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binding matters: reflecting on the affectivity of a light projection

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abstract

This visual essay introduces and critically reflects on a creative research project entitled *Spectra on the edge of embodiment*, undertaken as part of my Master of Fine Art study in 2017 at the College of Creative Arts, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. The project was motivated by several questions and concerns: What is the being that is human? How does it interact with the space it occupies? Through a work of art, is it possible to convey to a viewer the metacognitive perceptions I have propagated in connecting to my interiority and how it interfaces with the world?

introduction

Spectra on the edge of embodiment, took the form of an immersive spatial installation including multiple video projections accompanied by a sound loop. Occupying a darkened room within a gallery setting, it animated uniform wall surfaces and corner spaces. The video imagery originated from textural surfaces, detritus, fluids and other such flotsam and jetsam reminiscent of interior anatomies, compelling viewers to linger and wonder what the body might look like from the inside. Such a detailed imaginary view of the body's interior environment stems from extensive cadaver studies that I undertook as part of my training as a physiotherapist.

The photographic images I gathered were manipulated using software that allowed me to debride, merge, dissolve, or warp them, a process which obscured them so that the visual effect was abstract, more palatable, and more approachable.

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After digitally scuffing away the surfaces until they broke and blended, I coagulated them together into a video sequence. The edges of the video became so disintegrated that the shape resembled the painted shadows of various portraits by Francis Bacon in the 1980s, like fleshy ectoplasms spilling out of body sacs into the room. He said, 'you must distort to transform.'⁰¹ Bacon wanted to distort the human body far beyond its appearance, but in the act of distorting it, bring it back to a closer recording of some extruded life-force. He used the viscosity of oil paint to convert the ephemerality of shadow into what looked like the gelatinous matter of interiority that he had extended out from the bodies over the floor of his paintings as a hybrid entity of presence and blood.⁰²

Projecting the video montage large on a ceiling-wall-floor surface brought the ectoplasmic shapes to life; they swayed gently across the corner of the room. Sound therapists Debi Karl and Rob Moore provided a layer of sonic textures and vibrational tones. The audio track appeared to mimic the sound of a body generating its own atmosphere. Patches of wall seemed to float and breathe, yielding to a sense of how the projection could hold its own vibrant life-force. The light display and sound vibrations allowed the inside to come out and the outside to penetrate the skin. It prompted me and my audience to participate in 'a greater attentiveness to the active power of things' alluded to by Jane Bennett, political theorist, in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Bennett's theory on vital materialism describes objects, things, and matter in general as containing a lively and energetic play of forces capable of agency.⁰³ The animated projection gave the impression of a human corporeal imprint, one that mimics the way a body subconsciously touches, probes and absorbs the space which it occupies with its entire sensorium. Hard, fixed boundaries belonging to humans and architecture softened to one another and ushered a viewer to imagine what their own inside material world might look like. My insights on interiority had been bound up in a bolus of light and were thrown out onto seemingly inert surfaces, illuminating their malleability to the idea of becoming porous and permeable. The aim of the artwork was to open a portal to a space beneath the skin, to provide the viewer with a mirror into their own interiority.

Figure 01:

Spectra on the Edge of Embodiment
1 & 2 [looped video installation] by
Isla Griffin, 2017. Two Channel video
projection with audio (6 minutes),
room 10A19, College of Creative
Arts (CoCA), Massey University,
Wellington.

perceptions on immersivity and light

The installation developed out of a number of experiments to test the effect of the projections spatially. The first projection I tested was directed from above onto a ceramic head sculpture placed on the floor. The fused imagery radiated out in a circular field around the work as an aura, disintegrating the original identity of the head, and reconfiguring the object into something else. It was as if the sculpture had projected its own personal space into the room. It raised questions for me around the malleability of the body at the edge of its embodiment and how an attentiveness to the porosity of our skin allows the world to flood in.

Pallasmaa, the Finnish architect, references his body as just another object among objects, interpenetrating and mutually defining each other in an osmotic interchange happening on a subliminal level. 'No body is separate from its domicile in space and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self.'⁰⁴ He suggests that our processes of perception and cognition advance, not from 'a sum of a visual, tactile and audible givens' but as 'I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.'⁰⁵ Pallasmaa's description of himself amongst his environment, the way his sensory system interfaces as a perceptive single entity, moment to moment, clarified the collaborative nature of my creative process with everything around me. The spontaneity of happenstance with material encounters that becomes a photograph for inclusion in the timeline relies on a tangible connection with interior life. One of image memory and emotion intermingling with the visual, auditory and sensory experiences exterior life offers up. The first projections, taken from a video on a screen to illuminate a room, offered me a recalibration of perception, one closer to the immanence of things.

Patti Smith, the poet, writes in her book *M train*:

I sit before Zak's peerless coffee. Overhead the fan spins, feigning the four directions of a traversing weathervane. High winds, cold rain, or the threat of rain; a looming continuum of calamitous skies that subtly permeate my entire being. Without noticing, I slip into a light yet lingering malaise. Not a depression, more like a fascination for melancholia, which I turn in my hand as if it were a small planet, streaked in shadow, impossibly blue.⁰⁶

Smith takes the reader to an object before herself. She is aware of the atmospheric movements over her head that, although within an enclosed room, take her into the stratosphere and back in through the walls as the atmospheric changes seep into her psyche. She is, within a minute or two, gone from the object scene to perceptions and connectivity of perceptions, to emotions. She observes, as part of her interior creative process, emotions that connect her to the holism of her situation in its ecology, which she can hold in a bodily manner.

Where the projection of *Spectra on the Edge of Embodiment* hit the fixed hard surface of a wall, it had the illusionary effect of rendering the wall's surface fluid and porous, as it masked the solid materiality of the building's hidden structural integrity. In the dark, another form of inside, all sockets, scuff marks, and corners disappeared out of sight. The projected image mimicked the body as an occupying force that extends beyond the skin. This experience, one of immersivity, was one that revealed the ability of the body to open to and sense the environment within which it lives. It did not speak of anatomical structures, but instead presented an empty vacuum within which our imaginings can arise. This way of thinking of the body as a vacuous interior encased in a permeable skin can be extrapolated to include the room as a corporeal cavity. The space became a mimesis for the human body and the viewer became a part of the presence of the work, thereby collapsing ideas of individuated separation. Rather than conceptualising our human selves as coherent containers to the outside world, *Spectra on the Edge of Embodiment* called on a viewer to reflect upon themselves as if they were a sieve.

Figure 02:

(left image) Interfacing on blood and love [looped video installation by Isla Griffin, 2016. One Channel video projection (3 minutes) over a porcelain ceramic sculpture. The Engine Room, College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

After creating the video sequence, I experimented with projecting it over objects including inanimate and live bodies. This process ultimately convinced me to remove the objects from the work and allow the light projection to occupy space as its own materiality. In the experimental projections onto live skin, the qualities of the individuated form are dissolved; the body seeps into its situation and the 'person' becomes just part of the spatial whole. Changing the shape of the projection from circular to that of an ectoplasm, the projection seemed to condense into an entity type presence, one that could stand independent of any skeletal scaffold.

abject interiority

Throughout the creative practice research project, the term 'abject' arose as a response to a collection of debrided and perforated ceramic heads referencing barnacle skin lesions and punctured surfaces. Maybe it's the exposé of anatomy that people find so difficult to approach. Or maybe I had become desensitised through hours poring over and interacting with cadavers and working in hospital wards for those with lung and vascular disease. I find discarded debris and detritus of the living fascinating. We leak out. I leak my breath along with other materials normally encased in skin, clothed, and contained. The oozing and unctuous substances sometimes found at the back of a fridge reference some sort of corporeal emission from an open wound, mucus or sputum, normally classified as 'abject.' It's a collective term to address any bodily fluid matter that has breached the integument and spilled out into the world. While abject materials almost always elicit a withdrawal, or feelings of disgust and rejection, Julia Kristeva describes the abject as a stage in development of the psyche—a priori, prelinguistic memory, an existential state where 'boundaries begin to break down, where we are confronted with an archaic space before linguistic binaries emerge on the fragile border where identities do not exist or only barely so, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.'⁰⁷ I imagine our internal world as a place of partial shapes and half-forms where nothing is quite materialised or recognised. They exist as amorphous hints of organic structures in the embryonic stage of conception. Rather than decay and ejected matter in the process of putrefaction, Kristeva's description evokes the idea of an evolving form that is amassing and becoming something. It reminded me of the exudation of fluid into an open wound as it starts to form a

scar, the threads and filaments of collagen emerging from the gloom interweaving our identity into the fibres of our skin, which over time becomes less stable and more membranous.

Accessing the abject layer in a viewer is to use it as a foundation on which the projection can act as a catalyst to provoke new understandings of embodiment. Kristeva's description of the abject as a place of potential reminded me of the Taoist notion of the un-carved block contained in Verse 28 of the Tao Te Ching. It refers to a returning of innocence, seeing through the illusion of separation and unifying our interior world with the totality of the cosmos, akin to Patti Smith's description of the beam of her conscious thought flow.

Verse 28 Tao Te Ching

When the opposing forces unite within
there comes a power abundant in its giving
and unerring in its effects.
Flowing through everything
it returns one to the First Breath.
Guiding everything
it returns one to No Limits.
Embracing everything
it returns one to the un-carved block.⁰⁸

I have, for many years, used the Tao Te Ching frequently as a guide to anchor my creative processes in simplicity. During the stage of deep engagement with the abject, this verse reminded me of how 'opposing forces unite within' and in the context of this project, the images of decay I had gathered could potentially, through unification (within a digital platform), give an effect of the beauty of becoming.

Figure 03:

Found surfaces and detritus [Digital photography] by Isla Griffin, 2017. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

the affectivity of technicity

In this project, I explored the quality of sensory experience a work of art offers to corporealise interiors, architectural interiors, and human body interiors. The projection maintained an ephemerality and precarity not found in objects or solid bodies. It is switched on. Off. On. Illumination, gentle movement and sound vibration captured the attentiveness of a viewer. The tactility of its performance mesmerised and whispered something deep into the physical and virtual sensory systems. Then, when it was gone, turned off, the room returned to an abject cavity. Emptiness, dark, white noise buzz. A viewer moved on. While watching other people take in the work, I always wanted to ask: Before you go, have I perfused my view from inside my body into yours?

When the room, as a folding inward of a spatial field within a wall, is considered as malleable, the solidity of its encasement and its 'insiderness' can be rendered more penetrable, more an 'enfleshing.' The term enfleshing was used by artist Helen Chadwick to describe a room altered by art to evoke it as a container for our memories and imaginations.⁰⁹ The wall of the room is no longer a diaphragm that divides and connects. In the light of projection, what was once a visually impenetrable static surface becomes the anatomical internal surface of skin, which rendered the atmosphere of the space as an enfleshing, body-place with multiple layers of interiority, and transient sense impressions rising and fading on the screen of the mind.

Standing within *Spectra on the Edge of Embodiment*, my body responds to animated sways and vibrational tones from the abject layer of existence. It is a primitive reflex to look towards light. I recall reflecting on how I am drawn from my thoughts into the world: I am being pulled towards a flash of a sunbeam reflecting off a wet leaf. I am pausing to absorb what it might mean. I am being transported away to a stratum of being different from where I usually inhabit. Animated light and sound vibration offer a portal into the proprioceptive and haptic nervous system. See, stop, feel. The system's plasticity can be accessed by the sense of transparency, permeability, weightlessness, flotation, and subtle movements the projection offers.

Although my creative process used technology as a way of transforming what some might describe as unsavoury images into captivating, abstracted light plays, it was a clumsy staccato process to start with. I was sucked into the virtual digital world where I sat for hours, static, barely breathing, captivated, and probing into the embodiment emerging on the screen. Rosi Braidotti, contemporary philosopher, has suggested that technology is at the heart of a process of blurring the fundamental categorical divide between self and other; a heteroglossia of the species, a hybridisation of what we used to call the embodied subject.¹⁰ There is a kind of reflexive moment, in which the software skill set matches the natural rhythm of creative intuitive out-pouring as it arises. My practice transformed, blending imagination synapses into the hard wiring of the computer processor. It was a spilling over.

i closed my eyes and spoke to you in a thousand silent ways

Our blended realities, our binding matters, are on a perpetual unfolding, like a mobius strip, with no apparent beginning or ending. Or, a dance with infinite spatial possibilities married to the extractive abilities of our nervous system to find what we feel is in harmony with and what we feel is dissonant to our sense of being. The work I have described here, *Spectra on the Edge of Embodiment*, used light as a material to change the atmosphere of an interior into a potent immersive environment capable of provoking a sense impression across the skin divide. A spatial and immersive installation rendered through a technological platform has the chance to be an extension of the artist's neural network and enquire of such existential dualisms as tangible/intangible, interior/exterior in a way material juxtaposing can not necessarily perform. From static surfaces to animated performative action, the permeable self is on the spectrum, the blending scale, from visibility to invisibility, form to formlessness, presence to absence, where the interior becomes the exterior, where the flesh bag that is me (or you) becomes the space within which I (or you) stand. Through projection, I can more readily begin a dialogue between my subliminal corporeal sensibilities and yours.

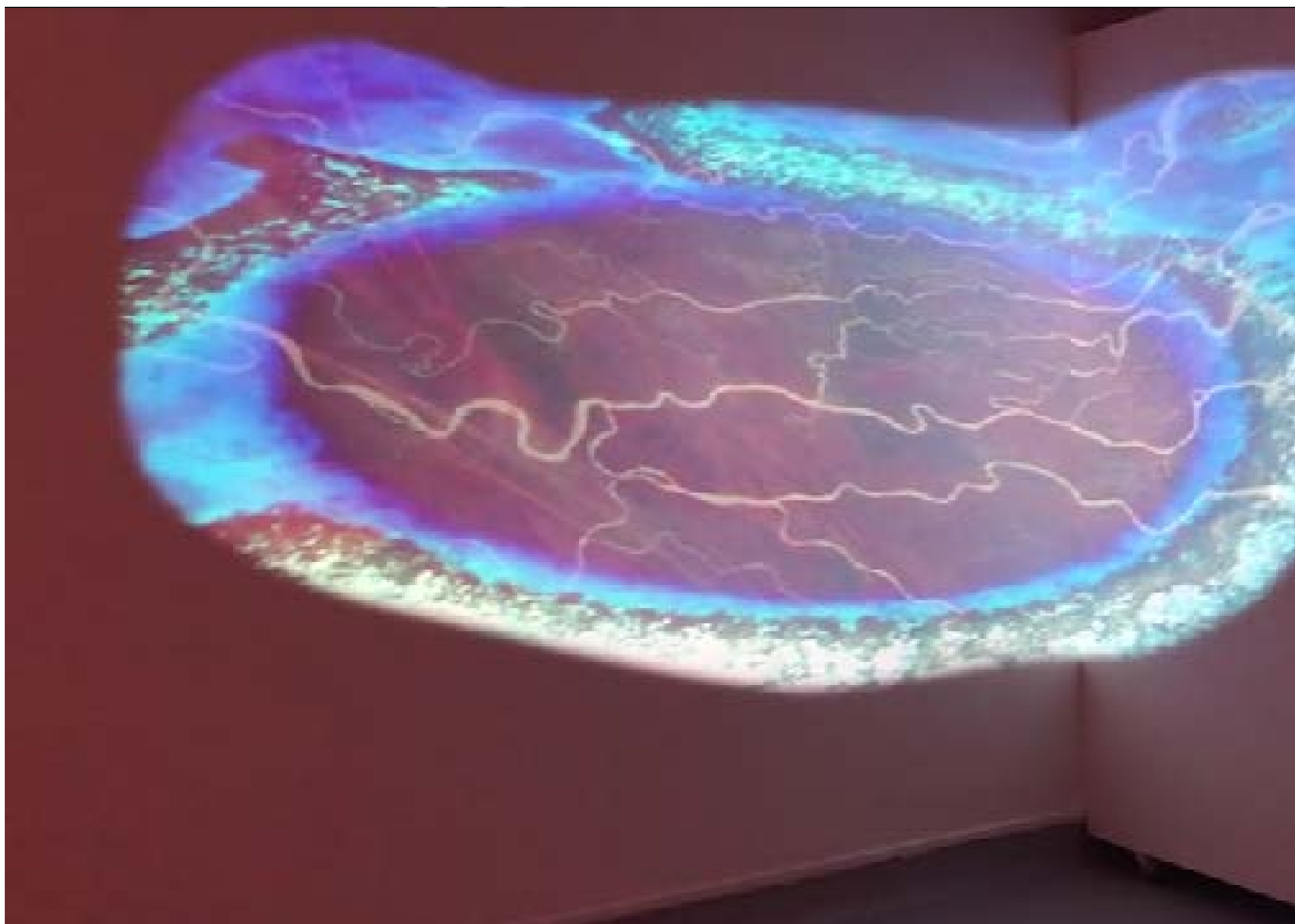


Figure 04:

Spectra on the Edge of Embodiment 1 & 2 [looped video installation] by Isla Griffin, 2017. Two Channel video projection with audio (6 minutes), room 10A19, College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Note: The artwork was filmed in situ as part of an exhibition where soundtracks from other art works are audible.

Video also available at idea-edu.com/media/2020/ideajournal_17_01_2020_Griffin_figure04.m4v.

acknowledgements

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biography

Isla Griffin's work explores the processes that occur on the edge of embodiment. Her art and writing reflects years of research into the multiple layers of existence, interior anatomies, surface topographies, body ecologies, and the invisible, mystical, energetic forces within which we live. The concept of 'wholism' linked to our place on the Earth and the beauty of nature's forms is the fuel for her creative pulse. She divides her time between studios in Cornwall, UK.

notes

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- 04** Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2012), 43.
- 05** Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 23.
- 06** Patti Smith, *M Train* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 52.
- 07** Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 207.
- 08** Lao Tze, *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*, trans. Jonathon Starr (London: Tarcher Cornerstone editions, 2001), 36.
- 09** Helen Chadwick, *Enfleshings* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), 109.
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