# Network Gestures

## Critical and Creative Responses to the Networked Body

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Emile Zile
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A classic three act structure with a global medical emergency as mid-narrative cliff-hanger, my first year was experienced as a musical montage of libraries and coffees, new people and learning university paradigms. Second year was chilled by Melbourne's prolonged and deadening series of COVID-19 lockdowns, hermetically sealed away in a Melbourne city rooftop loft – a spaceship in orbit over depopulated streets frequented by bored police, international students and the homeless. The third and final act revealed itself with a tentative renegotiation of risk, emerging from the Work From Home cave and into the sunlight. Throughout it all Amelia Borg has lived inside this project with me, and I will always be grateful for her patience, support and love.

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# Abstract

Bodies are in a constant process of performance, transmission and reception within online platforms. Mediation of the body occurs via online video platforms through the transmission of gestural performance, physical acts, audio and music – and has been a topic of analysis in performance art studies under the theme of liveness (Auslander 1999). The topic of the self online has been explored from multiple directions, including by artists and scholars – notably performance, media and post-internet artists and digital media theorists.

The technological affordances of online platforms allow performance and gestural communication to circulate widely as virally transmissible, popular and engaging cultural forms. Over the past decade, the mediated body has gained widespread attention via the widespread use of network-enabled smartphones and devices with increasingly wideband and affordable data rates, on social media video platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. As miniaturisation of high-quality lenses continues alongside the proliferation of inexpensive and always connected broadband devices, the mediated body equally accelerates its transmission and re-presentation through culture. This creative practice research project uses artistic outcomes to examine the tensions and overlap between performance art, gesture and online mediation within a social media-oriented contemporary culture. It seeks to ask the following research question: *How does gestural performance art allow for contemporary interpretations of the mediated body.*

# Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Introduction

This creative practice-based doctoral research project explores the mediated body through the development of three major practice-based public research works which engage with themes of gestural performance, the mediated body and language. These three major public artworks were presented as performances between 2018 and 2021, utilising a practice-based methodology that incorporated theoretical research and studio-based rehearsal and development. The artworks produced during this research project demonstrate how performance art can contribute to new ways of perceiving and critically engaging with contemporary forms of networked communication. This research utilises performance art as a mode to critically reflect on network-based communication and actively uses networks in various forms as vital participants in final artworks.

In this accompanying dissertation, the methodology of each performance work is elaborated upon to demonstrate how each project allows for complementary yet distinct modes of engagement with the larger themes of the research. Together, this dissertation and the attendant creative practice seek to engage in public debate on the mediated body at the intersection of contemporary art, performance art, media theory and network culture.

This dissertation seeks to contribute new knowledge in the form of a creative practice engagement with questions centred on the mediated body, performance art and its relationship to notions of performativity online. This research utilises a creative practice-based methodology and reflects my own institutional position between the Schools of Media and Communications and School of Art at RMIT University. Expanded audiovisual documentation of the artworks that accompany the written component of the research project is accessible for assessment purposes at http://phd.emilezile.com.

The scope of my creative practice output centres around three large-scale creative projects that utilise performance art to explore the role of gesture and the mediated body. These works were generated and presented across the three years of my doctoral project and are elaborated on in detail throughout this written submission. The three major performance-based works developed as part of my PhD research and discussed within this document are *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham),* a solo performance in Melbourne (2018) and Amsterdam (2020); *Becoming The Icon* (my capitalisation), a performance film in collaboration with Melbourne dancer and choreographer Lilian Steiner (2018–20); and *4500*

*Lumens* (2021), a solo performance delivered in Melbourne as part of the National Gallery of Victoria Triennial EXTRA performance program.

## 1.1 Research Question

My research question allows me to answer questions around mediation, the body and communication, to be answered in the form of performance art projects with a corresponding written dissertation that responds to specific dimensions of the following question:

> *How does gestural performance art allow for contemporary interpretations of the mediated body?*

## 1.2 Context and Motivation

This research is grounded in gestural performance and incorporates key theorists from the fields of art history, contemporary art, media theory and network culture to develop a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding gestural performance and the mediated body. My research is domiciled within the School of Media and Communications, yet my focus is squarely on art as the mode for enquiry and for this reason my secondary supervisor is located within the School of Art. Within this constellation of enquiry, I have explored the research question through large-scale creative practice projects, working through relevant themes with a methodological mode of enquiry that incorporates the iteration, reassessment, and production of creative work.

Central to all aspects of my creative practice is the concept of remediation. Media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe the process of remediation as an act of media consuming media in a constant process of becoming. With the birth of each new media, older media is remediated in and through the new. It is a dynamic process that in their definition acts as 'the translation of media forms and practices, the extension and complexification of media networks' (Bolter and Grusin 2009, 61). By utilising 'immediate' remediation as a strategy in the creation of new performance work, I seek to create the conditions for the collapsing of both the lived experience of the audience and remediation through communication platforms. I discuss this effect in relation to my performance *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* in Chapter 4. This collapsing of zones of physical space and time engages with Bolter and Grusin's notions of hypermediacy, reflecting multiple temporalities at simultaneously. An expression of this temporal

dislocation is also evinced in my performance *4500 Lumens*, which uses historical sculptures and gestural performance to create sensations of time displacement and evoke trans-temporal dislocation (see Chapter 6). I argue that in order to understand the mediated, networked body in performance art we need to revisit the idea of remediation.

'Mirror affect' is a term used by Romanian art historian Cristina Albu to describe artworks that function in concert with reflective surfaces, amplifying intersubjective states of being for the art audience. The use of the mirror affect in art can offer a 'disruptive force that suspends individuals' sense of self sufficiency and opens up new possibilities for interpersonal alliances' (Albu 2016, 6). Albu sees the role of artworks using mirror affect as encouraging audiences to 'conceive themselves simultaneously as viewers and as active producers of a highly variable field of reflections and responses that elude individual control' (Albu 2016, 4).

Incorporating Albu's theorisation of mirror affect as a structure to analyse the practice-based research outcomes generated in this period, I aim to show how the use of reflective and mirroring strategies in performance creates empathetic and communicative structures to orient meaning between performer, audience, and audience members. The use of mirror affect techniques is most clearly evident in the performances *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* (Chapter 4) and *4500 Lumens* (Chapter 6). More broadly, my three major creative works of this research each engage with themes of the body mediated in various forms, utilising a selection of technological, physical and network mirroring techniques and gestural devices to create a contribution to knowledge around the mediated body, performance art and gestural communication.

Within my creative practice I seek to create empathetic connections with audience members, utilising dramaturgical tools and techniques to foreground the poetic dimensions of contemporary communication. Aristotle defines Pathos as 'awakening emotion in the audience so as to induce them to make the judgment desired' (Kennedy 1991, 119). In Classical Greece, Pathos was defined as one of the three artistic modes of persuasion, alongside Ethos (character) and Logos (discourse). Modern conceptions of Pathos would frame it as a narrative device related to 'pity and sadness' (OED 2021). This undertone of sadness can be seen in my performance works, as evidenced in the narrative spoken-word delivery within *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* and sequences from *4500 Lumens*.

By highlighting the emotional economy of online communication within performance, I attempt to isolate that melancholy and present it to audiences for dramatic

effect. Dutch media theorist Geert Lovink accurately isolates this sensation of online sadness as distinct from clinical depression or more serious maladies in his 2019 book, *Sad by Design*, stating:

> Sadness expresses the growing gap between the self-image of a perceived social status and the actual precarious reality. The temporary dip, described here under the code name 'sadness', can best be understood as a mirror phenomenon of the self-promotion machine that constructs the links for us (Lovink 2019, 48).

This sense of being a dislocated self, at once present and atomised, is a melancholic ambience I am attempting to isolate within many of my performances. Media and visual cultures scholar Paul Frosh in *Poetics of Digital Media* distinguishes media poetics by its ability to possess a 'world-producing capability' (Frosh 2019, 1). It is precisely the world-making potential of performance that I seek to generate for audiences engaging with my performance work, creating temporary zones of managed ambience.

Within my performances, meaning is constructed by directing and channelling the flows of information that contribute to the daily construction of one's reality online, the sensation of having preferences guided almost on rails by seemingly invisible marketing and advertising imperatives enmeshed with machine logic. Media scholar Annette Markham reflects on this construction of self alongside commercial interests:

> The social negotiation of self is made more visible by the traces of texts, tweets, and emojis that evidence this dynamic. The computational aspect of this social construction process is highlighted – but perhaps made more mysterious – through the appearance of advertisements that are well targeted to our interests (Markham 2017).

The position I take within my performance art works places me as a protagonist between a self-generated sense of self and reflections of the informational mirror reflected back in the form of algorithmic suggestion, commercial messaging and behaviour management. I calculate this as the base reality within which my performance personas operate. Speaking broadly, my body of performances reflect the protagonist yearning for a complete sense of self or unity, in tension with a realisation that the self is a composite image of deeply mediatised flows of information, atomised and disparate. 'As platform and individual become inseparable, social networking becomes identical with the "social" self' (Lovink 2019, 1).

This ongoing tension between impossible unity and dissolution of the social self on platforms is a prevalent meta structure that exists in many of my performances.

The last 15 years has seen a deepening trend of concentration of social media platforms by the globally dominant, large US internet companies. The largest and most notable acquisitions and mergers have been Google's acquisition of YouTube in 2006 for US$1.65 billion, the purchase of Instagram by Facebook for US$1 billion in 2012 and the integration of video game streaming platform Twitch into Amazon Web Services for US$970 million in 2014. This concentration of ownership of online services under the logic of platforms has led to what is described as Platformatisation – defined by Dutch media studies scholar Anne Helmond as 'the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web' (Helmond 2015, 15).

Platform studies, as an umbrella academic term, has been gaining in relevance as platforms continue to widen their impact on everyday life. The term platform has been used in many and varied manners, including as a shared technologically mediated space that behaves in a largely uniform manner for many participants, a set of technical affordances that provide a stable 'platform' to develop and conduct research, or as a stage from which to speak, sometimes as 'platforms' of debate, harking back to the raised platform as a site of political discussion. Within notions of the platform there is a constant tension between the platform provider and end-users around the negotiation of the use of the platform and its potential for use and misuse. As pervasive tools that exchange the cultural capital of users and their user-generated content for the potential of exposure, viral transmission and broad reach, platforms exist in a relationship with their users which is at once shaped by technical, commercial, aesthetic and cultural forces. The co-evolution and co-dependency between platform and user is a site of cultural production and negotiation that I explore within my performances.

It is beyond the scope of this research project to go into a Platform studies analysis of all the platforms I am engaging with to produce these creative outcomes. Instead, I choose to enact a subjective and hybrid reading of these platforms via their comparison to art historical movements and their antecedents.

Utilising performance to investigate these themes before an audience allows for a mode of elaboration that, like daily activity on social media platforms, feels at once intimate and distant, too far away and too close at the same time. By multiplying the layers of remediation and reflection, audiences are held at a distance and also kept painfully close. Tracing a lineage of media performance to American comedian and Surrealist Andy

Kaufman, curator Omar Kholeif describes Kaufman's engagement with media and his persona as 'not to entertain; it was to use the "self" to interrogate "entertainment"' (Kholeif 2018, 122). Akin to Kaufman, a sense of dark humour has been present in my performance and art practice, and I will explore this technique of humour across several chapters.

My interest in gesture, performativity and online cultures is borne from my ongoing artistic practice, which is situated between performance and visual art. Within my artistic practice I have incorporated non-verbal gesture, performance on video, performance for live audience and voiceover. My solo live performances, including *OMG_sisyphus* (2015), *James Cameron's Avatar* (2014) and *Five Production Company Logos in 3D* (2010), have utilised gestural contortions and hand performance as a central mode of expression. My practice utilises instances of everyday, commonplace technology at its core, often engaging low-tech tools in concert with a spoken word and gestural element. My work aims to elaborate on how the body is mediated and transformed when enabled by infrastructures of electronic communication.

Monologues serve as an empathetic dramaturgical device within my performances, intended to draw out an emotive relationship between the viewer and my performance. Machine translation, cloud computing and online platforms are used as infrastructural vessels to temporarily hold language in performance, often using the user interface live in performance as a co-author of the work. When used in performance, these tools are exposed with all of their failings and mistranslations intact, informing a sense of innate digital poetics that present themselves as compositional ready-mades. Media philosopher Sybille Krämer highlights this irresistible disappearance of friction within social media platforms: 'the smoother media work, the more they remain below the threshold of our perception … only noise, dysfunction and disturbance make the medium itself noticeable' (Krämer 2015, 5). By actively destabilising the sensation of a smooth flow of information within my performances, the infrastructures of communication technologies are revealed, allowing themselves to be seen and incorporated.

This series of performances depict – in an embodied and gestural manner – the management of desire that online platforms require in their accumulation of cultural capital. There exists in the works a persona of an 'everyman', an anonymous user who is both a result of the factory preset and one who shapes his interactions. Factory presets can be the built-in templates and filters that offer a frame or method of visually interacting or modifying user-generated content. Factory presets could be overlays, image frames, special effects or other forms of 'on-rail' guided creativity.

Figure 1: Emile Zile *OMG_sisyphus,* 2015

The recurrent performance persona in these works is a participant in a network, seeking communication with others and often falling short. These enactments are ill-fated attempts to interact with media, often physically, collapsing boundaries and disturbing the self-contained frictionless flow of media. An example of this materially engaged relationship with the image is my performance *James Cameron's Avatar* (2014), which physically masks and blocks the projected image of the movie from playing and 'enhancing' it with a reduced suite of hand-based 'special' effects. *Five Production Company Logos in 3D* (2010) follows a similar trajectory of using hand gesture to create the illusion of animated Hollywood logos, with the assistance of a composed soundtrack aping the musical cliches of bombastic Hollywood production music.

TikTok is a prime example of a platform that embraces built-in extensive audiovisual presets to offer a guided creative experience for the user. 'Creative' interaction with the user's material is not through coding, programming or editing, but through highly managed content interaction with sliders or closely managed software interactions. A recent turn in my artistic practice has been to follow the address-to-camera mode of social media diarists and vloggers, directly addressing the camera and delivering performed monologues that are part confession, part inspirational 'corporate-speak' and part customer satisfaction review. These monologues to camera are exemplified in works such as *Liquid Cooled* (2019), which offered

a YouTube-style video review of Earth's extractable resources by a temporary planetary visitor, spoken in a snarky consumer review demeanour and presented online as a livestream performance at Modern Art Oxford Gallery.

Figure 2: Emile Zile, *Liquid Cooled*, 2019

Building on my experience as a performance-maker utilising network conditions within my live work, I have sought to further expand on this existing trajectory within my PhD research outcomes. From 2019 to 2021 I developed large-scale performance projects to reflect upon the role of gesture, language, and communication utilising performance art.

## 1.3 Impact of COVID-19

The second half of my PhD research was deeply impacted by the outbreak of the global pandemic COVID-19. The enforced government lockdowns and regulations had a substantial impact on my ability to conduct research outside of an online context. Throughout the majority of 2020 I was unable to access my art studio, which meant previous working methods of production were modified in order to develop, test and produce creative practice outcomes. During the height of the pandemic, ways of publicly presenting outcomes were limited and under constant re-negotiation, resulting in a substantive impact on two of the large-scale works that make up this PhD research project. Access to university facilities –

such as postgraduate research centres and stable study labs for research work – was halted for 18 months, forcing the bulk of this research and writing to be undertaken at home, under sometimes precarious and suboptimal working conditions.

My major project in 2020, *Becoming The Icon,* with Lilian Steiner, consisted of multiple phases due to limitations caused by governmental response to the pandemic and was ultimately realised as a stand-alone 30-minute short film. The limitations on being able to physically meet and collaborate to film new scenes and test ideas also impacted on the modes of collaboration for producing the work. The context of the pandemic also had an impact on my final performance, *4500 Lumens,* insofar as the entire development period was conducted online, and for the performance both the audience and I as a performer were required to wear face masks and observe proximity limits, which impacted on the delivery and perception of facial gestures and movements. The impact of COVID-19 public health responses on the development of these two works will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

## 1.4 Research Objective

My research objective was to generate new creative practice projects that engage with an ongoing public debate around notions of the mediated body. I use the term 'mediated body' within my PhD research to describe the extension of human communication through, and activation by, networked internet and computer communication. Representations of the mediated body may contain but are not limited to the representations of the body (imaging), the auditory presence of language (speech), non-verbal physical communication (paralinguistics) and the impression of data an individual leaves during their participation in networked communication (data body). This process of *datafication* has been defined by Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger and Kenneth Cukier as 'the transformation of everything into quantified (meta)data, transmitted online through social media and communication platforms, allowing for real-time tracking and predictive analysis' (Mayer-Schönberger 2013, 67).

My proposition is that artworks and performance art that engage with the transmission of the mediated body can assist the performer to theorise and critically engage with how bodies are perceived, shared and consumed online via internet protocols and communication technology. In the context of this research, conceptions of the mediated body are central to the themes of networked and post-internet performance.

American writer and artist Artie Vierkant describes the condition of post-internet art as 'a result of the contemporary moment: inherently informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture,

and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials' (Vierkant 2010, 1). The category of post-internet art was further defined by contemporary curators Karen Archey and Robin Peckham in their essay accompanying the 2011 exhibition *Art Post-Internet* at Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing, as that which describes:

> an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception. As such, much of the work presented here employs the visual rhetoric of advertising, graphic design, stock imagery, corporate branding, visual merchandising, and commercial software tools (Archey 2011, 2).

This stands in contrast to earlier conceptions of internet art, which privileged a more oppositional stance in relationship to the network. Early streaming experiments and online art movements saw themselves as more self-consciously radical in their stance towards the platform, highlighting the primacy of coding and hacking; as seen, for example, in Max/MSP audiovisual programming language and early web design HTML programming. Following from early internet art practitioners, artists labelled *post-internet* would follow and be criticised for being apolitical and withdrawn from political questions around internet freedoms and access. For post-internet artists, the online platform was an end of history, a set of aesthetics and practices which saw pleasurable over-identification with corporate aesthetics as a strategy to create readymade art objects from the detritus of a highly networked, contemporary culture.

I have generated three major creative practice art works during my PhD research. The solo performance *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* was built on a reworking of Dan Graham's 1975 performance *Audience/Performer/Mirror,* and performed at LIMA Amsterdam to a physical and online public audience on 15 January 2020. Creating an iterative feedback loop between audience, performer and camera, the LIMA event was held as a homage to this particular work by Graham, with performances and contributions by Keren Cytter, Jan Robert Leegte, Adad Hannah, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, and Judith Hopf. The performance themes of *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* included the perception and performance of the self, engaging verbalised proprioception in performance, and acts of audience displacement through narrative suggestion of time displacement and physical transmission via networks. The internet provides the performing, mediated body with 'ubiquitous capacity of multimodal, interactive communication in chosen

time, transcending space' (Castells 2013, 132). Both performer and audiences exist in a complex sphere of mediated relations which can transcend fixed notions of space and time.

*Becoming The Icon* is a 30-minute performance film developed with Melbourne dancer and choreographer Lilian Steiner. Through a process of studio-based improvisation, camera-based rehearsal, revision and discussion, scenes and sequences were created between 2019 and 2020. The production was forced to modify its production aims drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic and these deformations are chronicled in Chapter 5. Keeping gestural communication central to the performance, *Becoming The Icon* included themes of political speech, the mediated space of democratic debate and politicised gesture.

The final practice-based public outcome of this research period was the performance *4500 Lumens*, performed at the National Gallery of Victoria for the 2021 NGV Triennial EXTRA. Expanding notions of gesture to include the transmission of light, *4500 Lumens* utilised public participation and gestural performance of light within the medieval and Gothic galleries of the NGV. A solo performance with three phases, the work used a spotlight as a central device, linking the historical religious works and audiences through a gestural beam of light.

## 1.5 Concepts and Themes

The core of this research project is conducted around the creative practice of performance art. Performance art is utilised as a method to explore and elaborate on contemporary practices of gestural communication and the mediated body. Performance art is utilised as a critical and practical method in this project because it creates and affords an embodied knowledge which allows for an engagement with debate around the mediatised body. American performance theorist Philip Auslander posits a differentiation between a performance practice that has a solely technological method versus a performance practice that takes as its starting point the vernacular, common, everyday nature of living in a mediated world, and orienting in that logic:

> What we are seeing in many cases is not so much the incursion of media-derived 'technics' and techniques into the context of live performance but, rather, live performance's absorption of a media-derived epistemology (Auslander 1999, 33).

My performance work takes this notion as a starting point, assuming a reality of electronic communication that runs in parallel to daily life, present and always online. This deep sense

of networked reality exists concurrently in multiple locations, emotional registers and spaces. Artie Vierkant describes the cultural condition that has created a new artistic category that sources its material from a position of deep ease within the vernacular worlds of the internet, describing it as 'art responding to [a condition] described as 'Post Internet' – when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality' (Vierkant 2010, 3).

The Post Internet seeks the poetic in the banality of communication over networks, accepting the pervasive experience of a highly technological communication environment. These networks are both massively complex in their infrastructure while meanwhile being the site of commonplace vernacular, speech and world-making. Indeed, this mediated universe is that which I highlight in my performances, often displacing the body or resigning it to a lower order within the performance. By allowing multiple mediated realities to overlap with the body within live performance, I can generate a nuanced and complex performance methodology to enact dramatic sequences that reflect a deeply technological and post-internet worldview.

Within this research project I purposefully isolate gestural performance as a subcategory to separate it from other distinct categories of performance such as dance, music performance or spoken word. Gesture is the use of the position of the hand, arm, body or head, which is expressive of an idea, opinion or emotion (Cambridge English Dictionary n.d.). Performative modes that have included overt gestural performance include Indian and Southeast Asian Classical Dance, Western traditions of mime and contemporary performance practices such as 'tutting' and performance to camera in social video platforms such as TikTok. I am using the mode of gestural performance within the category of contemporary art, conducted in a theatre, gallery, cinema or on-screen as a video recording. Philosopher Carrie Noland locates gesture in a wide field of human communication:

> Gestures can be intentional or involuntary, crafted or spontaneous. They can be in the service of aesthetic, expressive, instrumental or survivalist goals. But in all cases, gestures manifest a wide range of 'effort qualities', to use the terminology of French Choreographer and Philosopher of Dance, Laban – tentative or firm, bound or flowing, lethargic or rushed – that affect their meaning, both for others and for ourselves (Nolan 2009, 6).

Nolan goes on to define gestural performance by taking Judith Butler's notion of gender performance as a series of acts that are naturalised through repetition. She argues they are both interested in the conditioning of human subjects, which ultimately subverts it. This paradox informs my exploration of gesture. Gesture acts as a layer of communication, creating meaning in its own right, beyond its accustomed role as linked to speech. Paul Frosh has developed a cogent theory of the gestural poetics of selfies as one such form of 'kinaesthetic image' that creates 'a circuit for mediating social and corporeal affective energy'. The idea of a kinaesthetic image that is intimately tied to a bodily expression is central to my thinking around performance – I unpack these ideas in later chapters that analyse my creative work in more detail.

The act of mediation is a bridging mechanism that links two or more entities. It is a process that allows one instance to be read through another. Mediation is a third party, a managing force; it is not passive but active. The mediated body is therefore an area of study that attempts to track and conceptualise expressions of the human body through its representation via network technologies, visualisation technologies, scientific quantification, or broadcast platforms. In tracing the contours of mediated representation of a body, we can perceive useful refractions to allow for an analysis of new modes of understanding the perception and reception of a body in the world. Artworks that utilise transmission of the networked body can assist audiences to critically engage with how bodies are seen, framed, and encoded.

The act of performative remediation affords the artist with a device to elaborate on themes such as temporal and physical displacement and multiple and concurrent encodings of body and voice, and to expose the simultaneous data flows and broadcast and reception that make up the reality of existing in a mediated, always online information environment. Bolter and Grusin describe in *Remediation* the act of remediation as including the mutually dependent yet 'contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy. In their formulation, immediacy acts as an image or unified and coherent source, whereas hypermediacy is that object within a mesh of other competing and concurrent sources that is similar yet fragmentary, that build to create a whole. Bolter and Grusin contend that the two modes are mutually dependent and exist most clearly on the internet with its multiplicity of sources and overlapping authorship. Strategies of remediation and hypermediacy are used extensively throughout my performance work to visualise and physicalise network conditions experienced by the mediated body.

The recording of the practice of performance art can be both representational and cinematic. The choice to record an act of performance can be made as a recording of an event or be staged to provide the secondary audience with a more intimate and closely linked experience of the performance. Auslander describes the split between the two forms of documentation as being either 'documentary' or 'theatrical'. His delineation describes documentary as being a traditional form of documentation which captures the live event before an audience or in situ, and the theatrical mode existing as performed photography:

> Cases in which performances were staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document (whether visual or audio-visual) thus becomes the only space in which the performance occurs (Auslander 2012, 25).

Performance art has grappled extensively with the concept of documentation and its relationship to the artistic act. To use Auslander's terms, performance artists routinely move between the theatrical and documentary mode of recording their work. I elaborate on this tension between staged and unstaged documentation in Chapter 3 in a discussion of the recording and documentation of my practice.

## 1.6 Dissertation Overview

This introduction provides an overview of the structure of the dissertation, outlining the contents of each chapter, which will include the literature review, the methodology and the research outcomes as explored through my practical works.

In **Chapter 2**, a literature review will outline the existing knowledge and context in which my research sits. The literature review is divided into the three main areas of interest to my research, the first of which is titled 'Performance Art and the Evolution of Networked Performance Art', in which I track the history of performance art and its relationship to ideas of 'networked performativity' and the new relationships created between audience and performer. The following section is titled 'Gesture' and unpacks the importance of gesture as a form of non-verbal communication with particular reference to its use in performance art with its relationship to media technologies. The final section of the literature review focuses on the development of performance art through the use of the internet and in particular online

social platforms. Given that the nature of this research is practice-based, I have also outlined the relevance of the above themes to my own artistic practice for each section.

**Chapter 3** outlines my methodology for this practice-based research. I outline the context and methodological approaches that make up my practice-based research project and provide an outline of the practice models that were used, including Melissa Trimingham's Spiral Model and Joanna Bucknall's Daisy Chain Model.

The following three chapters – Chapters 4–6 – discuss and analyse the three large-scale public performances that I have been developing during this research period. In **Chapter 4** I will outline the solo performance, *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)*, and discuss how this work engages with notions of the temporal and physical displacement of the mediated body. I will discuss how the use of direct address and live transmission through online platforms during the performance and live recording re-imagines and re-engages with Graham's act of 'mirroring' the audience.

In **Chapter 5** I outline my collaborative work with Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon*. I discuss how our work explores themes of gestural communication through performative explorations of the mediated space of democratic debate. We use performative gesture as a tool to reflect on political speech and gesture, elaborating on how this is transmitted through online networks and platforms.

In **Chapter 6** I outline *4500 Lumens*, performed at the National Gallery of Victoria for the 2021 NGV Triennial. I discuss how this work engages with gestural acts of framing and mirroring through performative acts, and how these impacts on our understanding of content and our reading of subjects. This is followed by a conclusion, summarising the research findings, noting the limits to the study and proposing future work to undertake.

# Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In this chapter I seek to provide a contextual framing for my research by practice PhD. I will discuss the fields of performance art, post-internet art and media studies, as my research sits at the intersection of these thematic areas. I seek to outline a frame of reference in relationship to these fields to offer context-specific locations for my public research-based practice. This written component accompanies the practical outcomes to create a coherent trajectory towards the creation of knowledge and an original contribution to the field. The study of performance art will focus on works which particularly engage with the development of video technology and online platforms, as this is central to my area of research.

## 2.1 Performance Art and the Evolution of Networked Performance Art

In this section I trace key elements in the development of performance art to outline the relationship between advances in technology and media, and their utilisation by artists historically, and how this impacted on the relationship between audience and performer. Network performance expands a previously direct relationship between audience and performer by encompassing multiple audiences, both present 'in the room' and present online. This expansion of live performance to include a live networked audience is a new development in performance, which I seek to understand and theorise within my research. It is relevant to track the relationship of the mediated body and the evolution of gestural communication within performance, focusing on platforms that privilege gestural audiovisual performance, such as TikTok.

Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was published in 1964, and in his words, 'explores the contours of our own extended beings in our technologies, seeking the principle of intelligibility in each of them' (McLuhan 1964, 6). McLuhan's fundamental thesis is that the medium through which a work is produced is inextricably linked to, and perhaps more important to, understanding the work, than the content itself. McLuhan asserts that the 'medium is the message' and he emphasises the nature of the medium as having an undeniable ability to shape and control the impact and meaning of the content. This thesis is central to understanding the development of performance art in relation to and alongside various video and streaming technologies. In the case of networked, gestural performance, the accelerated development of the video camera, computer, phone and online platform become key to understanding the performative affordances made available to performance art.

The crossover between performance, networked communication and internet culture can be seen as far back as the experiments with community access television in the 1960s. Allan Kaprow's early 'tele-happenings' created images for participants to be enmeshed within, but also created the platform for their social relations. His work *Hello* (1969) was co-produced by the Boston television station WGBH and connected four locations through five cameras and 27 television monitors. Each site participant would address the camera with the greeting "Hello! I see you; do you see me?". The participants were able to see and hear each other in real time without being in the same physical location, creating an interconnected network of interaction between them, prefiguring the subsequent development and deployment of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Figure 3: Allan Kaprow, *Hello,* 1969

Here the duality of audience watching performer, was significantly expanded; an audience member no longer needed to be seated in the same room watching a performer. The performance could now occur between a group or system of interconnected machines, over various locations and with multiple participants. In Kaprow's influential 1966 essay, 'Notes on the Elimination of the Audience', he declares with the tone of a manifesto: 'It follows that audiences should be eliminated entirely. All the elements, people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time – can in this way be integrated. And the last shred of theatrical convention disappears'. (Kaprow 2013, 281) Kaprow's thinking in this text heralds a separation between monumental sculptural art towards an intimate, body-

oriented experience of art as part of everyday experience. This work also signals prospective important links between gestural communication and the now-mainstream format of video telecommunication platforms such as Zoom and Skype. Kaprow would describe the work as 'strange, straining yet hilarious scramble of efforts to reach out' (Kaprow 1974, 17-18).

Here we see first attempts at rudimentary greetings and acknowledgements between participants; there is an obligatory wave, an assessment of location, a confirmation that communication is successfully technologically mediated by a platform, and that technical issues are not impeding communication. This artwork reveals an early link between a gestural performativity and communication through the format of video performance and streaming. Frosh defines these non-verbal acknowledgements of communication as crucial in the development of a shared social stage; 'Highly ritualized and yet profoundly routinized, phatic utterances demand to be requited' (Frosh 2019, 130). Hollowed out of a mode of direct address, we see in Kaprow's *Hello* the beginnings of a rudimentary gestural language linked to live streaming communication.

In the 1970s, the miniaturisation of video technology, such as the Sony Porta-Pak video camera, and the emergence of accessible community media centres across the Western world, saw a new impetus by artists to embrace creative video and televisual culture. With this technological advancement came new ways of incorporating technology into performance artworks. Early examples of the use of streaming in artwork can be located in Nam-June Paik and John Godfrey's *Global Groove* video of 1973. The video takes on the format of a television program, referring to the advent of satellite broadcasting and prefiguring internet communication. The opening titles introduce the *Global Groove* concept, 'This is a glimpse of a new world when you will be able to switch on every TV channel in the world and TV guides will be as thick as the Manhattan telephone book' (Godfrey n.d.).

The inclusion of streaming practices and culture within performance can also be seen in American conceptual artist Bruce Nauman's experiments from the late 1960s. His work *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) depicts the artist in his studio, filmed from above and an inverted position. The recording shows Nauman stamping around in a circular motion across his studio without addressing or recognising the camera or audience. Here we see an elevation of the mundane to the sculptural. By stamping across the studio, Nauman questions the role of the artist and their ability to create work within a studio. Echoing the questioning of monumentality and studio-based practice, the video transforms Nauman's body to a readymade artwork and becomes an important artwork that seeks to engage with the mediatised body and reflections of self.

Serbian performance and conceptual artist Marina Abramovic's video-performance *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975) builds upon Nauman's early performative engagement with video. One can see Abramovic aggressively combing her long hair with a brush in one hand and a comb in the other. She aggressively works at her hair, while repeating the sentence 'art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful'. This work serves as an example of Abramovic's early works, centred around a durational test of a body under duress. This work prefigures much of recent video-based self-portraiture associated with online social media platforms. By presenting an agonised, dutiful preening and self-management of the self, Abramovic questions what the image of a female artist should be, what is expected, and what is anticipated. Both Nauman and Abramovic use the medium to question the role of the artist within a mediatised realm and how performances of masculinity and femininity are encoded by the lens and language.

Figure 4: Marina Abramovic, *Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful,* 1975

American installation artist Vito Acconci's early video performance works pioneered the use of video to create highly personal and intimate works. Acconci can be seen addressing the camera, treating it as a performative and confessional space. His video work often explored ideas of the self, narcissism and exhibitionism, and he clearly acknowledged the impact of

media in expressions of himself. In his work *Theme Song* (1973), Acconci lies on the floor facing the camera, his face is close to the lens, as he delivers a monologue. Talking to the viewer in a very intimate way, Acconci rambles to an unknown yet acknowledged audience:

> I have no idea what your face looks like. I mean you could be anybody out there … Ah, but I know there's gotta be somebody … watching me. Somebody who wants to come in close to me.

Figure 5: Vito Acconci *Theme Song*, 1973

Utilising emotive background music and riffing on lyrics of pop affectation, Acconci attempts to carouse the viewer into an intimate yet one-sided exchange. Acconci's self-portraiture before the camera serves as a foundational piece in the history of video and performance art. His delivery is confessional, direct and delivered to a remote audience who is not physically before him. The concept of an expanded audience emerges within this work, an audience and subject beyond the camera: 'Literary and performative, Acconci treats the impersonal camera as a person in real time, yet recognizes the future-oriented experience of viewers who will all watch the tape' (Garwood 2006, 46). While he invites the viewer into

his space in a highly personal manner, he admits that he cannot be sure who they are, or even if they exist.

Many of the ideas developed by Abramovic and Acconci foreshadow recent online self-portraiture video, disseminated by online sharing platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. American artist Petra Cortright's *VVEBCAM* (2007) is a video work made with webcam software and presented on YouTube, where the artist stares into the webcam as cartoonish icons and characters float across the screen. Cortright's performance uses the format of early YouTube to inform the content and mode of delivery. Cortright references the medium, its content and affordances, "YouTube is filled with people making webcam videos of themselves, talking about whatever, journaling their lives, performing for some audience" (Cortright 2015). The notion of 'some audience' is key here and reflects Acconci's reflections 35 years earlier on the lack of fixity of his audience. Both Cortright and Acconci's lenses are mirrors, transmitting them beyond themselves to an unknown other.


Figure 6: Petra Cortright *VVEBCAM,* 2007

## 2.2 Gestural Communication

My PhD research focuses on the role of gesture, a performative device to communicate with hands, in conjunction with speech, or alone. My interest in gesture centres around it as a form

of non-verbal communication; one that often exists alongside language, but that can be de-coupled from language. As a performative tool, gesture is used within my performance practice extensively. I am interested in the complexities that exist between gesture as an elemental and deeply rooted human method of communicating, and the new affordances that have allow the mediated body to engage with it in new and developing ways.

The role of gesture has long been central to my artistic practice. Numerous performance works have explored the relationship between media and gesture and have built a vocabulary of movement in each work. For example, in *Five Production Company Logos in 3D* (2010), I perform fictional cinematic introductory sequences to the camera, using the movement of my hands only: 'Though gestural hand motion implies stroke, the piece also mines the history of the video format as a medium for effects, motioning toward cursor or hardware driven art-forms … The online video format sublimated against itself' (Bradley 2010, 1).

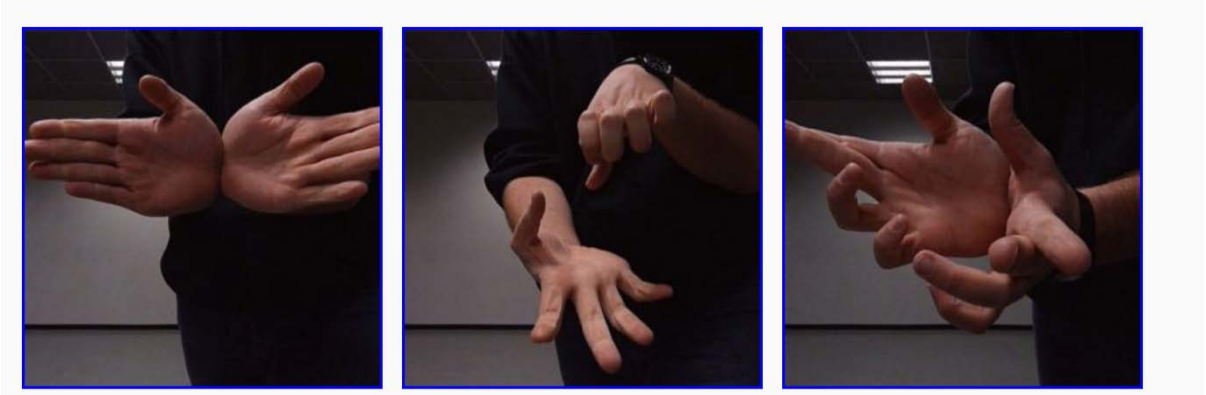

Figure 7: Emile Zile *Five Production Company Logos in 3D*, 2010

In my live performance piece, *James Cameron's Avatar* (2014), I used hand gestures to block and frame a projection of the 2009 film *Avatar* onto a screen. I performed a reductionist shadow puppetry over the film, in an attempt to add a layer of hand-produced 'special effects' onto this multi-million-dollar Hollywood blockbuster. The film was presented in its entirety of two hours and forty minutes, and throughout the duration of the entire film I am positioned below the projector with my arms reaching above to modify and frame the projected image. My intention was to return the film to a 'handmade' status, returning the film to the hand, rather than allowing it to remain in a realm of digitised special effects. Through a series of hand-based, gestural 'enhancements', I sought to frame and reduce the film to the origins of projected entertainment, fireside storytelling and shadow play in the cave. My body acts as both an unrequited layer and a counterpoint to the original film; the act

of masking is critical to shaping the narrative and blocking certain information to modify the projected image. In this instance, the body itself is becoming a mediating force, creating a structural layer through which the film must pass.

Figure 8: Emile Zile James Cameron's *Avatar,* 2014

## 2.3 Gestural Communication and Performance Art

Roman orator and statesman Cicero coined the term 'chironomia' in his *De Oratore* (55 BC), and defined it as the study of non-verbal communication through hand and arm gestures that accompany speech (Morie 2009, 6). Gestural communication as a form of meta-communication serves to 'instruct about or alter the ongoing communicational process' (Scheflen 1974, 205). Gestures are a central aspect to all communication and are 'symbols that exhibit meanings in their own right' (McNeill 1992, 105). Gestural communication has been used in various modes throughout history and can be linked to a vast range of societal exchanges, including symbolic or ritual gestures in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, or within the constructs of commercial exchange on market trading floors. Buddhist mudras, a Sanskrit word for 'sign', are elaborate collections of hand gestures to express forms of spiritually significant states of being.

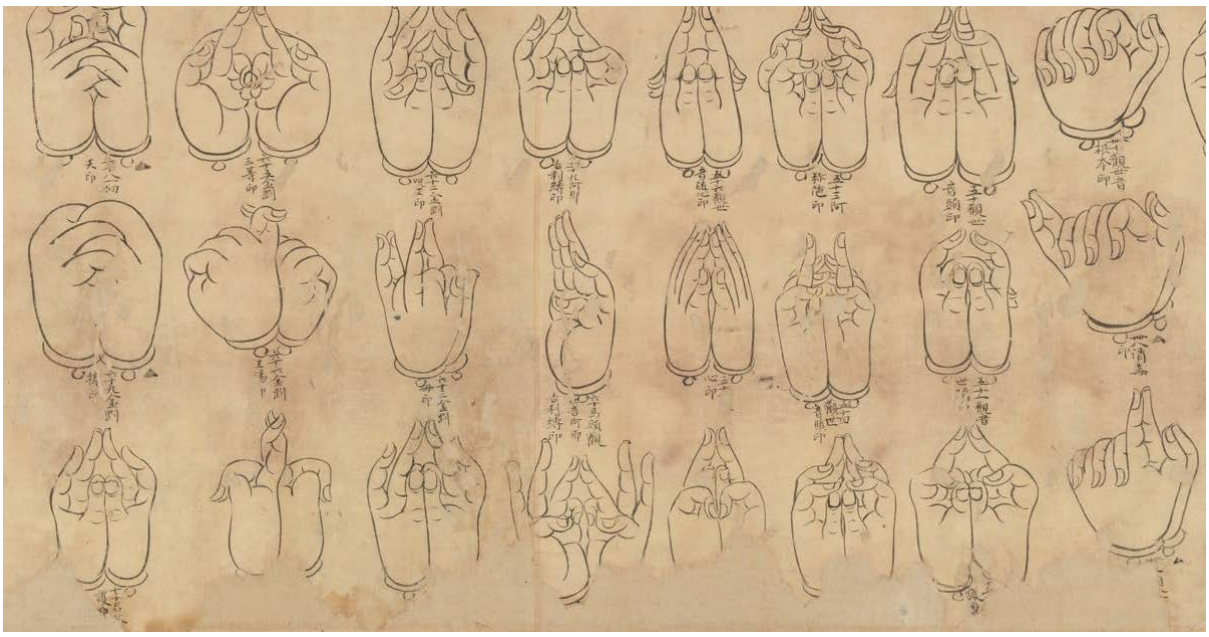

Figure 9: *Mudras,* 794-185 Japanese Heian Period

Performance art lends itself to a direct exploration and extrapolation of new modes of physicality, via an embodied relationship to the world. Performance art has long been a site of the development of new concepts of the body, often heralding new realities and social relations. Twentieth-century avant-garde art movements such as Futurism were motivated by the ability of performance art to destroy 'the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious, and the Sublime in Art with a capital A" (Goldberg 1979, 7). Working against the fixity of a final stable artwork, such as a painting or a sculpture, performance art would challenge perceived notions of art.

Early exploration of gesture within screen-based performance art can be seen in dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* (1966). Throughout the six-minute video, Rainer's hand performs tightly controlled expressions, the movements increasing in complexity until they relax into a flat position. Limited in their scope and movement, Rainer's hand gestures introduce and elevate everyday and commonplace gestural forms into sharp focus. The abstracted, reduced expression communicates through a tightly held energy, the reduction of the field of performance to a hand and a film frame.

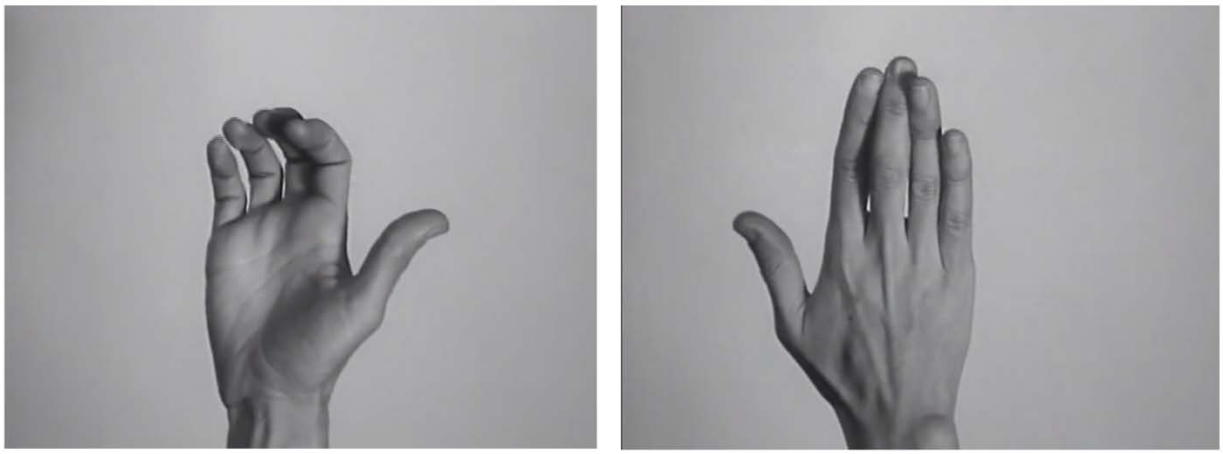

Figure 10: Yvonne Rainer *Hand Movie*, 1966

Similarly, Swiss artist Nikolaus Gansterer utilises a form of gestural, expanded live drawing practice to visualise and elaborate on the interconnectedness of thoughts and structures. The works are often performed with white chalk on a blackboard, reminiscent of elaborate scientific diagrams rendered by hand. Often performed next to academic props familiar in a twentieth-century science laboratory, the performances oscillate between poetic expression and live drawing, akin to a performance of analytic system theory or diagrammatic pictures. Within the performance work of Gansterer, we see a gestural form of expression which utilises drawing as an integral device to connect concepts. As Gansterer says in an interview with Florian Langhammer:

> an extended drawing practice plays a central role, not so much in order to mimetically depict and explain the world, thus making it more controllable, but rather to make phenomena, things and the relationships between them that are not initially obvious – visible, and as precisely as possible, for both myself, and others (Langhammer 2019, 1).

Gansterer's performances are magnified by the use of live video systems that enlarge and display the performance area for a live audience. This enlargement of the performative field creates a dramatic tension between the simplicity and purpose of the hand and the gestural magnification provided by live camera. In a similar manner to my own practice, Gansterer performatively amplifies the links between a live performance and a mediatised 'enlargement' of the work. Within my performance work with Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon* (2020), we use a similar dramatic device, performing as a duo with permanent markers,

using a video tripod to shoot disembodied hands, marking territory and communicating between each other.

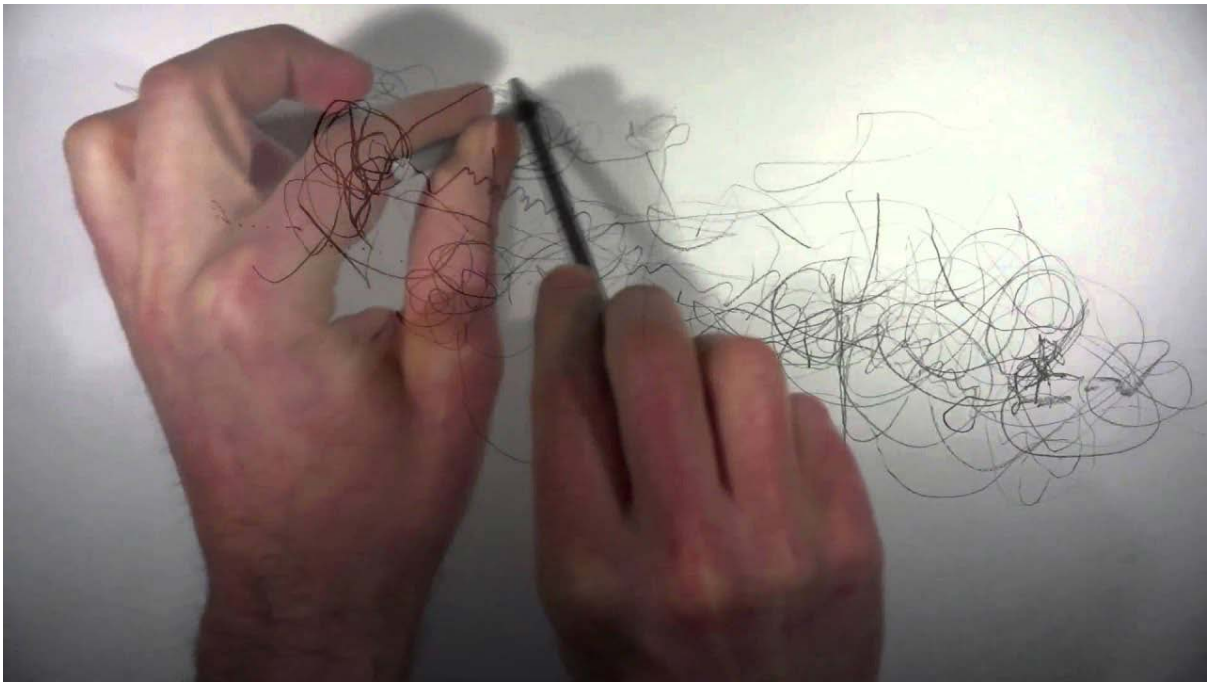

Figure 11: Nikolaus Gansterer *Third Hand (Part I & Part II),* 2014.

Akin to the way I sought to use bodily and gestural interventions to intervene with the uptake of media in *James Cameron's Avatar* (2014), artist Thomas Hirschhorn's 2012 video *Touching Reality* utilises similar gestural techniques. In that work we see a manicured woman's fingers swiping and sliding across a touchscreen to reveal different, disturbing, photographic images of mutilated, dismembered and severely injured bodies from recent television war footage. The fingers are ever-present, caressing the images with a clinical calm to view more detail, and then dismissing them to move on in the next movement. The hands interact with the touchscreen interface, using gestures of pinching and swiping that are known to all users of haptic smart devices. The hands become the gatekeepers to our visual consumption, the framers and the editors of the relationship between the body, the eyes and the machine. The gestural flick and pinch reflects a 'highly attuned cybernetic communication and control system, its feedback loops responding to the user with such lightning speed that it harmonizes human and machine – in an uncanny fashion' (Dixon 2020, 236). Here, Hirschhorn's use of hands and gestural movement acts to conflate seeing and touching, advanced gestural interactions with the touch-sensitive screen being used as a portal to engage with the dismembered, disfigured and deformed bodies of war.

Figure 12: Thomas Hirschhorn *Touching Reality*, 2012.

Within the vernacular traditions of online video websites, a number of gestural forms have emerged. These subcultural performance tropes utilise hand and body gestures to convey performative communication. Social video platforms such as TikTok utilise gesture and music as key components in generating meaning and narrative expression. 'Within the non-verbal codes of TikTok we see a new paralinguistic language emerge online' (Rettberg 2017, 9).

In a video made for YouTube, user Nigerias Blessing posts a tutorial entitled "*Musical.ly Tutorial (30+ Hand Motions with Explanations!)* 2015. The user explains how to perform common hand gestures that are used as non-verbal tools of communication specifically for the application Musical.ly (a previous iteration of TikTok). The tutorial includes tutorials on communicating 'thinking … you're on my mind' or 'going on a vacation' or 'how to communicate swear words or bleeps'.

In the video we are shown not only how to perform the gestural action to communicate, but also how to simultaneously direct the hand camera with our other hand. Here, we are seeing a new gestural language develop in conjunction with the collapse of distance between camera and performer. Online platforms that encourage camera-based

diaristic uploading have led to a widespread proliferation of the vlogging and camera-based performance, with gestural performance becoming a major mode of performance online.

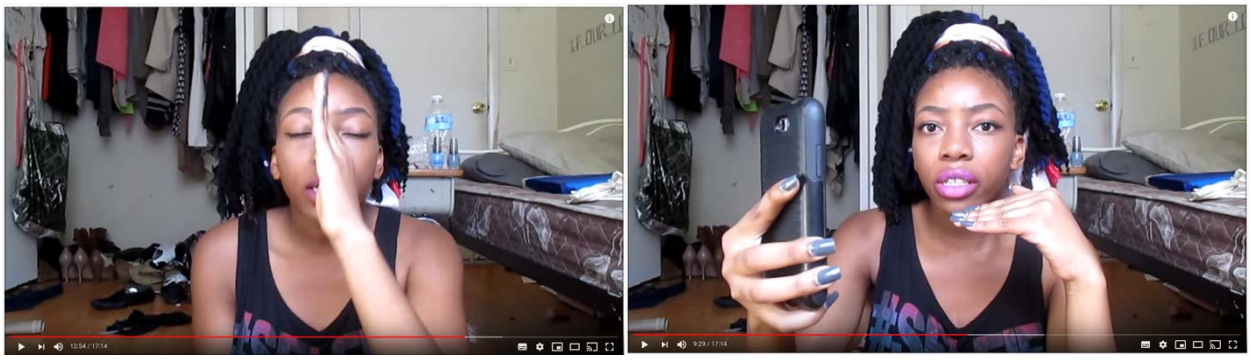

Figure 13: Musical.ly Tutorial on YouTube, 2015

The increasing use of gesture across internet communication platforms is linked to the rise of video chat software and the miniaturisation of lenses on laptops, webcams and smartphones. Rising use of gestural communication online is reflected in vlogging, or diaristic video content and product reviews. The overt use of gesture can be a repeated and signature component of social video performativity, and certain gestures, body movements and signature sayings can become symbolically attached to the content creator's identity.

## 2.4 Platforms and Performativity

Within online platforms the networked body is always present. Major video sharing platforms include YouTube (desktop/mobile/set top box); Twitch (desktop/mobile/set top box), focused on gamers and Let's Play cultures; Instagram (desktop/mobile), focused on quick image and video sharing, with a growing emphasis on short ephemeral stories; and TikTok (mobile-only), focused short lip-sync, comedy and dance video.

The move away from written language to a paralinguistic language of emojis, video and reaction gifs, highlights the need to research these emergent forms and develop ways of understanding their impact on communication. This rapidly evolving mode of networked communication has profound societal impacts. Within the acceleration and simplification of signs and symbols, we see the opportunity for political debate to be managed, the use of social media as a soft-power theatre for activists to battle for influence and the role of algorithmic logic to create extreme polarities by their logic of sorting for similarity and concealing the aberrant.

YouTube is the largest video-sharing network in the world. Creative uses of YouTube include diaristic and surreal interventions, such as the user Alantutorial. Appearing in 2012, the user created darkly comical tutorial videos that over-explain and over-elaborate a simple activity with a high-pitched nasal voice. Tutorials mocked the online video tropes of educational 'how to' videos shooting in disturbing and off-putting locations such as swamps and trash yards. This excess of meaning, an instructional surplus creates a disconcerting relationship with the viewer, as we attempt to ascertain clues and meaning behind the instructions. Using the diaristic format of a homemade tutorial with low-quality video and compression that elicits a sense of authenticity, Alantutorial conveys the sense of being allowed into a very perverse and personal world. By never showing his face and always showing only gestural movement with hands, Alantutorial retains a sense of mystery and intrigue about the intentions and meaning behind the tutorials.

Similarly, in the mode of the individual directing their delivery to a camera, the influential work of Hennessy Youngman, a persona deployed by performance artist Jayson Musson, captured a moment of critique of YouTube 'influencer' critique in 2010–11. Lambasting the art world, identity politics, curation and art schools in a series of video performances to camera, entitled *Art Thoughtz*, Hennessy breaks down contemporary art production, transmission and circulation in the persona of a street-talking young African-American man. The disjuncture between the highly coded language of artworld discourse and the highly coded language of street hustler conversation combine and expose each other for their values and expectations.

Both forms of language are used to keep outsiders away; both forms of language are held by distinct identities. Boundaries collapse when Hennessey Youngman breaks down the implicit rules of entry to the art world. Youngman acknowledges 'the Game', a term to describe the hustle, grind and detachment one must endure to get ahead in everyday life. Overlaying 'the Game' onto the proposition of developing one's career within a competitive art world over-saturated by artists and low-value opportunities, Hennessey comes across as a big brother figure lending support and advice to young artists navigating the unchartered waters of artworld power. The emperor has no clothes and Jayson Musson exposes it effectively.

Figure 14: ART THOUGHTZ with Hennessy Youngman: How to Make an Art., 2011

The mode of addressing the camera phone on video can be seen as a natural extension of the photographic selfie. Whereas the traditional photographic selfie was defined as a single snapshot, the range of performance-to-camera on TikTok can be categorised as a selfie with time, existing as it does in 15 or 60 second time frames. TikTok is well known for its dance component, which is its most popular category. TikTok users have a wide selection of music clips to choose from within a predetermined bank of thousands of commercial and user-generated songs. TikTok users lip sync and perform gestural and figurative dances to the music. It is possible to duet with someone and incorporate their pre-existing video with one shot by the user. These audiovisual dance sequences then have the ideal conditions to be transmitted virally and propagate across the network; ease of reproducibility and a purposefully friction-less user interface streamline the vertical scrolling process into a seamless and ever-updating flow of content.

Recent debates on the effects of social media and the logics of algorithmic cultures on the political landscape have been elucidated by the work of Angela Nagle in her book *Kill All Normies*, which seeks to generate a recent history and analysis of post-Trump culture wars. In her book, she tracks the rise of Trump and the youth culture that emerged alongside it as

being more indebted to a Marquis De Sade spirit of confrontational provocation than actual commitment to political debate:

> The rise of Milo, Trump and the alt-right are not evidence of the return of conservatism, but instead of the absolute hegemony of the culture of non-conformism, self-expression, transgression and irreverence for its own sake – an aesthetic that suits those who believe in nothing but the liberation of the individual and the id, whether they're on the left or the right. The principle-free idea of counterculture did not go away; it has just become the style of the new right. (Nagle 2017, 49–50)

Social media platforms require incessant user activity to maintain their credibility. The ever-increasing performativity seen on social video platforms has expanded to include influencer cultures, bedroom political pundits, diarists, live streamers and vloggers, who are constantly redefining the parameters of the mediated body online.

# Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This PhD research project deploys a practice-based mode of research that is supported by written research and analysis of relevant artworks within a community of practice. The practice component includes the development of a series of large-scale creative works which had a variety of public outcomes between 2019 and 2021. This chapter will elaborate on the creative practice research methodology utilised within my PhD and discuss the role it played in contributing to the outcome and the generation of new knowledge. I will detail my comprehension of practice, and how research was undertaken through a process of reflection, contemplation, and observation.

My research in year 1 and 2 focused on historical and written research to define a context and community of practice within the category of performance art, as detailed in Chapter 2. In conjunction with this research, I developed a suite of major performance works that aimed to elaborate on and offer new readings of gestural communication and the mediated body online. The three-performance works produced in this research period are: *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* (2020), performed at LIMA Amsterdam; *Becoming The Icon* (2020) (with Lilian Steiner, my capitalisation), presented by Arts House North Melbourne; and *4500 Lumens* (2021), for the Triennial EXTRA program at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

## 3.1 Practice-Based Research

A practice-based research approach was the key method employed for this PhD project. As a contested and emerging mode of academic enquiry, there remains debate around this research framework. Numerous terms such as 'practice-based', 'practice-led' etc can be found. Arts-based research methodologies are unique in that they are 'characteristically emergent, imagined, and derivative from an artist/researcher practice or arts praxis inquiry models; they are capable of yielding outcomes taking researchers in directions the sciences cannot go' (Rolling Jnr. 2010, 15).

The discussion around practice-based research centres on the complexity in defining a set of accepted practices and protocols for subject matter, which may be intentionally nebulous, elastic, ambiguous and realised in vast media and outputs within an academic context. Unlike other disciplines, the creative arts field relies upon embodied practice and interpretive subjectivity, with the tendency to 'thrive on a proliferation of types of creative and investigative difference that will always tend to resist the incorporation into meta-

schemes or systems of knowledge' (Kershaw 2009, 5). As Robin Nelson observes: 'Numerous instabilities in the diversity and ephemerality of performing arts practices pose particular challenges to ideas of fixed, measurable and recordable "knowledge"'. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, there is an imperative to enact, record and reflect upon these evolving processes and methodologies through research projects such as these in order to strengthen, advance and bolster the nature of academic research within these fields. It is through process that we are able to extend the relevance and potential of this type of knowledge production.

While this method of academic inquiry has been active more than three decades, there are still several definitions of practice-based research and practice-led research, which both fall under the umbrella of 'practice as research' (PaR). Nelson offers the following description:

> PaR involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry (Nelson 2013, 9).

Candy and Edmonds offer their definition of a practice-based research approach as 'an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge, partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice". Key to their perspective is the separation of research and practice as independent processes, and that the creative artefact itself becomes the basis of the knowledge contribution, rather than the research leading to a new understanding about practice itself, which would be considered by them as practice-led. This understanding is further supported by Joanne Bucknall: 'Practice based research (PBR) has practice as a central element of its methodology of knowledge acquisition but does not offer a standalone practice – generated output'.

Candy and Edmonds highlight that '(a) basic principle of practice-based research is that not only is practice embedded in the research process, but research questions arise from the process of practice, the answers to which are directed toward enlightening and enhancing practice' (Candy and Edmonds 2018, 63). This model of dynamic reflection suggests that central to the process is a questioning, and consequential reframing that guides or directs the process. Reflection on the work thus forms the basis for it to move from practice to research, the model is a reflective process that requires rigour of research within a practical context. Bolt characterises the interplay between practical outputs and conceptual thinking as a

‘double articulation between theory and practice, whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time as practice is informed by theory’ (Barret and Bolt 2010, 29).

This relies upon the concept of *praxis* and situates the researcher in a role defined by Donald Schön as a reflective practitioner or ‘knowledge-in-practice’. Central to praxis is tacit-knowing or knowing-in-action, as well as a reflection-in-action:

> Through reflection, [the practitioner] can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience (Schön 1995, 61).

Fundamental to the practice-based research is the understanding of different modes of knowledge or knowing and the spectrum that exists between these modes of knowing. ‘At one extreme it is almost completely tacit, that is semi-conscious and unconscious knowledge held in people’s heads and bodies. At the other end of the spectrum, knowledge is almost completely explicit or codified, structured and accessible’ (Leonard and Sensiper 1998, 120). Julien Klein asserts that the knowledge is created through practice, “whether silent or verbal, declarative or procedural, implicit or explicit – in any case artistic knowledge is sensual and physical ‘embodied knowledge’.

Schön’s notion of ‘tacit knowledge’ – which built on Michael Polanyis’ writing on this subject – is particularly important for my approach as a performance artist working to create new knowledge from my practice. His definition of tacit knowing seeks to characterise the embodied or unconscious knowledge and expertise held by practitioners; knowledge which may be difficult to describe or quantify. Schon articulates that knowledge occurs at multiple levels: “‘knowing in action” driven by expert, close-up knowing that is experiential, haptic, tacit, and embodied knowledge, “reflection in action” the processing that occurs during practice, and reflection on action’, which describes the contemplation that occurs on the practice in retrospect.

## 3.2 The Spiral Model and The Daisy Chain Model

This process of reflection upon my creative practice has been central to the creation of new knowledge and the development of my artworks. As Nelson points out, the reflection that occurs ‘allows for the making of an intelligence which nevertheless remains fundamentally located in embodied knowing’.  The realisation of these works and the reflection and critical

thinking that occurred after these works were completed formed a feedback loop, where the research informed the inception around the work and the work also served in testing a framework or assumption posited through the research. The process of reflection undertaken as part of this research project can be most aptly articulated through Melissa Trimingham's 'spiral model', and Joanna Bucknall's 'daisy chain model'. The daisy chain model is derived from the fundamental principles of the spiral model and thus the models are intrinsically linked, and both included here for clarity.

Trimingham's 'hermeneutic-interpretative spiral model' offers a methodology for practice and reflection 'where progress is not linear but circular; a spiral which constantly returns us to our original point of entry but with renewed understanding'. This spiral model was conceived by Gestalt thinker, Kurt Lewin, and implies that ideas are subject to change as the work progresses, and as new input 'enters the spiral': 'The in-built dynamism of the spiral is the only paradigm model that can account for such change in theory in relation to the on-going practice, whilst also successfully defining the area of research, and preventing it spiralling out of control' (Trimingham 2002, 56).

The model suggests an arbitrary starting point of both entry and exit – however, as the work develops, a review process occurs and as the understanding develops it affects the practice; the renewed understanding then in turn impacts on the next set of tasks or approach to making the work. The act of evaluation through the lens of this model involves 'revisiting the point of entry and reviewing theory in the light of the journey just undertaken through practice, then formulating and articulating *new* aims and objectives and *new* tasks' (Trimingham 2002, 57). The non-linearity of this model aims to formalise a continued thought process rather than reach a finite end or conclusion.

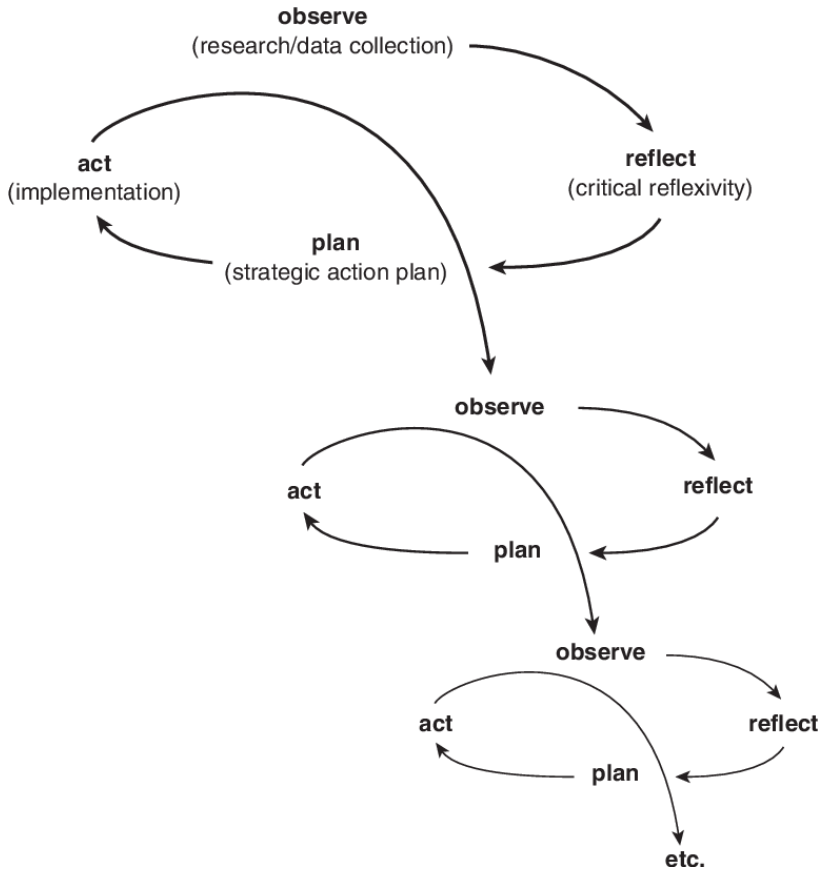


Figure 15: Hermeneutic – Interpretative Spiral Model

Joanna Bucknall's daisy chain model builds upon the spiral model, to enable more dynamic inputs and iterations, and this most effectively describes how I undertook my research. Bucknall's model was developed to account for the relationship that occurs between the roles she defines as 'reflective practitioner' and the 'reflective participant'; it builds upon the spiral model by also allowing for the inclusion and mapping of other emergent relational factors. 'Each petal represents a research activity or the impact of a relational discursive field, which feeds back into the entry point of the research concerns/questions, influencing and impacting upon the development of the praxis and, ultimately, the insights that it generates' (Bucknall 2017, 60).

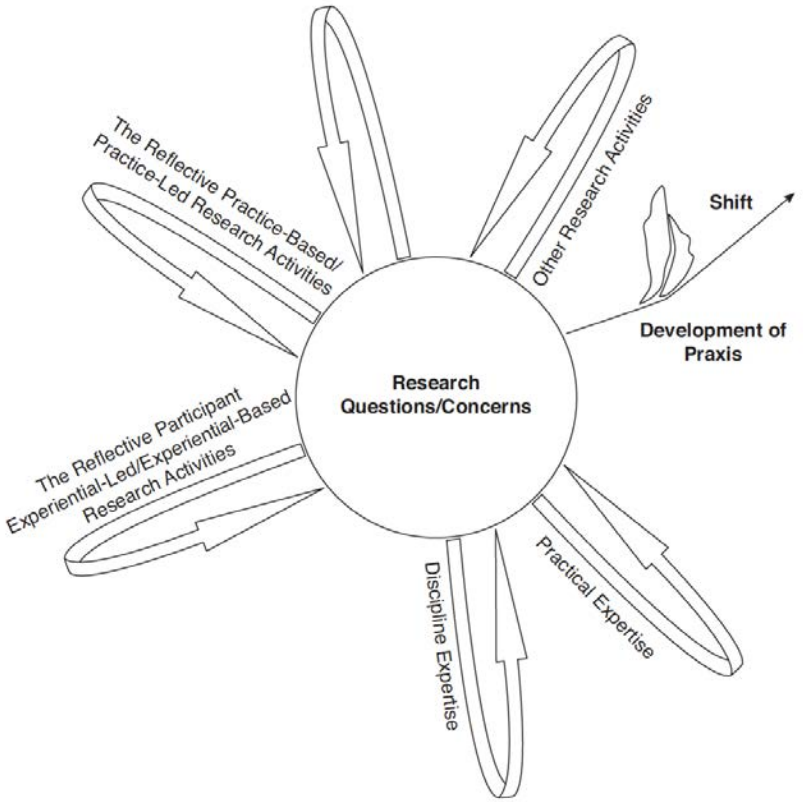


Figure 16: General daisy chain single head model

Unlike the single, all-encompassing spiral, this model enables and acknowledges multiple, concurrent spirals feeding back into the research question. The model incorporates active intentional research, but also recognises passive research (such as reading and conferences). 'The model serves as a reflective tool that can be employed to recognise the passive and active influences that play a role within the development of the praxis and ultimately the discourse that it produces' (Bucknall 2017, 61). The model incorporates these various 'petals' of inputs for each flower head, with a point of exit to enable a shift or development of the praxis.

When used on a large-scale research project, the model demonstrates the evolution of the research idea, where a single flower head represents an iteration of an idea, and a continuum of flowers represents the process of development that occurs; 'a new head is created to acknowledge a shift or renewed focus of the central research questions and concerns, and the whole cyclic process continues' (Bucknall 2017, 62). This model effectively describes the process that occurred over the course of my PhD, which saw the focus of my question shift from looking at gestural performativity in relation to specific

online platforms and communities such as TikTok, to moving towards researching the question through my own practice.

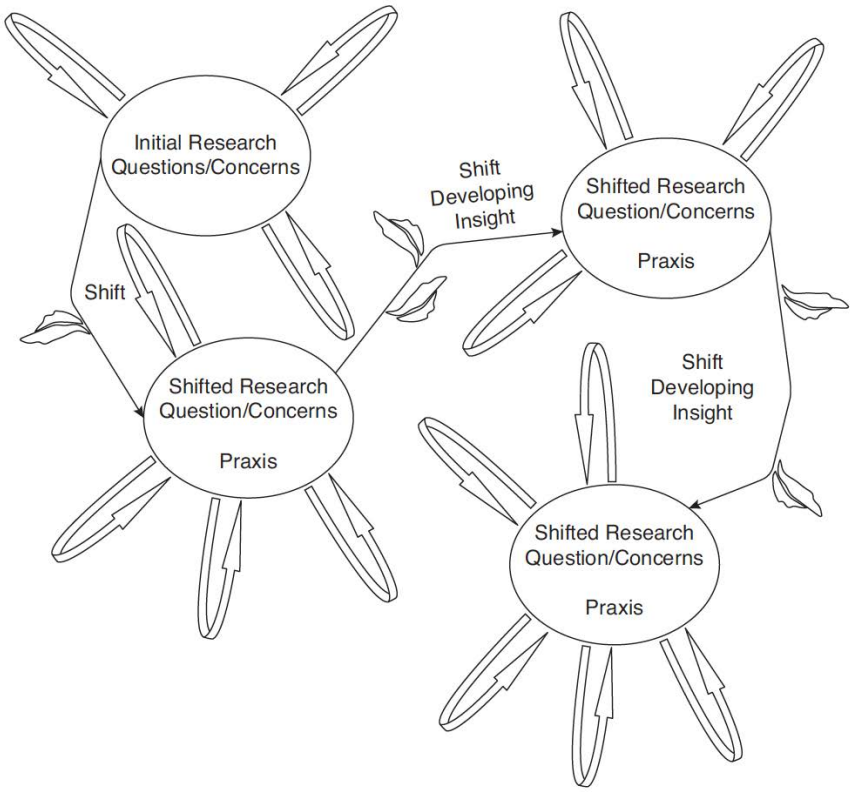


Figure 17: General daisy chain multi-head model

The process enabled a dynamic inclusion of a multiplicity of ideas throughout the three-year period, acknowledging shifts in focus, yet marking each stop along the way as integral to the progression of the research. In this way, the model can also be useful as a tool to map the praxis; The daisy chain model marshals and disseminates these discursive fields and produces a map of the constellations that come together to form discourse: 'it has the potential to offer a tool to the practice/performance-based researcher that can visually represent the full range of knowledge(s) produced, along with their epistemic lineage' (Bucknall 2017, 63).

At the outset of my PhD project, the scope of the research was broad and through a process of iteration and methodical reflection I was able to narrow the scope of my research using the creative practice methods outlined in this chapter. Using a model such as the daisy chain is a valuable structure to outline this mode of research progression and track its process.

## 3.3 Performance as a methodology

Practice-based research has been central to the methodology of this PhD as a tool to explore the conceptual and theoretical questions through performativity. Specifically, I have used the practice of performance art to develop new readings of online communication and behaviour, gestural performance and mediated network speech in an embodied and multi-temporal manner. More generally, performance is used as a primary tool, as it can immediately complicate and make links between the body and culture, which previously have gone unremarked or unanalysed. By introducing a performing body in front of an audience, an empathetic relationship naturally occurs between performer and audience. It is the human relationship, through a prism of technology and platform that offers depth and new ways of perceiving mediated human relationships: 'performance is a means through which something else can be explored … it is the "something else" that is the primary focus of the discipline in question' (Barton 2018, 15).

As a creative practitioner within the arts community, my work has been realised through multiple modalities and outputs ranging from film-making to photography and print-making, and live and recorded performances. Over the last ten years, my practice has focused on performance-making. Public performance works form the basis of the artistic works that have driven this research. It is therefore necessary to unpack the particularities of this form of practice, not just in relation to methods and processes unique to this mode of working, but in the ways that performance art can transmit, be read, and produce knowledge.

I seek to maintain a distinction here among the many definitions around *practice as research*, *performance as research*; I have not employed performance as a research strategy in the sense that it has been the sole *method* of enquiry; however, it remains the object or subject of my academic enquiry and is thus important to unpack. Mark Fleishman, in a discussion of performance as research, asserts an extreme position on the difference of performance as a mode of research , "Its refusal of binaries (body – mind, theory – practice, space – time, subject – object), its radical openness, its multiplicities, its unrepresentability, its destabilization of all pretentions to fixity and determination" (Fleishman 2012, 32). While I see his position around the refusal of all binaries and fixity excessive, some insight around the unique nature of performance can be gleaned from his position.

## 3.4 Recording and Documentation of Practice

It is important to recognise the role of documentation and the act of recording that plays a central role in the development, understanding and representation of my performance works.

Recording is significant, both in relation to the documenting of these works for the purposes of practice as research, as well as being central to my method, a process that possesses a role in rehearsal, as well as in final completed works. Auslander defines the understanding of these categories as documenting for either '*documentary'* or '*theatrical'* purposes (Auslander 1999). His reflections on the role of documentation, and on the use of media within work, have been very influential to my practice. He asserts that live works, and the experience of works through recording or reproduction, cannot be truly experienced as 'live' or be read outside the context of a mediatised culture. His core proposition is that layers of mediation pre-exist within live works, and therefore the conception of pure or 'live' performance is untenable.

His position and reflections on recording directly challenge Phelan's belief that the fleeting nature of performance is central to its being and definition, 'Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations' (Phelan 1993, 146). For Phelan, performance is 'a representation without reproduction'; '[p]erformance's being becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan 1993, 146). She deems that there is no method of recording that truly captures a performative act, and that through the act of recording the work takes on a new and different form of cultural production. Nelson succinctly summarises this purist perspective, "Those who deem the ontology of performance to lie in its very ephemerality and disappearance may even see attempts to save and retrieve the fleeting moment of the live event as a betrayal'.

When undertaking practice-based research there is, however, a necessity in documenting the works for both the articulation and evidence of the practice. The means by which the work is recorded for consideration becomes key to locating it within the research. By undertaking this research project, I have also come to realise how important the act of recording is in my own process and practice. When developing performance works, recording development sessions, and reviewing these recordings via playback, are central to my creative process. However, beyond the necessity of recording the performance for research purposes, in some instances the act of recording the work has become, in fact, central to the work itself.

In *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* – which I will address in Chapter 4 – the act of recording was an embodied part of the performance itself. The live performance was recorded by a camera operator on stage, which was simultaneously projected to a large screen at the rear of the stage. The audience was viewing the work in both a 'live' sense, (directly viewing the performing body), as well as through a live projection through the lens

of the camera; framed by the camera operator, who moved around to various positions throughout the duration of the performance. Here, the technique of recording and replaying within the performance itself provides an instant act of remediation which collapses the idea of the fixed body.

During the performance, elements of my interactions with the audience were via messaging live on Instagram; here, contacts were able to view part of the performance from locations outside of the immediate theatre context. As contacts joined the live stream and began to comment within the Instagram platform, I began to react and perform my networked experience; the recording, framing and streaming served to extend the reach of my body, streaming multiple framings of my body via the network. As Auslander observes of spectacles such as live sporting events, 'The rhetoric of mediatization embedded in such devices as the instant replay, the "simulcast" and the close-up, at one time understood to the be the secondary elaborations of what was originally a live event, are now constitutive of the live event itself' (Auslander 1999, 25).

In my performance *Becoming The Icon*, which I will discuss in Chapter 5, recorded sequences of the development and process of the work in turn became the work itself. Over the course of the first development period of the work, Lilian Steiner and I would form an idea, test it and record it. This process of recording and reviewing was central to the process of the work and resulted in hours of recorded tests and sequences.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the opportunity to develop and perform a live work was curtailed, and subsequently these recordings of work then became central to the final piece. We utilised performance documentation in the final work, together with new sequences performed and shot when possible, given very unstable working methods, state-imposed limits on our physical proximity as collaborators and city-wide lockdowns and curfews. Indeed, as a film project that had its beginning as a live performance there was substantial video material that already existed as high-quality documentation. Working with our cinematographer, James Wright, to shoot sequences using a high-definition cinema camera, our choice of material was both 'theatrical' and 'documentary' by Auslander's definition. In the process of shooting documentation we were also shooting what would become final material for our outcome, serving both the needs of rehearsal observational material and material for a final edit.

## 3.5 Conclusion: Complexities of Interpretation

This chapter has illustrated my understanding of the complexities that surround the translation of embodied or tacit knowledge through established practice-based research models. This body of writing sits as a supporting document to my performance work, and its primary function is to contextualise and locate the work within a practice of community and to offer analysis and a range of interpretations rather than a single truth or definition of the works. It is important to reinforce that I do not wish to place definitive or containing meaning upon my works; 'ambiguity is, after all, fundamental to the nature of art and its complex relationship to our capacity for appreciation' (Candy and Edmonds 2018, 67). As Julien Klein asserts, 'Whether silent or verbal, declarative or procedural, implicit or explicit – in any case, artistic knowledge is sensual and physical, "embodied knowledge". The knowledge that artistic research strives for, [sic] is a felt knowledge'.

The following chapters go into detail about the public projects which constitute the practice-based component of this PhD research. I elaborate on how the three projects delivered substantial and specific ways of addressing questions of performance, gesture and notions of the mediated body, using distinct modes of creative practice to achieve specific research aims. By using complementary techniques of creative practice, I engage with the research question in a physical and embodied manner.

# Chapter 4: PERFORMER/AUDIENCE/LENS (AFTER DAN GRAHAM)

## 4.1 Introduction to Work

Central to my research methodology is the creation of large-scale public performances. The creative project I will discuss in this chapter is titled *Performer/Audience /Lens (after Dan Graham),* a live performance that was first performed in Melbourne in August 2018, and subsequently performed in Amsterdam in January 2020.

Dan Graham (1942–2022) was an American conceptual artist active since the mid-1960s and an early practitioner of performance art. This performance was developed directly in response to Graham's performance work *Audience/Performer/Mirror*, first performed in Amsterdam in 1977. Re-performance of existing works would itself become a mode Dan Graham utilised later in life, for example re-staging *Audience/Performer/Mirror* at the exhibition *Video/Architecture/Performance* in 1995 at Generali Foundation, Vienna.

In this chapter, I seek to outline the impact and ongoing relevance of Dan Graham's performance work, *Audience/Performer/Mirror* (1977), which utilises personal gestures, audience interaction and a mirrored surface to activate perception, language and self-observation. I will unpack and analyse the subsequent version I undertook, entitled *Performer /Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* 2018–20, staged as a critical homage to the earlier work. Using live online platforms and live video, my performance seeks to explore the expansion of the original work into a dialogue with notions of the networked body. In doing so, I actively engage performance art as a critical and embodied tool to discuss notions around the networked body in society and further elaborate on it in the following written thesis.

## 4.2 Dan Graham's Audience/Performer/Mirror

Dan Graham would revisit his historical artworks throughout his career, often returning to past projects and reconfiguring them for new audiences. Multiple versions of *Audience/Performer/Mirror* have been performed in multiple locations with slightly different aspects and qualities. For clarity and consistency, the version I am referencing in this dissertation is the first video recorded instance, performed in 1977 at De Appel Amsterdam (Graham 1979, 88).

The performance *Audience/Performer/Mirror* consists of the artist Dan Graham entering a performance space, facing the audience in front of a large mirror, and delivering a

series of verbal phenomenological observations to the audience. Firstly, he talks of his own body, his hands, his micro-gestures, the feeling of being inside his body; verbalising the biochemical rhythms and sensations he is experiencing within a sensory field of corporeality. By activating a zone of perception and communication between the audience and the artist, Graham produces a moment of intersubjectivity, a zone of shared use of language and affect. Intersubjectivity can be described within phenomenological sociology as referring 'to the mutual constitution of social relationships' (Marshall 2009, 1).

We see this sense of a shared interpersonal universe emerge in the time-space Graham creates in his performance. A delicate relationship is established between performer and audience, navigated by spoken narrative. Within Graham's performance there is a linguistic play between the experience of the lived body and its function as a social body, the body in relation to other people. Speaking on his role of performer in *Audience/Performer/Mirror* in an interview, Graham states: 'I didn't want to use myself as a performer. I was interested in the spectator.' (Graham 2017) Graham foregrounds the thin but important and ever-present layer of social scaffolding used to orient oneself in society.

Graham's monologue turns from self-analysis to directly addressing the audience. Facing the audience with intent, he begins verbally analysing their behaviour and their movements. He describes their reactions in real time, their squirming torsos, their suppressed laughter and subtle seat-shifting movements. An active dialogue develops between Graham and the audience as he describes their movements. They become more aware of their movements, in anticipation of Graham isolating them from the crowd and describing their actions. In the third and fourth phase of the performance, Graham faces a mirror that was installed behind him at the commencement of the performance (his back is turned to the audience). He continues to describe the actions of himself and the audience, this time through a refracted experience of the present, a mirroring. He uses the reflective surface as an apparatus to both view and project an image of the audience back onto themselves.

Figure 18: Dan Graham, *Audience/Performer/Mirror*, 1977.

Graham had used the reflective materiality of surfaces since his *Project for Slide Projector* (1966), through to his 1970s experiments with live video and real-time playback, and continued to use them up to and including his most recent architectural sculptures, such as *Play Pen for Play Pals* (2018). Cristina Albu uses the term 'mirror affect' to describe artworks that utilise mirroring as a dramaturgical physical device. She isolates the mirror function in its capacity as a 'disruptive force that suspends individuals' sense of self-sufficiency and opens up new possibilities for interpersonal alliances' (Albu 2016, 6). By using a mirror to create a dynamic relationship between himself and the audience, Graham forces attention on the division between the performer and the audience, and, by extension, the individual and society. *Audience/Performer/Mirror* concisely draws a line between performing body and audience body by over-signalling performative cues in the form of verbal self-analysis.

Canadian–American sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* published in 1959, stands as a landmark sociological study into the presentation of the self in public life. Goffman utilises dramaturgical terminology to enable the language of theatre craft and performance to elaborate on how interpersonal relationships are negotiated in the workplace and everyday life. His analysis locates performance within zones of 'front', being the public-facing zones of intersubjectivity

and the ‘back’, that of pre-production, non-public development and privacy. Goffman summarised this non-public zone as ‘dirty work’, whereby tasks are undertaken which are ‘physically unclean, semi-illegal, cruel and degrading in other ways; but these disturbing facts are seldom expressed during a performance’ (Goffman 1959, 28). Graham collapses the distinctions between Goffman’s notion of a ‘front’ and a ‘back’ in the moment of performance, simultaneously acting and reacting upon himself and the audience in a tightly wound live feedback circuit.

Goffman challenged the notion of ‘one authentic self’, suggesting that everyday interactions are defined by a series of identities one displays in different socio-cultural zones, to different classes and relationships. Many of the ideas within *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* can be read within a performance art context. One possible interpretation of the text is as a handbook of performance art concepts, or an index of diverse modes of being in society, which can be modified for performative affect. For example, Goffman writes the following passage, which contains many parallels to Graham’s artist statements from the mid-1970s:

> This kind of control upon the part of the individual reinstates the symmetry of the communication process, and sets the stage for a kind of information game, a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery (Goffman 1959, 13).

He continues:

> The audience senses secret mysteries and powers behind the performance, and the performer senses that his chief secrets are petty ones. As countless folktales and initiation rights show, often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this too (Goffman 1959, 61).

The growing interest of artists in conceptual and non-object-oriented artwork, such as performance in the 1970s, can be linked to the opening up of societal structures in the wake of 1960s counterculture, as well as increasing frustration with the ‘myth’ of the expressive artist, associated with painting movements like Abstract Expressionism. Art critic Lucy Lippard would chronicle this turn away from painting and the object, in her

history and chronology of the period: *Six Years: Dematerialisation of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. Her working definition for Conceptual art would be defined as work in which 'the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or "dematerialized"' (Lippard 1973, vii).

Working against the orthodoxies of psychological treatment at the time, which sided with physical intervention on the affected subject, such as electroshock therapy and isolation, radical psychologists, such as R.D. Laing, were instrumental in broadening the field of discourse around the ethics of psychoanalysis. Laing's writings became influential by offering a counter-cultural perspective and humane approach to psychological practice, which brought the patient back to the centre of treatment. In a 2005 interview Graham talks of the then popular mode of embracing video within performance to aid in psychological self-help:

> One thing that interested me about video a lot in the late 1960s was how many people were involved with, well, as John Lennon said, 'instant karma' It was all about psychological self-help. There were all these ideas like 'Primal Scream', about some kind of enlightenment through some kind of collective scheme (Graham 2009, 1).

On the links between Graham's mirror affect artworks of the 1970s and Laing's theories of psychological analysis, Albu writes:

> Graham's […] systems of interrelated frameworks expanded not only the relations between visual representations but also the network of relations between participants. Their *mise en abyme* of processes of self-perception recalled Laing's discussion of cognitive schemata based on chains of interpersonal inferences (Albu 2016, 136).

Within a structure of interconnected nodes, Graham's artworks seek to physicalise networks and personal relationships. Utilising a broad range of artistic methods that traverse performance and architecture, his broader practices retain a hybrid working method that did not seek to privilege one medium over another (a fact widely commented on in the various obituaries in 2022). In this manner, Graham's artistic

output would influence later generations of post-internet artists, who would take examples of this hybridity and multi-medium approach as a given.

## 4.3 Project Background

On 11 August 2018, I performed the work *Performer/Audience/Lens* (after Dan Graham), at the Melbourne performing arts venue Brunswick Mechanics Institute. The invitation to perform came from Next Wave Festival and the MEL/NYC state-funded arts program that aimed to promote and strengthen cultural links between New York City and Victoria. Entitled Export Happenings, the curatorial premise developed by Melbourne-based curator Anita Spooner was to respond to the historical legacy of the influential New York downtown performance scene of the mid- to late seventies. Artists were invited to respond to a performance work from the era and create a new work responding to their chosen historical performance artworks. My performance was programmed alongside short performances by Australian artists Angela Goh and The Band Presents, each reinterpreting canonical performance works from that epoch. The performative context was a medium-scale theatre seating 120 people.

## 4.4 Project Context

Throughout my art practice, I have been interested in the methodology of performative sampling, recuperation and critical re-engagement with existing artists and artworks. In my early video work, I sought to sample moving image media to create new video works, and in a live music context I have used sampling and audiovisual improvisation in VJ performances in nightclubs and venues. A deeply audiovisual sense of live remix has continued throughout my art practice, providing me with a flexibility in recombination and composition that allows for lateral moves between mediums and outcomes. This working method privileges a way of working that is deeply reflexive, incorporating mediation from the outset. This hybridity has also translated into works made for exhibition outcomes, where I have sampled still imagery to create new prints made for exhibition display.

In 2014 I was invited by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, to respond to the Yoko Ono retrospective show, *War Is Over (If You Want It),* which presented Ono's body of work in performance and installation. Curated by Joel Stern and Danni Zuvela, of Australian contemporary art organisation Liquid Architecture, under the title *Experimental Universe*, the performance series was staged over two nights and sought

to re-engage with Ono's legacy of performance and film work. My performance, entitled *I Follow Yoko and Yoko Follows Me*, incorporated references to the physical, object-based legacy of Ono's art practice, as well as her performative and media aura.

The live cinema-based performance utilised Yoko Ono's current-day Twitter feed as raw material to create new search terms for YouTube. Purposefully avoiding referencing the historical artworks of Yoko Ono, I chose to use the live results from her Twitter feed to generate search terms, which I would enter into YouTube and other platforms live, to create immediate and tangentially related visual material within the cinema performance. The results of the live YouTube searches in turn generated material that would become folded into the performance and generate new audiovisual backdrops relating to Ono, her relationship to John Lennon, the Beatles and her historical media image. In this way, the performance seeks to collapse time, as many of my performances do, to fold together the instant moment (Yoko Ono's current Twitter feed) with a moment past (the historical image of Yoko Ono as represented in video clips, music documentaries and in relationship to the Beatles). Embodied sampling and critical remix of previous performance work is an ongoing dimension in my art practice and distinguishes my approach from other modes of creative and critical appropriation that only utilise image-based sampling.

American curator Robert Blackson, in his essay *Once More … With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture*, identifies four strategies for artistic engagement with the past, namely Simulation, Repetition, Reproduction and Reeneactment. He cites re-enactment as a zone for compelling re-engagement with the past, defining its importance as being 'distinctive in that it invites transformation through memory, theory and history' (Blackson 2007, n.p). It is the quality of an embodied remix technique that attracts me to re-performance, allowing my body to be used as a vessel that carries the past performance and allows it to be re-presented, with new modifications and responding to unexpected, updated contexts.

Philip Auslander argues that the live event is now intimately fused with its mediated presentation, arguing that these two ways of being are now inseparable and allow for a re-enactment impulse that allows for a remix of the live event's inherent media qualities. As he puts it, '[T]he apparatus of reproduction and its attendant phenomenology are inscribed within our experience of the live' (Auslander 2005, 39). By taking mediated reality and its immediate reproduction as a given, the artist has a broad historical realm from which to access for comment. In the case of Ono – a highly

mediated and photographed persona – who has been in the popular spotlight of the media for over 70 years, there is a breadth of content to work from when making a hybrid media portrait of the subject. By commenting on and engaging with the mediated reproduction of reality, an artist is afforded scope to reference multiple time periods through the frame of a living body. Using performative remix and archival performance, I was able to utilise the mediated reflections of the subject to offer a new reading rather than engage with the subject herself, directly. Arguably, the mediated reflections are more expressive than the subject itself.

## 4.5 Networked Performativity

I am particularly interested in Graham's work *Audience/Performer/Mirror* because of the dense and suggestive verbal relationship Graham establishes with his audience. The use of verbal signposts and observational comments keeps the audience locked in a close relationship with the performer. The simplicity of the performative scaffold of *Audience/Performer/Mirror* draws in the audience to an intimate dynamic of watching and being watched. Within the tight feedback loop of bodies and voices, Graham launches a series of radar pulses in the form of language, echo-locative missives that return to him and allow him to adjust his vocal delivery, his tone, his attention. These moments of awareness tie up the time-space for the audience and Graham, enmeshing each participant in a bind of self-perception, observance of the other and vocalised awareness.

The simplicity of the 'game' being played is the strength of the performance. Within the intimate verbalising of bodily affect, Graham's work squarely grounds the body in language. Continuing to work within relationships of active versus passive conduct, audience and performer, perception and consciousness, Graham would begin to introduce video in subsequent installations, stating 'mirrors reflect instantaneous time without duration … whereas video feedback does just the opposite, it relates the two in a kind of durational time flow' (Goldberg 1979, 104). Graham's interest in what constitutes interior and exterior, conducted by exploring perception and reception within the living body, can also be seen in his subsequent architectural installations from the 1980s onwards. An ongoing preoccupation with the material presence of reflectivity permeates his sculptural work and questions of inside versus outside are ever-present.

In the act of reimagining *Audience/Performer/Mirror*, my aim was to introduce a new audience to Graham's formula – the networked audience. My remix and re-

performance of Graham's work followed a similar construction to Graham's, beginning with me standing alone on stage facing the audience. I begin by describing my body in the space to the audience, the way that I am standing: "I am rocking diagonally, up and down, side to side … my hands are in my pockets, my left hand is in my left pocket, my right hand is in my right pocket."

Within my dialogue to the audience I am reflecting their perception of me, doubling down on what they are seeing (me), in an act of guided, public self-perception. I then describe what I can see in the audience, by telling them what I see of them. "I am seeing faces, I am looking at the audience, everyone seems to be staring at me. I can see some scratches; someone is scratching their neck … some laughter in the audience." The audience is comprised of individuals, and I see them as individuals in a mass-formation. Individual movements are isolated by my observation of them, yet the individuals remain in their group – no individual is isolated away from the audience.

Figure 19: Emile Zile *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)*, 2018.

I turn my back to the physical audience and face the rear of the stage. A cameraperson stands facing me, his back to the screen. He begins a live video feed on the projection screen. He begins to film me with a camera, which provides a real-time projected 'mirror' to the back of the stage. The footage is streamed in real time back to the audience. This mobile camera allows for flexibility in the positioning and cropping of the video frame and brings a new performative relationship into play, that of the live video mirror image. Through this act the

audience is placed in a live state of mediation, between the live experience and the projected image on screen. Jonathan Steuer defined this sense of 'telepresence' in 1992 as 'either a temporally or spatially distant "real" environment' (Steuer 1992, 6). Dislocation within space and time are valuable tools in performance, offering a dramatic device for creation of new work.

Seeing themselves projected on screen behind the cameraperson, the audience is in a live video-feed relationship with itself, seeing itself and inhabiting a zone of self-perception. By using a camera in place of mirror, I am attempting to narrow the audience's perspective towards me, siphoning their self-perception through the prescribed directions I have given to my cameraperson. A fixed mirror allows the audience to see themselves instantaneously, while in the new performance the video lens offers both immediacy and a flexible method to change focus, manipulate perspective and manage what the audience sees. The audience members are both present at the performance as it is happening, and as soon as the moment is complete, they become an image of documentation, immobile and inert.

As the cameraperson moves towards me on-stage and continues to frame me for the projection, I begin a performative sequence using the social media platform Instagram on my iPhone. I start a 'live' stream function, to record and stream an on-stage monologue to my 2000 Instagram followers. I explain to my audience in the room and the audience on the platform: "I am streaming out to Instagram Live now, I am seeing myself in my little hand, and I am holding my phone within my right arm …. people are joining…" I begin to interact with users watching the stream online, and they are interacting with me. By opening up this live stream, another layer of mediatised time is established, potentially offering multiple audiences access to the performance and also offering the audience in the room both the live camera and the Instagram mediation, an excessive over-coding of bodies captured by platforms and databases.

When an Instagram audience member seated in the audience sends to my Instagram Live account a 'waving hand' emoji, I verbally unpack this gesture and elaborate on it. I go on to over-elaborate on the function of the open hand waving emoji as a "non-threatening open gesture of friendship and non-aggression … someone has waved at me … this image is in my hand". By taking what is usually perceived as a casual and immediate shorthand image to confer meaning, and precisely elaborating on the symbolic meaning of a waving hand emoji, I am mirroring Graham's microscopic elaboration of the physiological aspects of his body and his audience. This mirroring of the act and the gesture incorporates the online audience, interacting with me via

Instagram as I describe their interactions to me with the audience in the room. My verbalising of the online audience's communication with me reflects Graham's use of overt verbosity to create performative tension around the social body. This excessive micro analysis of the body, of seeing and being seen, suggests that multiple realities of sociality are at play. Multiple distant audiences, close audiences, witnesses everywhere.

Figure 20: Emile Zile *Performer/Audience/Lens* (after Dan Graham), 2018.

This act is an attempt to multiply and overload my relationship with the audience. Within a performative gesture, I am attempting to communicate physically in person, via platforms and network transmission and via mediated camera stream. All these versions of the one moment coalesce together to create the performance. While Graham directly brought the physical audience into the performance, the act of streaming the performance and mirroring the interaction with the online audience back to the physical audience creates a magnified network of relationships and interactions. This is also inferred during the performance, when looking deeply into my iPhone, I say "You're the audience and you are here, and you are also here in my hand, and you are also in the room and you are travelling together with me … Things are happening, interactions are happening, the audience is getting involved."

There are multiple destabilisations of place within *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)*. In a sequence during the Instagram Live stream, I elaborate on the audience

being taken with ‘me’, from being seated in the theatre to a Vodafone base station in Brunswick, Melbourne, to a network base-station on the east coast of Australia, then on to undersea fibre-optic cables linking us to the west coast of the USA, then into a Facebook data centre housing the Instagram files and infrastructure. AI researchers Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler have created a publication and conceptual map of the physical, material and labour costs that go into producing a cloud device in *Anatomy of an AI System*. By breaking apart the constituent parts and embedded energy requirements to create an Amazon Echo product, they are successfully retro-engineering the product and cataloguing its constituent parts and resource needs, calling their research on the Echo product ‘an anatomical map of human labor, data and planetary resources’ (Crawford 2018, n.p).

In a similar vein, I am attempting to use vocal narrative and performance to suggest to an audience the embodied cost of their participation in the use of the internet, vocalising the degree of investment and commercial incentive to keep the network infrastructure operating smoothly, to reliably deliver something so commonplace and banal as an Instagram Live stream. In short, within this monologue I direct the audience’s attention to the massive commercial deployment of physical infrastructure needed to maintain stable internet services. By creating a momentary awareness of this, I seek to materialise the use of the ubiquitous network computing and dent the narrative of cloud-computing as being immaterial and a seemingly magical zone that has no real-world impact or presence.

In their influential 1995 essay *The Californian Ideology*, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron define such technological boosterism as being born from the historical legacy of west-coast hippie idealism and American free-market economics. They site a Californian ideology as a construct that ‘simultaneously reflects the disciplines of market economics and the freedoms of hippie artisanship. This bizarre hybrid is only made possible through a nearly universal belief in technological determinism’ (Barbrook 1995, 3). The delivery of my vocal narrative attempts to separate the perception of cloud computing as being an all-encompassing, ever-knowing, ubiquitous presence, to a deliberate and highly-managed sequence of industrial-scale infrastructure points that have real-world locations and places. An attempt is made in the performance to highlight the tools of production, to concretely locate them and offer the audience a new perspective on their physical embodiment within network time-space.

This performance locates the audience as a co-traveller in the moment that their image departs from the room, travels through commercial infrastructure, becomes processed and re-distributed by a private data centre and returns to my hand to then

become material for me to comment on. By using a theatrical apparatus of making visible the means of production and transmission, I create a performance that responds in a poetic manner to the current era of the 'Internet of Things'.

An unexpected result of the live streaming in the theatre is the playful, unrequited participation of audience members in the production of the work. Multiple audience members decided to interact with physical hand gestures and interactions, performing gestural hand actions around my monologue, seeing themselves on-screen and also within the Instagram stream. Another audience participant streamed my performance live via a smartphone and kept the phone speaker on, offering an audible echo during the performance.

With these multiple layers of requited and unrequited network time-space present, a sense of distributed liveness was present. The slippage of a temporal delay inherent in network streaming created further dislocation between network time and live time. This multiplication of my voice acted as a clear materialisation of a delayed network feedback loop, one that left my hand to travel as an undersea transmission, then on to a distant data centre, to return in the room once again. The delay between the live moment and the response from the device allowed one to see the speed of information transferred. The pause between the call and response from the network contained the network time, within which temporal dislocation exists between the platform and its infrastructure.

The use of my monologue within this performance allows me to offer multiple temporal and spatial realities to audience members. These vocal narrations assist in foregrounding the use of internet platforms not as immaterial, efficient, and effortless places, as often depicted by commercial cloud services in their self-representation, but as a distant, elaborate, and complex network of undersea cables and contingent services placed deliberately within a physical global network infrastructure. In the next chapter I elaborate on my work *Becoming The Icon*, which continues this materialisation of the network in a different form.

# Chapter 5: BECOMING THE ICON

## 5.1 Introduction to work

*Becoming The Icon* is a performance work developed in collaboration with Australian dancer and choreographer Lilian Steiner. The work serves as a performative testbed to generate real-world research-based responses exploring gesture, mediated language, and non-verbal communication between two individuals.

In this chapter I will outline the collaborative and organisational context that gave rise to this work. I will discuss the methodology and processes that created the work and will illustrate how the four distinct scenes within *Becoming The Icon* provide critical and creative responses to understanding the networked body and gestural communication. I will explore how each of the performances provides new perspectives on embodied knowledge and contemporary modes of communication.

Figure 21:Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon* 2020

## 5.2 Organisational Context

*Becoming The Icon* was initiated through the support of a Culture Lab Residency program at Arts House in October 2018, with further development supported by Arts House/City of Melbourne in May 2019. The work premiered as part of the inaugural BLEED Festival (BLEED: A Biennial Event in the Everyday Digital) at Arts House, North Melbourne, in July 2020. Arts House then supported the work over a further four-week development period across June 2020. *Becoming The Icon* had numerous modifications in rehearsal method and development due to the then unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, and I will elaborate on these changes later in the chapter.

BLEED is a six-year project exploring live experience across online platforms, conceived and presented by Arts House (Melbourne) and Campbelltown Arts Centre (Sydney). BLEED observes the creep of digital communication into our communities, systems, identities and cultures, and curates and produces live art across online platforms that seeks to elaborate and respond to this condition.

Lilian Steiner is an Australian dancer–choreographer and my primary collaborator on this project. As a dancer, Lilian has worked extensively with Australian companies, Lucy Guerin Inc and Phillip Adams Balletlab; as well as independent choreographers, Melanie Lane, Shelley Lasica and Brooke Stamp; and visual artists, Brook Andrew, Ash Keating, Mikala Dwyer and Alicia Frankovic.

## 5.3 Project Context and Background

The project grew out of a desire to work with Lilian Steiner on a new performance work that spanned the fields of contemporary dance and performance art. The prospect of collaborating with Lilian and advancing my own skills and performative abilities appealed to me, specifically as it would allow me to elaborate on the performance techniques I had been cultivating in contemporary art, applied to the longer duration and bigger budgets of a proper theatrical production period. The collaboration was born out of a mutual willingness to work together, and to develop outside of mutual zones of expertise.

Existing at the fringes of live art and theatre, performance work that exists in the same conceptual realm as *Becoming The Icon* has at times been described as live art, performance art or contemporary performance. The work can be located between the zones of full-body

dance and the language-focused modes of contemporary art performance that privilege speech and image as carriers of meaning over direct movement and physicality.

An Australian artwork aligned to our method of working is Chunky Move's 2015 work *Complexity of Belonging*, by Anouk van Dijk and Falk Ritcher, which used a wide array of screens and technological live-video methods to suggest an ever-mediated, always-on communicative world shaped by digital tools with multiple competing senses of self. In a 2014 interview, the choreographer and theatre-maker described a way of working which echoes our rehearsal strategies:

> [O]nce we go into the studio we basically go back and forth, so Falk has an idea to start with an improvisation and then I have an idea to start with another improvisation and we respond to what we have seen of each other, and from that we start to heighten more text, more movement […] there is a back and forth from the very first day up until we share a microphone in the theatre directing the show (Richter 2020, Interview).

A rehearsal methodology that privileges iteration, feedback from performers and multiple waves of improvisation – the methods used by Falk and van Dijk – allow for seemingly minor moments within the studio to become enhanced and developed into performance-ready sequences.

As discussed in previous chapters, Swiss artist Nikolaus Gansterer is an important figure in the development of my own performative work with technology. His hybrid use of the tools of re-mediation, including live video systems, theatrical props and language, were a strong influence to my practice when I met him in a studio residency in 1997 in Rotterdam. Gansterer's primary mode is solo performance, delivering live performances in cinemas, theatres and art spaces. In interviews, Gansterer urges the primacy of drawing in his practice, resonating with a gestural and physical delivery of information. 'It is about materializing thought processes through gestures, drawings, objects, which collectively create an inherent and temporary logic – but only to a certain point, and then it collapses like a house of cards' (Gansterer 2020, 9). The temporary constructions Gansterer makes are performative lectures using drawing and symbols to convey meaning and hold narrative. Elaborate structures of symbolic interrelations can be built up on a chalk board and then erased with a single gestural wipe of the hand.

Gansterer's statement highlights the role of rehearsal methods to create a world and a relationship between concepts within a tightly sandboxed realm, allowing those processes to

unfold, then allowing them to collapse under their own weight. What is produced by such forms of performative prototyping can either be kept, discarded or returned to later. As a form of energy mapping, drawing the written word is integral to our performance rehearsals in *Becoming The Icon*, and is also used as a performative mode in Sequence 4, which I will discuss in a later chapter.

## 5.4 Rehearsal Methodology

The nature of the collaboration in *Becoming the Icon* saw Lilian and myself as equal contributors in both the creative direction and development of the performance. From the outset we discussed avoiding choreographer/dancer, director/actor distinctions in favour of an equal working relationship that credited us as co-creators. A studio-based rehearsal methodology was developed for the project, within which we combined the developmental processes of contemporary dance and performance art. Using techniques borrowed from dance, improvisation and studio art practice, we worked together during a four-week period, rehearsing from 10 am until 4 pm in Studio 2 of ArtsHouse. We used certain rehearsal principles from contemporary dance, utilising a large open stage with a sound system and vinyl dance matting. The rehearsal room was furnished with a basic sound system, tables for laptops and notebooks, a video projector, and seating around the circumference.

Development days would begin with a Lilian guiding a series of dance warm-ups; stretches to music to wake up the body and activate the moving mind with music. While I felt initially self-conscious and brittle, these sensations quickly fell away. Having known Lilian as a colleague and friend ahead of the project, afforded me trust and conviction in the dance processes she brought to the collaboration. Similarly, working with voice and speech improvisation is a realm in which Lilian felt less comfortable and I took the lead to conduct rehearsal workshops and warm-ups for these elements. The private and dedicated rehearsal process allows for risks to be taken and actions made without fear of failure. By shaping the rehearsal period to reflect the developmental methods of both contemporary dance and contemporary art, we were able to build a multi-layered and hybrid rehearsal period which incorporated rehearsal methodologies of both disciplines.

Rehearsal room techniques were developed to test ideas, which had their roots in a linguistic concept or semiotic formula transcribed on paper. Sketching out words or phrases and creating a plot or script allowed us to see patterns and formations of ideas, which may then be transformed into a performative gesture or sequences. During rehearsals, we would each begin by suggesting an idea, a passage of music or mood. After discussing them, the

challenge was to make them viable performative concepts through trial and error. Often certain tropes would solidify, feeling like they possessed more 'density' and 'stickiness', allowing them to remain fixed to an ongoing discussion of what the work would be. Using the methodological process of daisy chaining (as discussed in detail in Chapter 3), focusing on refinement, discussion, reintegration – provided the method for securing the ideas that work and jettisoning those which did not represent our intentions.

We would bring in written texts or excerpts from broadcast media that resonated with the project. Text fragments brought in would then act as discussion starters or provocations. The speeches of Australian politicians would be re-edited and become the raw material for the final sequence of the project, a speech to camera where we focused directly on the camera and delivered multiple lines of dialogue reframed and remixed

## 5.5 Knee Operation

On Friday 3 May 2019 I had a knee operation to alleviate the pain associated with a torn meniscus muscle in my right knee that had occurred while attempting a heavy deadlift in the gym preceding the 2018 rehearsal period. I tore the muscle while performing a deadlift alone, not bracing myself properly and attempting a personal best result. The meniscus muscle can be torn when excess pressure is applied between the two major leg bones causing the meniscus to become distended and stretch or tear. The meniscus is a flat muscle between the leg bones which stabilises and supports the knee.

The injury has been a present co-author of the work, after being sustained in the weeks before our initial rehearsal in 2018, forcing its presence into the development of the work by way of limited movement, causing me to consciously avoid certain exercises and movements and live with a sense of extra care towards the knee. Due to unavoidable production dates, it was decided to persevere with the rehearsal period in 2019. Before both the 2018 and 2019 development periods, this knee condition was present, impressing itself into the fabric of the work through conscious and unconscious means. The limited mobility that was forced upon me wove itself into the performance. An awareness of one's physical limitations, of not wanting to overexert and cause more damage to an injury, played on my mind and created the conditions for an increased gestural sense rather than a full-bodied performance that may have included floor work with knee and legs.

It is telling that this occurred while developing my body in preparation for the performance, as I prepared my body for the sustained physical tasks and energetic requirements of extreme physical exertion. The limited movement felt throughout my body

and articulated by pain, left me to focus on the gestural, limiting other movements. During the period between the injury and the surgery, a sense of chronic throbbing pain was felt in my knee, a presence that remained a close co-author.


Figure 22: Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon* Rehearsal room video still. 2019

We employed a range of making process and techniques to develop the scenes in collaboration for this performance. We would make video recordings of a rehearsal scene performed in development, watch the recording, and then re-record and repeat this, developing a highly iterative process that privileged video recording as a mode of seeing and sensing. Through each iteration we distilled and refined the movement and coding of each performative scene. We used video camera technology to record and play back rehearsal recordings with the aim of developing a tour presentation to the audience, allowing the microscopic analysis of certain movements or sequences.

Recording video of rehearsals offers a way to revisit material after the fact, returning to a moment lost or ignored. The other role of video recording in the rehearsal room is to engender a subtle change in performance when one knows they are being recorded. An increase in energy and focus is invoked when the red button is pressed, and recording has begun. It may be slight and almost imperceptible, but the knowledge that the actions in rehearsal are being committed to a recording medium sharpens the mind, much like an in-person audience can produce another layer of performative energy for live performers. Other

rehearsal strategies included the use of text, for example, cutting up printouts of speeches sourced from Australian, American and British prime ministers and presidents. The act of recombining them to locate moments of dislocation or connection provided raw material to work with in the rehearsal room. These recombinant vocal sequences would find their final form in the last scene of the film, within which we addressed the camera in unison, two faces beading moisture and delivering empathetic words free of conviction.

Figure 23:Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon,* 2020

## 5.6 Working with Video

Utilising video within the rehearsal space to record our processes offered us a direct image of what performance sequences appear to be. These video rehearsal recordings informed us of moments that could be isolated or expanded upon and turned into a new passage. Video camera recordings assisted in monitoring energy levels and performance states and offered an insight into the rehearsal method and its efficacy. The rehearsal video recording is an informal capturing of a temporary space, a temporal sketchbook of half-resolved ideas that bear further inspection. They can retain a candid authenticity, existing as they do between an idea and a resolved artwork. Seemingly incidental and throwaway short, gestural micro-performances to the camera or a punctuating sound made by performers just before the camera is shut down, offer an insight into the mood of the performers in that moment.

YouTube was used in rehearsals to share references and video clips. Clips that we had been researching and ruminating over were brought into the rehearsal room to act as raw

material and energetic cues. An archival video example of this video scrapbooking approach was our use of a clip of the border guards on the Indian–Pakistan border, who hand over control of their gate in a performative and expressive manner. This expression of masculine peacocking and gesturalism was incorporated into our movement and physical composure. The resulting effect on our performance may be as slight as a heel turn or an exaggerated snapping of the neck, the kind of minor detail that may be read as an incidental or almost subliminal detail, but which nonetheless contributes to the overall mood and ambience of the piece. The influence of these video sketches entwined themselves within our rehearsal method and added to the atmosphere and physical definition of individual sequences. Small influences were incorporated into the larger themes that we had been working with and could become a defining moment or a key to our movement.

Within our performance, platforms such as Instagram and Facebook were not used as core motivators of action or central infrastructure. Video of rehearsals may end up on social media in a promotional context, but unlike *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)*, active social media was not used in a live feedback system to generate the creation of the work before an audience.

## 5.7 Gestural Performativities

The rehearsal period of *Becoming The Icon* defined four discrete scenes that occur one after another, punctuated by a stage reset in-between each scene. Lilian and I are on stage, sometimes facing each other, sometimes facing the audience, sometimes seated, sometimes moving independently. Highly structured movements are framed by clear and dramatic lighting choices. Throughout the performance there is minimal use of props or stage accessories. The project is a meditation on displays of embodied power using the gestural economy of non-verbal communication.

The function of non-verbal communication is to create meaning. In assessing the functional efficacy of non-verbal communication the following parameters have been articulated by Eaves and Leathers: '(a) the *purposes* for which meanings are communicated (information, persuasion etc.); (b) the *accuracy* by which meanings are communicated (facial communication has more impact than tactile communication etc); (c) the *efficiency* of the transmission of meaning (how does speed of delivery affect the reading of nonverbal cues etc.)' (Leathers 2018, 6). Using these points as markers to push away, we can defy the codes of meaning present in non-verbal communication and combine them, let them slip and create new intertextual offerings.

In a sequence of scenes that interpret power, gesture and projection of force, Lilian and I enact performative scenes, communicating as protagonists. The performance locates the interchangeable nature of political speech to elaborate on how the projection of power is transformed through the body into gesture.

Figure 24:Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon,* 2020

## 5.8 Becoming the Icon Live Presentation: Scenes 1– 4

**Scene 1:**

In this scene Lilian and I face each other, lit in a dramatic half-light. Lit from above, the black T-shirt outfits mean our bodies blend into the darkness. Our exposed flesh, limbs, arms, legs and faces jump out of the darkness. Moving predominantly with our hands, we proceed to perform with gestural contortions. Our communication is sharp and direct, staccato flows of digit and forearm producing a suggestion of meaning. Gestures are performed between Lilian and me, a series of overt actions, or hints of pleas, commands, fractured directions and frustrations. Remaining close enough to touch, but separated in our own territories, the physical differences between us as performers is exacerbated. The light accentuates the curve of my shaved head and nose. With her dark hair tied back, Lilian's focus is at once direct and open, set in a half-gaze, she looks on at both of our arms and hands moving together.

Together our hands generate shapes that might be an alien language for docking spacecraft, an elaborate ritual of sequences designed to unlock a secret knowledge. A speed-

run of gestural communication and conflict, these four hands dance with each other, pausing for a moment before beginning again, tumbling and falling through fleshy expressions.

Figure 25: Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon,* 2020

At a point the hands pause, open themselves to the sky, palms outstretched upwards. The gesture occurs and the two performers walk off stage. Throughout the performance there is a non-stop acceleration of performed gesture between Lilian and me. The dynamic is not conversational; there is barely a pause between each movement, no time to react to or respond to each other's movement. Although we are looking at one another and facing each other, it appears as if we act almost independently of one another. There only exists a slight suggestion of call and response.

In this passage of action, we are interested in depicting the heightened speed in which communication occurs over the internet. As media philosopher Paul Virilio wrote, '[Speed] ostensibly perverts the illusory order of normal perception, the order of arrival of information. What could have seemed simultaneous is diversified and decomposes' (Virilio 1980, 102). Our physical communication is fast, energetic, non-stop, yet also appearing to be ineffective. This physical expression of gestural communication finds its equivalence in the experience of online communication. We invite a reflection on the speed of online communication through these actions, directed and targeted, separate and solitary.

**Scene 2:**

Scene two begins with Lilian and me seated, facing the audience. Light falls on our outstretched hands, while our faces are not visible. Akin to a Renaissance sketch of hands in pose, these hands are free-standing, removed from our bodies, still and held. Amplified by microphones, the audience hears our voices, speaking aloud and describing the actions of our bodies as they begin to move and enact an action. Rapid responses, physical improvisation, moving between sensation and affect:

> 'movement of air', 'breathing deeply', 'filling the lungs', 'contraction and expansion', 'breath control', 'controlling the thought', 'expressing with clarity' 'convincing with an argument'.

Figure 26: Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon,* 2020

Hands move and create gestures, remaining lit in a side-angle chiaroscuro manner; the hands move against the voice, trying to act counter to the directions of the voice. Avoiding direct translation, the hands move against the voice in a manner that seems counterintuitive. Purposefully avoiding literal readings, the hands are now disconnected from their role as punctuation for speech. Untethered from their role of supporting the spoken word, the hands gesture towards new truths. Our spoken words begin to possess an air of corporate wellbeing, praising the individual consumer with self-care mantras and emotional suggestions. Words are directed at the audience to enhance their sense of self with positivist jargon. This 'excess

of communication' defies readability and meaning, becoming an over-expression and over-identification.

**Scene 3:**

In the third scene, Lilian and I begin by facing the audience with our hands outstretched in a slightly unreal mannequin pose. Looking out beyond the audience, our hands begin to move. Over time, the movements begin to gain more and more momentum. We begin to pace backwards and forwards, tracking a vertical line through the theatre. Moving towards the audience, we perform highly gestural movements and then back away. We sway between gestures of intentional intimidation towards the audience and an unspoken internal monologue.

An air of intention and decision-making is evident. While we appear to be driven by a kind of will and determination, the intention of our actions is unknown for the audience and clearly devoid of any obvious direction. Over time, the movements appear to resemble empty gestures, a physical shape which can only temporarily hold an idea. As theorist Giorgio Agamben remarks, 'What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported' (Agamben 1992, 52).

Figure 27: Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner ,*Becoming The Icon,* 2020

Lilian and I move towards and away from the audience. As we reach the front, we pause slightly, and perform a series of primitive gestures. The movement is fast, intentional, and appears to have an underlying anger; the movements resemble a shaken fist, a convulsion, an admonishment, a warning or reprimand. Hands question, hands gesture, hands corral. Our eyes are fixed above the audience.

There is a sense of threat, of physical violence that is suppressed but never enacted. Ineffective human gestures towards another state of being.

**Scene 4:**

In the final scene, Lilian and I begin, lying inert on the ground. As figures lying on the floor, we roll and squirm in a reduced mode of communication. Limbs move on the floor in a rudimentary way; there is no speech. Here we aim to explore a state before language; we resemble soft clay waiting to be moulded. Concurrently, a video plays projected on a side wall. The video depicts a fixed aerial view of two hands drawing on a sheet of paper. The hands draw live at the same time, they draw on paper and around each other. They compete for space, write on each other, and overlap each other. One hand will trace the outline of another, forming new marks and shapes on the page. When a page is filled, a new page is revealed, and a new complementary energy emerges between the hands. Personalities of the hands play out in micro-relationships, attraction, repulsion, contraction, expansion.

Figure 28:Emile Zile and Lilian Steiner, *Becoming The Icon* 2020

This sequence depicts a state of communication before language, suggesting a preverbal state. Two performers are now standing, leveraging on one another to begin to walk. Unable to walk alone, they lean into each other. The beginning. Before words. Reduced energy, a reduced capacity.

## 5.9 Public Presentation – August 2020

A three-year development period was destined to encounter some production obstacles and necessary deformations. However, we did not anticipate a worldwide pandemic outbreak in our risk calculations. As the novel corona virus outbreak (COVID-19) began to land on Australian shores in March 2020, emergency talks were held between Lilian and me, the host organisation Arts House/City of Melbourne and the presenting partner BLEED/ Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney. As the news emerged and the weeks passed by, it became clear we were facing an unknown situation, which would impact on the amount of risk the City of Melbourne (CoM) were willing to take on in hosting our project. The uncertainty of the virus and the new layer of risk which was brought about by COVID-19 impacted on our ability to perform *Becoming The Icon* as we had hoped, thereby excluding any chance of performing on stage before a live audience.

With discussions being undertaken between Arts House and our creative team, including producer Freya Waterson, it was declared impossible to use any CoM facilities for the foreseeable future and not possible for the work to be a traditional performance with a seated audience. We had anticipated using live streaming to conduct the performance in the first re-assessment of the project. This would be a limited live performance season within a specially built performance stage with cameraperson and live audiovisual engineer mixing a live audio video stream performance for a remote audience watching via the internet. I have had similar projects incorporating live camera people on-stage and the hybrid nature of a streamed live event suited the topics and themes we established in the rehearsal room.

We were in the early stages of mapping out how this presentation outcome could be delivered when it became clear Lilian and I could not be in the same space whatsoever, given that Lilian was living with her parents at the time, who were in an at-risk age group thereby making any physical performance off-site also impossible. The early days of the virus outbreak made stakeholders extremely risk averse. We had to remain flexible to accommodate multiple limitations and new working conditions as the unknown impact of the virus was being estimated. Arts House provided options for us to limit our expectations of the

project and of ourselves, offering a way out of the project if we felt it was too dangerous or difficult to proceed. We were determined to continue with the project and were content to make it under the unique conditions of COVID-19 and accept it for what it would become.

**Rethinking, Responding**

Accepting the conditions placed on us by city, state and federal laws, the bio-security fears instilled by the response to a barely understood virus, and the desire to persevere with the project and complete it in 2020, Lilian and I devised a plan to continue with development of *Becoming The Icon* as a short art film to be screened in an online streaming event setting. By utilising pre-existing footage from earlier rehearsals and new footage which we would record when it was safe to do so, we agreed to persevere and continue. Considerations were made around how to edit video remotely, using video conferencing platforms like Zoom and WhereBy for discussion and Cloud storage platforms, such as Vimeo and Google Drive, for hosting draft edits and media.

At that time (June–July 2020) we were considering recording additional material in our own homes and workspaces, devising a way to combine them in my studio edit suite later. At the conclusion of the first major lockdown in Melbourne we arranged to record a new studio scene with cinematographer James Wright at Footscray Community Arts Centre. Working from a script that used cut-up and collage as a technique to destabilise the speeches of politicians, we shot the final scene on a high-resolution 8K Red camera with autocue and full lighting kit. The resulting shot of our heads addressing the camera would then be the final scene of the film.

**Post-Production, Sound**

Sound was always seen as an integral element of our project. We worked with sound designer Nick Roux to develop an original soundtrack for the film. His compositions for theatre and film had fused organic human energies with processed machine aesthetics, which appealed to us for this project. Through a process of discussing ideas and material approaches, sharing video material from the rehearsal room and hearing examples of Nick's earlier work, we sketched out an aesthetic logic to guide the compositions and mapped an energy envelope, which Nick embodied in his final sound design. To develop the otherworldly aspect of the voice, which is a major component of the final work, we transcribed and re-recorded our improvised monologues in Nick's audio studio.

To generate a strong sense of uncanny destabilisation linked to a disembodied voice, we re-recorded our own voices and laid them upon our moving mouths, mimicking our initial rehearsal room improvisation. The sensation of very deliberately re-recording our own voices created a dissonance of meaning which enhanced the otherworldly dimension of the final scene. A subliminal disconnection between voice and body is suggested, heightened by the sound treatment. Nick recorded our voices and meticulously placed them over the existing voices, a form of temporal inhabitation. Nick also recorded foley sound, which replicated the rolling, touching and breathing we were doing on camera. This sense of hyper materiality, of all sensations and physical proximities being magnified and exploded outwards, acted to contrast with the limited physical nature endured doing COVID-19. By creating a rich sonic field of microphonic physical encounters, an enhanced sense of our corporeal bodies was introduced to the film. The film hangs on gesture, language, bodies and movement; all elements that were greatly enhanced by the soundtrack.

The final film was streamed online at the project website bleedonline.net on 19 August 2020. The decision was made early on to make this a one-off streaming event. We decided to keep a sense of live event present by advertising a start time, having a question-and-answer session at the conclusion of the 'show', and being available via chat platform to interact with the audience. This insistence on keeping to an advertised start time and promoting the event as a one-off show was important as our predominantly Melbourne audience had been in lockdown since 26 March. The absence of any kind of live art event was palpable and audiences were hungry for art experiences. Theatre technician Tony MacDonald at Arts House was in repeated discussions with us to plot the delivery of the stream for the audience. An immense learning experience for all was generated by the dislocation of expertise brought about by COVID-19.

By using an iterative methodological approach to highlight the gestural possibilities of performance art, this project sought to unpack gestural modes of performance, creating a major public outcome in the process. This performance would ultimately lead to the final performance in this research project, the solo performance *4500 Lumens.*

# Chapter 6: 4500 LUMENS

## 6.1 Introduction to work

This performance forms the final of three public artistic outcomes as part of this research project that foregrounds gestural performance. The artistic outcomes offer a contribution to the field of media art performance, adding to public debate around technological mediation and the human body, and suggesting contemporary and innovative modes of artistic production. In this chapter, I explore my research question through my most recent performance work, *4500 Lumens*, beginning with a discussion of the context informing the performance – specifically the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and artworks of the European Middle Ages, as well as what it means to perform during a pandemic, in which density restrictions, social distancing and also masks all featured. Then I turn to a discussion of the three sections of the piece, elaborating on their development. I seek to discuss the relevance of reflected light as a performative tool and go on to discuss art historian Cristina Albus' notion of the 'mirroring act', a principle which guides this performance.

This performance work was developed as one of four local commissions for the 2020 NGV Triennial EXTRA program, a major exhibition of local and international artists across all galleries of NGV International. The public performance program was conducted under the title EXTRA and included performances, live music and discussion events in the Great Hall.

*4500 Lumens* was delivered as a site-specific performance within the context of the collection of medieval and Gothic European statues, situated on Level 1, Gallery 13 of NGV International. *4500 Lumens* was performed six times throughout the season of the EXTRA public program, spanning 29 January to 12 February 2021. This performance work emerged from ongoing research interest in physical, gestural performance with projected light and the use of light as a site-specific performative device.

## 6.2 Background to the Performance

The performance was conducted at the NGV in its 14th–16th Century Gallery – Painting and Decorative Arts, which contains sculptures from the period of the European late Middle Ages. I performed this work in a gallery that contains six devotional carvings from European Christian churches from the period 1300–1450 AD. Made of limestone, polychromed limewood and oak, they depict various saints and biblical figures, such as Mary, St John, St Mary Magdalene, St Catherine and St Barbara. The sculptures originate from Germany,

France and Spain and were collected by the NGV over the course of the twentieth century. This room at the NGV is arguably not highly frequented by audiences interested in contemporary art and has not been modified or altered in many years.

Figure 29: *St Catherine* (c. 1350) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

This work emerged from an invitation by NGV curators to engage with a space or gallery within the institution during the time of the Triennial, a large-scale exhibition of local and international contemporary art. An open invitation of such scope and freedom is daunting, and from my perspective it was important to avoid contemporary galleries, where I felt that the art historical references were too present, too contemporary, too unassailable. My wish to work within the 14th–16th Century Gallery stems from the sculptures being overlooked, sidelined, motionless and stuck in time. Uncool and uncontemporary, these sculptures exist beyond the purview of excited press releases and breathless gallery marketing. It is their unmoving austerity and sincerity that appeals to me when set in contrast to the larger structure of the Triennial. The darkness and minimal spotlight lighting in the gallery provide a backdrop for illumination, and the act of illumination is also a religious one.

The bright veneer of the NGV Triennial's public image is a powerful force. NGV International is the fifth most Instagrammed place in Australia (NGV International n.d.) and

is a prime example of institutional art gallery marketing logic that aims to create compelling and visually arresting art spaces for social media experiences, photographic consumption and sharing. The large scale of the Triennial forced my hand towards the darker (both physically and philosophically) zones of austere and sober early Christian sculpture. An example of this public-facing maximalism in the Triennial was the forecourt sculpture by Rafik Anadol. A towering monolithic screen of ever-changing amorphous and abstract imagery, said to be generated live by an algorithmic process behind the scenes, it was a live moving image that morphed and swayed. Monumental and demanding attention, the sculpture attracted audiences to be photographed with it and use it as an ever-changing backdrop for social media photography. Melbourne writer and artist Philip Brophy would describe the impact of the presence of the work to 'grant virtual visceral thrills to hordes of Instagrammers without the negative publicity the NGV attracted in 1997 when it briefly exhibited Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987)' (Brophy 2021, N.p). The broad remit and curatorial framework of the Triennial exhibition towards a wide field of contemporary artwork pushed me to avoid such current artistic zones and seek a place which was in some sense beyond contemporary taste and criticism.

My interest in working with these sculptures stemmed from an appreciation for the medieval and Gothic periods, a period often referred to in Western history as the Dark Ages. The icons and artworks created in this time exist beyond the realm of contemporary rationality and technology. Existing in the historical context of being utilised as narrative devices to transfer moral allegories, these sculptures were placed in churches to aid in the expression of Christian storytelling to devout believers. I find in the sculptures a refreshing sombreness and stillness. The sculptures of saints and figures depict items attached to the particular saint's narrative and mythos within the Christian allegorical structure, often depicting a wheel, a castle, a book, a crown or similar object, adjacent to the body of the saint depicted. The presence of these sculptures as austere physical figures allowed me to work with them in a performative manner to contrast and complement them.

The historical nature of the sculptures I chose gave me distance from contemporary debate and the issues of the day and allowed me to refer to older layers of Christian symbolic meaning. The sculptures and their display in the gallery – a semi-circle of human figures that face the public as they enter the gallery – is imposing and arresting. The choice to locate my performance at this 'stage' acknowledges the impact of the museum's curatorial choices to place these sculptures in a powerful semi-circle at human eye level. The sculptures are not behind glass, which affords them the advantage of proximity and intimacy to engage with as

a performer. This is a highly charged gallery and one that I sought out to engage with, for the sculptures, in addition to the architecture of the gallery, were conducive to a performance project, deploying a temporal shift in my performance, dislocating the sculptures from their place in art historical canon, reanimating them with light and attention – dictating where and how my focus should be deployed onto them.

The sculptures, which possess a simplicity and unadorned beauty, also refer to the historical period of the late Dark Ages, a time defined by the Black Death. The Black Death (or plague) and the social upheaval caused by it would eventually lead to the Renaissance. A peculiar historical mirroring with a widespread public panic and disease was not lost on me as I performed this work at the time of another pandemic. My requirement to wear a mask during the performance while under COVID-19 conditions charged the work with added significance, connecting the historical period of the Black Death embodied by the sculptures and widespread infection across populations to a contemporary experience of pandemic and a global health emergency.

Being one of the first performance art events in Melbourne following a difficult and protracted lockdown period, linked my image of being masked to the lived experience of many fellow citizens. Each night, within the performance, I moved through the space, sometimes entering the physical personal space of the audience members. This action took on further import by being in direct contravention of physical distancing protocols that reiterated keeping a 1.5-metre distance from one another at all times. Traditionally within my performances proximity is used as a powerful tool, whether it be elaborating on the experience of distance by highlighting network communication and its infrastructure (*Performer/Audience/Lens*) or contracting physical space in the personal act of grotesque selfie photography (*OMG Sisyphus*). I made a conscious decision to be near the audience, forcing the issue of my body, the body of the sculptures and the audience body upon each other. This enforced intimacy is critical and is a social negotiation of space that only art can open up and play with. My previous performance work has foregrounded a sense of destabilisation between audience and performer, and a physicality unobscured by layers of theatricality or distancing props.

The season ended with a performance on Friday 12 February 2021, the same evening that Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews announced a return to lockdowns, instigating a snap five-day lockdown from midnight to prevent further infections from a COVID-19 outbreak. Residents were required to not to leave their homes except for essential shopping, exercise,

caregiving, essential work, or participating in a professional sporting event. They were also limited to shop or exercise within 5 kilometres of their homes. During this time, face masks became mandatory at all times out of home, with all public gatherings banned, and all schools closed (COVID-19 Pandemic in Victoria n.d.).

The final performance on the eve of a new lockdown added a sense of shared social time ending, an imposed cut-off, a curfew on the body and the imagination. This suggested curfew moment added to the impression of COVID-19 as a modern form of plague and ruin, which has to be avoided at all costs. This fear permeated the air and allowed me to navigate through time with these medieval sculptures, attempting to connect disparate eras in a poetic moment of performance. On that Friday morning in February, NGV curatorial staff called me ahead of the lockdown to ask if I wanted to go ahead with the performance, informing me that it was my choice, and they were primarily concerned for performer and audience safety. A feeling of imminent suspension was clear and palpable. Something akin to the last moments of a corrupt government regime waiting for the helicopters to arrive, shredding documents, taking any items of value. The day possessed a foreboding sense of imminent and unavoidable collapse. Social structures were about to shift and there was little to be done about it.

Throughout the day, rumours were whispered in backstage corridors, police officer cousins were cited in apparent confirmation of an imminent shutdown and knowing glances were exchanged in staff canteens. As it turned out, I was the only performer on the night to request to perform and this unique moment energised the last performance of the season. Audience numbers were limited due to the NGV controlling access to the space for State Government density limits. Fewer audience members provided me with greater scope to interact with the assembled public throughout the performance.

## 6.3 4500 Lumens

The performance has three distinct sequences. In the opening sequence I wheel in a portable speaker with a retractable top handle. The unit is large and the speaker is illuminated by rainbow LED lights that cycle between red, green and blue. The speaker is similar in nature to the kind of battery-powered portable speaker used by a curator giving a floor talk or a security guard giving directional instructions to gallery attendees. After bringing the speaker to rest in the gallery, I commence the performance by starting the sound from an attached smartphone while the house lights dim to a low level. I circle the space on foot, holding a very bright LED spotlight in my right hand and angling the beam downwards through my

walking legs, letting it shine through my legs as I walk, gradually becoming more agitated and energetic. I bounce the light off the ground, making it hit the public and the six sculptures in the gallery. The audience surrounds me, their backs against the walls, as I walk around the space, the spotlight flicking light around the darkened gallery.

Figure 30: Emile Zile, *4500 Lumens* 2021 Photo: Tim Stone

I begin to swing the light higher and higher and these actions could be seen to emulate that of incense swinging conducted by priests in the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic traditions. I am dressed in black, wearing an anonymous standard T-shirt and black pants, black sneakers. These clothes are not dissimilar to other very straightforward and 'blank' dress codes I have incorporated into other performances. My aim is not to be theatrical or suggest a costume or fancy dress. By highlighting the actions, sound and visual effects, I downplay the role of costuming in this and other performances. My walking speeds up and turns into a frantic pace, almost running now, I am navigating the bodies of the public, flicking the light into their faces and eyeballing the sculptures as I move past them.

A growing wall of static signals the beginning of the performance. The sound is generated via a software noise generator that lets me mix different levels of noise to create a wall of noise effect. These modulated sounds of static were recorded in my studio and transferred to my phone for playback in the performance. The simple creeping composition fills the space and modulates very slightly, moving from thin grey noise to a fuller sounding wash of wide-band static. The speaker is loud and present enough to make the sound inhabit

the room and almost become uncomfortable. There is no musical information in this sequence, only the gradually modulating noise moving in a subtle and slow way towards a very full crescendo and cut.

The second and longest sequence of the performance runs for ten minutes and begins with the sound of static abruptly cutting from full, room-filling sound to the sounds of sheep bleating, a watermill churning, people at a market; sounds that re-create the imagined environs of a medieval village. As the sound cuts from formless noise static to naturalistic audio, I turn my spotlight on the first sculpture and begin to modulate the light with my left hand to create visual effects on the surface of the sculpture. I move slowly, stepping deliberately and attentively, pacing myself around the room and letting the spotlight follow details of the sculptures.

Figure 31:Emile Zile *4500 Lumens* 2021 Photo: Tim Stone

My controlled physicality is markedly different from the first sequence. The frantic speed is replaced with deliberate and measured footfalls and a very direct gaze towards the sculptures in line with the beam of light. My calm motion is considered and purposeful, almost akin to hunting or stalking prey on foot. I stand eye to eye with the six sculptures and aim my gaze directly at them. I am wearing a surgical mask as per State Government COVID-19 public health instructions. I move across the six sculptures, in physical stances and gestures that are

sometimes threatening, sometimes defensive, sometimes actively engaging with the sculptures. I am too close to the sculptures, almost touching them.

Figure 32: Emile Zile, *4500 Lumens* 2021 Photo: Tim Stone

Meanwhile, using a set of sound samples mixed at my studio to emulate the environmental audio conditions of a European medieval village, the samples begin with farmyard animals such as sheep, pigs and geese. The animal sounds are in high contrast to the static which preceded it. The audio of the medieval village modulates in intensity and moves through phases of farmyard animals, blacksmith, horse and cart, ringing church bells, waterfall and mill. Ending on the grinding of the mill, the volume increases to an all-encompassing wall of sound again that has its mirror in the grey noise static of the beginning performance. The audio tails off with rushing water and bells ringing out. Audio samples in this sequence were recorded using the MyNoise online audio generator tool.

In the third and final sequence, as a new audio sequence commences, I pass the spotlight to a random audience member. I do not direct them or tell them what to do with the spotlight; they take the spotlight and can choose to shine it at the sculptures as I have done, shine it at others or shine it on the ground. I return with a mirror and give the mirror to another audience member standing across from the current spotlight holder. In some instances, it is clear what the implied relationship is, and the spotlight holder and the mirror holder begin to communicate and proceed to reflect the beam of light around the space,

engaging in a non-verbal and tacit understanding of the relationship between themselves as communal holders of the beam of light. In some instances, the audience are less prone to making the connection between spotlight and mirror and do as they please.

Figure 33: Emile Zile, *4500 Lumens,* 2021 Photo: Tim Stone

Control over the scenario is given up by my invitation to the mirror holders. While I have set up the conditions for this 'game', the outcome is defined by the public and their use of the mirror. Some participants are initially wary, others are absorbed by the process, others ignore me when I hand them the mirror. By choosing to be in the audience at this moment, I consider them to be willing participants, and to a greater or lesser extent they are in control of a brief moment of this consensual setup. There is coercion present in the act of handing someone a mirror among people they may know and others they do not know. The well-known dread that many people fear when thinking about being approached by stand-up comedians or performance artists was present here, as much as it is anywhere that a public has a knowing complicity yet is unaware of what the expectations the performer may have for them.

The organised structure of the performance allows them to act in a way that is seemingly open and free, but in reality is strongly influenced by the social pressure of doing what others have done and what they have seen me do. The majority of people follow this 'game', a few refuse to play, and fewer don't understand and stall. I proceed to bring out two

more mirrors and hand them to other audience members. I am not aiming for anyone in particular, unceremoniously taking the mirrors and handing them to new participants. I do not acknowledge the holder of the torch and mirror. With my head down, I take it from them and give it to someone else; another human outline in the semi-darkness. I stalk around the space, stepping in a deliberate slow trance-like manner and observing the potential for the beam to be reflected and bounced between individuals.

The final sequence uses a piece of music that originated in thirteenth-century Spain, the Cantigas de Santa Maria, a series of poems with musical notation written in the medieval Galician–Portuguese language during the reign of Alfonso X of Castile El Sabio (1221–1284). This music is accurate to the period of the sculptures and possesses a dark and foreboding melody, which is intended to provide a slow trance-like mood for this concluding communal 'game'.

## 6.4 Light and Gesture

Using the six sculptures as the anchor of the performance, I move through the gallery with a high-powered handheld torch, performing hand gestures with the light creating a play with light and shadow on the sculptures. By modulating the light beam from the torch with my hand and gestures, I create expressive moments of dappled, expressive light to allow a new encounter between the sculptures, myself and the audience. My presence is foregrounded as I move around the room to create a series of performative personas in relation to the sculptures. Through the act of lighting and shadow-casting through gesture, I create new lighting conditions that bring forth features of the sculptures, at once not visible under traditional static museum lighting.

Through a manipulation and modulation of the light on and around these sculptures I am creating new moments in time to view the sculptures, physically engaging with sculpture from antiquity in a way which is not commonly accepted in a gallery; I am too close to the statues at times, I am bringing my physicality to bear on them, and use my physical presence in the room in a manner that is usually unwelcome in the controlled environment of an art gallery.

The act of animating light around a subject gives the object a dimension of time; the moment light is cast upon them they are animated by a temporary layer of light upon their surfaces. An immobile sculpture temporarily wears a veil of light. In this rudimentary shadowplay, the aim is to reframe and re-present the sculptures and elicit additional character from them through my application of light. My application of light upon their surfaces using

gestural movements becomes a dramaturgical device to direct the audience's gaze. I describe this as applying a narrative meta-layer to the works, enabling them to be perceived within a performative structure that allows a beginning, middle and an end, under the applied gaze of the spotlight – a point I return to below.

The title of the work, *4500 Lumens*, refers to the total output of light of the torch I am emitting, as measured in lumens. Early philosophers of antiquity developed a worldview that saw divine light as multi-modal, for example, Hellenistic Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus would outline a worldview that saw divine light as both what emanates from a divine source to the individual, and that which emanates from the individual on to the world. Plotinus would describe these as complementary and entwined *energea* or energetic forces.

The spotlight used in this performance is designed to be held in a pistol-grip mode and is built with rugged styling and protective rubber surrounding the LED unit to protect it from heavy knocks and drops. Typically, these LED spotlights are used in maritime, hunting and security applications, and are purchased from specialty electronics retailers, outdoor and camping shops. The number of lumens the lamp can emit is important as the bouncing effect of the beam is reduced with less luminosity.


Figure 34: TechLight spotlight, Commercial documentation JayCar.com.au 2021

The use of the specific scientific measurement unit of 4500 lumens in the title is presented in contrast to the religious content of the sculptures. This use of specific scientific terminology in the title is a nod to a materialist reading of light as a scientific principle, not something divine. By overtly making the title a scientific measurement, the suggestion is at odds with the religious content of the sculptures and the theological importance of light in Christian mythology. I am attempting to suggest that divinity is beyond human measure or subjectivity and that the modern will to measure, catalogue and scientifically describe is contrasted here with the religious intention to suggest the infinite. The metaphorical use of a hunting spotlight in this context is also to confer the impulse to seek out and find something in the darkness, to uncover a truth. The act of lighting previously dark areas suggests enlightenment, discovery, transcendence.

A lumen as a unit of measurement is based on the total quantity of visible light emitted by a source per unit of time. By referencing the light-emitting capacity of the torch in the title, I strongly foreground light as the central anchor of this work and reference the human-defined parameters of measurement, and its link to scientific and theological literature. The spotlight I used in this performance is a high-powered device with three LEDs that emits a high-powered central beam of white light, which also mirrors the concept of the Christian Holy Trinity. Marshall McLuhan once famously posited that electric light is without content, and it is this uncontainable nature and purity that I seek to incorporate into the performance: 'The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message' (McLuhan 1964, 8). As a convert to Catholicism in 1937, McLuhan would have had an ongoing fascination with the Trinity or sets of three.

In many ways the development of my performance work with light-emitting technology has been one of increasing simplicity and reduction, culminating in this point of working with pure electric light. My earlier performances, such as *James Cameron's Avatar* (2014) and *DVD Burner (NIMk)* (2012), both used the transmission of light or the purposeful blocking of light as a performative device that could be modulated for dramatic effect. As my practice has developed over time, and into this PhD research project, the use of light as a device has been reduced and simplified, to the level of pure light in *4500 Lumens*.

As my art practice has developed, I have generated closer proximity with the audience and jettisoned elaborate and overtly technical setups, seeking to privilege the use of commonplace and everyday technology. I describe this use of vernacular technology in performance by invoking the 'digital everyman', performatively inhabiting the persona of an

anonymous user of widely available internet and computer technology, someone trapped within the narrow presets and creative parameters of factory standard definitions. By using this persona, I intend to highlight the user interfaces of various platforms and devices, and act to either exalt them, break them, re-use or misuse them. By inhabiting their platforms, I can talk in their native codes and medium-specific languages, subverting and commenting on their user interfaces for artistic value.

Media theorist Eric Snodgrass, in describing the aesthetics of vernacular banality, suggests that 'institutions of power, digitally born and otherwise, often adopt a certain strategically cosmeticized veneer of the banal, with their cheery doodles and seemingly plain vanilla shopfront windows, the wolf in sheep's clothing tactic' (Snodgrass 2014, 34). The aesthetic sensibility here seeks the poetic in the generic and engages with presets and machine limitations as the bittersweet readymades of a sensibility that has been described by late English political theorist Mark Fisher as 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009, 1). Fisher outlined the functioning of capitalist realism as a form of 'pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action' (Fisher 2009, 21). Within this cultural structure, the preset is presented as a powerful readymade sculpture, a portrait of the information age world which spawned it. I actively engage with these shared modes of communication as part of a conscious desire to speak in the shared contemporary vernacular of my audience.

Australian artist Thomas Smith defines this aesthetic as 'post-digital generic', which he conceives of as not simply an image, but more broadly as a social relationship that can exist on multiple planes as: '[a] set of capabilities, aesthetics and experiences that are immanent to lived experience of contemporary capitalism' (Smith 2019, 17). The broadening of this term to cover a wide range of cultural production reflects the reality that contemporary life is largely mediated by devices that frame and channel our attention spans, and the creative re-use of these generic tools can be an effective mode of creative critique and reuse. Influential French writer and philosopher Guy Debord would similarly define *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 as being not simply visual imagery, but the modification of behaviour and perception that those images engender. 'The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images' (Debord 1977, 4).

## 6.5 Mirroring Acts in *4500 Lumens*

A 'mirroring act' is defined by Cristina Albu as an encounter with one's own self-image, 'be it a reflection or a video projection, a series of dynamic interpersonal concatenations between affective experiences, behavioural responses, and imaginary projections' (Albu 2016, 16). Albu refers to the works of Dan Graham and in her analysis of performers utilising mirrors to physicalise the sense of the self and other, self-presentation, performance and daily life. My work, *4500 Lumens*, directly engages an audience with a collective mirroring act and aims to produce moments of personal yet intentionally limited agency for audience members. For example, in the final sequence of the performance, I distribute mirrors to audience members and allow them to participate in an act of reflecting a beam of light around the room and onto the sculptures. This sequence of the performance has a duration of four minutes and is linked to a passage of music. While I am present in the room and actively defining the use of the mirrors by giving and taking them from participants, I do not instruct them verbally on what to do or suggest through heavy-handed implication what they should be doing. Most participate in the distribution of the light beam around the room, some refuse. Once the music comes to its conclusion the performance is over and the moment of limited agency for the audience is complete. Aligning with Albu's 'mirroring act' concept of a shared intersubjective moment using a mirror, these performances:

> offer the promise of a collectivity mediated by images or similar behavioural acts, yet deny access to a communal identity; they offer temporary intimacy in an unpredictable spatiotemporal interval, yet take away privacy, keeping spectators in a state of limbo between multiple unfulfilled possibilities (Albu 2016, 16).

By visualising a sense of connectedness and sociality, the communal mirroring act within *4500 Lumens* emphasises the interconnectedness between disparate individuals yet displays how precarious and tenuous such relationships can be. By creating a moment of affective and temporary community among strangers, a tenuous infrastructure is established for the participants to establish codes of conduct without negotiation or speech, as they choose to bounce the light further or to collapse the link between the mirrors. A brief performative zone of social engagement is established. An implied social pressure exists to hold and bounce the beam of light successfully around the room.

Figure 35: Emile Zile, *4500 Lumens* 2021 Photo: Tim Stone

As Albu identifies, the use of mirroring acts in art increased throughout the 1960s and correlated to three key factors: the desire to contest modes of art production focused on the individual, the growing miniaturisation and availability of audiovisual equipment and the doubt that was permeating throughout society due to the impact of grassroots social movements and anti-war protests (Albu 2016, 33). Akin to the miniaturisation of lenses that Albu isolates in the 1960s, we are currently in the midst of another transformative technological moment, whereby the miniaturisation of lenses and networked devices is bringing with it new waves of performance that find expression through the mediated body.

In this chapter I have explored some of the key influences informing *4500 Lumens* as part of a series of three creative practice projects for this PhD. *4500 Lumens* distinguishes itself as being a physical expression of a network rather than using a digital network. Purposefully low-tech, this construction of a network shows the constituent elements of a network physically: signal (torch), mirror (node) and individual (server). The ad hoc network can be read as discrete elements which together constitute a series of social relationships, a network. In a low-tech and non-digital sense, these physical relationships then expand the concept of a network for an audience, implicating them in a shared game with limited agency.

Each of the distinct performance works explores various dimensions of the research question – critically reflecting, in a dynamic and embodied manner, on how mediated representations of the networked body, gesture and networks can be deployed to rethink the

role of performance art. As I have argued, through examination of the role of gesture as a remediation of communication processes (Bolter and Grusin 1999), we can reconceptualise performance art in a period of pandemic, integrating new awareness of gestural telecommunication and performance. The use of gestural communication within a digitally mediated tele-present reality will continue to grow and be a necessary site of research and enquiry.

# Conclusion

A brief moment in time, bracketed by the beginning and seeming end of a global pandemic, this research project provoked new understandings of my practice of network performance art and gestural communication. The substantial duration of a PhD allows for deep and sometimes unsettling reflections. Conducting a research project that is centred on your own art practice, located in your own name, body and identity can also prove to be immensely challenging.

This dissertation is an account of the development of a series of artworks that comprise the major research activity of this practice-based PhD. Through an iterative and recombinant methodological model, new performances were developed and presented to public audiences in Melbourne and Amsterdam. Three individual and complementary modes of delivery were explored: theatre-based performance with seated audience, performance for short film and performance in a public art gallery. Utilising gesture as a central motivating theme, these artworks created multiple and varied expressions of network-based gestural communication in performance.

*Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* used the *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977) performance by American artist Dan Graham as a starting point and provocation. The original work by Graham was performed in June 1977 at De Appel Amsterdam and re-performed by Graham numerous times afterwards. Acting as a re-interpretation of an existing artwork and a new work in its own right, my version of this performance aimed to integrate a new audience, namely the networked tele-present public, into the fabric of the work. Acting as both a historical reference to the original work and existing in a tradition of contemporary art utilising performative re-enactments, *Performer/Audience/Lens (after Dan Graham)* foregrounded new interpretations of changing audience dynamics, addressing multiple audiences both present and watching via video streaming. This work folds in a hybrid approach of engaging both an in-person audience and a remote audience via the Instagram Live platform and expands on an existing body of my work that has used network devices in the live creation of meaning onstage. This work offers new modes to engage with historical re-performance of archival sources, as well as performing multiple layers of engagement with remote audiences in performance.

Between 2018 and 2020 I collaborated with Melbourne dancer Lilian Steiner on *Becoming The Icon*, a work which explored physical gesture in a manner that utilised both of us as primary participants. Expanding on the use of gesture to incorporate political speech,

language and dialogue, this performance was initially conceptualised as a live performance, but due to the then unknown impact and safety concerns brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the project saw its outcome as a short film with an accompanying live stream event, which took place during one of Melbourne's extended lockdown periods in 2020. Through a series of scenes recorded on a high-definition camera, Lilian and I developed multiple performative readings of power and language, physical negotiation and gestural conflict.

Utilising a studio methodology of iteration and using the spiral model of research inquiry, defined in Chapter 4, performative sequences were thought out, tested, recorded by a rehearsal studio video camera and either reinforced, modified or discarded. Tracking alongside the outbreak of COVID-19 and the gradual normalisation of post-pandemic performance arts practice incorporating digital media, *Becoming The Icon* can be seen as a cultural project that allows for an analysis of new ways of creating a large-scale performance work under intense organisational pressure and structural uncertainty. The many deformations and negotiations that occurred to this project and their documentation within this dissertation provides a perspective on the experience of creating media art-based performance in a pandemic environment. A drawn-out and difficult project to develop at a time of extreme local and global displacement, *Becoming The Icon* premiered on 19 August 2020 and exists as a 32-minute short film available to stream online via the BLEED Digital Festival platform.

The final project in this suite of research-based artworks to utilise gestural communication and networks, is *4500 Lumens*, performed as a solo work at the National Gallery of Victoria during the 2021 Triennial. Expanding beyond the proscenium staging of a theatre or short film context, this performance used the 14th–16th Century Gallery – Painting and Decorative Arts sculpture galleries of the NGV as a site-specific location. Using historical sculptures as a site-specific zone within which to perform, I developed a sequence of performative scenes, which included projected beams of light to create an ad-hoc network between members of the audience and myself as the solo protagonist. Reverting to a purposefully non-digital form of network, this performance created the conditions for audience interaction within an ordered and controlled space.

Within the dissertation, to contextualise *4500 Lumens,* I engaged with Albu's concept of the 'mirroring act' to elaborate on the role of mirroring in performance and its use in historical performance art (Albu 2016, 30). Utilising the medieval and Gothic sculptures as subjects and silent participants in the work, light is engaged in a way that divorces it from

image-based representation. By using mirrors and willing audience members to reflect a beam of light, a materialisation of a network becomes apparent, creating an intentionally constrained representation of network effects, nodes, and interrelationships. In a time when proximity and public intimacy were being challenged by stay-at-home orders, lockdowns and mask-wearing, this performance aimed to present physically mediated light as a socially connecting gestural tool, bypassing a digital concept of a network in favour of foregrounding an analogue and brutish physical representation of a network.

The impact of COVID-19 during this research period cannot be understated. When commencing this PhD project prior to the pandemic, I had a clear vision of how I perceived the progression of research would unfold. The disruption caused by the pandemic not only interrupted existing personal workflows and methods but extended to a large-scale reorientation of global workplace practices, methods of communicating and negotiating public and private risk. As a new form of aberrant risk that could not be contained by existing structures of insurance and liability, COVID-19 massively dislodged existing social structures and ways of working.

The resulting societal changes then required new parameters of necessary legal re-ordering, negotiation and paperwork, which continues to resolve through the hierarchies of society. The impact on physical bodies during this time included new requirements to stay at home, to be socially and physically distant and to undertake the operation of public life based on new sensitivities and structures. Examples of the social change that occurred within the years that bookend this PhD research include the now-commonplace experience of working from home, the increasing utilisation of lens-based smart technology in the production and negotiation of daily life, and the measures put in place in order to live a physically distant existence in public.

An unusual sense of time was generated during extended lockdowns in Melbourne which at once felt like a stasis or pause, in tandem with the impression of a heavy acceleration to an ill-defined point in the future. It was a brief and densely felt rupture of time that will continue to have cultural repercussions in new ways yet to be sensed. It is my hope that through this dissertation and its attendant creative practice, I have been able to offer a timely reflection on what constitutes new senses of proximity in public, private and network space. On a practical level, I hope this research provides an understanding of how artworks of a certain scale, with close stakeholders and venue expectations, can be produced under rapidly shifting new societal conditions, such as COVID-19. I believe my art practice, which had already engaged with concepts of the self, internet cultures and mass communication,

was further developed under the difficult conditions of COVID-19 and the reflections on these new discoveries are contained in this dissertation. This research period allowed me to foreground pressing issues of transtemporal dislocation, remote participation with audiences and the psychology of users when faced with an invitation to allow themselves, their data body and their gestures to be captured and re-presented by digital platforms.

New performance art emerging from a widespread society-wide wave of post-pandemic digitisation is integrating new codes of language and behaviour. Croatian performance artist Nora Turato describes this dislocation of processing speed between the body and language as an opportunity for performance art:

> Our bodies are lagging and limping from one dopamine hit to another. By crafting these performances and spending hours and hours and hours drilling one paragraph, one sentence, one syllable, one vowel, one consonant, I found a way of coping with that. It's my way of saying, 'Stop, lemme take a moment and process this.' It feels very empowering, and it means a world to me (Janevski 2022, n.p).

As a strategy of analysis and processing, Turato slows the speed of online communication to the point where it becomes dislodged from its original context and is allowed to reveal itself as absurd via repetition and reinforcement. Artists interested in new forms of language will continue to respond to a hybrid technological reality of an always-on networked social space, where leisure time is tracked and boredom is replaced by 'continuous partial attention' (Stone 2022, n.p).

The prevalence of screen-based mediation in the pandemic era may also see a swing away from modes of digital capture and online performativity; that is, it is probable that a pushback away from the screen-mediated experience may indeed be emerging. A newfound return to the body, unencumbered by the continuous demands of social media performativity may accelerate the interest in meditation retreats, digital detox facilities for the wealthy and a continuous reel of self-help tomes to advise on how to think without machines or how to disconnect from the algorithmic logic of hyper-efficiency. Cultural space will open up beyond the control of machine logic, in the tradition of outdoor festivals that offer a carnivalesque retreat from rationality, existing as temporary autonomous zones of experiential thought beyond capture. Temporary zones of freedom from restraint have been present through history to aid a ruling order and maintain social cohesion and control. Symbolic acts of social reversal, such as carnival allow the state to temporarily release the

individual from control, in the hope of longer deference being maintained (Bakhtin 1968, 12). Similarly, a digital detox for the white-collar elite may be another market opportunity for New Age corporate ‘wellness’ providers to isolate high-performance individuals from their devices in the hope of achieving an edge or competitive advantage.

This research project has afforded me the scope to reflect deeply on specific concerns within my art practice in relationship to the world. The creation of new work in conjunction with written research, reflection and practical iteration has allowed me to extend beyond the zones of enquiry I once occupied. Studying the mediated body and its engagement by performance art and society at large allowed me to critically engage with these themes for an extended period and hone my critical and creative responses to them.

At the conclusion of this research project, I will continue to engage with the topics and themes contained in this research by creating new art and film productions which delve further into the conditions of the mediated body and the infinitely reflexive interplay between the individual user, communication systems and society. It is my aim to turn the discoveries and new sensitivities gained in this research into emergent creative projects that critically and poetically reflect on the mental landscapes and mirroring structures we navigate as users of communication platforms.

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