Visualising the transient self: An examination of the intangible in creative work

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Visualising the transient self: An examination of the intangible in creative work

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Faculty of Education and Arts

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract:
The aim of this research is to visually explore the intangible human condition of the transient self via the methodology of creative practice, specifically through the medium of video projection. A praxis will be developed between the creative research and the theoretical perspective, which will be grounded in the key ideas of the philosopher Slavoj Zizek, as espoused by Zizek (2000; 2006), Catherine Belsey (2005) and Tony Myers (2003). Specifically, Zizek's notions of the Self and the Subject in relation to the Real and the Symbolic Order respectively will form the centre of the theoretical base. Key terms include the notion of 'the Act' and 'extimacy' in relation to self, the latter of which is derived from Jacques Lacan's notion of 'extimate', as outlined by Patrick Feury (2000) in relation to film. The research findings will act as a basis for a comparative analysis of specific works by three artists, providing examples of how these notions have been articulated in the past, and as means of informing my praxis. The artists include video artists Bill Viola and Anna Gaskell and glass artist Gabriella Bisetto. I also critically analyse my previous and current creative work through the same lens, and locate ways in which I have developed my practice using this theoretical framework. The aim of my praxis is to create video works and develop an experiential space that attempts to make the intangible, tangible.
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Jacqui Monks
I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisor, Ms Nicola Kaye, for her invaluable advice, support, encouragement and time in the development and completion of this research project.
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Introduction

The aim of this research is to develop a praxis based on the philosophical notion of the transient self and how it can be explored in creative work to produce an experiential space. Praxis can be defined as the merging of both theoretical notions and creative research. The transient self is referred to in this project in a psychoanalytic sense, alluding to the fractured self, described by conscious and unconscious states, and to modes of psychological transition. It is also apparent in a philosophical sense, within the key ideas of the philosopher Slajov Zizek. The term ‘transient self’ aims to describe both the transience experienced within the mind via psychological transitions, emotions and interior dialogue, and via the shifting duality experienced between mind and body.

In my research, I have been investigating the tensions between the raw, breathing, physical certainty of the body and the malleable, mutable, ephemerality of the mind in constructing an experiential space with projection and video works. The term 'experiential' can be defined as "'Relating to or resulting from experience'; ‘a personal, experiential reality,’" and "’derived from experience or the experience of existence’" ("Experiential", n.d.). By ‘experiential space’, I am referring to a space in which the viewer’s whole body is engaged: their physical body, their senses, and their unconscious. An experiential space attempts to envelop the viewer in a sensory experience that has the potential to articulate intangible notions of the human condition.

In terms of my creative practice the desired result is in constructing spaces for the viewer in which new experiences regarding transience can be viewed. The reasons for this are to fill a gap I perceive between ‘being’ and its recognisable visual manifestation. The gap is the space between what we ‘know’ about ourselves, and what we cannot perceive; between our corporeal body, our intangible mind, how we experience emotion and how we think. As forces both within and outside of ourselves increasingly mediate our experiences, our understanding of what it is to ‘be’ becomes increasingly complex. The experience of transience in relation to self arises as we both consciously and unconsciously attempt to navigate our own mediation. We move backwards and forwards between at times dual psychological states that simultaneously challenge and imprint our mediated self. How and if we can manage to negotiate this is debatable and difficult to encapsulate. It is my view, however, that it is this very negotiation that positions the duality and overlap between mind and body – the transience of self – as an intrinsic part of the human condition.
For my research, it is thus essential that creative explorations on the self, mediation, and the unknowable as referenced in the idea of transience take place and are examined. In Chapter One, I have outlined the conceptual framework in which I have investigated the notion of transience in relation to self. This theoretical scaffold has been constructed via the key ideas of the philosopher, Marxist and Lacanian psychoanalyst Slajov Zizek. Coming from a psychoanalytic position, I contend that Zizek is an appropriate choice in whom to establish a definition of self, as it is from a similar position from which I will be basing my creative work. Zizek’s theories are grounded in his apparently diverse and perhaps contradictory, dual positions as both Marxist and psychoanalyst. In this dualism I am able to locate a theoretical framework based on ideas that are as elusive and malleable as the notion of the transient self that they attempt to interrogate. Due to the complexity of Zizek’s ideas, it is unsurprising that locating definitions of the ideas within Zizek’s own writings has been virtually impossible. For the sake of clarity, I have defined the key terms as espoused by Tony Myers (2003) as well as Zizek (2006). The transient self will be explored via Zizek’s theory of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Subject,’ and their relationship to the ‘Real’ and the ‘Symbolic Order’ respectively (Myers, 2003, p. 45). Key terms of Zizek’s that will be investigated include the notion of the ‘Act’ and ‘extimacy’, the latter of which is derived from Jacques Lacan’s notion of ‘extimate’, a term that is explored by Patrick Fuery (2000) in relation to film.

Many artists are concerned with ideas about the self in relation to the unknown, the intangible – the transient. In Chapter Two, I have used Zizek’s ideas to critically analyse specific works by three artists, to provide examples of how notions of the transient self have been articulated in creative work. The artists include video artists Bill Viola and Anna Gaskell and glass artist Gabriella Bisetto. I selected these artists as to me, their work attempts to visually communicate the notions of the transient self – they are attempting to make tangible the intangible. I am interested in creative works that suggest the unknowable, and that attempt to articulate the gap between which issues of the self fluctuate. For example, in reference to the notion of transience, of intangibility, Michael Rush (2005) writes that the “undelineated boundary between the known and the unknown is characteristic of [Anna] Gaskell’s work” (p. 120), as seen in her looped video projection, half life (2000), (see Appendix 1a). In this work, the body of a young girl floats under water. The tension of the piece alludes to the expectation that, although it appears that the girl is alive as she opens and closes her eyes, she neither seems fully awake. Rather, she appears to be either ‘gestating’ or close to drowning. She is in “a state of non-being” (“Exhibition notes”, 2003), of transience between death and life. It is suggestions of the unknown such as these that Bill Viola refers to when he writes in Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House (1995):
Artists have known for a long time that the most interesting connections in things involve areas of low, or ambiguous information, so-called 'gaps' in recognition ...(Yet when the viewer asks) ‘What does this mean?’ they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things. (p. 67)

In this project the ‘other things’ Viola alludes to have been explored in the praxis between the Zizekian notions of the self and the creative research element that seeks to articulate the intangible.

In Chapter Three, I investigate the creative research and creative outcomes of that aim. I outline the details of these works, how they interrelate, and how they can be analysed via the writings of Zizek. I critically examine the process by which I arrived at the completed works, culminating in an exhibition in which two conceptually linked video works are split between one room. This, I contend, creates an experiential space in which the viewer can immerse themselves, bringing to the work their own “personal, experiential reality” (“Experiential”, n.d.). In a work that references the self, mediation, and transience, it is perhaps integral to leave open any number of readings of the work, as every viewer – every self – will experience the work differently.

The praxis developed in this project argues for the significance of visualising the individual within a tangible context in which they can question aspects of the self. It is a difficult area, as it relies heavily on subjective experience. By referring to Zizek’s umbrella terms of Self and Subject, however, I have attempted to identify a framework in which to locate these ambiguous notions of self and thus interrogate the reasons why this research is important in the development of my practice.
Chapter One

Theoretical perspective: Locating the transient self within the terms extimacy/extimate and the Act

The term ‘transient self’ aims to describe both the transience experienced within the mind via psychological transitions, emotions and interior dialogue, and via the shifting duality experienced between mind and body. I will be investigating the tension between the raw, breathing, physical certainty of the body and the malleable, mutable, ephemerality of the mind. In exploring the ideas of transience and duality in relation to being, I began by considering Rene Descartes’ seventeenth century notion of the self as a dual entity. This comprises both the privileged, distinct and transcending mind, (or the spirit), and, conversely, matter, (or the physical body). The Cartesian subject is positioned as an autonomous ‘individual,’ an utterly independent and subjective being in complete control of its destiny (Descartes, 1993, pp. 50-58). Cartesian duality was a keystone of philosophy in the past, yet lost favour over time, particularly as post-structuralism came to the fore of cultural theory (Myers, 2003, pp. 32-36). Arguably, post-structuralism purports that the subject does not exist as an individual, but rather as an empty void, into which cultural institutions pour their influence. The subject in this instance becomes an utterly constructed being, a product of the cultural paradigms and norms – as determined by language – into which they are born and moulded. Anything that lies outside of language has no bearing on this construct (Belsey, 2005, p. 28-29).

I concur with Myers that Slajov Zizek seems to straddle the line between the Cartesian notion of duality and the post-structuralist model of the constructed self via his positioning of the Self and the Subject (2003, p. 38). In a re-reading of Cartesian duality, Zizek maintains that people are constructed in two parts – the Subject and the Self. In Zizek’s reading, the Subject is a void: static, unchangeable and a part of the meaningless Real, (a term that describes the world before it is sliced up by language; a means of describing the indescribable), into which he positions the physical body. The Self, on the other hand, is mutable and open to regular modifications, and is located in what he terms the Symbolic Order, the superego of culture into which the world is categorised and, subsequently, in which meaning is found (p. 45). According to Zizek, it is the Self that enables us to filter the elements of the Symbolic Order in an individual way, and thus negotiate the world with some level of (mediated) choice. However, the tension between the Subject and the Self arguably remains: The Subject, (read: the body), is an undeniable part of the Real, of nature. We cannot exist without our bodies. Yet we are not only our bodies. We are also Symbolic subjects, (read: the Self). It is within the Symbolic Order, defined by language, that we are able to relate to our bodies at all
(Myers, p. 43). Indeed, Zizek suggests that rather than a total duality between the Self and the Subject, there is an overlap—a transience—in which each state of self shifts backwards and forwards, informing the other. This overlap provides a kind of adjunct in which, for example, there is both a spiritual element in the body (such as the 'it' factor, or sexual charisma), and a physical element to spirituality, such as the manifestation of phantoms or ghosts (p. 73).

In terms of creative practice, I am using video work that includes ‘real’ footage and animated footage to visually represent these notions of transience, of shifting states. It is the ephemerality and temporality of film as a medium that I argue relates most strongly to the concept of the transient self for my own creative practice. Other creative mediums are also effective in exploring these issues that I will expand upon in Chapter Three. It is within the processes of manipulating moving images, however, both via computer editing applications and drawing for animation, that form the key basis of my creative research into Zizek’s mind/body (and Self/Subject) overlap. In this instance, the visceral, physical act of drawing within the context of creating an animation becomes an allegory of the tangible, fixed, Real-centred Subject. While it is its manipulation into a filmic narrative that refers to the intangible, mutable and transient Self. These ideas will be developed further in Chapter Three, when I discuss my creative praxis in detail.

Praxis is a term derived from the writings of Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who coined the expression in his *Prison Notebooks* (1971), (cited in Oliga, 1996, p. 217). In his ‘philosophy of praxis’, the term can be described as “the unification of critical theory and revolutionary practice” (p. 217). In Gramsci’s view, praxis is defined as a tool for the proletariat to employ in developing a class consciousness that will enable them to engage in ideological resistance against hegemony. The most effective form of resistance, for Gramsci, is in arming the proletariat with both the knowledge of their own oppression, and using that knowledge in conjunction with the practice of revolutionary struggle, (such as forming a network of factory workers), (p. 217). While praxis as described in this research does not rely on the political definitions as described by Gramsci, the emphasis on knowledge, (or theory), used in conjunction with (creative) practice to activate an effective outcome, applies. Praxis, as utilised in this project, demonstrates my use of reflexivity. This reflexivity demonstrates my negotiation of mediation for the viewer. I agree with Haug (1999) when he asserts:

Indeed, philosophy of praxis designates a general approach, to understand every ‘reality,’ as it is ‘for us,’ as ‘mediated’ by human activities and the conditions under—and the relations in—which they are carried out and which, on their part, are mediated by previous activities and so on. (p. 107)
The tension between the two co-existing, transient states of Self and Subject can also be found in Zizek's notion of extimacy, a word comprised of two words: external and intimacy. The state of extimacy suggests that the core of the individual is outside itself. That is, we are unable to see ourselves from within ourselves, only through the mirror of the Symbolic Order, of reality as constructed by language (Myers, 2003, p. 41). In this way, the individual becomes open to Symbolic mediation. Extimacy is a term directly derived from Jacques Lacan's notion of extimate, and the terms are interchangeable. Dylan Evans (1996) describes extimate (and, indirectly, its relationship to the transient self) as:

The way in which psychoanalysis problematizes the opposition between inside and outside, between container and contained. The real is just as much inside as outside, and the unconscious is not a purely interior psychic system but an intersubjective structure ('the unconscious is outside')....The center of the subject is outside: the subject is ex-centric. (n.p.)

Patrick Fuery (2000) positions the notion of extimate in relation to the body in film, suggesting that:

film can give the body this extimacy by taking what is deeply intimate (our corporeal identities and qualities as they are formed by ourselves, and the interplay of this sense and the cultural contexts and exchanges) and exposing it as even more closely tied to what we see as part of our subjectivities. In this sense, film makes the body more intimate, and yet at the same time has the capacity to render the body as something alien and strange to behold....Film...can defamiliarise the body, giving it qualities that have been unseen and unthought of before, and still construct the body as something we recognise as part of the known. (p.72)

It is the way in which the notion of extimate/extimacy can be explored via video projection and thereby inform the creative element of the research that interests me. Fuery (2000) demonstrates that the editing possibilities of film allow for the manipulation of the filmed body, creating a 'known yet unknown' quality to the image. In this way, the body on film becomes a conduit in which the notion of the transient self – the self (or Self) that is both inside and outside of itself – can be explored.

To break away from the inevitable influence of the Symbolic Order, Zizek introduces the notion of the Act. The Act is a complete rejection of the Symbolic Order by the individual, who chooses self-annihilation – or aphanisis – as a means of denying the status quo. Ultimately, the Act is an act of revolution, holding the tenuous promise of firstly returning the individual to a state of the Real, (read: death, or Symbolic suicide), through which they pass to be reborn into a radically changed Symbolic Order (pp. 59-60). Zizek (2006) describes the Act, or the 'death drive' (a term coined by Sigmund Freud and, later, reinterpreted by Jacques Lacan), as a means by which:

the organism is no longer fully determined by its environs, that is it 'explodes/implodes' into a cycle of autonomous behaviour. That is the crucial gap:
between utilitarianism as the radical ‘outic’ denial of freedom (those who control the conditions which determine behaviour control me) and the Kantian...assertion of unconditional autonomy (of moral law, of the caprice to enjoy) – in both cases, there is a rupture in the chain of being. (p. 231)

The possibility of rebirth or reinvention – of rupturing the chain of being – via this transition from the Symbolic to the Real and out the other side, once again speaks about transience. Of moving in between states of being in a conscious way, of making a decision to abandon ones’ own sense of self as a means of becoming something else. It suggests a liminal or ‘betwixt and between’ space in which all is given up with the promise of transforming into something or someone else.¹

Video installation and creating an experiential zone via visual art, could be viewed as appropriate methods in visually locating the transient self. In an experiential space, the viewer becomes a part of the space in the sense that they are enveloped in a specific frame of reference or mood as suggested by the creative work. Thereby they become a part of the work, yet, as an objective viewer, are simultaneously positioned as an observer of it. This is not to suggest that other creative mediums such as painting would be less effective in achieving this aim. Seminal Abstract Expressionist, Mark Rothko’s enormous paintings of luminous colour, in which the paint seemingly hovers over the canvas, demonstrates this point. Arguably, the washes of light-filled colour work in tandem with the enormous scale of the canvas to envelop the viewer in the spiritual truths that Rothko is trying to communicate (May, 1998, n.p.). As Rothko states: “I paint large pictures...because I want to create a state of intimacy.” (n.p.). In my creative research, I aim to create experiential spaces that position the viewer in a similar immersive environment, focusing perhaps on creating a state of extimacy, as described in the writings of Zizek. In my video installations, I am exploring ways in which to visually represent the transience of self in an experiential zone. As they negotiate the space between their own body and the filmic body when immersed in this space, it is my hope that the viewer’s experience becomes a replication of the transitional or transient state of self that my work explores.

¹ There is a great deal of writing that explores the notion of transience in relation to self. In attempting to locate the transient self within a theoretical context, I would like to reference Gilles Deleuze’s notion of ‘immanence’ (Deleuze, 2001, p. 27). ‘Immanence’ in Deleuze’s philosophy purports that, in relation to the self, there is no duality and therefore no possibility of transcendence or reinvention in the way that Zizek maintains. Rather, Deleuze suggests that the individual, the subject, does not exist as a persistent state of identity (core or otherwise), in which transience and change are grounded. Instead, it is change and difference that produces a kind of simulated identity. In Deleuze’s theory, any possibility of duality collapses into a pure, flat plane (Widder, 2006, p. 405). This notion of identity as a ‘surface effect’ is particularly interesting with regard to video projection, which is itself a pure flat plane that generates an optical illusion. In using the moving body as a channel in which to explore the notion of immanence, I contend that projected video is an exceptionally apt medium in discussing the transient self.
Chapter Two
Creative practice: Locating the transient self in creative works that explore the intangible

Video projection has been a significant element of my creative exploration, in which the filmed body has been used as an allegory to the transient nature of the psyche. Projection in itself is an ephemeral medium. It does not exist until the projector is turned on, and disappears when it is turned off. When it does exist, it is elusive, made of light, and therefore intangible. The viewer can walk through it, and cast the shadow of their own body over it, effectively becoming a part of the work. I am arguing that it is the strong psychoanalytic connections of video projection as a medium that I deem to be imperative for my praxis. It is this that I am investigating through both my creative research and via a comparative analysis of works by established video artists. I argue that video can offer itself as the visual equivalent of the unconscious, in which thoughts and dreams and subconscious desire are literally 'projected.' Also, it is a medium in which the corporeal body on film can be manipulated, (via editing), rendering the body as concurrently recognisable and strange (Fuery, 2000, p. 72).

Subsequently, the filmed body becomes at once familiar and unfamiliar, something we have not seen before, yet that we "...recognise as part of the known," (Fuery, 2000, p. 72). In this sense, I would assert, video projection allows for the manifestation of the ‘phantastic’. The filmed body represents the liminal space between the Self and the Subject as it moves between the Real and the Symbolic Order, and becomes the visual, moving equivalent of the altered states of self that my work addresses. The experiential spaces created by seminal video artist Bill Viola in works such as *The Messenger* (1996), (see Appendix 2a), speak of these altered states. Large-scale projections such as this are often accompanied by aurally overwhelming soundscapes, dominating the viewer’s senses, and in my opinion, rendering the filmed body almost hallucinatory. In *The Messenger* (1996), the projected body is larger than life and submerged in water. Initially an abstracted blur of colour, the body floats gradually to the surface where it is revealed as the figure of a man. Finally breaking the surface of the water, the man gasps for air, only to be submerged again in an endless loop. The water acts as a metaphor to the unconscious mind (Sparrow, 1996, p.10), a “...deep, blue-black void” (p. 18) into which the viewer is swept. This is by the mirage-like imagery, and, perhaps, by the initial site of the work – the Romanesque Durham Cathedral in the north east of England, grand and beautiful. The cathedral setting immediately links the work to Christian ideas about transcendence, resurrection and, perhaps, baptism. Yet I contend, that even a secular reading of the
work would place it into the realm of the experiential, as it engages the senses of the viewer, much like the paintings of Rothko discussed previously. Transplanted to the Guggenheim Gallery in New York in 1997 and projected against white walls, the work "...spoke in a more generic sense of transformation, purification and elemental change" (Heartney, 1997, n.p.), yet left viewers mesmerized nonetheless, ensuring that they stayed to watch the entire 15 minute duration of the projection.

According to Heartney (1997, n.p.), changing the location of The Messenger (1996) to a more traditional gallery setting did not diminish the experience of the viewer. This possibly suggests that experiential space can be dictated by the projected image itself, regardless of the site in which it is viewed. Although it must be noted that different environmental contexts will impact the connotation of the work, and, one would assume, the experience of the viewer. Yet perhaps Heartney is referring instead to what Kate Mondloch (2007, n.p.) refers to as "the spatial dynamics of spectatorship". Mondloch (2007) describes a ‘doubleness’ of spectatorship:

In a curious amalgamation of gallery-based spatial experimentation and political aesthetics, this model of spectatorship proposes that viewers be both ‘here’ (embodied subjects in the material exhibition space) and ‘there’ (observers looking onto screen spaces) now. This new double spatial dynamic radically reinterprets the conventional ways that screen-reliant spaces have been described and experienced. (n.p.)

This model refers to the notion that, as members of the hegemonic ‘society of the screen’, our constant interaction with screened images has invisibly divided us from material reality, creating a dislocation from both the real world and the worlds represented on the screen (n.p.). As such, the viewer, when interacting with video installation works such as Viola’s The Messenger, are “both here and there – or, perhaps more ominously...neither fully here nor there” (n.p.). This question of presence I would suggest, can perhaps also be linked to notions of the transient self, an unformed and shifting condition that is neither absent or present, conscious or unconscious, yet all of these things simultaneously. In such a reading, the double spatial dynamic outlined by Mondloch (2007) in relation to the viewer’s experience of video installation is perhaps apt. Also, in the case of creative work that is investigating these notions of transience and liminality.

Viola, however, maintains that it is the undeniable corporeal certainty of the viewer’s body and bodily reactions, positioned in the physical present of his installations, that fully describes the work. In the body, it could be argued that Viola could be referring to the Zizekian Real when he says:

Art has always been a whole-body, physical experience. This sensuality is the basis of its true conceptual and intellectual nature, and is inseparable from it...In my work,
the visual is always subservient to the field, the total system of perception/cognition at work. The five senses are not individual things but, integrated with the mind, they form a total system and create this field, an experiential field which is the basis of conscious awareness. This is the only true whole image. (cited in Iles, 1995, n.p.)

My research investigates and seeks to clarify that video projection as a medium, and the filmed body as the subject of that medium, become effective tools in the visual exploration of incorporeality and the transience of being.

Viola's work has always maintained a lyrical quality that references spiritual notions of the self (Rush, 2005, p. 152). In reference to Zizek, the sense of the potential for redemption as found via a type of conscious decision, or Act, to 'fall' and thus be reborn – as explored in Zizek's notion of aphanisis, or Symbolic suicide – can be viewed in Viola's work. In Stations (1994) (see Appendix 2b), an installation of a series of three, computer-controlled, five-channel videos are projected onto large pieces of rectangular granite hanging on a wall, which are in turn reflected on mirrored surfaces on the floor. The images are of bodies as they seemingly fall through the air or in water. The bodies are seen falling in slow motion, and the viewer is subject to an almost overwhelming sensory experience as they are encompassed by loud sounds and intense colour of a "grand scale [which] contribute to a cinematic experience of man immersed in nature" (Rush, 2005, p. 155). The notion of the body as a part of nature, or as a part of the Real is present in Viola's work. The unmediated, unknowable and uncontrollable aspect of the Real is reflected in the sensory overload of the installation. We are at the mercy of our bodies, of our senses, of the certain corporeality of our own physicality. Also in the reflections of the bodies as they are mirrored from the floor up, body into body, image into image. It is the act (or the Act) of falling that is embedded in the imagery that links it most directly to Zizek's notion of Symbolic suicide. The person depicted in the projection floats, seemingly in between worlds, or in between states of being, neither landing nor starting at any given point. The work, I propose, can be interpreted as embodied transience – the self imagined in the body of a floating man.

The video work of Anna Gaskell, specifically a video projection of a looped film entitled Future's Eve (2001) (see Appendix 1b), I assert, taps into Zizek's ideas regarding the Self and the Subject, with particular reference to the Act, or self-annihilation. In this work, Gaskell has filmed a view from the bottom of a grave, into which earth is continuously thrown and removed (or reversed), by disembodied hands. The space in which the film is projected is utterly black, small and tight, creating an experiential space in which the viewer finds that "instincts take over and we can only
read [the] sequence as we experience it physically” (Gaston, 2001, p. 16). The choice of the artist to create a space in which the viewer becomes extremely aware of their physical senses is of particular interest if one were to view the image of the grave as a void. In this sense it could be a metaphor of the Real Subject, into which the unseen Self is ritualistically buried and unburied – born and reborn. In reference to this work, Gaskell says, “I imagine someone in that grave. Not necessarily a dead or dying person, but something emerging and being given another chance or a first chance to become something new, something different” (cited by Gaston, 2001, p. 16). The grave becomes a site of the Real, a “place of discovery where all rules are indefinitely suspended” (p. 16), into which the Self falls, giving up all that is known and leaving the viewer to physically experience that space in the ground “with anticipation or dread” (p. 16.). It is this duality of both anticipation and dread that interests me when critiquing Gaskell’s projection. The kind of ambiguity this image evokes is a fitting metaphor for the ambiguity of the transience of self, as it shifts from state to state, from Subject to Self, from the dual emotions of anticipation to dread. The use of video projection as a means of exploring this theme can be linked to Zizek’s view that the Real can be found in the illusion. As Zizek (2000) writes:

Deprived of the Real, of that which resists the simple integration into our common reality (symbolization, integration into our universe), reality itself turns into a malleable, indefinitely plastic texture that, precisely, loses the character of reality and turns into a fantasmatic effect of discursive practices. And the obverse of the same paradox also holds: the ultimate experience of the Real is not that of a reality which shatters illusion, but that of an illusion which irrationally persists against the pressure of reality, which does not give way to reality. (p. 671)

In a sense, Gaskell’s ‘illusionary’ grave becomes the Real, disappearing once the projector is turned off, but ‘irrationally persisting’ as an experiential space, as a kind of shadow of Zizek’s Real.

Gabriella Bisetto’s sculptural works as seen in her exhibition Little Breaths (2007) reference Zizek’s notions of the overlap or adjunct to Self vs. Subject, in which the transient self is both body and mind simultaneously. In Bisetto’s work, the “physicality of existence” (Bisetto, 2007) is explored via the creation of glass sculptural objects that incorporate in some way the physical human body. For example, she fills glass beads with blood (see Appendix 3a) and glass vessels with her own breath (see Appendix 3b and 3c). Yet the corporeal certainty of these ‘trapped’ bits of body, of the Real, co-exist in the transparency of glass. The metaphorical qualities include the ability of light to pass through it, and thus allowing the viewer access into both the interior and exterior of the object at the same time: the duality of being is expressed in the material that describes it. While Bisetto’s work references the physical aspect of ‘being’, (the Subject), the use of
transparent materials in my opinion, are also strongly linked to Zizek’s notion of Self. Transparency is expressed in Zizek’s writings in relation to notions of Self as “a special form of darkness: we are not able to see something because it is transparent, because we see through it” (Metzinger cited by Zizek, 2006, p. 214). That is, the Self “is a model which cannot perceive itself as a model, and thus exists only insofar as it does not perceive itself as a model” (p. 214). The work Little Breaths (2007) also references Zizek’s notion of extimacy, as Bisetto attempts to make sense of her body by drawing it out of herself and holding it inside sculptural forms. This I would argue is to place it, away from the body to be processed and given meaning by the Symbolic Order.

In my previous installation entitled Ascend (2006) (see Appendix 4a), I explored the possibilities of sculpture working as a metaphor to the body, and film as a metaphor to the mind. In this work, a series of suspended, glass-like resin vessels float up and away from a large video projection of a body as it rises into a white sky without falling, disappearing into itself and over itself in a looped series of dissolves. The video element has a strong link to the transience of self, as the body disappears endlessly into itself, rising but never falling, forever reaching for some kind of ascension, or redemption, in a constant state of transition. The image has a ghostly aspect to it, suggesting the link between physicality and spirituality expressed in Zizek’s re-reading of the duality of Self. I would assert that Zizek’s notion of aphanisis, or Symbolic suicide, is also present in the video component of the piece, as the body attempts to reach some state of change via its endless ascension. The sculptural forms used in Ascend (2006) (see Appendix 4b) consisted of transparent resin, the amorphous shapes referencing the body. The materials used were temperature-sensitive and prone to expanding and contracting in warm conditions and, when filled with water, morphing from one state to another. Transience implies something temporary and short-lived, something which does not stay the same but changes. It refers to transition. In this way, the materials used in the sculptures also became a metaphor to the notion of the transient self. This allegory can also be traced to the stages of the making process as the resin starts out as a liquid substance, yet hardens to become a particular shape, regardless of how unstable that shape might be.

Similarly, it is in the process of making that I have arrived at my current investigation. This research, however, has resulted in a shift in the reading of tangible sculpture as body. I am now more concerned with the role of metaphor than matter. The corporeal sculpture is no longer the representation of the Real body. Instead, it is within the process of making, with particular reference to drawing, or tangibly mark-making for animation, that links my work with the body (see...
Appendix 5b). In the visceral scribbles and scratchings apparent in my animation, it is my own hand, my body, that links the work with the notion of the Subject, of the Real, and of corporeal certainty. From my perspective, it is the medium of film, of the body in motion, as ephemeral and intangible that links it simultaneously with the Self, with the Symbolic Order. The animation, in which the body appears and disappears, reappearing again, blurred and distorted from the darkness, describes the person in the footage as sliding between these two positions, of morphing between states. I concur with Fuery’s point that this renders the body as both intimately recognisable, yet “alien and strange to behold” (2000, p. 72). Referencing my own body through the process of drawing, I connect my views to those expressed by Gabriella Bisetto in relation to her blown glass works: “For a moment I can see my permanent interaction with the environment, and in essence, see myself….[the works are] allegorical time capsules of the indefinable and momentary qualities from which we live” (2007, p. 8), (see Appendix 3). Similarly, it is the aim of my creative work to make metaphorical, experiential works that enable the viewer to engage in the human condition of being, as a mutable and transient experience.
Chapter Three

Context: An analysis of my praxis

After the completion of *Ascend* (2006), I found myself at a creative impasse. While still deeply interested in video as a creative medium, I became conflicted about its effectiveness in encompassing everything I was trying to articulate in relation to the transient self with regard to mind and body. In particular, I was concerned about the method of creating, as video work is a technologically dependent process that relies on the video camera, the computer, the data projector and the screen to exist. And while I concur with Bill Viola’s view of the video camera, who describes his relationship to the medium as “...a part of my body. It is intuitive and unconscious” (cited in Rush, 2005, p.157), it is my experience that, at the same time, film work arguably distances the physical body from the process of making. To this end, I had become disconnected from creating with my own body, without the assistance of machines. Sculpture had served as a medium that had provided me with a clear reference to the physical, as evidenced in the metaphorical link between the tangible sculptural form and the body. During the course of my research, however, the clarity of the division I had made between mind (read: video work), and body (read: sculpture), began to blur. There is an ambiguity evident in my research regarding mind (the Self) and body (the Subject) and how they overlap and shift. Clarity dissipated, and the contradictions I outlined regarding my relationship to video as a medium, arose. I realised that, as with Zizek’s notion of the self as indefinite and malleable (or transient), the process involved in making creative work must reflect this lack of clarity, this indistinction. I made a decision to explore other creative processes as a means of articulating the Self/Subject overlap. I resolved to retain the use of video as I felt it best expressed my ideas on the ephemerality of self, yet I also wanted to incorporate my own body into the method of making in a more tangible way. As such, I began to draw.

In the process of creating video work, the ideas and the result are captured by both the camera and the computer. The hands simply become a means of manipulating these tools. However, in the process of drawing, the body is viscerally involved. It can create immediate results, without the filter of technology to edit and dictate choices. It is a process mediated by the body, enabling me to obliterate, reveal and manipulate images instantly. I found in drawing, refreshingly and with enormous enthusiasm, instant gratification. It became, in a sense, my own window into the Real. In keeping with my desire to connect creatively with the physical, (with the Subject-state), I opted to use charcoal as the medium in which to draw as it is a sensuous material. It is soft in texture, and it
can be spread with the fingers. It creates a foggy, ill-defined edge and allows me to create both a strong tonal (or sculptural) element to the drawing, which can create a sense of ambiguity and intangibility to the work. It is in both the ambiguity of the images and the physical presence of my hand in the drawing process that I reference Zizek’s notion of Self/Subject as an ambiguous state, “...an illusion which irrationally persists against the pressure of reality” (Zizek, 2000, p. 671).

Having located the reason for my creative impasse as one of process, I was able to continue making video work bearing this in mind. My decision to create an animation clearly resonates conceptually with this realisation. In the animation method I have employed, (detailed below), I have drawn directly onto video footage, allowing the work to retain both body (evidenced in the mark-making of the drawing), and mind (evidenced in the moving image of the body in the video). As a result, both my physical body and the filmic body coalesce. This constructs an additional layer to the notion of the Self and the Subject as a transient and overlapping state is visually apparent in the creative outcome.

The methodology I developed to create the animation is as follows: I filmed myself in a darkened room with one strong light, in which the body appears and disappears in strong relief. I used the filmed footage to print off a series of single frames, which I then hand-drew over using black charcoal and white pastel chalk, emphasising the tonal differences. Approximately 2000 drawings were then scanned into an editing programme, the sequence creating an animated version of the actual, ‘real’ footage. Conceptually, it is the animation of the ‘real’ that interests me in this process. What is real and what isn’t? Is the animated ‘version’ of the body any less or more mediated than the body represented in the ‘real’ footage? The real footage captures the real body, unadorned and undeniably present, yet removed by the extended arm of technology – separate, cold, a documentation or voyeuristic surveillance of a person in an undefined black space. Yet in the animated version, the body is distorted. It is rendered ‘less real’, less recognisable as a ‘real’ body:

2 My decision to film myself, as opposed to filming a separate subject for the work is, I believe, an important element of this work. My praxis is engaged in investigating notions of transience in relation to self that incorporate conceptual ideas, (such as Zizek’s Self/Subject overlap), with practical, tangible outcomes, (such as the creation of video works). In using myself as the subject of the video, I am connecting my own body with these conceptual and practical ideas regarding the mind/body relationship. My body becomes the site upon which I explore these notions. It is my body I am drawing over when I produce the animation, linking my physical body in the process of making with the conceptual idea apparent in the frame. I don’t believe that using my body in my creative process will always be necessary in exploring notions of the transience of self. Yet I would propose that in experiential works that are referencing extimacy (or intimacy as external), and as a starting point in my creative research, it does seem to be the most honest form of investigation.
an example of Zizek’s notion of extimacy, in which the intimate Self is externalised (and consequently mediated, or edited), to make sense of itself. As Zizek (2006) writes:

The consistency of the Self is...purely virtual; it is as if it were an Inside which appears only when viewed from the Outside, on the interface screen – the moment we penetrate the interface and endeavour to grasp the Self ‘substantially’, as it is ‘in itself’, it disappears like sand between our fingers....At the level of material reality (inclusive of the psychological reality of ‘inner experience’), there is in effect no Self: the Self is not the ‘inner kernel’ of an organism, but a surface effect. (p. 206)

It is this footage, however, in which the body is perhaps more saliently visible via the charcoal and chalk mark-making of the creative process. It is in my discernible bodily involvement that arguably ‘personalises’ the piece. While the animated version requires even more technological ‘steps’ in the making process than the ‘real’ footage, it is perhaps the animation, that imbues in the work a certain corporeality. This draws together, quite literally, the notion of film as metaphor to the mind (the Self), while the creative process evident in the animation extends this metaphor to include the undeniable presence and overlap of the body (the Subject), in relation to being.

In my Honours exhibition, I intend to paint the white room I selected as the exhibition space in the gallery, black. I made this decision in an attempt to create an experiential impression – a void – that announces the viewer’s arrival into something that is not what they have, until that point in the gallery, experienced. It is also a practical consideration, given that the work is film-based, and that lighting is a central issue. I selected a space upstairs as it is geographically separate from the rest of the gallery. This, I hope, will enable me to better create an experiential space that is more readily controlled than a space that needs to be shared with other work.

The work, Dis/Integrate (2008), comprises of two video components. I intend to install one small, wall-mounted screen on which I will play the ‘real’ footage from which the animation has been created (see Appendix 5a). This will be the first video work the viewer will see upon entering the space. The animation will be projected on a larger scale opposite this screen (see Appendix 5b). The viewer will need to fully enter the space and then turn around to see it. It is my hope that this arrangement will result in the merging of the shadow cast by the viewer’s body over the projected image, and thus become an inadvertent part of the work. This, coupled with the immersive experience of the black room, will perhaps position the viewer as complicit in the mediation of the projected body, while concurrently calling into question their own mediation, their own extimacy. It also possibly separates the work from the Act, or Symbolic suicide, as outlined by Zizek as “An
uncoupling from immersion in one’s environs, in following a certain automatism which ignores the demands of adaptation – this is what the ‘death drive’ ultimately amounts to” (2007, p. 231).

Unlike the figure in Ascend (2007), in which the projected body disappears and reappears in the hope of transcendence, the subject of Dis/Integrate (2008) could be viewed as being trapped in eternal Symbolic mediation, disappearing and reappearing without hope of release, concentrating only on survival. However, other readings may also apply. The experiential space, as a space consciously created by the artist to have an immersive effect on the viewer, could be seen to be highly mediated. Both Dis/Integrate (2008) and Ascend (2007) and, perhaps, any other creative work aiming for an experiential outcome, may be positioned as responses to this mediation. That is, the work may exist in a highly mediated space, yet the viewer’s response to the work is their own. Thus, the ‘death drive’ is implicit in the viewer’s personal interaction with the work, as opposed to the work alone. As Judson writes of the experiential installations of Bill Viola:

Anyone entering one of Viola’s installation spaces will encounter more or less the same visual and auditory environment as anyone else, orchestrated, of course, by the artist. Yet the actual experience of one of these works is as if the revelatory moment of extended duration, so characteristic of Viola’s installations, had been one’s own. (1995, n.p.)

Whether this positions the viewer’s experience of the work as deeply personal or, conversely, as deeply mediated, (or, perhaps, more tellingly, as both), is arguable. Finally, in creating an experiential creative work, the artist may themselves be enacting a form of Symbolic suicide, as they consciously create an experience that stands outside the Symbolic Order. This ignores its demands of adaptation, in making a new, separate environment into which immersion could be possible.

The placement and size discrepancies of screen and projection, creates a dialogue between each work about notions of intimacy/extimacy. The small screen calls for close inspection, yet the monitor acts as a type of ‘barrier’ between viewer and image. The viewer may look at the work as one would a television image. The interaction between viewer and image is one-way, in so far as the viewer may experience the work in a voyeuristic sense. Yet they remain relatively disconnected from its content, (which in itself, could be read as a type of surveillance, as the camera follows the person endlessly around a darkened space). This experience may be linked to Mondloch’s model of ‘double spatial dynamics’ (2007, n.p.), in which the viewer becomes neither here nor there, but rather dislocated from both the reality of the screen and reality per se. However, the large, projected animation, while monumental in size (and therefore perhaps a denial of the intimate), may be read,
ironically, as more intimate than the small screen, as it demands from the viewer a differing level of interaction. The projected image, freed from the constraints of a monitor or screen, hovers as ephemera, as intangible and transient as the self. For me, it represents the absence of the body, while the drawing evidenced in the animation references the presence of the body. The animated image moves in and out of the darkness, and shifts between states of indistinct motion and moments of clarity, in which the filmic body is revealed. This notion of absence and presence, (and, perhaps, 'Inside/Outside' as referenced by Zizek, (2007, p. 206)), is highlighted. In as much, the viewer is asked to immerse themselves in the space by considering their own body in relation to the projected body, and thus engage with the liminality of the work in relation to their own sense of self.

As such, the content of the work reflects the same sense of liminality, of transient states of self. The filmed body endlessly navigates a dark space or void, in which she dissolves and re-emerges, mutable. While her response appears to be embedded in an unspecified fear and anxiety, underscored by the at times vertiginous and erratic motion of the camera, the reason remains unknown. This creates a circular and unresolved narrative, her plight an eternal loop that goes nowhere. The theme of the works is ambiguity, intangibility and the transient nature of self: in what it means to 'be' and to 'experience'. They are about connection and disconnection and a desire for interconnectivity, between the self and the body, between the self and others, and between the self and what defines or mediates it. Specifically, they explore the shifting, nebulous and overlapping spaces and tensions between Self and Subject, between the Real and the Symbolic Order (Myers, 2003, p. 38). They are also about a sense of interiority, of being locked within ones own head, and how isolating and disconnecting this experience can be. Leading, perhaps, to some primal desire for self-annihilation and rebirth (pp. 59-60). It is my belief that, perhaps ironically, it is the latter experience that is shared by everyone, by every 'self', and it is that which fascinates me and ultimately drives my creative practice.
Conclusion

At the start of my creative exploration into notions of the mind/body (or Self/Subject) relationship, I made a clear distinction between the creative processes I used to represent these ideas. That is, I read ephemeral video projection as the mind, and tangible sculpture as the body, as evidenced in my work, *Ascend* (2007). As the complexity of the relationship between Self and Subject and how they overlap became apparent in my theoretical research, this distinction became blurred. As I have demonstrated, while still predominantly interested in video work, I was eager to use my own body more viscerally in the process of making. I became extremely attracted to the primordial, ‘Real’ nature of drawing: the use of my hands and fingers in the making process, the body as instrument. I came to explore the tangible process of using my own hands to actively create.

My investigation revealed that this sense of the physical body as a tool in the process of creating made sense in relation to the conceptual nature of my research. In this case, it was in the process of drawing, of using my own body to tangibly mark-make as evidenced in the essentially ephemeral outcome of animated film that the overlap between Self and Subject has become apparent. The conceptual content of my research became irrevocably linked to the process of making, as well as the creative outcome, i.e., the construction of praxis. It is perhaps appropriate that such a shift in my praxis has occurred during the current research, considering its focus on transience and intangibility. As I established with Zizek’s notion of the overlapping states of Self/Subject, my creative research into these concerns has echoed this liminality. I have identified that Gabriella Bisetto’s aim is to explore “the intangibility of being and the difficulties posed by representing philosophical abstractions in a corporeal form” (Hendry, cited in Bisetto, 2007, n.p.). I have demonstrated that such an aim is echoed in my investigation, as I have attempted to locate the transient self in a visual way.

As I have examined, locating the transient self is a complex task. In researching the literature and art works outlined in this paper, I have identified Zizek’s model of Self and Subject (Myers, 2003. p. 38), by which I have explored the issue of transience. Zizek’s notions of extimacy (p. 41) and the Act (pp. 59-60) have been detailed as a means of articulating the mediated self in relation to these umbrella terms. Zizek’s ideas are based in a psychoanalytic context, and thus I have argued, his theories have been appropriate in researching notions of the self. His ideas aided in forming a theoretical framework in which I have explored experiential creative outcomes as evidenced in the work of Bill Viola, Anna Gaskell and Gabriella Bisetto. I have sought to establish that these artists
demonstrate possibilities in which to visually communicate the intricacies of the self as a transient and possibly unknowable state, which is also the aim of my creative work.

My research has shown that video projection as metaphor for the unconscious or the unknowable is perhaps an apt medium in which to visually represent notions of the transient self, as it is, by its nature, ephemeral. These intangible qualities have an allegorical link to the intangibility of self as a malleable state. In particular, I concur with Fuery, who suggests that “film has the capacity to make the body more intimate and yet at the same time… render the body as something alien and strange to behold” (2000, p. 72). If the body can be read as the static Subject, (the Real), and the intangible Self as the mediated mind, the capacity of video to distort the body is perhaps appropriate, as it details the impact of the mind on our relationship to our physical selves.

In terms of exploring mediation and the uneasy relationship between mind and body, sculpture has similar possibilities, as demonstrated by the use of transparent materials in Bisetto’s work. As Zizek writes, quoting Metzinger, “We are not able to see something because it is transparent, because we see through it” (2006, p. 214). As such, we are not privy to our own mediation. It is invisible – we see through it. In my investigation, I have found that, for this project, projected animation in which noticeable mark-making is evident, references Zizek’s adjunct between Self and Subject (Myers, 2003, p. 73), and thus visually expresses the liminality of the nebulous, transient self. It is my conclusion that, while a subjective and complex proposition, it is possible to locate the transient self in creative work using Zizek’s Self and Subject as a theoretical framework.

An outcome of this research has been the realisation of the complexity of the notion of experientiality in relation to viewing creative work. As explored in this paper, the Zizekian ideas of Self and Subject and the experience of extimacy are perhaps derived from the overall notion of mediation as determined by the Symbolic Order. How we understand ourselves is how we identify ourselves via the Symbolic Order – the world as it is described by language (Myers, 2003, p. 45). As Zizek (2000) suggests:

The faces we wear are inherently a deceptive lure, (that) none of them are our face. Ultimately, the subject’s true face beneath the masks is nothing but the formless, skinned, raw, red flesh. The guarantee of our identity is not the face we wear but the fragile symbolic identity that is always threatened by the face’s seductive lure. (p. 679)

This is how the Self, as described by Metzinger as “a special form of darkness” (cited by Zizek,
2006, p. 214) becomes a model in which our own mediation is imperceptible to us (p. 214). The tension between the Real, unchanging Subject and the malleable, transient Self are the core ideas that have formed the theoretical framework of my visual exploration. Yet the relationship between how the viewer of creative work is similarly mediated in the process of seeing is what informs the work as an experiential zone, as examined via Mondloch’s model regarding the ‘double spatial dynamics of spectatorship’ (2007, n.p.). As my installation attempts to create an experiential space — a “personal, experiential reality” (“Experiential”, n.p.) between the work and the viewer – further investigation into these relationships has become paramount.

Thus, in continuing my praxis, I will develop the inter-relationship between the viewer and the work, my body and the work in the process of making, and the content of the work. These inter-relationships, perhaps, become sites into which mediation and the self as a transient state are made apparent. In furthering my praxis of visualising the transient self, I aim to interrogate the viewer/creative work relationship as a means of informing experiential space in my work. I will also further my investigation into being via the writings of other theorists, (such as the concept of immanence as described by Gilles Deleuze), as counterpoints and/or adjuncts to the ideas of Zizek. Finally, I intend to continue my exploration into making tangible the intangible notions of self via my creative research.
Reference List


Appendices

Appendix 1a

Appendix 1b
Appendix 2a


Appendix 2b

Appendix 3a


Appendix 3b


Appendix 3c

Appendix 4a


Appendix 4b

Appendix 5a


Appendix 5b