be put forward as missing form'. It is the recognizable nature of the work that continues to offer the viewer rationality. That is, the work of modernist 'sublime art' as characterized by *abstract expressionism*, is a conscious effort to 'unpresent' content (or neat form). The absence of form is more present in its 'unpresentability' for the viewer to rationalize more easily, or work harder i.e. really rationalize the work. This does not offer an altered-state akin to transcendentalism but rather it produces work of a new genre (*the 'unpresentable'*) where the work becomes a game for the viewer at form-making.

Understanding this conflict (with respect to Lyotard's notion of the 'unpresentable' and rationalism) posed a difficult challenge for my studio work.

### 1.5. Further art practitioners informing the work

An artist who had some influence over this period was Gabriele Leidloff. Her genre was radiography, CAT scanning and sonargraphy techniques for reproduction. She recognized the limitations of concrete representation that places pressure upon the viewer to be dominated by completely formulated pictures. As seen below in her work '*Mannequins*' (figure 3) her 'bodies' represent visual paradoxes that intrigue me. Through a desire invested by the viewer to explore and search she uses a device of fragmented sequences and contradiction that deny static or concrete definition.



Leidloff, '*Mannequins*', 1996

Nina Zimnik (2004) commented on Leidloff's work and suggests that there is:

'...an aesthetic of oscillation - probing of thinking into representation. The process thus initiated, causes the mind to temporarily produce an unstable syntheses between immediate sense data and reason: thus, reason is in the image (think of it as a Kantian work of art).'

Opening the work by undoing stability and creating more of an in-between space became a crucial development in my thinking with respect to these practical ideas of movement, time, embodiment in projection and representation. Leidloff's work explored the problematic details of representation in relationship to the Kantian sublime stages of perception and reason. Focusing on the transitional in-between phase between the two she made me aware of how my work could adapt a similar kind of process.

Initially I struggled to find a way to weld together two experiences I.e. the process of sublimity with the process of *no-self*. For instance, acknowledging the merit of interactivity, installation, projection, the viewer as participant came primarily out of a more rigorous understanding of sublimity. One at first had to acknowledge that a loss of control was, in fact, integral to any authentic act of sublimity. I needed to let go in my practice the idea that I could control and pre-determine how the viewer responded to the work. The notion of loss of control is important in the anatta theory of *no-self* and this therefore needed to be reflected in my work practice. I had to acknowledge that the very practice of art-making has a strong element of constructed reality placed there partially by the very discourses of art theory and practice and as a specific discipline in our world of knowing. This means that my installation had to become part hyper-simulation. This hyper alludes to a kind of excess in setting the stage of the sublime experience through the dominant codes of reading self. Also it means simulation should be acknowledged as real as any other encounter or experience of being in the world. My new understanding of 'representation' meant that our world today is saturated in imagery and this means it is impossible to have it unmediated. The installation as a simulation of life or experience is part artifice and part real —or to put it more accurately telling the real apart from the artifice is an impossibility and perhaps, the sublime experience *par excellence*.

This conclusion leads to the final interest for this last year, which has been the practice of sublimity. I would like to expand further the work leading to this direction.

### *1.6 The use of Projection*

Deconstruction is not about replacing one system for another (an old with a new, like modernism) but rather it is about finding the repressed or overlooked systems of knowledge, and then revealing them as their weaknesses. This practice of deconstruction therefore holds onto certain aspects of Modernity in order to reveal another perspective such as; the notion of the feminine sublime which is suppressed through Modernity. Another example of conscious

inclusion into my practice is Romanticism,<sup>6</sup> which emphasizes the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental. I recognize from the Romantic<sup>7</sup> heritage, like Modernism, I have continued on the themes of potent subjectivity without actually holding to the idea that (as a subject) I have a selfhood (as defined by Modernity). What I value from this movement is the emphases on the subject's emotion and imagination over and above rational and logical approaches. Therefore I have reframed a notion of transcendence in my work (figure 4).



(Figure 4) *Quantum Self series 1* Multi media, paint, X rays and computer generated imagery that is projected at 300 cm by 150cm. Rendered in 23/10/2004.

In the image entitled *Quantum Self* (figure 4) the work encapsulates some notion of Romanticism. For instance, the work appears evocative and mysterious with a sense of the epic search for selfhood, as indicated by both the title and numerical/textual references. We are caught up in a self that can be mathematically infinitized and this gives the content its

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<sup>6</sup>" Albert Gelpi in *The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry*" by Albert Gelpi from *The Southern Review*, Summer 1990, <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/gelpi.html> 14/4/2006 pp. 517-541. The Romantic's grounded not in reason or institutional systems of belief but in the felt experience of the individual: not in powers of induction and deduction but in the personal intuition of the universal in the particulars of experience. These moments of intuitive insight constituted acts of genuine signification and proceeded from the highest human faculty of cognition, which philosophers called transcendental Reason and artists called Imagination. Gelpi also identifies the common ground between Romanticism and Modernism in this statement:

"In fact, despite the manifestos and axiomatic pronouncements against Romanticism, Modernism represents an extension and reconstitution of the salient issues that Romanticism set out to deal with. In the face of the intellectual, psychological, moral, and political turmoil which had propelled the last two centuries into more and more violent crises, Modernism continued to exalt the imagination as the agency of coherence."



Romanticism (a *transcendental reason* or *imagination* of the self that coincides with the infinite formularising inherent in quantum physics). In this way, the searching themes of the German Romantic Movement, e.g. the search for truth, is revisited. This work was rendered in Photoshop and used X -rays with inscriptions of quantum equations and scientific diagrams to suggest a relationship between selfhood and Quantum constructions of selfhood. The final viewing of this work was projected on a large format, playing with scale as a means to create a sublime effect.

### 1.7. Moving Image

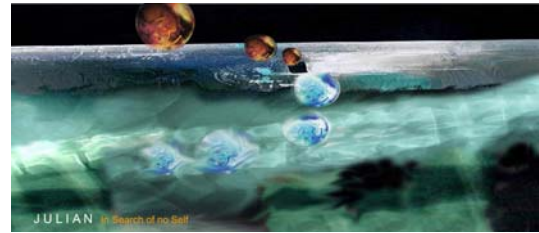
Another significant development in the research was with experiments in moving image. Initially experiments began using Microsoft PowerPoint whereby I created a moving works entitled *Quantum selves*. (See figures 5, 6 & 7 as three still images from the slide show)



(figure 5) Still from PowerPoint slideshow *Quantum Selves*.



(figure 6), still from PowerPoint slideshow *Quantum selves*)



(figure 7), still from PowerPoint slideshow *Quantum selves*)

This moving image work (which was submitted for my year one exhibition), was manipulated via Adobe Photoshop and transformed into moving imagery in PowerPoint. It ran as a simple transitional loop program. A lyrical audio track was added to help create the mood of a certain journey from a highly technologised world into a more organic planet-like environment. Within the cavity of the planet, a glowing orange sphere appeared out of clouds. Inside the sphere appeared a rotating fetus. The 'film' cut back into the planet surface focusing upon a skeletal back-bone form. Again, out from the planet appeared more spheres and then the frame suggested a transformation of a planet-like-sphere that turned into a fetus. There is a limited use of superimposed scientific text which aids as back drop for hinting at the Quantum (scientific and mathematised) infinitisation yet formulaic construction of selfhood.

The 'film' *Quantum Selves* highlighted a significant moment for this project, as it instigated the use of additional stimuli to create absorbing environments, particularly through moving imagery (or spatio-temporal mediums). This shift is indifferent to the former reliance on purely 2-D static images to convey meaning. The digital film plays with nuances of light, the use of

scale (via projection) to create visual impact, and atmospheres that are highly coded in (visual) discourses of the epic; charged with an excess of emotional energies. In this regard, it is a continuation of Romantic themes.

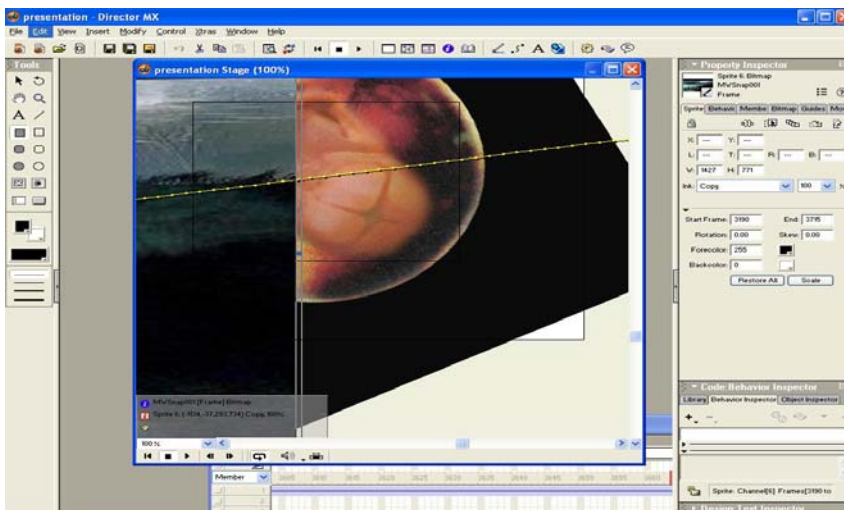
Although this work signified a break through in the development of creating environments, it still defaulted in ways that made reading the work too pre-conceived. For example, the digital film revealed a narrative structure that was very linear, with its heavy reliance on references to scientific and evolution theories. One could easily read this digital film as a clear representation of self that aligned neatly with Darwinian logic and also I was told, certain 1970s sci-fi films especially the canonical *2001 Space Odyssey* by film-maker Stanley Kubrick. Later on viewing the Kubrick film myself, I could clearly see the obvious (albeit unintended) moments of reference. I realized this was a possible reading of the work. As multiple readings (exits and entry points) endorse my project I saw this as a positive outcome.

By the end of the year the resolution between studio work and theoretical work still required investigation and refinement. During the semester break my son Joshua unexpectedly animated my digital film. This added a new and unpredictable dimension, which tied in with my ideas of loss of control (integral to ideas of sublimity). His innovation inspired me to explore this new genre. By assuming a deconstructive approach, I rigorously dismantled the notion of a neat linear narrative, (a scientific evolutionary propaganda) that preconceived a naturalized and unmediated notion of identity and selfhood.

The shifts contest the beginning and finishing points to the digital film. With the edges of the images exposed and a further framing device superimposed over each image, feelings of movement and at the same time static is felt. This framing device becomes more self-conscious that we experience frames within frames, i.e., the superimposed frame creates the still feeling within a moving-temporal works as a reference to codification. The framing device grows more expressive and starts to expose the apparatus that constructed our viewing as it quite clearly begins to reference the software program of Director (see figure 8). This deconstructive move reveals that a seamless linear narrative film is not a passive agent but

rather a highly constructed work that makes us feel passive and neutralizes our position in relation to the work.

Introducing a deconstructive methodology into the work, the short animation created illusion and then exposed that illusion by revealing how that “reality” was constructed. The Modernist-Postmodernist debate in my studio work found some resolution in the later film. Here I have deliberately exploited Modernist romantic imagery as a subversive strategy. The content of the film of a fetus evolving into a sphere/planet that references *2001 Space Odyssey*, are devices I have adopted from modernist aesthetics as a means of notation. The use of such ploys is seditious and aimed at staging an illusionary constructed sense of self.



(figure 8) Still from digital PowerPoint film *Quantum Selves* reformulated through the Director program.

The project began to respond to the notion of collaboration.

### 1.8. Projection with Holographs

The idea of using holograph was explored for a while because it holds a unique quality for creating a virtual reality that ‘problematized’ the clear boundaries between the real and the constructed. Holograms can project coherent light that create an illusion of 3-D space. They

are visions, which can materialize and dematerialize in our space. The illusionary space is like the 'mirage of self', seen as a metaphor for *no-self*.

The images which constituted 'the self' are projections of practical semiotics. Holograms offered a hypothesis that cohered nicely with the Buddhist notion of *no-self*. If a hologram is cut in half and then illuminated by a laser, each half will still be found to contain the entire image of the original. This is synonymous with the Buddhist state of oneness,<sup>8</sup> where one contains the all and the all is the one. As much as the genre of Holographs offered a hypothesis, I did not have the resources or technical support necessary to work in this medium. However, this it remains a very important approach and one that I intend to pursue later in my art practice. The other concern I had with this approach centered on the metaphorical assumption that the self is an entity, easily reproducible without change, whereas *no-self* was an experience. Thus, holograms even though they sit within a framework of Buddhism, do not align with 'anatta' theory of *no-self*. If anything it is antagonistic to it (as it is to deconstruction), because by seeing ourselves divided and multiplied promotes sublimity in the notion of excessive selves. The fact that each self becomes identical in form to the next is problematic and reduces the multiple differences of self, which upsets a stable selfhood.

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Universe as a Hologram* . Bohn explains this undividable nature of a hologram. Indeed, even if the halves are divided again, each snippet of film will always be found to contain a smaller but intact version of the original image. Unlike normal photographs, every part of a hologram contains all the information possessed by the whole. The "whole in every part" nature of a hologram provides us with an entirely new way of understanding. The universe and self could be described as a projection, a hologram. There are no separate entities; no dissectible individuals rather seen through a hologramic paradigm the universe and self are interconnected and undividable.

## **Section 2:**

### *2.1 Return to the practice of sublimity*

Having consolidated the relationship between both post-structuralism's re-formulation of sublimity and 'anatta' theory's *no-self* (discussed in Chapter 1, *Sublime* section) the project began to explore studio work that could potentially activate this praxis. That is by using sublimity to alter states of consciousness.

Altered states of consciousness can occur under 'abnormal' conditions. This can range from fundamental alterations like delirium, intoxication, trauma and mental illness. These are not the types of altered states I wished to induce. It is interesting to note that there are extreme conditions of deprivation present under such alterations. It has been proven under laboratory conditions that the removal of meaningful sensory stimuli has resulted in the subject undergoing extreme altered states. The altered state activated by the interactive installation, although it cannot be predetermined and should not consist therefore of too much description, takes some reference points from results in holotropic<sup>9</sup> states of consciousness. In particular states that are triggered by various forms of meditation, concentration and breathing techniques as used by Zen Buddhism. The state of the feeling "oneness" (which is quite different from *seeing* "oneness" earlier alluded to by the holographic representation) is a primal meditative state that the installation hopes to activate. This has been constructed by composing through many elements (light-projection works, audio-tracks, spatial sphere boundaries etc) a rhythmic and primal relationship to one's body (breathing/beating).

However, this kind of holotropic encounter is not activated initially within the installation program. The participant is to undergo a dismantling process, whereby the environment starts to initiate feelings of order and then disorder (a shift from logical convention to uncertainty). This displacement of orientation is initially meant to be disturbing (as in the initial phases of

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<sup>9</sup> David Lorimer editor of *Thinking Beyond the Brain A Wider Science of Consciousness* explains holotropic states as transpersonal phenomena often experienced as spiritual or mystical. An example of this is the ancient and aboriginal cultures which used mind-altering techniques such as; chanting breathing, rhythmic dancing, fasting, social and sensory isolation and extreme physical pain. Used in shamanic procedures, rites of passage and ceremonies. Sometimes induced by intoxicating plants such as hemp, Psilocybin mushrooms and other substances.

dread with respect to the sublime) Although it is not designed to bring the participant to a heightened and traumatized state, this can be guaranteed in part (and this is also acknowledged as the default of art) as the participant is fully aware that they are engaging in an artwork, as opposed to something completely unknown. However, to the positive aspects of artwork, the installation consciously employs an “unknown order” for release of sensory stimuli—it is this kind of unknown structure that works within deconstruction practice, which acts to dismantle self-orientation and activate intuitive perception. Further it is important to reiterate an earlier sentiment, as it is possibly the most important element for the installation’s success, i.e., to have a real question of sublimity in its staging: and to acknowledge that the very practice of art-making has a strong element of construction and that this is to its advantage. This installation works in part as a simulation of life or experience and is therefore part artifice and part real—or to put it more accurately, telling the real apart from the artifice is an impossibility and perhaps, the sublime experience.

## *2.2. Analysis of Installation*

### *(a) David Cross an artist informing the work*

The evolution of the spherical “zorb” (this term explained fully later) that dominates this installation originally was preempted by viewing a presentation of an installation piece. In Year One of the MA, I attended the School of Art & Design inaugural Postgraduate Mini-Conference (August 2005). The conference was set up to provide a forum for the AUT Art & Design postgraduate candidates to voice their research via a twenty-minute presentation on current ideas and developments. It also hosted two keynote speakers, one who was Massey University academic and visual arts installation practitioner, David Cross. Cross presented his doctoral practice-based research that included his work from last year ‘*Bounce*’ (a one day performance see figure 9) as the third component of his exhibition *Closer*, that was on show in the Michael Hirschfeld Gallery from 24 June – 31 July 2005.



(Figure 9). 'Bounce' inflatable structure, photo courtesy of the artist David Cross.

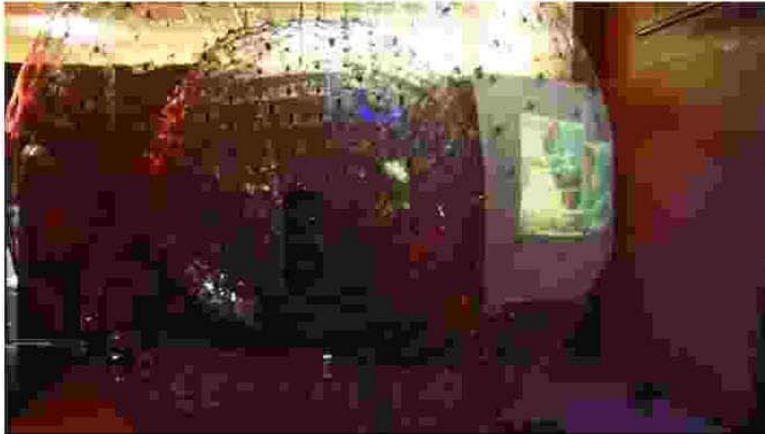
The performance involved a large inflatable structure being installed in the main foyer of City Gallery Wellington and provided the opportunity for direct interaction between audiences and the artist. Cross says of this event: 'I want people to think: 'Yay, a bouncy castle in the gallery, let's go and play, let's go jump all over it!'. Yet at a crucial point the audience response will change, as they fully understand what is actually taking place within the work. That shift in their response from humour into shock or seriousness is what I'm interested in.' Cross's work is interested in the grotesque with respect to issues of masculine beauty, but his work has a wider currency in relation to issues of the uncanny. It was this issue of the uncanny that held resonance with my project's aims for activating a sublime experience. Similarly the formal quality of the sphere evoked a helpful question around inside/outside and viewer/participant engagements. Cross had deliberately hidden beneath/within the sphere in 'Bounce' and strategically set himself up as a voyeur through two eye-holes cut into the centre of the sphere that allowed him to visually "advance" on unexpected viewer/participants as they bounced innocently on the sphere. When they noticed him hidden and secretly viewing them their innocent delight turned to horror and disgust —i.e., a shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar (the uncanny). The wider concern here of the uncanny holds a certain agency in my own installation where the participant will experience in a similar embodied way the shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar — a device employed to unsettle notions of certainty (of self).



My own sphere requires that the viewer/participant enters inside the “womb” like structure. The potentially claustrophobic sensation that one experiences entering a small enclosure aids my concept in two ways. Firstly, I want the viewer to feel insecure so that the body is given emphasis making the mind a secondary concern. (Even though it is the mind that wrestles with the physical condition). Secondly, I wanted body and mind to reach a point of forgetfulness (harmony if you will), which I anticipated would occur via the projected light and sound work —taking oneself out of oneself! There are some definite limits for testing out my project to its fullest, however, preliminary tests have been made. That is, the assemblage of the sphere has come about through hiring the “Zorb” construction from the Zorb Company in Rotorua. Whilst I take this to be another level of collaboration within the installation work, I acknowledge that hiring the Zorb primarily came about due to my technical and financial limitations for making something so ‘perfect.’ Aesthetically the Zorb has a quality that mimicks the sci-fi and techno genres mentioned earlier and therefore is appropriately in keeping with the sci-fi narrative component of the projected work. (As too is the obvious association and reference to the womb, re-birth etc). The inflatable sphere invites the participator to clamber into an uterine-like cavity and initially be wrapped in darkness. Once inside this darkened space the stimuli of orchestrated light and audio-visual effects are presented both inside and outside the sphere —Again this disrupts and dislocates any simple notion of spatial boundaries (both one’s own and those habitats [the sphere in this case] that enclose us). On immediate viewing before one enters the central site of the sphere, it can be read as a kind of habitat for the body. (A womb enclosure is the most dominant or literal reading here).

### *(b) Experiments*

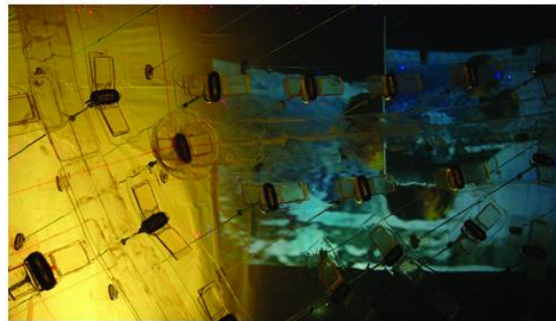
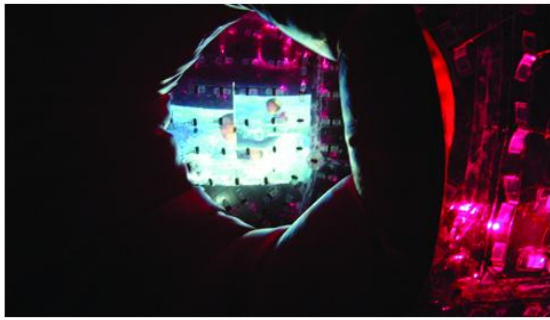
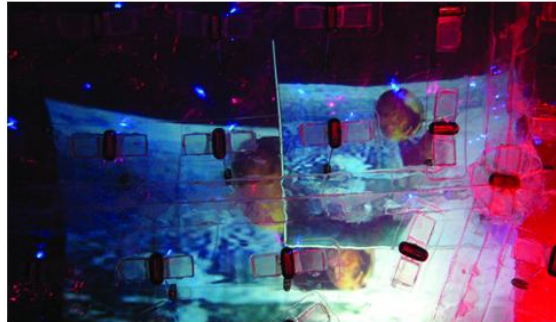
With the assistance of Keith Kolver, the Zorb Company manager, I conducted numerous tests for projecting light and image onto the sphere’s interior and exterior. (See figures below that reveal different experiments according to duration and light – day and night).



Sphere with participant sitting within viewing the movie projected onto it.

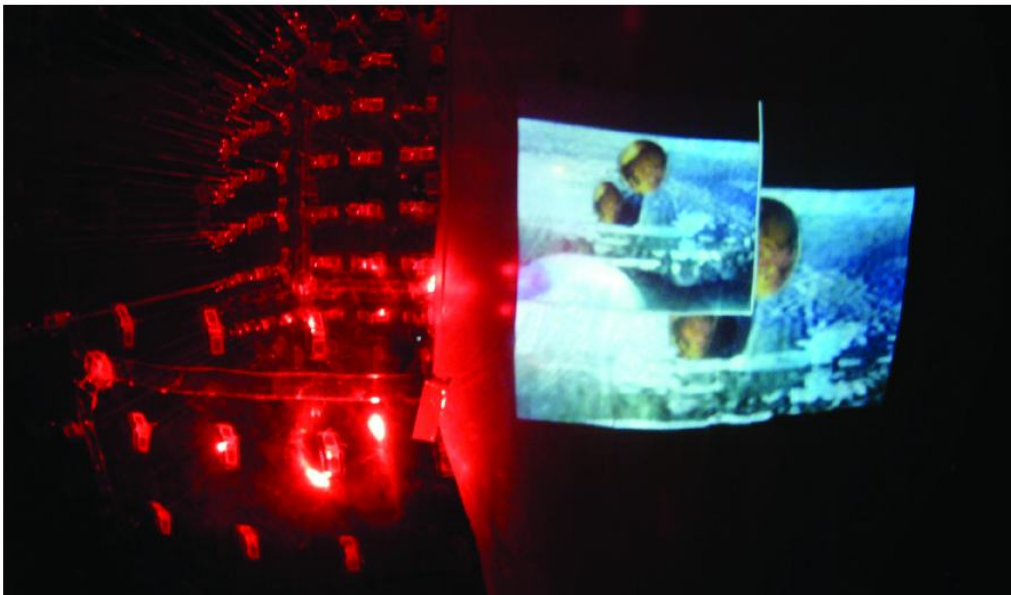


Daytime test . Participant sitting and standing within sphere to demonstrate scale. The zorb/sphere had sci-fi visual qualities very fitting with the project.

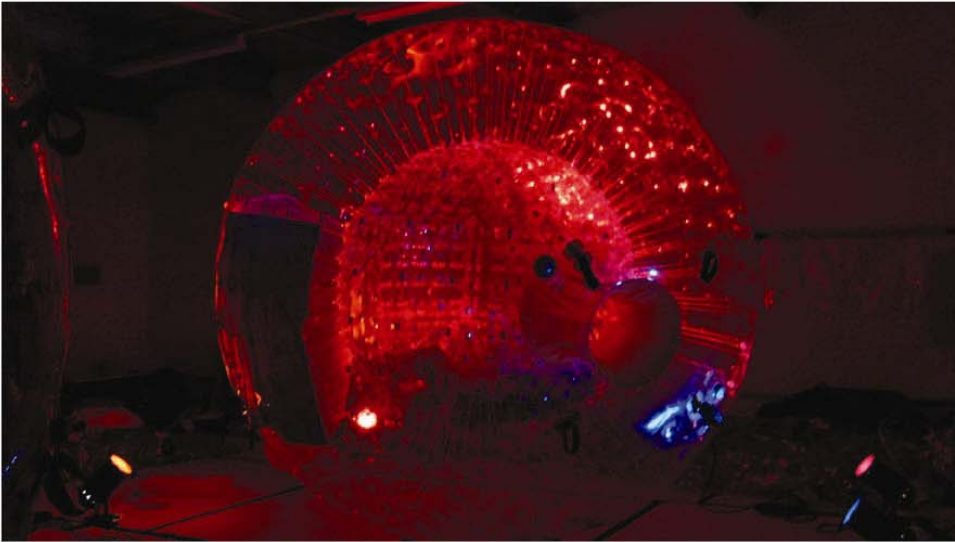


Above: Images are shots taken from within the zorb/sphere with the various lighting effects tested on the second trip to Rotorua with the assistance of Mike the lighting technician on March 2006

Below: More tests conducted at night with lights and projected film image. The zorb had such wonderful abstract qualities that refracted the light so well. A very exciting test.







The sphere seen with recent lighting test conduct 17 Feb 2006

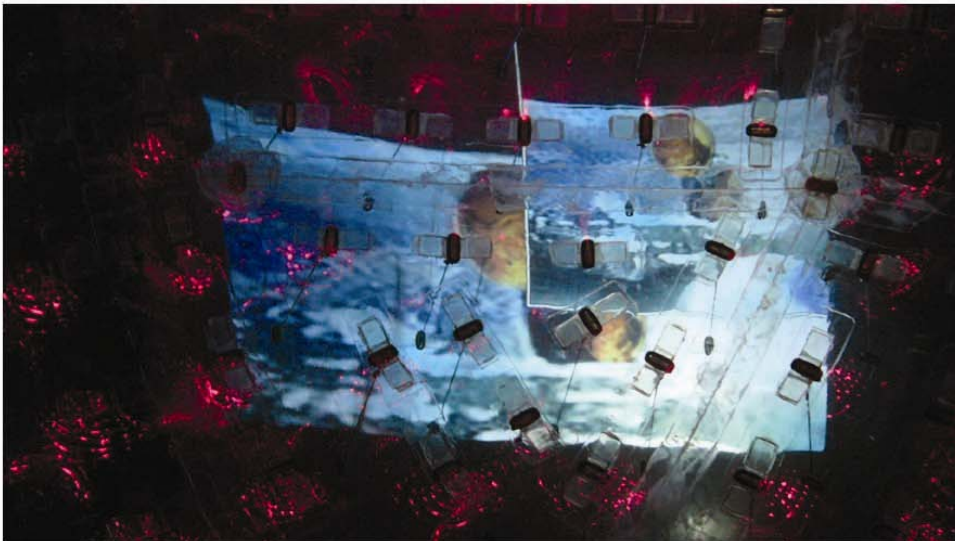
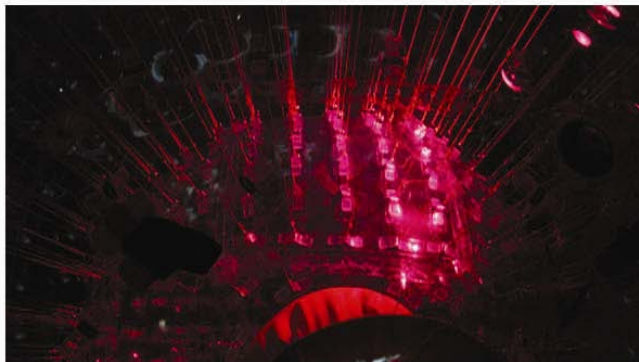


Image of the movie projected on side of the sphere



Glowing light on the inner lining of the orb showing the effects of the cables

The Zorb is 1.3 meters in diameter and its construction is made with colored cables that support the inner tube to the outer one. Within the pocket of air, the participator can sit or stand comfortably. It was also important to activate the installation in a site-specific location whereby viewing, or participation, is not limited by just one person at a time. Rather, the work can be viewed by many who enter at the mezzanine level of the Hastings Community Arts Centre (this location I shall address in more detail later). That is, I particularly wanted the person inside to receive a certain audio-visual and light orchestrated show and at the same time viewers on the parameters (via the mezzanine) also to experience the same yet different perspective of the orchestral scenario. Since the Zorb allowed both interior and exterior projection to be displayed it became an ideal scenario for provoking questions around neat inside/outside binaries. That is, this inside-outside question of boundary provoked interesting entry and exit points with respect to questioning internal and external notions of selfhood.

*(c) Spatial considerations (site-specificity)*

The Hastings Community Arts Centre provides appropriate spatial dimensions for this project. With a large open foyer and a wrap around mezzanine balcony that enables viewing down into the stage-foyer (where the sphere is located) the sphere can be experienced with an outer and inner dimension. A 'bird's-eye' perspective symbolically references the hierarchical or dominant readings of selfhood, whereby a totalizing perspective provides that sense of control and knowing. However, after a viewer has encountered the panoptic perspective and enters the enclosure of the sphere, all knowing and certainty that was held in their mind's eye is totally dismantled. It is this dialogue between totality and partiality that is one of the most interesting aspects of the project. Further it evokes Michel de Certeau's essay on aspects of daily urban life in 'Walking in the City' (1984) where he distinguishes between the urban planners and managers theories of a city from a perspective of up-high (think here of the skyscraper), to the every day pedestrian utterances that go on by the everyday individual inhabitants. This dialogue is also reminiscent of another *Michel*, Michel Foucault (1979) whose notion of difference between programs (i.e. what is planned for) and practices (what is lived out) comes into play. Foucault is also the philosopher who theorized the architectural panoptic figure with respect to totalitarian power structures in relation to the control of our

bodies. This panoptic principle is deliberate as both a real and metaphorical set up within this installation and its spatial configurations.

Further this exhibition is a nocturnal affair. I deliberately anticipated its viewing to be at night whereby the use of natural darkness becomes a key for creating a notion of infinity. In order to create a sense of the infinite, darkened space is essential as a metaphor and actuality to express the 'external outer' referenced by the audio-visual play. The concept of Buddhism's 'nothingness' and its relation to infinity (the 'void' in which there is nothing and everything) has been discussed earlier but it is also another conceptual register. On a practical (technical) level darkness was always anticipated for the success of the installation to sharpen the resolution of the lights and projections. Allowing natural darkness to enter, removes the outer exterior of the venues walls. This can allow for the sense of infinity, where the idea of limitlessness is heightened. The obvious disadvantage of the venue with its huge plate glass window is that the dark of the night is not pitch black but I have theorized that such influences, such as streetlights etc, heightened the sense of stimuli and relationship to ongoing boundaries that fold into other worlds/contexts.

#### *(d) Sound*

My experimentation with sound has as a way of creating excess stimuli had many influences, which I shall briefly detail here; Sound is a more synesthetic way of translating ideas— As, part of my methodology involves a mode of cross-sensory translation sound becomes an important device for altering our experience of reality; especially if when worked in conjunction with light. Influences already mentioned, such as Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, use sound to create a sense of ambience. For example, a loud, low frequency rumble was used to depict the spaceship interior, and silence a translation for the void that is space. Sound creates imagined realities powerfully.

The intention for the use of sound in the installation is to infer shifting realities so that a sublime experience is engaged. These are the following stages (that are inter-related) within the installation:

1. Sound is used as embellishment for the first phase of the projected filmic works and mimics a late-60s style of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), epic (i.e. depicting the futuristic shift from technological development to mystical re-birth) and sci-fi genre.
2. Sound is a sensory device to create moods of unease and uncertainty that move through to feelings of serenity and affirmation.
3. Sound is used as a subversive device through its synesthetic relationship to other sensory mediums and produces a dismantling and disturbed reality via its disjunctive relationship to the imagery.
4. Sound is used to create spatial orientation and disorientation.

*(e) The process for achieving the aims for this sound-work:*

Soundtracks were collected over a period of time, sourced partly from the internet, home recordings and re-worked through collaboration with sound artist Mark Howden. At one point we recorded a spoken voice track that was subsequently, almost entirely edited out. Reflecting on this voice track, I realized that this kind of narrative device performed too literally as a directional force. This would result in my intention being undermined. That is; causing the audience to be driven into a predetermined experiential location. One of the most successful aspects of the sound work is a combination of soundtracks modified to perform simulations of bodily encounters e.g. breathing and heart-beat. This further resulted in the correspondence between breathing to larger organic principles such as the rhythm of the sea. The main impetus is that it acts as an agent of disruption through disjunction and yet subliminally makes relationships between images, light work and bodily encounter.

*(f) Lighting*

Another collaborative relation was with the use of lighting in consultation with Mike Forsyth, a theatre performer and technician. We worked together with a mutual trust that was based on an intuitive impulse that undid any firm sense of authorial intent. We worked together creating ideas formed from translating sound into light. The light program, whilst it has been under some considerable discussion will appear completely “original” for each new participant’s

encounter with the sphere. That is, Mike Forsyth will be a free agent to orchestrate the lighting anew each time the sphere is entered. Working against having directorial control this method serves an intuitive impulse and uncertainty, that resonates with the aims of the work and the performing engagement inherent in deconstruction.



### CHAPTER 3. CONCLUDING COMMENTARY: THESIS OUTCOMES

I have combined deconstructive ('non existence' of self) and Buddhist ('*no-self*') methodologies as a path to interpret approaches to a critique of selfhood (affirmed in the epoch of Western Modernity) in order to activate an embodied experience as "self" 'un-presented'.

Deconstruction is a methodology that is not interested in replacing one system for another but rather works through the overlooked or repressed moments in the history of Western metaphysics. My work therefore, is not engaged with a replacement of one system of thought for another, e.g. replacing Modernity's subject with Buddhist notions of being in the world. Rather, this project centrally engages with a rigor dismantling selfhood though drawing attention to selfhood as a highly constructed Western legacy that aims at controlling a subject. That is, Modernity's subject is born out of instability and desire for finding a fixed and static ground for knowing the world. Whilst this legacy has many rational positions, it is fraught by the fact that our being is complex, shifting and impermanent. This notion of impermanence is key, as it is our death or mortality that marks the greatest impulse for rationalizing our sense of fixity in the world. This is the major conflict that we have inherited in the western world and where Heidegger's notion of 'being for death' as a critique of modernity has its greatest currency. This project has been a process of undoing these secure forms of epistemological systems. The project has traversed a similar rational conflict whereby I have encountered some personal discomfort theoretically and in practice, as I have had to let go of many conditioned predetermined assumptions about my identity as an artist, researcher and thinker. I too have undergone a process of deconstruction or what I like to term a process of 'un/finding' and dismantlement.

However, once this thesis repositioned its "self" through an embrace of change, the process "it-self" became a process of liberation. That is through searching for *no-self* via a process of 'un/securing' selfhood that is permanent and unchanging, moments of *security* for this project surfaced. Deconstruction with its provocative notion of the 'undecideable' evokes an ongoing edge or limit of our being. We are surrounded by multiple conceptions. There is an ongoing

relay or dialogue inherent in our being that aligns with the 'undecideable' — that is the 'undecideable' is a state of being as there is always something to be decided upon.

Personally this has clearly pointed to two fundamental aspects of 'being' in the world. Firstly, to say our 'being' was framed by knowledge, yet with it has an inability to experience and recall its own death. Death is an unknown experience but we all know that we are mortal. It would appear that 'Modernity's Subject' desires fixity as false assurance for what is happening all around us — that is incessant change. Secondly, the liberty of being present in the world, in constant negotiation with change, can embrace the idea and identity with difference. This provides a different emphasis for relating in the world. No longer is the self pre-determined, instead greater emphasis is placed on sensual experience, rather than the building of knowledge systems for securing our idea of self. This project seeks to communicate and facilitate, through its installation, this cross-sensory sublime experience. It seeks to take emphasis away from the dominance of one sense such as sight, and activate perception through other sensory means. Thus the project aligns itself to the Buddhist *anatta* theory which dissolves the significance for having a self.

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Film:

Kubrick, Stanley. (1968) *2001: A Space Odyssey*

## **Appendices**

Catalogue for exhibition/presentation\*

CD with images documenting exhibition/presentation, documentation of catalogue, full text of exegesis.