

# Dirty bodies and clean technologies: the absent abject body in media arts culture

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# **Dirty Bodies and Clean Technologies**

*The absent object body in media arts culture*

**Ian Haig**

**PhD Thesis, 2010–2013**

**UNSW, COFA, Media Arts**

**October, 2013**

## ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.'



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## **ABSTRACT**

My research explores why the abject body is not conceptualised within the idiom of media arts culture. Why is it missing and often edited out of the framework of art and technology? While media arts often rethinks the body and its augmentation and enhancements through new technology, the abject body is often nowhere to be seen. It would appear that the abject body has been disqualified as an aesthetic from the post-humanist paradigm of art and technology. In its place appears to be the transcendence of the body through technology, rather than the base level everyday reminder of our meat bodies. I explore what cultural conditions have led to the erasure of the abject from media arts culture. In addition I look at the cultural history of abject art and the abject body's relationship to the emerging mediasphere. My own studio work attempts to reactivate, reinsert and reconceptualise the abject body within contemporary media arts.

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# Introduction

My PhD research asks the question:

Where is the abject body within media arts culture?

For some time now a theory for the body within new media art culture has been developed, including the disembodiment, augmentation and extension of the body within emerging media. Such topics have been explored extensively by writers such as Lev Manovich, Darren Tofts, Mark Dery, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, Erik Davis, Roy Ascot, and numerous others. However, it is my proposition that with all this talk of the body and art and technology, a theory of the abject body within the genre is not present.

Much of my frame for thinking about the removal of the abject body from media art culture is premised on Julia Kristeva's seminal text *The Powers of Horror*, in which she summarises the abject as:

*...the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.<sup>1</sup>*

Winfried Manninghaus has made an interesting point concerning Kristeva and the abject:

*The reception of Kristeva's theory of abjection promotes a return to the real within the scholarship of literature and the arts that made use of Kristeva's term. Previous to this, the catchword 'posthistorie' had signaled a putative end of history; the talk of medial simulation and technological simulacra had signaled the end of conventional reality.<sup>2</sup>*

For visual artists working with abject themes during the 1990s, the return of the real was a return to the corporeal body. However today the foundations of art and technology see the absent and virtual body. 'The real' is now evidently located outside of the corporeal abject body, and instead is located in screen space, hyper reality and simulated mediaspheres.

The eradication and jettisoning of the abject body from the framework of art and technology appears to be as violent and absolute as the aesthetics of the abject body itself. Kristeva's theory on abjection is important here and will be elaborated on further in the following pages. However I also want to frame my thesis around ideas of materiality and the abject body and wider cultural references connected to the topic, including a range of artists and filmmakers who have explored the theme.

I feel it is also important to frame my research around notions of visual culture because abjection is primarily a visual response to an object or image. In this context my research looks to the body horror films of David Cronenberg and the texts of writer J.G. Ballard, whose novels are richly visual. Cronenberg and Ballard are two important figures that have provided a space for conceptualising the human body and its relationship to technology in highly visceral, abject and provocative ways. If we lack a theory of the abject body and its relationship to technology within the media arts it is Cronenberg and Ballard who can guide us through the viscera.

Cronenberg's notion of the body as an extension of the media landscape is explored in numerous films such as *Videodrome* (1983) and *eXistenZ* (1999). J.G. Ballard's rendering of the body and its psychopathological relationship to the technology of the automobile is a pertinent theme in *Crash* (1973). Both provide enduring and compelling meditations on the body and its relationship to technologies and the media environment.

Ballard, in particular, is an important and dominant voice throughout my thesis. His influence, observations, novels, cultural commentaries and interviews inform much of

my research. As Simon Sellers has pointed out, Ballard's novels and commentaries have fuelled writers such as Bruce Sterling, William Gibson and Mark Dery in their narratives and to develop a cyber discourse of the 1990s. Ballard's *Crash* is 'hailed as a proto cyber punk classic.'<sup>3</sup> Will Self has pointed out that Ballard 'carved out a new conceptual space for the emergent post modern world.'<sup>4</sup> However I would argue that Ballard's many observations, obsessions and commentaries around 'technology as a facilitator'<sup>5</sup> of hidden human impulses and latent human psychopathologies as it relates to the body and technology has made less of an impact on media artists' work.<sup>6</sup>

I am drawn to Matteo Pasquinelli's provocative observation that:

*The novels of J.G. Ballard can describe the nature of technology and the contemporary media scape better than any philosopher, media theorist or cultural studies academic.'*<sup>7</sup>

Pasquinelli speculates that while postmodernism was reduced to the notion of the linguistic sign, 'Ballard was left alone to map the new becoming of the media unconscious.'<sup>8</sup>

As Mark Dery has pointed out, Ballard was there before the hyper realities of Baudrillard and before deconstructionists like Derrida. 'Ballard was the first to ask how we became post human'.<sup>9</sup> Ballard's enduring projects like *Crash*, which he often describes as a 'psychopathic hymn',<sup>10</sup> distill our latent and hidden relations to the technological world. Ballard has clearly colonised my own imagination as an artist and provides the foundations for much of my studio-based projects and research.

Other important commentaries and writers who have influenced my research and who have informed my literature review include Mark Dery's meditation on the body and morbid anatomy and his critical earlier writings on cyber culture; Philip Brophy's exhaustive research into the body horrible and body horror; Carolyn Korsmeyer's illuminating analysis of disgust; Colin McGinn's exploration of the aesthetics of disgust in relation to the films of David Cronenberg; William Ian Miller's study of repulsion and

disgust in relation to death and contamination; and the writings of artist Mike Kelley, and writers Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille.

The developing discourse of cyber culture in the mid 1990s saw writers like Mark Dery begin to unpack the new digital landscape and legitimise it as a valid area of cultural studies. This moment in the early 1990s intersected with my own developing interest in new media art and combined with my ongoing interest in horror films. Some twenty years later, notions of body horror, abjection, and art and technology seem to me like a natural fit, a conceptual vantage point, a toolkit, to understand and consider our relationship to the developing mediasphere.

## ***Time frame***

My research is framed by four critical cultural moments. The following trajectory and history is outlined to form my argument around the absent abject body in emerging media arts practice:

1. The body horror genre of horror movies of the 1980s and their relationship to the body and technology.
2. The emergence in the 1990s of the abject art movement and a return to bodily themes in contemporary art practice.
3. The development in the 1990s of emerging new media art and its trajectory in Australia which ultimately saw the removal of the abject body and, in its place, a pre-occupation with the transcendence of the body in relationship to new technologies.
4. The return of the abject body as a site of extreme visceral sensation as a result of emerging technological developments in contemporary media, such as the internet, YouTube, DVDs and so on.

My thesis places my individual studio works in the context of the notion of body horror. The approach enables me a broader cultural discussion of the abject body and art and technology, which feeds into a discussion of my different studio works I produced during my PhD. My works reference the various themes of body horror, the technological uncanny, abject screen-based media, the uncanny cyborg, and the dead.

In my thesis I argue that the following have had little impact on the dominant culture of media arts and the genre of art and technology: the period of 1980s body horror movies and their focused and visceral themes of the body and the machine; the emergence and interest in abject themes of the body explored by various visual artists in the 1990s; the growing fascination in all manner of extreme and visceral bodies within the developing culture of the internet. My PhD is therefore premised on producing work and research that does exactly that which has been ignored. It draws a historical connection to such cultural markers of the abject body and feeds it into an art practice utilising art and technology.

A significant cultural moment occurred in the mid 1980s concerning ways in which the abject body and its connection to various forms of technology and media was considered. The appearance of various horror films in the 1980s, which would eventually constitute the genre known as 'body horror', prompted the journal *Screen* in 1986 to publish a number of seminal essays on the topic, including: Philip Brophy's 'Horrority –The textuality of contemporary horror films'; Peter Boss's 'Vile bodies and Bad medicine'; and Barbara Creed's 'Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection'.

The above essays and research in the area are significant because many of the horror films analysed in them are concerned with themes of the body and its invasive, destructive and perverse relationship with various technologies. Iconic body horror films such as *Alien* (1979) by Ridley Scott, *The Thing* (1982) by John Carpenter, and *Videodrome* (1983) and *The Fly* (1986) by David Cronenberg often position technology as having an invasive relationship with the body, often depicting the dissolution of the

physical and the machine. This can be seen, for example, in *Alien* and the discovery of an extraterrestrial form against the backdrop of bodily eruptions and a technologically sophisticated space vessel; *The Thing* with its discovery of a shape-shifting alien, where the body is the visceral site of both the cellular fusion and destruction of the alien species; *Videodrome* and the body as a visceral extension of the media landscape; and *The Fly* with the creation of a new mutant species of insect-human and the destruction/transformation of the body via modern technology. Indeed the depiction of the body hybridised with sophisticated technology has been a regular occurrence in the body horror film period from the 1980s and beyond. Yet such a messy and confronting amalgam of the body and technology never quite made it to the genre of media art culture and the idiom of art and technology. Even though this genre has consistently dealt with themes of disembodiment and the augmentation and extension of the body through technology, abject body horror has only existed on the periphery.

My research also looks at the mid to late 1990s and the rise of what can be described as abject art, including an interest in exploring bodily material, disgust, attraction and repulsion, and the uncanny. A key movement of this was when YBA (Young British Artists) artists like Marc Quinn, Jake and Dinos Chapman and others appeared in the *Sensation* show, an exhibition curated around the collection of Charles Saatchi held at the Royal Academy of Art in 1997. The other major exhibition that really put 'abject art' on the map occurred in 1993 with the Whitney Museum's exhibition *Abject Art*. Such an interest in abjection and a return to the body in contemporary art was occurring culturally at the same time as the developing media arts culture in Australia and the utopian promises of new technology. Almost as the complete cultural antitheses, the virtual body was being highlighted and the visceral, abject body in media arts in the mid 1990s onwards was being rejected, removed and replaced instead with the transcendence of the body, the narrative of posthumanism, the body as data, and the sanitised body. Technology, it seemed, was leaving the body behind. In addition I look at the close relationship of the abject to notions of the monstrous and an analysis of Mike Kelley's *Uncanny* exhibition staged at the Tate Liverpool in 2004 as a move away from notions of posthumanism, I also explore the technological uncanny in a range of works.

My research of emerging media art practice primarily concerns the last twenty years. While artists working with art and technology and research into the field clearly occurred prior to this period, to give my research some parameters and cultural context I have elected to relate it to this period. Further, the mid 1990s in Australia saw the release of the federal government's Creative Nation policy in 1994, which saw the media platforms and new technology of CD-ROMs, interactivity and the internet as a significant focus in the cultural sphere. The Creative Nation policy saw \$250 million put towards cultural institutions, with the primary aim of placing Australia on the global stage in its use of new information technologies.

The Creative Nation policy prompted an explosion of funding programs for the media arts in Australia in the mid 1990s. In retrospect I would argue that the strong relationship the sector has had with funding over the years has quite possibly resulted in the provocative, confrontational or abject being omitted from such funding models, for themes of abjection and disgust are hardly ones supported by cultural funding initiatives underwritten by a desire to support the development of the new, forward thinking and progressive enterprise of art and technology. There are clearly exceptions here, such as the early CD-ROM work of Linda Dement or VNS Matrix for example, amongst others.

In addition I discuss the developing interest in the 1990s of art/science crossovers and the sanitised, clinical body, which, in some respects, I see as providing the groundwork for the removal of the abject body from media arts culture. I also explore topics that take the conversation of the abject body and art and technology to more lateral areas, such as the uncanny cyborg, or an analysis of the art and technology practice of Stelarc and his denial of the abject body.

In the fourth chapter I discuss the developing media landscape of the 1990s and beyond and impact on a developing media arts culture. This includes the recasting of the body and technology in a utopian context in the pre-millennium and Y2K fervour of the mid 1990s, which resulted in various notions of the transcendence of the body. Key signifiers

include such cultural manifestations as the *Heavens Gate* cult, or the emergence of the techno rave scene in contemporary music, where the body occupies the site of ascension, transformation and transcendence or, in the words of the *Heavens Gate* cult, ‘*the level above human*’.<sup>11</sup> In the cultural context of the mid 1990s, media arts culture, in its embrace of all things digital, was leaving the body behind or at least the body was thought about in different terms. The shiny utopian promise of the new millennium, of technologically idealised states and the narrative of the future and newness, was appearing on the cultural radar.

I consider the return of the body as a site of abjection and J.G. Ballard’s notion of ‘*pure visceral sensation*’<sup>12</sup> via new technologies and the developing media landscape of 2013 and the era of [www.Rotten.com](http://www.Rotten.com), arguably the world’s most disgusting and disturbing website. In such a context, I examine how emerging technologies have provided us with the facilitator of the perverse, of visceral bodies, embarrassing bodies and extreme makeovers of YouTube, TV reality shows and the weirder and more extreme corners of the internet. While, on the one hand, we are enthralled by the abject and visceral body in popular media forms, the genre of media arts sidesteps, removes, disqualifies and consciously avoids the repellent, the uncomfortable, the disgusting and the abject.

I end my thesis with a discussion of the most abject of all material: the corpse. Here I unpack the notion of death and its interesting relationships to technology, contemporary media and the end of the body. I also reference a number of my works that have explored themes of the dead body and the reanimation of the corpse.

The above timeline and parameters frame my research and give it a particular focus and context. However at other times my research has explored other areas of culture, and its relationship to the body, abjection and technology, in order to extend the discussion and attempt to understand and articulate the absence of the abject body from art and technology practices.

The timeline follows an approximate chronological structure throughout the following chapters: *Body Horror* (1980s); *Abject Art* (late 1980s – mid 1990s); *Abject Art and Media Art* (mid 1990s onwards); *The Trajectory of Emerging Contemporary Media Art* (1998 – present); *The Contemporary Mediasphere* (2000 onwards); and, finally *The Dead* (1960s – present).

## ***Introduction: Studio-based approach***

In the early 1990s Laurie Anderson commented that the problem with virtual reality is that it lacks dirt. It lacks the grime, the residue of lived experience, and, most of all, it lacks the dirty reality of one's body. My aim is to insert the bodily dirt and fluids and the abject body back into a genre which so often shies away from it, ignores it and indeed disqualifies the abject as an aesthetic that has any kind of perceived value.

The operative words here are 'back in'. Abject art has a long history within the visual arts - artists have long used the material reality of their own bodies. Much of my research is premised on the notion of recapturing, rethinking and reanimating how such practices can inform the contemporary world of art and technology.

Simon Penny has pointed out that electronic artists can draw on the rich and vast history of 'Artistic knowledge bases' <sup>13</sup> including 1960s performance, Fluxus, happenings and installation art from the last forty years. With this in mind my thesis attempts to cast one's eye into the rearview mirror to see how artists over the last forty or so years, from practices such as performance art, body art and installation, have explored the theme of the abject body, often in quite radical ways.

Historically, the aesthetics of repulsion and the abject, and its close proximity to the uncanny, have largely occurred in the static visual art disciplines of photography, sculpture, figurative art, installation, painting, but less so in the emerging field of electronic and media art. Research surrounding notions of the 'uncanny valley', as put forward by Masahiro Mori<sup>14</sup> often occur in media art and in the areas of robotics and

CGI. However the Freudian world of the uncanny and the abject, somatic body appear less frequently.

A common trajectory of much electronic media art has been to secure an aesthetic that is removed from more base level concerns such as revulsion, the abject and a bodily aesthetic and, rather, more towards an aesthetic that distances itself from the body and its moist interior, in all its difficult, ugly and messy detail. The evolution of ever increasingly sophisticated technologies means that we leave the body further and further behind in the rush of the media vortex.

In some respects our bodies in 2013 are distributed through various vectors of media. Distributed through mobile phones, avatars and online identities, the body is no longer mapped as an isolated biological entity. The idea that technology has evolved our bodies and, in the process, eradicated the more lowly, primitive and messy aspects of the human animal body is perhaps one line of thought. The belief is that the human body will fully evolve from the stinking, shitting and wet organic body into a shiny, efficient and intelligent being, no longer held back by the corporeal and difficult reality of one's body. This utopian idea of technology accelerating our evolution, and the notion of post - and transhumanism, haunts the culture of media art. I argue that the rise of new technology has conversely made us more aware of the physicality of our meat bodies.

As Francis Bacon has expressed:

*We are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher shop I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal.*<sup>15</sup>

On our relationship with science and technology Carolyn Korsmeyer has pointed out that things like moral reason, abstract thought, culture, science and technology are what separates us from lower animals.<sup>16</sup> Technology is arguably the removal of the animal. In such a context, my own work attempts to reinstate not just the abject body, but the animalistic body, a reminder of the human body, that is pre-digital, pre-technology, pre-networks.

In some respects what is potentially more incompatible within the genre of media arts is less the abject body fused with technology but the abject which recalls and reminds us of the animal body, which is entirely and utterly at odds with the trajectory of forward thinking media arts culture.

As Georges Bataille has articulated:

*Ideas are prisons; the idea of human nature is the largest of the prisons: in each man, an animal is locked up... like a convict.*<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately we are animals that technology rescues us from (but also, conversely, technology returns us to the primitive world of visceral sensation as I discuss in Chapter Four). The notion of culture, society and technology repressing the animal in us is accurately expressed by Norman O. Brown:

*Man is the animal which represses himself and which creates culture or society in order to repress himself.*<sup>18</sup>

Arguably, disgust is a uniquely human emotion, not experienced by other animals, unlike anger, fear, surprise and joy which translate through to other species. Perhaps evolution has given us disgust as a way to recoil from aspects of our animal nature. Disgust protects us from descent into a bestial condition of vile degradation. Disgust keeps us human; to feel disgusted is to be human.

Taking this line of thought further, if the framework of art and technology sees the removal of disgust, in some respects it is also the removal of what makes us human. (Such an idea is explored in my work *The Joey Machine*, where disgust and the abject are actively used as a vector to signal the human within a cyborg fantasy of technology.)

This awareness of and confrontation with our own bodies is contemplated by J.G.

Ballard in *Crash*. Here Ballard connects the body and its implicit relationship to the technology of the automobile which resonates well with the premise of my research.

As narrator James Ballard contemplates:

*For the first time I was in physical confrontation with my own body.* <sup>19</sup>

In relation to *Crash*, Mark Dery points out how such a confrontation plays out in our engagement with the new media landscape:

*The car crash functions as a bracing jolt that reconnects us with our bodies – bodies that are part of a material reality that seem to be receding as we spend more and more time on the other side of the screen, be it the computer terminal, the television, or the video game.* <sup>20</sup>

Unlike the static visual arts it is the time-based and kinetic nature of media art and technology driven art practices which I believe can evoke notions of the abject in ways uncharted and unexplored. In addition to drawing on the dense history of the visual arts, my research also extends to the extremes of contemporary culture and the way in which the body has been conceptualised as material and its relationships to taboo, transgression, attraction/repulsion and the abject. This also includes consideration of the uncanny and the monstrous and how these provide a rich knowledge base for thinking about the body in the context of contemporary media arts and our increasingly hyper mediated world. The body is usually situated in media as being integrated with technology, of technology enhancing and landing on the body as a sophisticated spectacle and the idea of the body and technology as a utopian coupling. I am less interested in enhancing and improving the body, and with it the narratives of progress, positivity and advancement, and more interested in the multiple fissions that attraction/repulsion and the abject can offer. Instead I look for a relation with the wider themes of death, mortality, the corpse, disgust, disease, and the ever-changing definition of what it is to be human.

Such a research topic could extend to an inquiry into the concepts of aesthetics and representation, the ideological notion of ugliness, queer theory, gender studies or the social and political implications of the abject. However I have tried to steer my research towards the fundamental question of observing where the abject physical body is within contemporary media arts and specifically how it relates to art and technology. In this new digital world, the abject body is a retrograde idea, an outdated model, which appears incompatible with contemporary technologies and our engagement with them.

For filmmaker David Cronenberg, the body remains integral to his overall project, it is an absolute critical and corporeal reality. In my own work too, the focus on the abject body is ultimately a return to the body. This is the very thing that technology has increasingly removed us from - it has attempted to split our engagement with the world into mind/body divisions, as Cronenberg has articulated:

*Many of the peaks of philosophical thought revolve around the impossible duality of mind and body. Whether the mind aspect is expressed as soul or spirit, it's still the old Cartesian absolute split between the two. There seems to be a point at which they should fuse and it should be apparent to everyone. But it's not, it really isn't.* <sup>21</sup>

Within the context of art and technology, where the abject body is absent, any reference to the abject carries with it a certain degree of aesthetic impact and transgression simply because such themes are not part of the aesthetic language and history of art and technology. On the other hand, to introduce abject materials and themes into the world of visual art comes with a degree of historical baggage and familiarity, which potentially diffuses the abject subject matter. It is precisely the unfamiliarity of the abject in the worlds of media arts culture that amplifies its abject effect.

Kristeva's theory on the abject is largely concerned with the divisions we make, what we must '*thrust aside in order to live*' <sup>22</sup> The abject for Kristeva is essentially something one wants to avoid at all costs. Conversely my own research on the topic is premised

on the notion of reclaiming the abject. Mine is a project of inclusion not exclusion of the abject. My ultimate aim in my research is to position the aesthetics of the abject body as the ultimate truth of who and what we as a species engaging with the contemporary mediashpere of 2013.

This exclusion and non-admission of the abject body within the culture of media arts can be interpreted as not only a general intolerance to abject bodily material but, in a sense, a form of censorship of the body, where any kind of content that makes a viewer uncomfortable is of no value. As J.G. Ballard has pointed out when discussing the need for uncomfortable material and themes:

*Nothing is allowed to distress and unsettle us. The politics of the playgroup rules us all*

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As I outline, such abject aesthetics and themes can have value in ways not normally considered. The bigger question here for media arts culture is: what does it mean for a culture to omit material that is potentially ugly, challenging, disturbing, disgusting, negative and uncomfortable in place of material that is positive, sophisticated, affirmative, worthy and forward thinking? Is this the definition of a 'progressive culture'? The excessive nature of some of my works is an attempt to highlight and explore such issues.

Underpinning my PhD research is an argument that art practice is, first and foremost, informed by the culture it finds itself in, and that culture itself can be more radical and experimental than contemporary art. I maintain that one cannot talk about art unless one speaks of culture. My thesis therefore looks to culture more broadly and not simply to the outputs of various artists.

Throughout this thesis I refer to media arts and visual arts. By visual arts I refer to artists concerned with conventional media such as sculpture, drawing and installation. This is distinct to media arts which as a genre is concerned with the interface of art and technology, such as robotics, electronics, networks, programming, video and so on. I

take the definition of media arts used by the media art festivals Ars Electronica and ISEA (International Symposium of Electronic Art).<sup>24</sup> Both organisations outline 'electronic media arts' as an art form where the computer plays a significant and integral component in the artwork. In addition, the term media art is used to encompass: new media art, electronic art and art and technology practices, hybrid media, intermedia and so on. While there clearly is much crossover between the world of visual and media art - for example, in the area of video art - they nevertheless remain as two largely distinct genres of contemporary art practice with their own individual cultures and histories. In many respects I perceive the distinction between visual arts and media arts as an artificial and culturally formed construction, dictated less by artists and more by the framework of institutions supporting the art world, such as universities, curators, collectors, galleries, funding agencies and so on, but that is perhaps another thesis.

I would describe my own studio work as operating at the intersection of visual arts and media arts. Visual art discourses have always informed my media arts work and vice versa. My work could just as easily fulfill the criteria of a visual art practice as much as it does a media arts one. I see my work operating in the space in between; it is this grey, hazy area of media art/visual art where my research and studio work is located. Many of the projects completed during my PhD are informed by the abject, uncanny body and its relationship to the technological landscape that surrounds us, forcing us to ask questions such as: What is human? What is posthuman? What do the changing definitions of the body represent?

I have defined my studio work here as technological, even though many of the works do not appear explicitly like new media based works. However, they all utilise 240 volts to produce their aesthetic experiences, from simple electrical timers, to Arduino open source software and micro controllers, to electrical motors, simple robotic elements video and the internet.

Further, I use the terms bodily material, the body and biology frequently throughout the following pages. I do not mean these terms in a literal sense, as in the work of synthetic

tissue engineering seen in the work of various bio artists such as SymbioticA.<sup>25</sup> Rather, I refer to the prosthetic body, fake body parts, artificial organs and so on. This is an important distinction, for my work references the world of the cinematic prosthetic special effect as sculpture, not the use of real bodily materials. The fakeness of my materials is integral to the notion of the body horror movie made flesh. My imagination is not limited by real world constraints but allowed to roam free into even stranger, impossible, mutant, abject bodies. Prosthetic body parts might activate the imagination in ways that real biology possibly cannot.

My studio work too involves a number of sculptural works that are the scale of the human body. The artworks *The Joey Machine*, *Some Thing*, *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, *Night of the Living Hippy*, *Workshop of Filthy Creation* and *Melted Head Connected to the Internet*, all reference the dimensions of the body. *Night of the Living Hippy* is a body or at least a different kind of body - a corpse.

As much of my research is around the aesthetics of the corporeal human body, it makes sense that many of the works are of a bodily scale. The human body itself can be defined as a kind of sculpture, albeit one that we inhabit. The materiality and physicality of the sculptural object and our I:I relationship to it has been a key component of my studio work. This confrontation of the material object and its direct relationship to one's own body can be seen as the antithesis of much emerging media artwork, for often in new media based art there is no material to speak of. In such works one experiences mediated space, screen space and networked space with no direct link to the physical object of a body as a sculptural form.

The sculptural object engages the viewer in a different kind of process to that of 'representation' as it appears in the mediums of video and emerging digital media; within digital media one encounters a representation of the world mediated through the delivery system and medium that one views it in. Sculpture, on the other hand, is a physical object, a thing that exists in the world. In the context of the abject, the thing

itself, or at least a close approximation of the abject, becomes integral to the work as an object.

In order to focus my discussion, I should also clarify that my discussion of the abject body and media art, is limited to that of primarily gallery based culture. The body is well integrated with technology in the physical disciplines such as theatre, dance and performance art. These, however, are largely outside the scope of this thesis.

There also remains a conundrum of sorts within my PhD. My focus is on reclaiming the bodily material of the abject within media arts practice. I aim to ignite technology-driven art with monstrous forms, messy bodily fluids and the interior of the body. While such practices and approaches do exist with the media arts, they remain marginalised and, in some respects, misunderstood.

The conundrum that persists is that ultimately such approaches need to remain on the edges, and, in some cases, ignored, for the moment such practices are popularised, normalised or accepted they potentially cease to operate as provocative, transgressive, shocking or disturbing. The acceptance of such themes means that they are recuperated into the dominant media arts culture and, in so doing, lose their critical function. While on the one hand, I am questioning why such an aesthetic is incompatible with media arts and technologically driven works, in the same breath I feel such themes need to remain on the periphery.

Finally in my PhD the notion of 'the doctor' plays out in a lateral way through figures like Dr Frankenstein (*Night of the Living Hippy* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation*) and William Burroughs's own misguided Dr Benway of *Naked Lunch* (*Some Thing* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation*). This also includes Ballard's own conception of 'Hoodlum scientists' as the writer refers to them.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of the doctor in the context of my work and research takes on a potentially perverse meaning, incorporating a misguided practice, the abuse of science, the subversion of authority, and the mutation of the human body.

I have made a conscious decision in my studio-based work to manifest a more extreme level of aesthetic inquiry. While my art practice has always hinted at perverse humor, ugliness and transgression, I felt I needed to take my work to the excessive end of this spectrum - and then take it further still, and further still again. Such an approach, as seen in the horrible, bloody remains of a human body in works like *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, were necessary to extend the ideas of abjection and revulsion which form my research. I wanted to delve into the black hole of aesthetic abject revulsion and body horror to see where it took me.



**Figure 1. Ian Haig, *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, 2012 (kinetic sculpture)**

J.G. Ballard has argued that violence can be used to kick start the imagination: 'Psychopathy is the only engine powerful enough to light our imaginations.'<sup>27</sup> Ballard has also spoken of the inoculation of violence into culture in small doses,<sup>28</sup> with art performing such a function. While many of my works don't directly explore violence, all of the works nevertheless point towards a kind of aggressive aesthetic violence or, in the case of *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, the aftermath of violence. In addition, instead of repressing

such material, I want to understand it and make sense of it. What is the attraction and repulsion of this kind of material in the context of a technological framework?

I felt within the context of academic research and a PhD the material needed to be as transgressive and perverse as possible to preclude it operating merely as an illustration of a thesis. I wanted the work to function in its own way as a series of strong artworks which could operate without the scaffolding of the written thesis.

Such a process, however, means that any kind of abject material is ultimately recuperated. Indeed, this was a key aspect of my studio-based research; what momentarily may appear transgressive or disgusting is ultimately normalised. Like the horror film, which simultaneously scares us while our mind knows what we are being scared by is entirely constructed. I wanted to re-create this construction in the works – that is, for the works to operate as disgusting and horrific but also entirely fake. The outcome of this aesthetic approach is that we are revolted not by the material itself but what it signposts and, more so, the baggage that we bring to the material as a viewer.

I wanted to produce works that functioned as an extension to the written research in lateral and open-ended ways. There are particular ways in which language can't function, most notably the physical and visceral confrontation of the body. Rather than simply produce works about the abject and its relationship to art and technology, many of the works resonate with other cultural meanings, narratives and wider connections.

Taken together, the studio work and thesis form a conversation and narrative around my research question. Hopefully the reader's mind and imagination are activated as they read the thesis and see it clearly for what it is: an extension of the studio work and a way of talking about the artwork in a way that the artwork cannot.

Aesthetically I have tried to match the mutant bodily aesthetic in the works with the technology itself, which often take on malformed, ugly and crude functions. This is evidenced by mindlessly repetitive grinding motors to half-finished assemblages of

wires and servo motors where no attempt has been made to disguise the technology or to aestheticise it in any way. Here, technology is ultimately an activator and an enabler for a system of perverse ideas rather than the content of the work itself.

I was not really interested in pushing the technology side of things, to produce works that behaved realistically or naturally or in any kind of sophisticated way. I am interested in the crudeness of the technology, in the primitive nature of gears moving and electrical motors spinning, highlighting the mechanical, unnatural and the monotonous. I was conscious I didn't want the works to be a demonstration of technology and its possibilities, which is sometimes the experience of new media artwork. I almost wanted to sabotage the technology, to keep it in the realm of the primitive and basic so one couldn't see the work as any kind of display of sophisticated technology.

Many of the works employ different aspects of humour, indeed puerile, infantile and juvenile humour permeates much of the material. An influence here is Paul McCarthy's work, where infantile regression functions as a powerful unformed, pre-linguistic Freudian space of exploration for the artist.

Concerning humour in art, Marcel Duchamp observed in an interview in 1960:

*Humour is a great power ...a sort of saviour so to speak because, before, art was such a serious thing, so pontifical that I was very happy when I discovered that I could introduce humour into it. The discovery of humour was a liberation. Not humour in the sense of comedy...Humour is something... profound and serious and more difficult to define. It's not only about laughing. There's a humour that is black, which doesn't inspire laughter and doesn't please at all. It is a thing in itself, a new feeling so to speak, which follows from all sorts of things that we can't analyse with words.* <sup>29</sup>

Duchamp's notion of black humour which sits outside of language could possibly be activated by strange aesthetic combinations, inappropriateness and odd pairings of objects and materials. Humour can derive strangely from the abject, as a kind of emotional defense mechanism, 'a narrative of dismay.'<sup>30</sup> Such humorous possibilities run

through each of my works. This does not mean that the works are less serious as a result.

The juvenile, infantile and puerile aspects in my own work take on I believe another layer in the context of academic research and even another in the framework of art and technology. As outlined elsewhere in this thesis, contemporary media art positions itself at times in relationship to posthuman discourse, where the idea of new media art is played out against the backdrop of amelioration and progression. In such a context, my work's preoccupation with what is possibly perceived as juvenile material or infantile provocation and regression (including horror movies, gore or toilets) is, in evolutionary terms, stunted, its growth and development retarded.

Juvenile and infantile humour arguably occupies a close relationship with the abject, while bodily disgust remains an incompatible aesthetic within the fraternity of new media art; infantile concerns would appear to be entirely incompatible and backwards – the inverse of the forward-thinking culture of art and technology and new media art.

The notion of abjection, and its connection to the uncanny and its relationship with infantilism is highlighted by Freud;

*[The uncanny] is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and become alienated from it only through the process of repression.*<sup>31</sup>

The abject/uncanny in the framework of technology is a throwback, a return to a immature, primitive period of infantilism, a return to Freud's anal phase, of bodily fluids and matter. It is the antitheses of the trajectories of the future, of new possibilities, and increasing sophistication, which often underwrite much new media art and emerging technology-based practices.

Notions of devolution have played out in my art practice previously; however, within the context of the PhD and the topic of my research, the areas of juvenilia and infantilism take on a richer and more complex resonance. I aim to create a space where the binaries of serious/non-serious, backwards/forwards, regression/progression, immature/mature, dirty/clean, primitive/sophisticated can be considered.

In the context of abjection, humour is often activated; in some respects black humour functions as a safety net, an emotion that we can quickly and safely engage when confronted by the aesthetics of disgust. Rather than deal directly with the aesthetics of abjection, humour is superimposed on top of such material as a mechanism to help one deal with it.

In Australia since the 1990s, new media art has functioned as if it's year zero, as if we all have arrived as fully formed Macintosh users, bright-eyed and ready to shed the past and embrace the warm glow of the dawn of a new technological future. My own studio work heads in the other direction; it is literally an art and technology practice that is traveling backwards in order to understand the present. Back to Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s and to artists such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley and their exploration of unpopular culture and the abject; back to the UK of the early 1990s and artists like Jake and Dinos Chapman with their fascination with the transgressive writings of Georges Bataille; back through mid-1980s body horror movies first glimpsed on VHS and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* from 1983 and the bizarre possibilities of the fusion of technology and flesh; back to J.G. Ballard's perverse fusions of the body and technology of *Crash*; back through art history to the 1960s and performance artists using the material of the abject body; back to William Burroughs's compelling and mutant bodies of *Naked Lunch* from 1959; back to Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny from 1919; and, finally, back to childhood.

## ***Approach to PhD research***

My initial research questions concerned the aesthetics of ugliness and were I felt somewhat broad. I consequently rethought my research question to arrive at where I am now. My approach to the research has been a process of iterations - reading, small amounts of writing, reviewing of movies, more writing, research, studio work, reflections and so on. I soon felt that, in order for the research to make sense to me, I needed to write from the material, from the studio work itself. Therefore once I had completed a number of works, I found the writing came easier and in a more direct way.

My approach to the text has been one of writing to be read – that is, to be academic but also engaging, and energetic. The nature of my writing is at times biographical, sometimes observational and, at other times, academic. I have felt such a hybrid approach is part of the process of exploring ideas around hybrid media art. Peter Lunenfeld has expressed: '*Hybrid media require hybrid analysis.*'<sup>32</sup>

In writing the thesis I have been reminded of a quote from Jacques Derrida in relation to writers quoting him. In the documentary from 2002, *Derrida*,<sup>33</sup> the theorist warns that he didn't write for others to simply endlessly quote him, but to synthesize what he was saying and to bring their own insights to the conversation. This I feel is an important point for any kind of academic writing; I didn't simply want to cannibalise what other writers have articulated but, like my artwork, I wanted to present a strong and independent voice in my writing.

A turning point in my research occurred in 2011 when I visited the art and technology events Ars Electronica and also participated in ISEA in Istanbul. Viewing many of the media artworks on display really confirmed my belief that the abject body and ideas of disgust are largely absent from the framework of media art culture. I realised there is a real lack of media artwork that explores such terrain, and felt the door was wide open to explore such an area in detail within my research.

The incompatibility of the abject body within art and technology is ultimately an odd notion. Why the removal of the abject body? What does this removal mean and signify?

My thesis attempts to answer these questions. My thesis also contains many images as my research is primarily premised on an engagement with aesthetic material. I argue that the abject itself functions as a kind of extreme ocular excess. In the context of my research, seeing, viewing, staring and looking become critical and vital points of association and engagement as one is repulsed, disgusted and attracted to the abject aesthetics of the human body.

## Chapter I: Body horror

The early 1980s saw the development of the VHS home video market. This new technological delivery system coincided with an enormous surge in the release of exploitation, porn and horror movies including the emergence of neighbourhood video libraries stocking all manner of horror themed VHS titles. In some respects one could be forgiven for thinking this new media of VHS was specifically designed to distribute horror movies, so commonplace and familiar were they.

There remains an explicit link between the VHS format and the horror movie. At the same time many horror films were experienced via the new media of VHS, and numerous films exploited the occult fascination and horrific materiality of video, television, satellite transmissions and cable TV. Of particular note from this time is David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* from 1983, in which the videodrome signal is essentially a pirate satellite transmission copied to VHS video. Films such as *Poltergeist* (1982), *Halloween 3* (1982), *Terrorvision* (1986), and John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness* (1987) planted the idea in the popular imagination in the 1980s of horror and its direct link to the technologies of video and television.

It's compelling to realise that the confrontation with the body in such films was ultimately mediated through the portal of VHS video, providing a lasting connection between the body and the technology of the screen to emerge. As mentioned

previously, J.G. Ballard saw the emergence of technological media as a facilitator for various psychopathologies to come to the surface. Such a notion is particularly apparent in the fusion of video and screen violence which occurred in the video revolution of the 1980s, providing for a new kind of 'unknowable world'<sup>34</sup> of the body according to Philip Brophy:

*The screen body in contemporary horror is thus a true place of physicality: a fountain of fascination, a bounty of bodily contact. If there is any mysticism left in the genre, it is that our own insides constitute a fifth dimension: an unknowable world, an incomprehensible darkness.*<sup>35</sup>

An explicit relationship between screen technologies and the camera appears in David Cronenberg's short film *Camera* (2000) in which an ageing actor tells of a dream about watching a movie in a cinema with an audience as the film starts to age him. Having caught some kind of disease from the film, the movie starts to accelerate his age, bringing him closer to death. While *Camera* provides us with a meditation on the notion of death and photography, 'the recording of the moment is recording the death of the moment.'<sup>36</sup> The film summarises in a space of six minutes the idea of screen technology and the intimate and implicit relationship to the reality of the body; encompassing disease, ageing and death.

Cronenberg has playfully said that he 'first learnt how to make movies by dissecting a camera.'<sup>37</sup> Such an image provides us with the perfect metaphor of a filmmaker interested in the inner psychology and biology of a particular character: cinema as a science experiment, and the technological apparatus of the camera itself as an extension of our bodies.

Emerging out of the period of the early 1980s was a unique subgenre of the horror movie and a key entry point to my research: 'body horror'. A genre of the horror film principally involved the degeneration and destruction of the body through disease, mutation, parasites and decay. Body horror specifically gave us films that dealt with

visceral themes around the impact of technology on the body. Among the splatter, the gore, the disembowelments, the bodily eruptions and meltdowns, the crushing of bone, and exploding heads, body horror provided us with an insight into the corporeality of the body in profound and fascinating ways.

As previously mentioned, the journal *Screen* in 1986 published a number of critical essays on the topic at the height of the body horror period. Elements of these texts have informed the following chapters, in particular Philip Brophy's 'Horrority – The textuality of contemporary horror films'.

Brophy's extensive writing on the subject of horror has informed some of my thinking in regards to the genre. This was particularly so coming out of the 1980s when there was little informed critical analysis of the new wave of horror and exploitation cinema in Australia. Brophy touches on an important point in relation to the body and technology when discussing the film *Westworld* (1973):

*The body laid out in "Westworld" is transitional. It presents inner presence as a mass (and a mess) of technology. That inner presence is reconstituted in table-scenes in films like "Day of the Dead" (1986) "Re-Animator" (1985) and "Return of the Living Dead" (1985) as a mass (and mess) of biology. Forget the wonders of modern science and technology – we are more overwhelmed by our own gizzards!* <sup>38</sup>

This notion of being overwhelmed by our own biology is central to the confrontation of the body (and the relationship to our own body) that the horror film provides. In the context of a developing media art culture, it appears we are increasingly less confronted by our own bodies. As I hope to outline in this chapter, the horror film of the 1980s was an important cultural moment where the confrontation of the body was often conceptualised in relation to various forms of technology.

The body ultimately appears as a transient and fleeting structure that is hard to grasp. As Jean-Luc Nancy articulates: 'Body is certitude shattered and blown to bits.'<sup>39</sup> The contemporary horror film has seen the prolific trend of the corporeal reality of the

body and its destruction and the fear that emanates from the horror film plays less on our fear of death and more the fear of how one loses control of one's body. Jean Baudrillard has commented that the notion of imagining death has the effect of bringing the fatal event closer, and also to imagine cancer has the same effect on one's body.<sup>40</sup>

A major reference throughout this thesis and my studio work, and a clear example of ways of thinking through notions of technology, the body, the abject and disgust, is filmmaker David Cronenberg. His films are full of new kinds of bodily and machine interfaces. His films explore the ways in which we can consider technology, the body and its relationship to the human experience as well as the uncanny nature of contemporary hyper reality. Cronenberg's position as a filmmaker has embodied ideas of the aesthetics of excess, '*to show the unshowable and speak the unspeakable*,'<sup>41</sup> the notion of looking and seeing is central to Cronenberg's cinematic vision.

While the novel can clearly describe the interior of the body or a person turning into a fly or any manner of other bodily transformations, it is the fact that we see such impossible and unclassifiable bodies on screen which is central to Cronenberg's ocular excess. As Michael Grant has articulated, '*a mode of showing the horror rather than telling it*,'<sup>42</sup> Cronenberg's movies are first and foremost body-conscious whereby the first fact of human existence is essentially the human body. The body is the base level of everything in this respect.

As Francis Bacon has pointed out on the topic of the body as subject matter:

*I think art is an obsession with life after all, as we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves.*<sup>43</sup>

William Beard has explored the notion of the violation of the body envelope and the critical idea of its confrontation with the horror genre. This lends itself to a wider idea of how we can think about the notion of abjection in art.

*The concept of violation is central to the horror genre. Those things that are found most objectionable in the horror film are the most central to its existence – it is not sufficient merely to refer to such feelings, to observe them from a distance or to encounter them only in their sublimated forms, because as anything other than direct audience shared feeling they are simply unavailable to the conscious mind.* <sup>44</sup>

Notions of disgust and the films of Cronenberg have also been explored by Colin McGinn, specifically the idea that film deals in ‘cinematically pictured disgust’. <sup>45</sup> Film, in fact, allows us no escape, it allows us to wallow in the disgusting and the horrifying, even though at the same time we are removed from it and kept at a distance, with no chance of actual contamination. As McGinn makes clear:

*Our emotion is actually not that of disgust proper but only an artistically transformed simulacrum of it - quasi-disgust as we might call it.* <sup>46</sup>

Cronenberg’s films are fundamentally about a kind of confrontation with the body, and the dissolution and violation of boundaries between the real/artificial, human/non human, organic/technological, hardware/software which, like much of my own work, is confronting precisely because such dissolutions are destabilising, shocking and unsettling to the norm.

Cronenberg’s vision of the mutating body fused with technology is unapologetically excessive, and this aesthetic extreme is a direction some of my own studio work has taken. In my work dead bodies are reanimated, the body exists as a pulsating unclassifiable form, and there are unseen bodily fluids and organs. Or as artist and filmmaker Christoph Schinglinseif put it so succinctly in an interview when discussing visual excess in his art practice: ‘*it is only through excess that one reveals the truth of the world.*’ <sup>47</sup>

The visions of J.G. Ballard no doubt had an impact on Cronenberg as a director. The body horror films of Cronenberg and Ballard’s own ‘psychopathic hymns’ share the same

nervous system. This was explicitly seen in Cronenberg's adaptation of Ballard's novel *Crash* in 1996, perhaps one of Cronenberg's most disturbing films, which fused Ballard's psychosexual narrative with the director's own sensibilities.

Many of Cronenberg's films signaled the way for a new kind of horror movie to emerge where the spotlight was put on the body itself and its horrific materiality - the horror of the internal body, the horror of medical science gone wrong, the horror of disease and the horror of technology and the body fused into one organism. In their own way each reveals a truth about the world and our place in it.

If we believe in the transhumanist and posthumanist discourses that argue that human evolution will be radically enhanced by technology, such a radical transformation of who and what we are can perhaps only be rendered in art in ways that are violent, confrontational, extreme and excessive.

In the translator's preface to Ernst Jentsch's *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* published in 1906 it is pointed out that Freud begins his essay on the uncanny, first published in 1919, with a sense of complaint that aesthetics has paid little attention to the repulsive and the aberrant. This concern was echoed by Cronenberg some sixty years later. Cronenberg put forward the view that the ongoing attraction and repulsion towards the body means that culturally we have an aesthetic classification for the exterior of the body, yet we lack one for its interior.<sup>48</sup> We never talk about, for instance, the most outstanding liver or the most beautiful spleen. Cronenberg's view is that we remain 'incomplete' as a species as we cannot deal with the internal viscera of our own bodies. Indeed the cultural perception of the body exists in a schizophrenic state. Internal human organs and excreta are instantly signified as repulsive once they leave the body, but within the body they are not.

Cronenberg has articulated the significance of the body within his own 'body' of work:

*I insist on returning to the body because I feel so much of human culture is an attempt to flee the body, that we do want to be disembodied, to not acknowledge it and not deal with it, and really not to place it at the centre of our reality, but I think that it is.* <sup>49</sup>

Cronenberg's body horror merges the line between attraction and repulsion and sees that such distinctions are irrevocably blurred, his films reveling in the collapse of divisions of the abject and non-abject and, more importantly where the lack of such divisions take us as a viewer. For Cronenberg the body is a polymorphous inside-out entity, his films show how the body literally becomes part of the mediasphere (*Videodrome*, *eXistenZ*) to having multiple functions and genders or latent and repressed psychologies (*The Brood*, *Rabid*) or new forms of sexuality (*Crash*), a place where beauty, the abject, repulsion and hallucinogenic states co-exist on their own terms.

Cronenberg has gone on to say that the aesthetic of the inside of the human body triggers disgust in most people. As the director puts it: *'if you develop an aesthetic for it, it ceases to be ugly, I am trying to force the audience to change its aesthetic sense.'* <sup>50</sup>

Cronenberg's films therefore become exercises in aesthetic reprogramming, each film providing a case to look past the abject repulsiveness unfolding on screen and see it for what it is.

As Linda Williams has argued:

*Contemporary horror has specialised in making the inside visible, opening it up and bringing it out and pushing the spectacle of interiority to the limit to find out what the limit is.* <sup>51</sup>

I will discuss a number of Cronenberg's body horrors, in particular *The Fly* and *Videodrome* which have had a longstanding impact on my practice. These films re-think the body and its visceral relationship to various forms of technology and media, in particular the body as a mutant extension and outgrowth of various forms of technology.

Cronenberg's consistent catalogue of body horror films explore such limits. A common feature of films such as *Crimes of the future* (1970), *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1980), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988), *Naked Lunch* (1991), *Crash* (1996), and *eXistenZ* (1999) is that they have positioned the body into a space where it is literally turned inside out, complete with bizarre orifices, weird growths, new sexual organs and abject bodily eruptions. There are also technological and bodily mutations where we can consider the body as an evolved form and development of the mediasphere. Both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, function as 'bookends' of the emerging media worlds - at the start of the 1980s it was *Videodrome* and the domestic video revolution, and at the end of the 1990s it was *eXistenZ* with game culture and ideas of virtual screen space. Both films deal in the confusion and blurring of the body and technology, an ambiguity over where the body ends and the media landscape begins - *Videodrome* with its tumor-induced mediated video realities and *eXistenZ* with its blurring of the body and game-induced virtual realities and disembodiments.

In relation to Cronenberg's extreme ocular excess and its relationship to biology and technology, it is perhaps the image of the baboon experiment in Cronenberg's *The Fly* which remains in the mind long after the movie has finished. The scene depicts a baboon traveling through a telepod, its body literally turned inside out. It is an almost impossible image for us to apprehend, as we watch the inverted baboon lay quivering, still alive. As a viewer, one imagines that if this is the result for the baboon's body, what would happen if a human traveled through Cronenberg's telepod? How would the human body appear as a living being turned inside out? Such an abject concept becomes unimaginable (as I will discuss later, such a scene provided the inspiration for my work *Some Thing*). *The Fly* then proceeds to show us the unimaginable made flesh as a scientist slowly transforms into a fly. The final, incomprehensible image of *The Fly* depicting the human together with the telepod in a fusion of flesh, technology and insect.

The telepod in Cronenberg's *The Fly* is an apt metaphor for the technological apparatus of film itself, which sees the transformation of the body within Cronenberg's unsettling

fiction. *The Fly* realises the notion of the body as a shell, a vessel, a host able to give birth to a new species from within. *The Fly* is a film that has as its centre all manner of fissions of the interior, exterior body, bodies turned inside out, bodies growing from within other bodies, and monstrous bodies being born, all underpinned and facilitated by the advanced technology of the telepod.

The telepod for Cronenberg is a highly advanced, experimental and sophisticated technological project with its promise of producing profound changes to life as we know it, a technological portal to the unknown. As the narrative of *The Fly* unfolds, this portal opens a dystopic future of the body. As Brundle Fly exclaims in the film, 'to change life as we know it'.<sup>52</sup> *The Fly* provides us with an image of an entirely new species of human. Further, the transformation into a fly is potentially one of the most despised of all creatures - the fly is an insect which defines abjection with its association with excrement, rotting matter, death and maggots. The transformation in *The Fly* is a transformation into a wholly abject body.

Cronenberg's interest in the transformation of the body, and various technologies, finds its manifestation in what the director calls 'The New Flesh'. The ending of *Videodrome* announced the notion of *Long live the new flesh*. As the televisual version of James Wood's character dies with a gun to his head, so too does his flesh version die moments later. Here, the new flesh is a state which confuses the real and video version of one's body as the same.

The new flesh for Cronenberg is a malleable adaptable material, a kind of newly evolved, posthuman, mutant flesh/technology viscera of the body, a flesh that adapts to the media landscape. *Videodrome* is a key film in the context of my research. In it the body literally mutates into the contemporary media environment including vaginal video tape slits in the stomach, video hallucinations, and TVs and videocassettes that appear as organic flesh-like material. Here we see the merging of hardware (technology) to software (the body) and vice-versa. Such bodily transformations Philip Brophy describes as 'Black holes, which are possible entrances into other unknowable bodies.'<sup>53</sup>

Ultimately the horror in Cronenberg's body horror is that of a boundary disruption; the dissolution of the physical and the technological. As Peter Ludlow has made clear, it is when the lines between human/non-human, biological/mechanical, and virtual/real all collapse that is so disturbing and frightening.<sup>54</sup> The breakdown of boundaries between the organic/technological is a key motif of the body horror film, and also my own work. Technology is conjoined with the physical, thereby creating not just a composite of the two, but a new kind of material, one that we have no real category for.

The contemporary horror film has presented to us a range of impossible and unknowable bodies: the body turned inside out, but also the body expanded, shrunk, mutated, melted - the body literally as a malleable material remolded and reshaped via modern technology. No account of the contemporary horror film and its relationship to the abject qualities of the internal human body would be complete without a discussion of John Carpenter's seminal body horror remake of *The Thing* (1982), a substantial entry into the catalogue of body horror and a major influence on a number of my projects.

A re-imagining as opposed to a remake, – of Howard Hawkes's, *The Thing* (1951), John Carpenter's *The Thing* represents a new species of horror centred directly on the horrific potential of the body. The film is included in my discussion because it directly explores themes of the body and technology but also because of its extreme and visceral transformation of the body from an outside agency that is exterior to the body.

The disturbing premise of the movie is manifested in *The Thing* itself, an alien microorganism that can replicate anything it comes into contact with. This means that everyone in the film is a potential alien host. In *The Thing*, the alien species has arrived hundreds of years before via the futurist alien technology of an interplanetary space craft buried deep in the ice in Antarctica. The sophisticated and advanced intergalactic alien species provides us with its aesthetic opposite: they are bodily, messy, wet and horrific.

In one particularly gruesome scene, *The Thing* microorganism has invaded a dog, which is in the process of a visceral transformation between species: it becomes both dog and

alien, the result being something beyond our visual apprehension. The inside-out body of this particular scene - of part dog, part massive pulsating flesh monstrosity – means that the horror that registers is more about the incomprehensibility of what we are seeing, a horror that falls outside of our classification of what the body should be. Like the Baboon experiment in Cronenberg's *The Fly*, this scene in *The Thing* occurs early in the movie, giving both the audience and the members of the remote Antarctica outpost in which the movie is set an indication of what lies ahead, it foreshadows that we are about to enter into the unknown territory of the horror of the human body. Or as film critic Nigel Andrews described the scene; '*wild animated bouillabaisse of dogs' snouts, bits of limbs, distorted human faces, flailing intestines, spines and tails.*'<sup>55</sup>

The location of *The Thing* also contributes to our reading of the premise of the film. We are at the edges of the known world, an isolated research base, thousands of miles from anywhere. This location is an apt metaphor for the terrain of the human body - we are in uncharted territory, at the limits of what we understand of the body.

Talking specifically about Cronenberg's cinema, Linda Williams has expressed that:

*Death becomes simply the body's victory over individual agency, as it mutates into a dazzling array of life forms in decay.*<sup>56</sup>

Williams's comment is also accurate when contemplating how death is depicted in *The Thing*. Further, as Marie McGinn has articulated:

*The death of a human being does not leave us with the 'thing' half of the previously coexisting body and mind, but at death the human body becomes a thing, an object that is inaccessible to psychological description.*<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 1. Ian Haig, *Some Thing*, 2011 (kinetic, robotic sculpture)**

Such comments are accurate when thinking of the body horror of *The Thing*, as death transforms into something that is beyond death. My own work *Some Thing* references this notion of the unclassifiable body. The piece is a key work of my PhD research, which directly references the body horror of *The Thing* - of the body arrested in a state of visceral transformation from one thing to the next.

More recently the theme of *The Thing* has migrated to the world of emerging technology. As a way of promoting the re-make of *The Thing* in 2011, a *Thing* iPhone app was released, providing users with the ability to infect themselves, causing one's head to split open and a chunk of their face to melt away. Here the visceral meets the digital and is a clear example of how such an aesthetic is probably more embraced by popular culture and mass entertainment than the worlds of emerging media art culture.

The final film I want to discuss within the context of body horror and its relationship to the body and technology is Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). I have always viewed *Alien* as the

antidote to a film like *Star Wars* made two years earlier. *Alien* provides the visceral, dark, bodily, moist unclean to *Star Wars* clean, sanitised and brightly lit world of sci-fi.

Barbara Creed has suggested that a film like *Alien*, with its various imagery of impregnations, birth and rebirth, encapsulates ideas of the 'monstrous feminine' .<sup>58</sup> In the beginning of the film the crew have been cryogenically frozen for the voyage back to earth. The ship's 'mother' computer wakes them up and they are reborn into a sterile, sanitised controlled environment. In such a context technology has banished the abject altogether. This is in contrast to some later scenes, which see the infant alien burst through the chest of a crew member - here birth is depicted as a horrifying and abject experience.

*Alien* was an important visualisation of Science Fiction that was non-utopian, and in which the idea of a sophisticated future, depicted as seamless, pristine and welcoming, was viscerally attacked, and re-thought. The notion of a sci-fi dystopia is a familiar one in cinema, often where technology is cast as the facilitator of control, manipulation, oppression and bodily intervention. This is the inverse of the common ideas within digital media art culture where technology is a wholly positive, sophisticated and, in some cases utopian construct.

In 1986, *Alien's* sequel, *Aliens* provided us with another instance of the body cast against the backdrop of technology, in this case machines. As the muscly, sweating, visceral body of the film's main character - Ripley operates the giant mega-exoskeleton, in which her body is extended through machinery - flesh and muscle becomes one with hydraulic pumps, pistons and valves.

*Alien* and *Aliens* were entirely bodily but, more specifically, bodily material fused with technology and machines in ways that were dark, disturbing and horrific. This was a new kind of depiction of our technological future, one that was entirely dystopian and violently visceral. H.R. Giger provided the original designs for *Alien* and with it the blueprint of the biological fused with the mechanical in startlingly original and disturbing ways.

The notion of advanced technology removing any evidence of the abject is seen in the sanitised deep sleep chamber of *Alien*, from which the crew ultimately wake into a living and very visceral nightmare. This is a point I would like to explore more. The notion of the dichotomy of advanced technology coupled with its opposite, the bodily, is important within the context of an emergent media art culture. Unlike body horror films, technology within the media arts appears to function as a cultural eradication device of the abject. In fact, the more sophisticated, the more expensive, the more advanced the technology, the more extreme the eradication.

As Alessandra Lemma has argued:

*Technology de-abjectifies the human body, banishing the messy, internal body and its expelled or leaked fluids. It creates distance from our organic nature and limitations, protecting us from the crude reality.*<sup>59</sup>

To take this line of thought further, Mike Kelley has discussed the original 1950s depiction of aliens, which were often represented as blob monsters. Kelley has explored the unusual aesthetic relationship of the slimy blob monster and the high-tech nature of the spacecraft. This is an aesthetic mixture of the abject and technological, which he described as:

*'The meeting of high-tech fetishism and symbolic body loathing.'*<sup>60</sup>

For Kelley the two aesthetics of the primordial appearance of the unformed alien appearing in numerous cold war 1950s science fiction movies, and the utopian high-tech nature of the spacecraft, is a difficult aesthetic to reconcile. The two aesthetics are so radically different, how can they co-exist with one another? The reading of the blob alien appears that much more abject in direct relation to the high-tech aesthetic it is combined with.

Such an idea can be manifested in the context of art and technology through the combination of the bodily, messy abject aesthetic combined with the metallic, shiny, ordered and slick appearance of various technological hardware. Each is polar opposite to the other, so much so that we cannot contemplate them within the same context; they appear to be categories that need to be kept separate.

The period of cold war science fiction and horror films of the 1950s, often featuring blob monsters, viewed science and technology as separate from the body. The monsters of Japanese horror films in the 1950s such as *Godzilla*, *Mothra* and *The Smog Monster* were clearly descendants of the atomic bomb and radiation fallout. The alien, the monstrous, the unformed, the blob, all were the by-products of science and technology gone terribly wrong.

As J.G. Ballard has outlined, Hiroshima and Auschwitz completely changed the image of science. Prior to such events there was a relentless optimism '*that science was going to re-make the world.*'<sup>61</sup>

Some thirty years later, the 1980s cycle of body horror films began to recast the role of science and technology. Here the external met the internal. Technology that was normally separate from the body was migrating and merging with biology so the two become indistinguishable as explored in such films as *Videodrome*, *The Fly* and *eXistenZ*. Science was no longer an exterior agency, it was also transforming notions of the body.

Now our bodies are increasingly becoming extensions of the media environment. William Gibson has articulated '*the physical has been colonised by our technologies to a degree.*'<sup>62</sup> Our identities and biologies now extend into the framework of the screen and the mediasphere.

The cultural association of the horror film as a low form arguably causes many artists to remove themselves from such a genre. Media art is often conceptualised as and clearly pays lip service to a more high art ambition, an academic and intellectual project that denies such a lowly common denominator form as the horror film and its messy bodily

rumblings. The low and high art divide has been challenged in contemporary art discourse, however, it would appear the association of the abject body, gore, horror and science fiction films still fall into the category of low art, some thirty years after their release.

Mike Kelley refers to the binaries of the art world not as high and low, but as '*allowable and repressed*.'<sup>63</sup> He argues that the official art world allows and engages a certain kind of art practice and represses another. If one considers abjection, disgust, and repulsion as signifiers of the low, the barbaric, the uneducated and base level, they too are forms that are repressed within culture. Media arts it would seem operates at the other end of the cultural spectrum - of high art, sophistication, good taste, beauty, education and the academic institution.

The body horror film has become a subject of cultural studies. Over the last three decades, cultural theorists and commentators have literally pulled apart the body of the horror movie, to understand how it functions in relationship to sexuality, the body, technology, gender and so on. Such cinematic terrain is still nevertheless often misunderstood, discounted as B-grade and trash cinema, terms employed to try and position such cinema as clearly operating outside of the confines of more mainstream movies, and also to culturally belittle it.

However the films discussed here such as *Alien*, *Videodrome*, *The Fly* and *The Thing* are not trash or B-grade in the true sense of the word. *Alien* in particular, with its multi-million dollar budget is hardly B-grade. I argue these films are complex, dense and compelling cultural markers and examples of how one can consider the relationship of the human body, the abject and their relationship to various kinds of technologies.

Finally, body horror has depicted interiors exposed and ruptured, as well as the complete and utter violation of the body envelope. The horror movie is a critical aesthetic reference throughout my thesis and studio-based work, as a form which complexly engages with the abject body in ways that the static object can never hope to. The horror movie hangs like a cloud over my research, its schisms of interior/exterior,

dead/alive, attraction/repulsion, human/non-human, flesh/technology and low/high circulating throughout much of my work.

## ***Special effects in cinema and the uncanny***

I will now turn my attention to the nature and uncanny materiality of the prosthetic special effect, which my work specifically draws on.

The horror movie often features sophisticated technology in the form of animatronics, robotics, CGI, digital compositing and special effect prosthetics. These are highly utilised to simulate the body transforming - being brutalised, decapitated, or destroyed. There remains a strong link between the technological production processes of the horror movie and its relationship to the body. Hollywood's hype around state-of-the-art digital effects and technology becomes a form of marketing for such films. The aesthetic of high-end technology and the visceral destruction of the human body has colonised our imaginations over the years.

Julia Kristeva has put forward the idea that the uncanny is an important effect of the abject. Both deal with the notion of foreignness. Kristeva argues that the uncanny effect introduces a degree of '*foreignness to ourselves.*'<sup>64</sup> It plays a crucial role in rendering otherness not as an isolated characteristic but a universal one. Such a concept of the uncanny finds a particular resonance in prosthetic special effects within the horror film.

The uncanny (which translates in German as *unheimlich* or un-home-like) is closely linked to the abject, hence its inclusion here. The uncanny creates a kind of cognitive dissonance, but the abject is potentially more violent than the uncanny. Like the abject we are attracted to the uncanny object but also repulsed by it; we reject rather than rationalise. The uncanny was first identified by Ernst Jentsch in 1906, when he defined the uncanny as being a product of '*intellectual uncertainty.*'<sup>65</sup>

The notion of the prosthetic special effect and its association with the uncanny is something my own PhD studio work has attempted to explore specifically through kinetic sculptural works which operate as uncanny/abject cinematic objects. In many respects one cannot speak of the abject without a reference to the uncanny.

Hollywood prosthetic special effects also have a place within the category of the uncanny. The very name 'prosthetic' references an artificial body part, the stand-in, an extension that replaces a missing body part. Often special effect models and prosthetics are only ever designed to be seen in the context of the film and are often destroyed afterwards or destroyed in the process of filming them. Made of materials like foam-latex and silicon, which are known not to last, such prosthetic models seen out of the world of the film, have a corpse-like quality about them - they become cast out, uncanny objects that are not of this earth and don't belong.

This uncanny nature of special effect models was made most apparent to me on visiting the movie memorabilia collection of Forest J. Ackerman in Los Angeles in 1999. Ackerman was famous as editor of the magazine *Famous Monsters of Film Land*. In the 1960s he turned his Hollywood Hills home into an overloaded museum of science fiction and horror film memorabilia. His collection housed all manner of props, costumes, rubber suits and prosthetic special effects that one had only glimpsed from films. To experience such models and special effects in his collection, as the harsh Los Angeles summer sun beamed through the window, was indeed strange. Many of the special effects were used as stand-ins for real people and real body parts. Divorced from the living, these special effects became eerily uncanny.

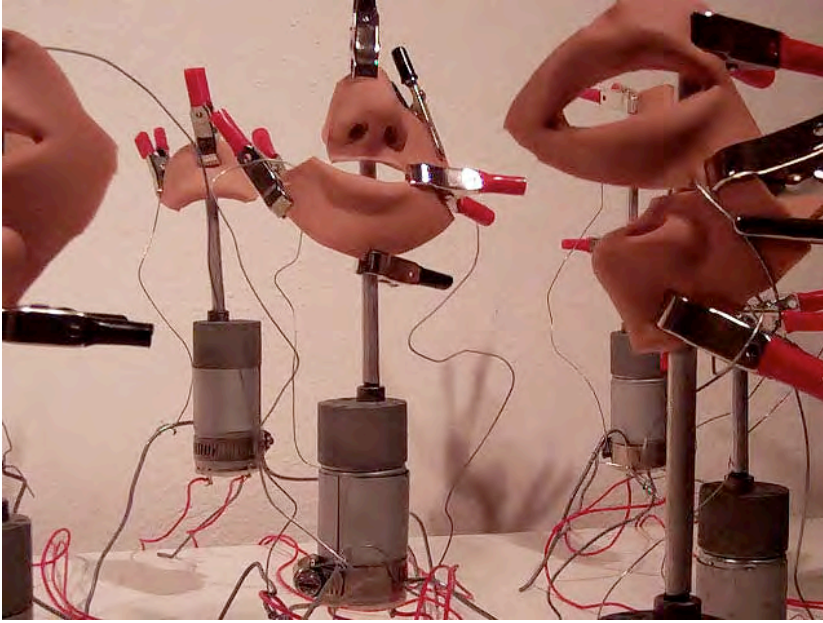
The notion of the internal body and the real body, and their confusing and uncanny perceptual differences, can be found in the notion of horror movie special effects. As Mark Dery has expressed, in connection to the over-familiarity of prosthetic horrors as seen in the special FX make-up work of Tom, in films such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*:

*The real internal body in autopsy documentaries and operation footage seems less real than the prosthetic corpses seen in horror movies, the real dead body, with its open wounds almost banal in comparison.* <sup>66</sup>

This perceptual confusion is also challenged by the advent of CGI (Computer Graphic Imaging) special effects, which now often replace the more traditional prosthetic bloody bodies that have been the standard approach to depicting the body in horror movies for some decades now. We know CGI is not real, therefore how can it disturb us? How can it trigger emotions of revulsion and disgust? This is unlike the prosthetic special effect, which appears less obviously artificial and synthetic.

The prosthetic special effect is tactile, its visceral appearance has a sense of mass, volume and texture that is entirely bodily. In many films the use of animatronics, stop motion animation, and prosthetic effects as opposed to CGI, can create a powerful illusionary space, a dreamlike, fantastic nightmarish space. CGI effects are not of the body, they lack the tactility and weirdness of real flesh and the notion that what we are seeing is actually happening to a real physical body. CGI is a rendering, an interpretation, of realism. The prosthetic effect can disturb in ways that CGI, for all its hyper reality, cannot.

My projects *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, *Some Thing*, *Night of the Living Hippy*, and *Workshop of Filthy Creation* not only reference cinematic titles in their names but playfully engage in the uncanny prosthetic special effect object as abject matter. *Some Thing* takes its visceral aesthetic from the horror movie. It literally appears like an animatronic prosthetic body from a film. One expects to see such an object within a film and not the real world. This dislocation from an imaginary space to a real space provokes an uncanny response for the viewer.



**Figure 2. Ian Haig, *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, 2011 (electronic, kinetic sculptures)**

Many of my works use the prosthetic effect from the world of film and re-think it as kinetic and electronically mediated sculpture. In this context Philip Brophy has highlighted the unique role of *Tokusatsu* (special effects) films in Japan, in particular 1960s and 1970s *Godzilla* and *Ultraman* movies with their intricate craftsmanship and toy-like appearance. These sets and models are obviously fake within the fake world of the film. As Brophy suggests; '*Tokusatsu developed more like a form of cinematic theatre*'<sup>67</sup> which acknowledged and embraced the artificiality of the cinematic experience.

Works of mine that operate in a similar way include *Night of the Living Hippy*, with material of the corpse literally purchased from a Los Angeles special effects supplier and its reanimated B-grade horror from the grave, and *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, with its rattling and manic movement reminiscent of a cheap effect in a movie. Not only do many of my works circulate with cinematic references, they attempt to playfully engage that uncanny space that is unseen and hidden from view. In this case, the special effect is divorced from the medium of film, finding itself in the real world as if it has arrived from another reality. The prosthetic special effect is customarily not intended to be viewed for an extended period but to be seen only fleetingly within a film at twenty-five frames

per second. Consequently its appearance in the real world as kinetic sculpture provides a kind of uncanny displacement.



**Figure 4. Ian Haig, *Night of the Living Hippy*, 2012 (electronic, kinetic sculpture)**

This uncanny effect is often apparent in the behind the scenes section of the DVDs of particular horror movies, whereby the realistic prosthetic effect is revealed on the set, surrounded by technicians and cameras, and often filmed on video. All of this contributes to a reading of the special effect as being outside of the world of the film, caught in between a space of the real and the illusionary, the dead and the alive.

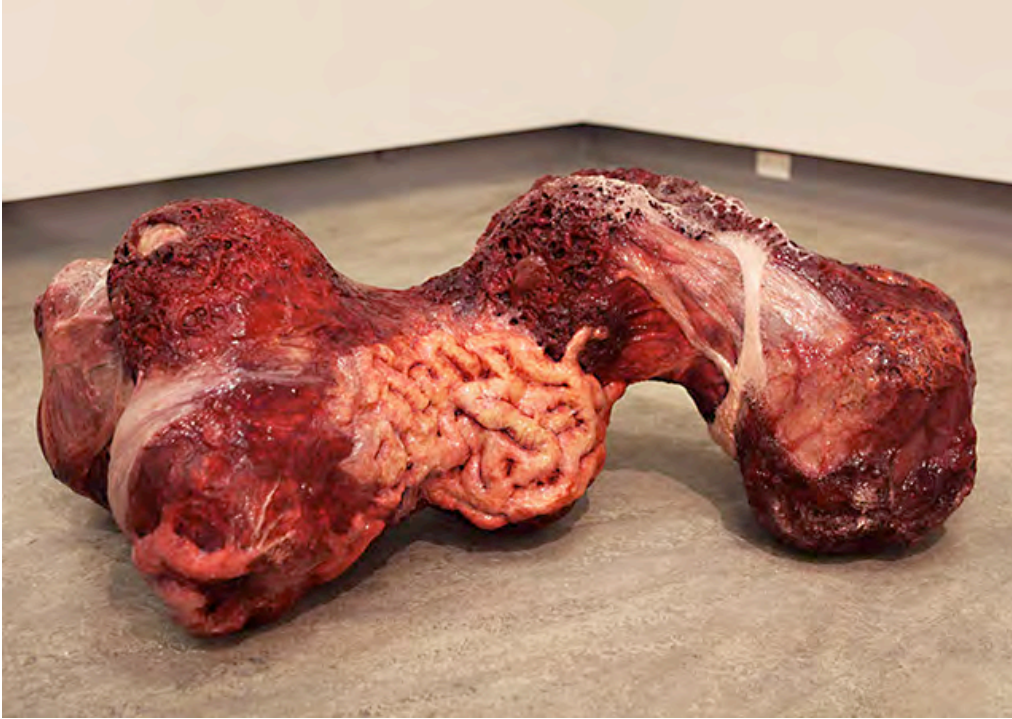
## ***Some Thing, 2011***

I will now discuss one of the major artworks for my PhD. As in many of my studio-based works, the works are not so concerned with wallowing in abject bodily disgust for its own sake, but rather to highlight and bring to the fore the repressed and unconscious elements of our bodily reality that are hidden from view, buried and ignored within the context of art and technology.

My work *Some Thing* is a kinetic, electronic sculpture which is a reference to various body horror films of the 1980s. *Some Thing* takes its visceral aesthetic directly from the body horror movie – we also expect to see such a gory prosthetic and pulsating bodily form within the world of a movie, such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* or Stuart Gordon's *Re-animator*.

The work is an explicit attempt to conjoin the visceral materiality of the body with technology. The electronic motors of *Some Thing* drive the behaviour of the work, which attempts to produce an uncanny effect for the viewer, who look at a bodily object that is neither dead or alive, but 'some thing' else.

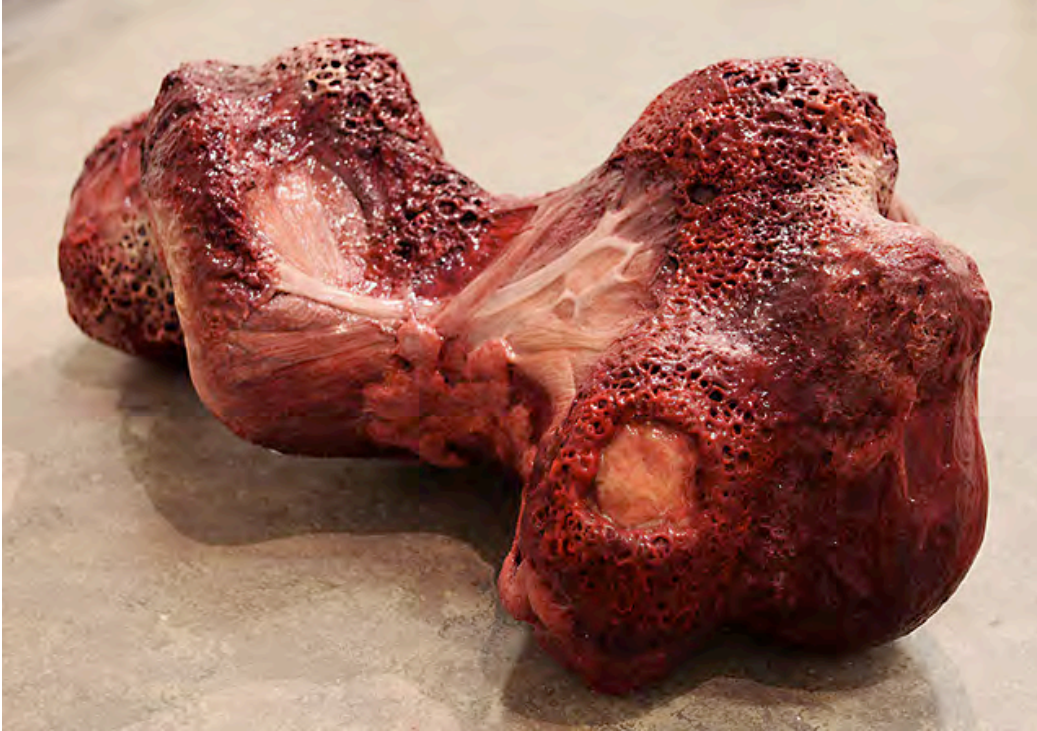
*Some Thing* represents the unclassifiable body, a body that slips out of the comfortable category of what we think of as human. In an attempt to describe accurately what this pulsating mass of melted flesh and guts actually is, the title *Some Thing* seems like an appropriate starting point. It is a body that was possibly once human and is now on its way to being something else, transformed into another thing. Then again this 'thing' could be subhuman or posthuman. We can't quite be sure. It is material that Colin McGinn refers to as '*biological matter at its most repulsive*'<sup>68</sup> when he is attempting to describe a particularly visceral scene from David Cronenberg's *The Fly*.



**Figure 5. Ian Haig, *Some Thing*, 2012, (kinetic, robotic sculpture)**

*Some Thing* is a bodily fusion of David Cronenberg's 'New Flesh' along with other assorted viscera from numerous horror movies and William S. Burroughs' transmuted bodies that populate *Naked Lunch*. When referring to the junkie's mutating body in *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs describes it as losing its 'human citizenship' and believes it 'was in consequence, a creature without a species.'<sup>69</sup>

*Some Thing* is perhaps a creature without a species, an aberration of flesh, guts and gristle housing a horrible form of technology. It is what Burroughs refers to as 'un-D.T' - Undifferentiated Tissue - a condition whereby the body and its flesh liquefies and transforms into a new form. Here we are literally seeing parts of the body consume itself with its own flesh. With this in mind, the notion of the body in a state of transmutation is central to *Some Thing*.



**Figure 6. Ian Haig, *Some Thing*, 2012, (kinetic, robotic sculpture)**

Colin McGinn has made the observation that:

*Embryologists have taught us that the human fetus contains the trace of earlier life-forms that still haunt our human DNA... We are in short, evolved animals, creatures of the churning biological world, carrying all that came before.<sup>70</sup>*

Such an idea is extended by Peter Ludlow:

*Humans are simply the product of generation after generation of mutations.<sup>71</sup>*

With such a reading, *Some Thing* becomes a version of the human body, albeit one we haven't seen before; the body rendered as pure mutation. The abjection that registers in the work is ultimately an abjection of ourselves, our own bodies, which exist in a slippery state of flux through birth, childhood, adulthood, old age and death.

This is a body that maybe represents the subjective state of disease or illness, and prompts us to consider how such conditions alter our imaginings of what the body is. Our latent fears, unconscious horror and disgust of the body manifest as a 'thing' not of this world.

The project's initial starting point was a scene in David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, which features an experiment on a baboon as it travels through a matter transporter or telepod. The illusionary world of film fuses in *Some Thing* with the real in the uncanny material of a strange cinematic object, the telepod of cinema delivering the work into the real world, cinema made flesh.



**Figure 7. Ian Haig, *Some Thing* (detail) 2012, (kinetic, robotic sculpture)**

*Some Thing* explores the idea of the death of our bodies - that is, death as the ultimate bodily transformation. Death renders the body as a cadaver, a thing other than a live body, and, in turn, the body decomposed or turned to ash becomes another thing, another material. However the more direct reference here is perhaps the development

and introduction of new kinds of improved death technologies, such as those nicknamed ‘The Digester’, which is currently used in the cattle industry.

The Digester involves a process known as tissue digestion or waste reduction; it is a process of mixing potassium hydroxide with the carcass to produce a slurry of liquefied matter. There are plans for The Digester to be introduced as a more efficient way to dispose of dead humans, and with less environmental impact. The process liquefies the body like a human Slurpee that is flushed into the sewerage.

No longer in the ground decomposing and returning to the earth, or incinerated with its fumes symbolically rising into the ether and its ashes scattered, the body becomes a waste product to be disposed of. The liquefied body sees the erasure of all features, all gender, all identity. The body is returned into a material state of primordial ooze.

The liquefied body is an aesthetic difficult to fuse with the technological – the oozing, melting and slippery biological body is the inverse of the digital. As previously mentioned, Mike Kelley has situated the organic and the technological as opposing aesthetic poles.

Mark Dery has made the observation that ‘*In truth all bodies are nearly liquid, masses of blood, bile and soft tissue.*’<sup>72</sup> Our bodies are 70 percent water after all. Dery recalls Poe’s gothic horror story when he writes:

*The facts in the Case of M.Valdemar (are) of a body dissolving into a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity.*<sup>73</sup>

The melted body has featured in numerous horror movies of the late 1980s and early 1990s to spectacular effect. This includes William Sachs’s oozing protagonist in *The Incredible Melting Man* (1977) to Jim Muro’s *Street Trash* (1987) and Philip Brophy’s *Body Melt* (1993), just to name a few. The visceral aftermath of the melted body, of recognisable human forms turned to sludge, carries a particularly unsettling resonance - the body

is not simply killed, burnt, chopped, slaughtered or disemboweled but dissolved with no remaining evidence that it was even a body.

*Some Thing* is about the body transformed into unclassifiable meat, the body as a form of raw and exposed gristle, fat and muscle stripped of its exterior shell. The body laying pathetically exposed, vulnerable and, possibly, in some kind of pain. Or, then again, maybe this body is only half alive or possibly it is being born, trapped in a state between life and death.

Solariums, liposuction, plastic surgery, body building, vaginal reconstruction and other body modifications all feature an amplified notion of what the body can be. Such procedures show us just how malleable flesh is but also how strangely limited the body is, in that such procedures are necessary to enhance and extend it.



**Figure 8. Ian Haig, *Some Thing*, 2012 (kinetic, robotic sculpture)**

*Some Thing* is the body as an alien species, the internal body inverted, or perhaps the discovery of a new being, a evolutionary missing link with no eyes or ears or means of navigation. The work depicts a body that was possibly once human but is now on its way to being something else.

In the documentary on his work *Bacon's Arena*,<sup>74</sup> Francis Bacon recounts a story of news of his sister's first child being born:

*She said the child is beautiful, it's got five toes and fingers. I thought what is this woman saying to me when she said it has five toes and all its fingers? Obviously it must be some latent fear, that some monstrosity is going to be born.*<sup>75</sup>

Such latent fears are played out in *Some Thing*, not simply as a monstrous birth, but the birth of an entirely new species, birth as the '*horror of the body interior becoming exterior*'.<sup>76</sup> The work is presented in the clinical light of the autopsy table. Such a biological curiosity connects the work to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Wunderkammer, which might have included two-headed fetuses, mutant sheep, three-headed cows and other experimental biology.

The simple robotic and kinetic movement - of twitches, slight movement and breathing in the work makes it appear as if the creature is either dying, partly alive or possibly being born. The ambiguity over the creature's state of being is intentional. The limited movement activates the imagination of the viewer into thinking they saw the creature move, or possibly not. The movement is almost primitive in its simplicity. This electronically activated sculpture is not premised on notions of life-like realism, with sophisticated behaviours and movement, but a work that represents the state of being barely alive. Here robotics do not simulate life, but dying.

In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the liminal, intermediate and in-between space of the body soon after death is referred to as 'The Bardo'. The term literally refers to the intermediate existence between one's life and the next. According to Buddhist tradition, The Bardo can manifest itself as a body caught as a transitional form. *Some Thing* is also a body caught in between states – between the internal, external, the living, the dead, and the monstrous. That is, the monster as an entity that is incomplete and unfinished, a body that is premature and not ready for the world just yet.



**Figure 9. Ian Haig, *Some Thing*, 2012 (kinetic, robotic sculpture)**

*Some Thing* references this teratological body, the body turned inside out, its internal viscera exposed or appearing in places that it shouldn't, the body engulfed by its own flesh, mutated like a DNA experiment that has gone horribly, horribly wrong. The work seeks to distill J.G. Ballard's idea where technology is a facilitator, an enabler of potentially untapped human perversities, as the work attempts to forge a bodily aesthetic of the abject body coupled with technology. The corporeal drama of *Some Thing* reflects a repulsive fascination towards the materiality of our own flesh and makes visible our unconscious horror that, within our form, we carry the biological seeds of our own transformation and destruction.

Finally I want to touch on the sound produced for *Some Thing*, which was made by PH2 (Philip Brophy and Philip Samartzis). The sound travels through four discrete movements and is presented in 5.1 Dolby surround sound, ideally at a loud volume. In much the same way as the work puts the microscope on the human body, the sound too sonically amplifies the body and its interior.

The soundscape involves percussive beats, garbled voices and abstracted internal bodily sounds. The drumming, which at times appears as manic and uncontrolled, represents nerves twitching and the last remaining signs of life or, perhaps, the first signs of bodily movement and nerves awakening. The sound assists in activating the work, of bringing

the work to life and further placing the context and location of the work as that of a cinematic sculptural object. The sound both intensifies the aesthetic of the work and extends its visceral materially.

In 2012, *Some Thing* was included in the high profile exhibition *The National New Media Art Award*, at the Gallery of Modern Art in Queensland. In some respects the work is not entirely new media or, at least, does not appear to be a new media artwork. However, on the other hand, electrical motors and computer programming are integral to the work and its robotic movement. In addition, the conceptual underpinning of the work, of the body represented as meat in the context of the developing media culture of our times, frames the work and its location within a new media art paradigm.

## **Chapter 2: Abject art**

I will now discuss the history of the theme of abjection primarily in visual art practice from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through to the 1990s, when the focus on such themes became particularly popular. What is also interesting is the absence of technological based media, computing and so on from the history of abject art.

While the body horror film cycle of the mid 1980s eventually saw the horror movie fragment into a range of genres and sub genres, a renewed interest in the body and bodily materiality could also be traced to the appearance of abject-based themes in contemporary visual art removed from the framework of technology. The abject art period saw the corporeal body placed firmly on the cultural radar in the mid 1990s. In some respects the body horror films of the early to mid 1980s paved the way for a renewed interest in all things bodily.

In her essay *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva introduced the idea of abjection as the basis of a fundamental difference between the self and the non-self. Kristeva defined abjection as a reaction to the confrontation with the abject, which can illicit repulsion and disgust. Kristeva has claimed that the most abject of all non-objects is the corpse, as it has no

status as an object and does not belong to the self and can therefore be seen as a threat to the subject, which ultimately rejects it. Abject derives from the Latin word - *abicer* and the English translation is to throw away, to discard.

Kristeva emphasises too '*that a lack of cleanliness or health*'<sup>77</sup> is not the cause of abjection, but rather it is:

*what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.*<sup>78</sup>

Mary Douglas has pointed out that filthiness is not a quality in itself, but, like Kristeva proposes, a by-product of a boundary disruption.<sup>79</sup> The abject for Douglas is largely defined by its context. Abject material as a thing in and of itself is not necessarily abject, it is the context that it came from - the body, disease, bodily fluids which makes it so.

Many artists inspired by Kristeva's seminal text and other writing on the subject of abjection came to be closely connected to a return to the body in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Such an interest in abjection intensified ideas around the subject which first appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with artists like Hans Bellmer's mutant doll works. Bellmer's strange bodily forms functioned as a direct opposition to the Nazi party's cult of the perfect human body dominant in Germany at the time. The 1990s saw that Bellmer was revisited and appropriated by Cindy Sherman in a range of works.

The interest in abjection was further fuelled by both feminist and queer theory in addition to developments like the AIDS crisis. Here the body and the boundaries of the body were put on the cultural map. The development of AIDS saw not just the fear of the body and of bodily fluids but the notion of bodily secretions as an agency of infection and potential death.

The history of the abject can be traced back to playwright and theatre director Antonin Artaud. In the 1930s Artaud advocated for a new kind of theatre, which he referred to

as the Theatre of Cruelty. This was a form of theatre that put the audience in direct confrontation with the subject matter, and where the false reality of the theatre was shattered. The *Theatre of cruelty* involved intense and disturbing uses of sounds, noises, groans, pulsating lighting and set design. As Lee Jamieson has pointed out, Artaud sought to:

*Remove aesthetic distance, bringing the audience into direct contact with the dangers of life. By turning theatre into a place where the spectator is exposed rather than protected, Artaud was committing an act of cruelty upon them.*<sup>80</sup>

Jamieson has indicated Artaud's link to Nietzsche's own sense of cruelty: 'with Nietzsche declaring that all art embodies and intensifies the underlying brutalities of life to recreate the thrill of experience.'<sup>81</sup>

Some decades later the abject body found its home in 1960s performance art, whereby the corporeality of the body itself became material in the performance work of Carolee Schneemann, to the gender inspired abject artworks of Kiki Smith. Abject art can also be traced back to The Viennese Actionists like Herman Nitsch, Gunter Brus and Otto Mühl. Their extreme performance art reinstated the abject body as central to their practice and its relationship to the radical politics of the late 1960s. French artists Michel Journiac and Gina Pane of the 1960s body art movement in France Art Corporel also put the body under the spotlight. Like the *Viennese Actionists*, the body was seen as raw material.

Carolee Schneeman's seminal performance/film work *Meat Joy* from 1964 casts the artist's body in a perverse fantasy and celebration of flesh as material. Eight nude figures writhe about with various objects and substances including paint, sausages, raw fish, and chickens. While Schneeman's piece is a reaction to the male dominated and male centric world of painting at the time and reinstates the female body as bodily material, the work is essentially one of sexual liberation and freedom.

Within the visual arts, abject art as a period seemed to have reached a peak of sorts in 1993 with the Whitney Museum of Arts' extensive exhibition *Abject Art* featuring a range of artists exploring notions of the body and transgression in a variety of ways. Abject based themes can further be traced back to 1986 and an exhibition entitled *Repulsion: Aesthetics of the Grotesque* at the Alternative Museum in New York.

In addition, *The Pathetic Art Show* in Los Angeles in 1990 curated by Ralph Rugoff, which featured artists like Mike Kelley and John Miller, plus others, explored ideas of failure, the shameful and the pathetic. This same generation of artists, along with others such as Paul McCarthy, were highlighted in the show *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s* at the LA Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992. While not specifically on the theme of the abject, but provocatively taking its name from Charles Manson's bloody rampage, *Helter Skelter* highlighted a number of LA artists who consistently engaged with themes of sex, serial killers and the abject body amongst other provocative topics.

The show put Los Angeles in the spotlight as a cultural site for a particular kind of artist, like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy and Raymond Pettibon who reveal the dark and perverse underbelly of the city of dreams and its fabricated reality of Hollywood and the entertainment industries. *Helter Skelter* coincided with another uncanny world view at the time in the form of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990 – 91), with Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) before it revealing that beneath the veneer of American culture exists a world of perversity, extreme violence and sex. The film starts with the discovery of a severed ear, and then metaphorically pieces together the rest of the corrupt and malformed body of a particular American nightmare.

A key figure here in the world of visual art is Mike Kelley, an artist long interested in ideas of the anti and negative aesthetic of art. A seminal artist throughout the 1990s, Kelley's focus on abjection has always been less about such material as a provocative and shocking reverse aesthetic and more concerned with the class of objects and their particular vernacular histories and belief systems associated with them.

As Noelle Roussel has articulated recently on Kelley's work following the artist's death:

*His was an art that researched not so much the dark recesses of America's collective unconscious, but the mechanisms of it. The way the collective unconscious and its refuse worked.*<sup>82</sup>

Kelley established an interest in sculpture of the unformed, or blob-like structures, the unclassifiable and objects of a weird otherness, which explore many notions of the uncanny that underpinned much of Kelley's late 1990s output.

If Kelley's work can be described as abject, there was also clearly a sophistication to the abjection. His contribution to installation art often centered around materials that were discarded, forgotten about and ignored, or having no perceived value. His work explored the terrain of different kinds of subversive unpopular cultures and how different kinds of belief systems are constructed. Further, Kelley's own research and curated show *The Uncanny* staged at the TATE Liverpool in 2004 is another key exhibition in the context of my research (discussed in detail later in this chapter).

Kelley's numerous texts, artist statements and books reveal an insightful and active mind on a wide range of topics related both to his art practice, other artists, and aspects of unpopular and popular culture. Amongst his numerous essays on kitsch, caricature and so on, Kelley brought to the fore the work of artist Paul Thek, a seminal figure in the 1960s who produced a range of sculptural work around notions of the abject body.

Paul Thek's series, *Technological Reliquaries* (1964–67), feature an array of sculptures of the body rendered as unclassifiable meat. These slabs of raw flesh and meat were encased inside minimalist glass vitrines. Preserved under glass, the works appear as relics of the human body. Thek's abject meat pieces operate simultaneously as repulsive and weirdly beautiful at the same time, his glass vitrines bearing more than a passing resemblance to Damien Hirst's glass encased sharks and cows some twenty-five years later.

Produced at the time of the escalating involvement of the US in the Vietnam war, one reading of the works is that they are a critique on the violence of this confrontation. However the works are more complex than this; they provide for a meditation on what it means to be human. As Kenny Schachter has pointed out:

*Thek's meat pieces invoke human rot, tumors, cancer – just about every person's worst fears and vulnerabilities. Yet, simultaneously, these works manage to be about life and beauty and preservation of the human condition.*<sup>83</sup>

Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* are key works in the context of my research, for their unique ability to straddle the unaesthetic with the aesthetic, to function genuinely in that area of the attractive and repulsive. My work *Night of the Living Hippy* is a direct reference to Thek's work and the notion of the *Technological Reliquaries*.

One of Thek's other iconic works is his collaboration with Andy Warhol from 1965 titled *Meat Piece with Warhol Brillo box*. The work fuses Warhol's cool, distant and aloof approach to Thek's moist, bodily, dirty aesthetic. The culturally superficial meets the dank and rotting underbelly.

Abject art can also be seen in the work of more contemporary figures such as Los Angeles artist Dawn Kasper, who regularly stages her own grisly death in her art practice. In her work the bloody remains of the artist are set against horrific and brutal scenes of carnage. Kasper rehearses her own death in a series of increasingly disturbing death rituals appropriated from the horror movie.

The seminal bodily performance work of Paul McCarthy and his everyday domestic stand-ins of chocolate and tomato sauce along with mayonnaise for particular bodily fluids are also of interest. McCarthy has consistently explored and revealed the hypocrisy and contradictions of the Disneyfication of American popular culture via the material of bodily fluids, abjection and cartoon repulsion.

Just as many media artists have jettisoned the abject body, artists engaged in themes of attraction and repulsion and the abject body have often ignored the presence of new technological frameworks within their practice. A clear exception here is Paul McCarthy's more recent, perverse, mechanical and sophisticated animatronic works such as *Mechanical pig* (2003 – 05) and *George Bush mechanical pig* (2005). *Mechanical pig* was recently included in the exhibition *Crash, Homage to J.G. Ballard*, at Gagosian gallery, New York in 2010, which links McCarthy's work historically to the Ballardian world of dystopian futures, consumer culture, visceral technologies and psychopathology.

McCarthy's recent animatronic projects extend the ideas of robotic simulated movement and its relationship to the uncanny, which clearly aligns to my own studio-based work. Their exposed mechanics and animatronics reveal their synthetic and mechanical origins. Like much of McCarthy's previous work, their fabricated sound stages and mock TV sets offer a de-mystified version of a constructed pop culture reality. Culture for McCarthy, like Ballard, is seen as a vast artificial sound stage to be deconstructed.

However technology for McCarthy is ultimately a means to an end. His mutant, oversized animatronic characters directly reference various theme park rides or, perhaps, Disneyland on crack. The material of technology here is less a statement on technology and the body and more a reenactment of the technology of the animatronic character as a kind of amplified cartoon malfunction. The work is expressing the darker side of contemporary pop culture, where technology is merely the catalyst to a system of ideas.

McCarthy's recent animatronic projects are highly sophisticated in their realistic movement and also extremely costly to produce - apparently at one point they even received interest from the Disney corporation themselves for their entirely realistic appearance.

However such work would probably never be thought of in terms of art and technology or new media art even though the systems McCarthy employs in these works are extending ideas around technology in art practice, possibly in more advanced ways than artists who work with animatronic systems within the genre of new media arts.

McCarthy's work is not seen or exhibited in the curatorial context of new media art. Possibly his extreme aesthetic cannot be incorporated into the fabric of new media arts. It is neither forward thinking, utopian, futurist or technologically determinist. Rather, technology here is serving a very dark, perverse set of ideas. This highlights another point: that the use of sophisticated technology by artists no longer simply appears in the ghetto of new media arts but has been incorporated into broader contemporary art practices by artists like McCarthy and others.

In his early performance work, McCarthy was exploring the interiority of the body - the body not as a void, but a construction of an inner materiality in the form of secretions, fluids, liquid. In his early performance works McCarthy's aesthetic of the human body was uncategorically wet. The very qualities of this wetness, and its association to internal bodily fluids, signifies our abjection, evidence that a boundary had been broken, a surface punctured, an interior exposed. The leaking body for McCarthy represents a kind of unconscious seepage, a symbolic entry of the unconscious into the real world. (Such ideas of the unconscious seepage of bodily fluids and materials is explicitly played out in my work *The Joey Machine*.)

McCarthy's own sense of satire, the absurd, parody and the psychology of childhood and the puerile, not to mention his messiness and unbridled perverse intensity of abjection and the body, have had a major impact on my work, probably unconsciously and consciously. However much of my own work has applied such themes to the ongoing project of a technological theme and narrative - of locating the abject body within the framework of a media arts culture which increasingly edits it out.

As I have outlined, numerous artists have directly explored ideas around the abject body within social, cultural, political and sexual frameworks. This includes Hans Belmer, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy or even more aesthetically extreme works from artists like Joel-Peter-Witkin photographing parts of corpses to the case of Anthony-Noel Kelly who was convicted for stealing body parts from The Royal College of Surgeons for the purposes of making moulds of body parts for sculptures. The abject also clearly extends to feminist-based works around abject bodily fluids and their codification within a patriarchal social order (such as Helen Chadwick or Kiki Smith.)

In 1990 theorist Simon Taylor identified a dramatic increase in artists working with themes of the abject. As he pointed out:

*abjection can and does act as an assault on the totalizing and homogenising notions of identity, system and order.* <sup>84</sup>

Many US and European artists were actively challenging perceptions of the body, from a range of social, cultural and sexual perspectives, such as the normal/abnormal, accepted/unaccepted, and the preferred/non-preferred body.

Across the Atlantic, the year 1997 saw the exhibition *Sensation* in the UK featuring the collection of artworks owned by Charles Saatchi, including work by artists like Marc Quinn, the Chapman Brothers, Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin and Marcus Harvey. *Sensation* seemed to signal a particular interest in the more unpalatable aspects of contemporary culture with an interest in the mythology of death, bodily fluids, transgression and the abject.

The British artists in *Sensation* follow a trajectory which, as I have outlined, first appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with an interest in transgression and the taboo. This continued through the return of the body in the 1960s in various performance art, to artists who came to prominence in the mid to late 1980s in Los Angeles such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley.

The rise of the art economy of the 1980s and 1990s and the commoditisation of art coincided with the emergence of artists in the early 1990s that were starting to question such a commercial framework. Themes of the abject and revulsion in art can possibly be viewed as a critique on the rising commercialisation and inflated prices of contemporary art. As Kiki Smith has pointed out:

*I miss radicality – in my own work and in the art world. The art world seems very product-dominated and I am not a product maker.* <sup>85</sup>

Ultimately and probably ironically artists like Jake and Dinos Chapman, Damien Hirst, Mike Kelley, amongst others, all of whom have dealt in transgressive aesthetics and the abject, were embraced by this same museum culture, auction houses and prestigious commercial galleries. Abjection was now culturally and commercially validated.

Critical artists in the discussion of the abject body are the UK artists Jake and Dinos Chapman. Their modus operandi is an art practice that doesn't have a moral compass or provide worthy social virtues but revels in all that is perverse, ugly and difficult. This includes a consistent critique of the very concept of enlightenment which has underwritten certain aspects of art practice for some time, which sees the function of art as an enterprise for enlightening the viewer – it fosters a belief in art with a purpose and with a socially worthy mandate. For the Chapmans, nothing could be further from their intentions. As Jake Chapman has commented:

*The presupposition is a work of art however nasty it is must ultimately serve some morally profound ambition. It still must be attached to the notion of progress, enlightenment, goodness and all nice things. What happens when you make a work and you say 'No, it's only nasty.'* <sup>86</sup>

Dinos Chapman refers to their practice as a kind of 'gleeful negativity'.<sup>87</sup> This has echoes in Mike Kelley's critical humour or what the artist referred to as 'negative joy', with the social function of art being to provide a negative aesthetic.<sup>88</sup> Unlike the social

institutions of politics, religion, sport, the environmental movement and so on which exist within a social framework and rhetoric of positivity, of improving the world and ultimately making it a better place, - such institutions cannot really be negative or have a transgressive sensibility, but art can, indeed it is one of the last remaining cultural zones that allows for this. The Chapmans' provide a perverse world view, of making the world a worse place. Their aesthetic does not function as holding up a mirror to society in order to reveal its grotesqueries and corrupt nature, as many have commented. Rather, their hideous and mutant aesthetic operates more perversely – it is not a form of social critique but wallows in all that is base and encourages the viewer to follow them there.

The Chapman Brothers are influenced very much by the writings of Georges Bataille. Their anti-redemptive stance is perhaps summed up best by Allan Stokel in his introduction to Bataille's *Visions of Excess – selected writings*:

*At the furthest point of evolution, of absolute knowledge, elevation is the fall; humanity is animality; insight is blindness; health is terminal pathology.*<sup>89</sup>

(The above, in some respects, can be considered within the futurist, progressive and positive paradigm underpinning certain aspects of media arts culture where worthy themes and responsible insights are implicitly intertwined with the delivery system of technology as a benign system of all that is good in the world.)

One of the more iconic and provocative works to emerge out of the mid 1990s fascination with the abject body would certainly be the Chapmans' *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-sublimated Libidinal model* of 1995 which has been described as:

*genderless, self-reproducing manifestations of excess libidinal energy gone awry.*<sup>90</sup>

The Chapman Brothers, and their intentionally provocative and disturbing pieces of the body fused and mutated into all manner of perverse incarnations, can be viewed on the one hand as occupying a kind of predictable enfant terrible status. Their prankster and

'shock' tactics at times seem almost designed to get a rise out of the British press. However they not only point to an entirely uncompromising position as artists, but also refuse to offer any kind of redemption or moral standpoint in relation to their provocative material, often centering on the teratological human body.

This is art that intentionally aims to provoke feelings of uncomfortable-ness, it is essentially art to make you feel bad. This recalls John Water's aim to make films that left one feeling dirty. To feel repulsed and uncomfortable in relation to what one is viewing is in fact a complex relationship between art object and viewer. While we may be repulsed by certain material in the context of art, the fact that it is presented in such a cultural context implies there is meaning and value attached to the abject, in opposition to, for example, seeing a dead body in real life, such as the victim of a car crash which has no cultural meaning. If one can find value in the truly abject and disgusting within the context of art, it would appear that abject art has a unique function to re-educate and allow us to re-see what we think has no value and no worth.

As previously stated, the rise and interest in abject art in both the UK and the US in the 1990s also coincided with a growing interest in the creative potential of new technologies, which certainly also took place in Australia at the time. Such a trajectory is elaborated on further in the following chapters. This includes the emergence of the internet, hypertext, interactivity and platforms like CD-ROMS, games and virtual reality; abjection was almost in direct opposition to the posthuman rhetoric of new media art of the 1990s. Abject art reinstated the corporeal body in all its difficult, messy reality into the art world.

Many artists over the last forty years who have explored the confrontation of the body in art - from Carolee Schneeman, Kiki Smith, to Herman Nitsch and Paul McCarthy - have done so as a provocative reaction to the dominant art, political, sexual and social constructions and discourses of the time. I view my own work in such a polemical context. It is reinstating the abject body into the language of electronic media arts. I maintain that contemporary technologies in fact make us more aware of our meat

bodies, more conscious of what we are. This is the direct opposite of the embrace of the logic of the computer, the LCD screen and the network - we are illogical, organic, messy, smelly. As Mary Roach has put it:

*We are biology. We are reminded of this at the beginning and the end, at birth and at death. In between we do what we can to forget.* <sup>91</sup>

## ***The reception and engagement with the abject in art***

As my research is premised on the nature of abjection, I feel it important to discuss some of the complexity emerging out of an abject aesthetic experience and its relationship to the human body. The abject body is more involved than it first appears.

An understanding of thinking about our engagement with the abject and disgust originally occurred in the writings of Georges Bataille, a writer who was often associated with the Surrealists but who operated on the edges of the Surrealist period. No other writer at the time interrogated the notion of aesthetics to the same polemical degree than Bataille. He also Influenced Kristeva's writing on the abject. Bataille offers an enduring understanding of the way in which we can consider the aesthetic of disgust and the abject and, more importantly, how such aesthetic conditions can contribute to cultural value.

In particular, Bataille reclaimed the conditions of disgust and repulsion to signify a more complex cultural reading, removing its associations from the merely base level and the loathsome. For Bataille notions of disgust came to represent what the writer called 'base materialism'.

Bataille developed the notion of base materialism as a general concept for matter that culture and society had no use for; such matter is often formless and has no rights to speak of. Base materialism is based on experientialism as opposed to rationalisation. It

was a concept that aimed to disrupt and destabilise all foundations of both high and low culture. As Joan Hugo has put it:

*Base Materialism is based on Bataille's scatological notions of "the science of filth" or "that which is other", and works to undermine traditional materials and hierarchies.*<sup>92</sup>

Bataille provided us with the language of the abject, principally as matter of the unformed. Base materialism brings all phenomena down to the same direct physical experience whereby the material of bronze, for example, has no greater aesthetic value than the bodily fluids of pus or mucus. As Bataille has articulated:

*Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.*<sup>93</sup>

Benjamin Noys has pointed out that base materialism creates a new tool for material thinking as it disrupts the distinctions of high/low, ideal/material, and bourgeois/working class.<sup>94</sup> In the context of art and technology, which has as its foundation ideas of progress, advancement and forward thinking, base materialism like the abject body is clearly a concept that has no currency.

Jean Paul Satre has offered an explanation as to why such material appears repugnant to us. That slime and gooiness is dirty and base level is not really the point. For Satre, such material is disturbing as it provokes an ontological crisis because such material clings. Its material state is that of *in-between-ness*, which provokes a feeling of the uncanny and the disturbing. Its movement is slow-motion, as if it could be possessed or is possessed.<sup>95</sup>

William Ian Miller has explored the aesthetics of disgust while also referencing Mary Douglas's research on the repulsive and the abject. He writes that our fear is not of disgust or the abject per se, but a fear of contamination.<sup>96</sup> In some respects our engagement with the abject is perhaps less an aesthetic issue and more a hard-wired

anxiety over disease – we fear the open wound, the festering sore and its potential to inflict us with the same.

Carolyn Korsmeyer has outlined the distinctively human character of disgust:

*Disgust recoils from indicators of our animal nature, thereby protecting the human “soul” from descent to a bestial condition and guarding our moral and spiritual being against degradation and pollution.* <sup>97</sup>

Contrarily William Ian Miller has made the intriguing observation that the target of aversion in the aesthetics of disgust and the abject is in fact us. Miller frames this idea around the topic of death:

*Death thus horrifies and disgusts not just because it smells revoltingly bad, but because it is not an end to the process of living but part of a cycle of eternal recurrence. The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot – rank, smelling and upsetting to the touch. The gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wriggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation.* <sup>98</sup>

Miller’s concept of ‘life soup’ sees that:

*by being proximate to contamination we lose our bodily integrity – die, decompose and become the disgusting object itself.* <sup>99</sup>

Such a line of thought underpins many of my studio works. Such as *Some Thing*, *Night of the Living Hippy*, *Workshop of Filthy Creation* and *Goo Tube*. The abject bodily material and fluids on display in such works relate very much to us; we are the abject body.

There remain fundamental differences in the notion of abjection as a theme used by

artists. There are many fine shades of abjection and its use, as Hal Foster has pointed out:

*Can abject art ever escape an instrumental, indeed moralistic use of the abject?* <sup>100</sup>

Abjection, for some artists, takes on a moralistic and ethical agenda where abjection is presented as a boundary that must not be crossed, as a condition to be avoided. My own approach is the inverse of such a model; my practice embraces and desires that which is abject. It seeks to find a weird beauty that it can produce for the viewer.

However, the representation of abject art is in itself somewhat problematic, as Foster puts it:

*Can the abject be represented at all? If it is opposed to culture, can it be exposed in culture? If it is unconscious can it be made conscious and remain abject?* <sup>101</sup>

On the topic of abject art, Hal Foster brings to light some important points. In many ways the site of the gallery as a validated cultural space is probably the last place that the truly abject can occur.

Ultimately the abject is that which takes place outside of culture because like the monstrous, once such material is domesticated and accepted by culture it ceases to be abject. The very notion of undertaking research on the topic of abjection suggests a desire for such material to be included. However as outlined previously, the notion of its inclusiveness and its acceptability short-circuits its status and its power of abjection.

Underpinning this is the idea of exclusion, for the abject can only ever retain its power when it is operating outside of a cultural context. Any real notion of transgression in art practice becomes highly questionable when the very framework of the art institution allows the transgression to take place and indeed accepts it. It's also worth remembering that within the world of contemporary art the label of *Object Art* was

essentially coined and validated by a major cultural institution such as The Whitney in 1993 in the seminal show *Abject Art*. The abject is clearly no longer the outsider, the other, the marginalised. It is no longer the domain of underground art cultures and subversive performance art but accepted and in some cases expected.

As mentioned previously, of interest here is Colin McGinn's notion of cinema which he states can only ever depict *quasi-disgust*,<sup>102</sup> as we are protected from real disgust because cinema as a form primarily consists of projected light. Within the context of visual arts and media arts, abjection can never entirely offer a sense of contamination or contagion for abject material in the art world also deals in abjection only as a simulacra. This is an important point my own work explores; the abject is entirely and self consciously fake, simulated and artificial. My version of abjection is mediated through the lens of the horror movie, the internet and other cultural sites of visceral sensation.

Further, if an art practice which deals in abjection is also framed with notions of redemption or critique or cultural commentary, all of which are systems of intellectual and conceptual value, they will ultimately negate the notion of abjection. For as Bataille has pointed out, base materialism is that which sits outside of a cultural value. It would appear then that abject art itself is as an oxymoron, for art is a cultural condition and abjection is the antitheses to culture. The work of the Chapman Brothers is an interesting case in this context, through their utter refusal of a redemptive art practice, and perceived cultural value.

However it is my belief that one can still explore themes of the abject within culture to a certain extent. One can still push at accepted aesthetic boundaries knowing that abject based work in a gallery is only ever a representation, a suggestion, of the truly abject.

The culture of media arts appears to be one area where the abject has not been accepted, tolerated or included. Like a homeless bum who is rejected from society, in order for society to reach its ideal, it would seem media arts culture has eradicated the abject in order to attain its own ideal.

One can even consider the denial and separation of the abject body within media and electronic arts as a kind of cultural exclusion. In this context it is worth considering the original meaning of the term abject. Essentially abjection means to separate, to divide anything that is part of a subject in order to define itself. The subject in this case could be oneself, society or an aspect of culture. Abjection can be seen as the result of the subject looking for its ideal, therefore casting aside those parts that are not ideal. There also exists a general misconception that abjection is only ever about body fluids or excrement but this is not the case. In addition, the adjective is used time and time again to describe material that is not necessarily abject at all, but rather disturbing, grotesque, ugly and shocking, all of which can function as non-abject.

Kristeva's idea of the demarcation of boundaries of the abject and non abject means that she doesn't spend a lot of time discussing and engaging with the pleasure or the perverse thrill and seduction of the abject as we rubber-neck to look at the abject but moments later look away from it. Kristeva does, however, address the inherent ambiguity of abjection:

*because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary abjection acknowledges it to be in perceptual danger.*<sup>103</sup>

Following on from this, a number of writers have tried to make sense of the appeal of the abject - its desire and a kind of pathological seduction - within the context of art. Mark Dery has pointed out the predictable cultural responses of the truly abject and grotesque body as an inability for us as a culture to emotionally and intellectually deal with our own wet interiors. Stunted as we are by '*puritanical mores and bourgeois notions of good taste*',<sup>104</sup> we revert to the 'gag me!' reflex when confronted with the abject and the macabre. Instead of trying to understand it, we reject it and deny its existence.

Dery has researched an emotion of sorts that he refers to as the 'pathological sublime'. He has defined it as:

*an aesthetic emotion that is equal parts horror and wonder, inspired by works of art (or nature) that hold beauty and repulsion in perfect, quivering tension. The Pathological Sublime is the sensation Emily Dickinson had in mind when she wrote, "'Tis so appalling – it exhilarates".*<sup>105</sup>

Dery traces the history of the pathological sublime back to Oliver Wendell Holmes Snr, a leader of the medical community in the mid 1850s, who spoke of the ‘worshippers of morbid anatomy and the aesthetic rapture of abject flesh.’<sup>106</sup>

Carolyn Korsmeyer has put forward the notion of the abject and the emotion of disgust and its ‘grisly relish’ and such material eliciting a kind of attractive aversion for the viewer. A terrible attraction that can even lead to one savoring the emotion, in effect to dwell on what is disgusting.<sup>107</sup> Further, Korsmeyer outlines the notion of ‘terrible beauty’ as a positive aesthetic response to material that is not in any way superficially beautiful.<sup>108</sup>

Cynthia Freeland has also elaborated on Korsmeyer’s theory:

*Beauty has to do with the moral insights gained by contemplating such horrific truth, as well as with the presentation of the insight within a medium that enables us to appreciate the insight rather than turn away from it, hiding our eyes*<sup>109</sup>.... whereby something disturbing in art can itself be edifying and also aesthetic, even if not specifically pleasurable.<sup>110</sup>

Other theories around disgust and the abject body also include Peter de Bolla’s accurate term for the emotion of visceral disgust ‘somatic spasm’, a curious shudder and involuntary spasm akin to the feeling of ‘someone walking on one’s grave’.<sup>111</sup> Aurel Kolnai describes disgust as a kind of eroticism where aversion ‘is superimposed upon the shadow of a desire for union with the object.’<sup>112</sup> Kolnai makes the interesting point that ‘something profoundly repulsive may also fascinate.’<sup>113</sup>

Arthur Danto has made an interesting observation about the aesthetics of abjection:

*'The redemptive task of art is not to make surplus beauty but to beautify what is initially as remote from beauty as the emissions of the flesh often are.'*<sup>114</sup>

This has echoes in what John Waters describes as 'reverse beauty' when discussing the work of Mike Kelley and the notion of finding beauty in material that is shocking, perverse and shameful.<sup>115</sup>

Danto has gone on to describe such an aesthetic strategy, which he labels 'disturbatory art':

*That is art that does not just have disturbing contents... Disturbatory art is intended rather to modify, through experiencing it, the mentality of those who do experience it*<sup>116</sup>

In an interview J.G. Ballard offered an insight into the notion of disturbing his readers:

*They were supposed to be disturbed, When I set out to write 'Crash', I wanted to write a book in which there was nowhere to hide. I wanted the reader, once I gotten him inside the book, never to lose sight of the subject matter.*<sup>117</sup>

The notion of confronting the viewer in order to change their perspective is central to my own work, especially in the age of contemporary media where attention spans are reduced to nanoseconds and information is experienced fleetingly, scanned and browsed.

From another perspective, the magnetism of disgust clearly operates in sexual encounters, as William Ian Miller has pointed out by applying Freud's analysis of sexuality and pleasure where desire itself depends upon a 'prohibited domain of the disgusting.'<sup>118</sup> In a sense bodily disgust sees the violation of the body and the borders of the self, together with the regular appearance of bodily fluids. However disgust and

sexuality are overcome with other feelings of desire and love. On one hand we remove bodily disgust from our lives at all costs, on the other hand we regularly encounter disgust in sexuality, and in fact integrate it into the framework of desire, lust and love. Sexual organs and genitalia function simultaneously as objects of desire in one context and bodily disgust in another.

While I have attempted here rather to focus my attention on our engagement with the abject and the aesthetic registers of disgust as it relates to the worlds of art and technology. Other important theorists on the topic of the body include Paul Valéry's important 'three body problem', as he breaks down the multiple bodily realities that we all inhabit. Valéry's theory was later developed further by Mario Perniola with a particular reference to the age of contemporary media.<sup>119</sup>

In addition other theories relating to psychoanalysis and bodily relations would include 'object relations theory' as put forward by psychologists Melanie Klein<sup>120</sup> and Donald Winnicott.<sup>121</sup> Further, Norman Brown's account of the cultural and historical meaning of excrement and Brown's notion of man as a 'diseased animal' are of interest. As Brown has aptly put it when contemplating the body:

*What the child knows consciously and the adult unconsciously, is that we are nothing but body.*<sup>122</sup>

One of my interests in the aesthetics of attraction and repulsion and the abject and ideas of disgust in the context of a developing media art culture is just how such an inquiry is often not taken seriously but rather misunderstood or dismissed outright. What is the purpose of such a research area? Surely such a topic is beneath us, deemed too base level, and featuring an aesthetic which needs to be avoided. Such perceptions, however, discount the complexity of the aesthetics and magnetism of the abject.

In addition, such questions and cynicism are rarely projected towards the abject's opposite: the beautiful. Beauty is culturally accepted and encoded, its aesthetic value as an emotion of pleasure continuously validated and reaffirmed. Within the visual arts

there is an established history and language of abject art practices; however, within the framework of emerging media art and technology driven art practices, the abject appears as a disqualified aesthetic for a number of reasons, which I will elaborate on in later chapters.

## ***The monstrous***

As a prelude to discussing the body of work of media artists who have explored notions of abjection and disgust, I want to briefly touch on a small number of contemporary artists who have explored the other side of the abject: the monstrous. This theme is an important one in the context of my research and art practice, for clearly the abject is closely related to the monstrous and the unformed.

The monster, like the uncanny, shares a close relationship with the abject.

The monster is that which is made up of multiple parts, a composite of different elements that co-exist. It lives at the boundaries of the real and not real; it is that thing which cannot be named. The monstrous relates to ideas of media art and technology, more so than what we initially think. The hybrid, the re-configured, the remixed, the recombinant, the mashup and mutant media are all terms used to describe aspects of new media art but they are also terms that could equally describe the monstrous.

The history of the monstrous has always been closely associated with the unclassifiable. The history of the natural sciences is a history of classification; however, the monstrous is that which consistently sidesteps an easy pigeonholing. Alongside ideas of the uncanny and the abject, the monstrous runs through my studio work and, in many ways, frames much of my research on the notion of the abject body and its relationship to media technologies. In particular, there is the notion of the monster as an unfinished entity - not only incomplete but hinting that there is more to appear, more to rise to the surface. This notion of the monstrous unknown is perhaps best articulated by Jacques Derrida:

*the future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which [they] are not prepared, you see, is heralded by a species of monsters.*<sup>123</sup>

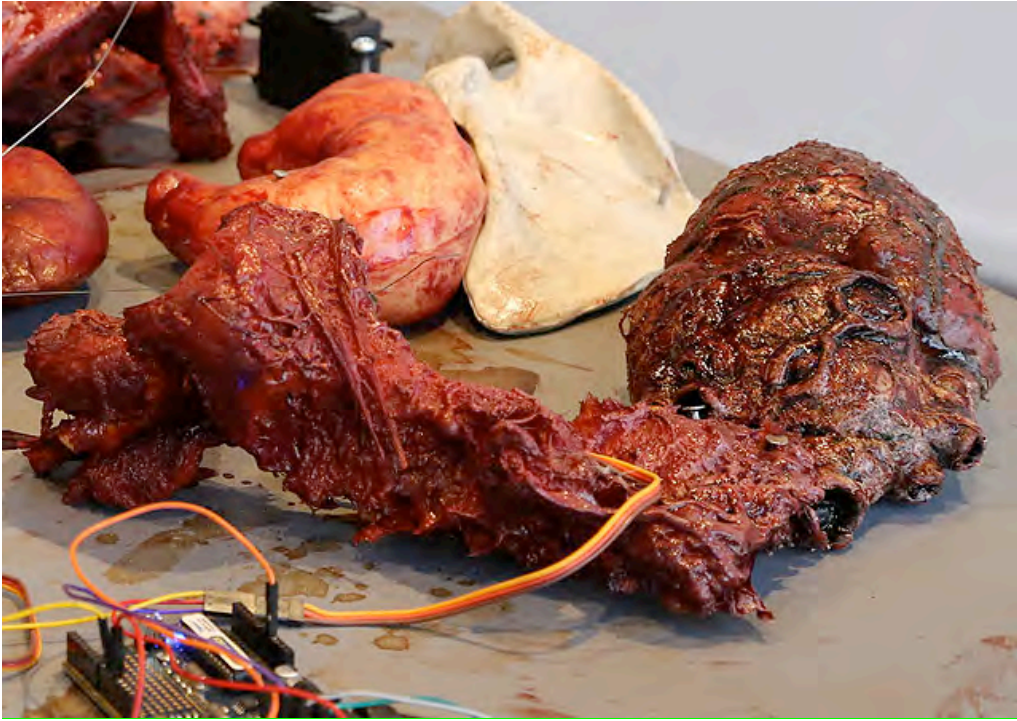
The framework of technological art is indeed a kind of futurist art of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an art of the future, of the unknown, enabled by contemporary technologies. Like the monster it is an amalgam of parts, histories, practices, methodologies and disciplines. In a literal sense it seems appropriate to conceptualise media arts in terms of the monstrous.

Derrida has described the process of the normalisation of the monster:

*But as soon as one perceives a monster [...] one begins to domesticate it, one begins [...] to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be frightening in this figure of the monster. And the movement of accustoming oneself, but also of legitimization, and, consequently, of normalization has already begun.*<sup>124</sup>

In some respects nothing is truly monstrous, or at least nothing remains monstrous as culture finds a way of recuperating the monstrous through a process of making normal what is abnormal.

My own work plays with the notion of the monstrous and often in quite perverse and extreme ways such as the horrible and bloody assemblages fused together with grating electrical motors in *Workshop of Filthy Creation*. I am very much aware of the element of play here, along with the domestication of the monstrous. Such imagery has been played out many times in horror movies, Halloween spectacles, ghost train rides, horror novels and, even more banally, in horror-themed theatre restaurants. The monstrous is merely signposted and suggested through the filter of a whole range of cultural references.



**Figure 10. Ian Haig, *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, 2013 (kinetic, electronic sculpture)**

The word 'monster' derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which means an aberrant occurrence often of biological nature. Other definitions have cast the monstrous in different ways: Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus viewed the monster as an entity that was non human, and later George-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon defined the monstrous as having excess or missing body parts.

A range of contemporary visual artists such as the Chapman Brothers, Ron Mueck, John Isaac, Charlie White, Cindy Sherman, Sue Webster and Tim Noble, and Patricia Piccinini (whose own practice emerged out of a media arts one in the 1990s) have all been obsessed with different kinds of depictions of the monstrous human form.

Piccinini's work has embodied the biomorphic monster and transgenic hybrid creature; however, her work ultimately aims to humanise the monster, to enlighten us to the ethical implications of such creatures. With this in mind her practice increasingly appears as part of the humanist tradition – it offers us an emphatic reading of her

strange bio-tech creations which stare at us wantingly and longingly with dewy eyes and empathetic expressions. Like 2003's *We Are Family*, much of her work is situated in the setting of the normal domestic environment of the nurturing family and mother figure. Any potential strangeness or perversity is quickly normalised within the familiar domestic setting. For once Piccinini's biomorphic creatures are domesticated and humanised, they are clearly no longer part of the class of the monstrous, they become the anti-monstrous.

The monstrous in Piccinini's work is ultimately negated and her creatures revealed to be just as human as the rest of us. Rather than presenting the monstrous as an aesthetic entity in its own right, Piccinini's work is geared more towards tugging at the emotional strings and pushing the emotional buttons of the viewer so they see her creations as 'human'. On the other hand the Chapman Brothers' monstrous and mutated creations aim to destabilise the viewer, to shock, revolt and manipulate. They operate in almost direct opposition to an artist like Patricia Piccinini's empathetic hybrid creations.

The AGNSW (Art Gallery of New South Wales) recent publication of Piccinini's work consisted of a colouring book of her creations for young children, further cementing her practice not in the monstrous territory it appears to be but the G rated, stable, non threatening, caring, child friendly zone of domesticity.

However, earlier in her career Piccinini explored what I believe to be the more creepy and strange end of her practice in the ambiguous odd fusions of flesh in her *LUMP* series or *Life with Unformed Mutant Properties* (1994 – 95). While often still operating in the humanist context of the family friendly environment and the new infant, these genetically modified blobs of flesh pointed to a more disturbing and mysterious outcome of human DNA experiments and genetic modification.

Another contemporary artist that has delved into the themes of the monstrous is Los Angeles artist Charlie White. His playful photographic series *Understanding Joshua* features an alien-type humanoid creature suddenly finding himself within the bizarre

world of southern California parties with their hedonistic excess. White's work from this period employs the artifice of the monstrous humanoid puppet *Joshua* set against the superficial California settings to deft effect. Like scenes out of a movie, or constructed TV show, White's work is cinematic in its reference and material use of the monstrous humanoid planted within the scene, providing for a kind of unnerving ontological crisis. In addition White's own practice from the early 2000s, with its lens set firmly on the monstrous, prosthetic, cinematic object, is one my own work shares to an extent.

John Isaac renders the body into a series of monstrous abstracted and abject bodily sculptural forms. His work plays on the notion of the malleable, material nature of the flesh of the body and the monstrous through extreme distortion and exaggeration of what is considered the normal/abnormal body.

Sue Webster and Tim Noble have utilised the idea of cultural detritus and in doing so have transformed and transfigured the monstrous into new meanings. Their piece *Scarlett* from the exhibition *Polymorphous Perverse* was shown originally at the Freud Museum in London. The work consists of a nightmarish assemblage of stuffed animals, doll body parts and crude mechanics, and it presents the monstrous as an unfinished, half formed combination of things in progress where machines and domestic power tools are activating some kind of horrible Freudian nightmare.

This is by no means a complete list of contemporary artists who have explored themes of the monstrous, far from it. I simply wanted to briefly highlight what I feel to be a number of important works on the theme and to examine some key works that have had an impact on my own. A fuller account of the monstrous and contemporary art practice is beyond the scope of this thesis. Interestingly the distinction between the monstrous and the abject is often a blurry one. The abject is clearly connected to the monstrous, the uncanny and the grotesque and, as discussed, the monstrous does have a connection to the notion of media arts as recombinant form. My research focus is targeted towards the abject body and its relationship to the imagination of emerging

media art culture as well as the fusion of the physical and the technological and the boundary disruption such a fusion provides. These are discussed in detail in the following pages.

## **Mike Kelley's The Uncanny**

In addition to the monstrous, the uncanny has a close connection to the abject. The topic of the uncanny has been theorised, and theorised again, within the culture of contemporary visual art. However I feel the corpse of the uncanny and its relationship to the abject still has some last remaining gasps of life in it, which I hope to outline here.

A key exhibition around the theme occurred in 1993 when Mike Kelley curated the exhibition *Uncanny* at Sonsbeek 93 in Arnhem, The Netherlands. An expanded version of the exhibition was later staged at Tate Liverpool in 2004. The exhibition is a significant one in the context of this thesis in that it brings together and categorises ideas surrounding the theme of the uncanny and its close relationship to the emotion of the abject.

The abject contains elements of the uncanny, and the uncanny elements of the abject. The uncanny can be thought of as an emotion that is *uncomfortably strange* and the Freudian idea in which something is familiar but not familiar at the same time. The topic of the uncanny seems a favorite topic for many artists. However, like the monstrous, it too sits beyond the parameters and scope of this thesis. Like the monstrous, it needs to be touched upon for its close proximity to the abject. My inclusion of Mike Kelley's uncanny show is to highlight a number of key issues he articulates in relation to the emotion and how this relates (and doesn't relate) to my thinking around art and technology.

*The Uncanny* exhibition for Kelley was also a response to the popularity of figurative sculpture, which was popular in the 1990s. In particular, Kelley cites a major show

curated around the theme of the figure by Jeffrey Deitch called *Post Human*. In the catalogue essay for *Post Human*, Deitch makes the observation:

*The Freudian model of the psychological person is dissolving into a new model... There is a new sense that one can simply construct the new self that one wants.*<sup>125</sup>

No doubt Kelley views Deitch's position as potentially utopian, where the promise of new technology can alter the foundation of our bodies. In a way Kelley's *Uncanny* show is an attempt to reclaim the Freudian body and its profound relationship to the notion of the human form. Kelley's *Uncanny* features the work of mannequin-based object work by artists like Damien Hirst, the Chapman Brothers, and other YBA artists such as Sarah Lucas and Marc Quinn. It also included Cindy Sherman's photographs of sex toys and medical dummies, and artists like Ron Muek, Robert Gober and Hans Bellmer.

For Kelley, the uncanny or the uncomfortably familiar resides primarily in the physical object of the human figure and our relationship to it. It is interesting to note that Kelley doesn't define the uncanny in relationship to the time-based, kinetic movement and the electronically/technologically reanimated but to the static and fixed materiality of the physical object and the categorical confusions over the static inanimate human figure.

This distinction is an interesting one, in that Kelley's reasoning of the uncanny qualities of the object seems partly founded in notions of doubt and an ambivalent relationship to the status of the object. Such qualities see our reading of it as an in-between state, for example, the mannequin as a stand-in and the statue as an embodiment of death. This relationship is clearly outlined when Kelley discusses Duchamp's ready-mades in the catalogue for the exhibition.

For Kelley, Duchamp's ready-mades are explicitly uncanny in that they shift their meaning from real object to illusion of the real, from art object to non-art object. The readymade for Kelley occupies the area of the double, the doppelganger, the

shape-shifter. When the status of the object and its meanings come under question, this I believe constitutes much of Kelley's take on the uncanny.

In the exhibition Kelley has broken down the uncanny into the following sub-categories: Scale, Colour, The Body Part and Wholeness, The Ready-made, The Double, Statues and Death, and The Harems.

However while Kelley's position on the uncanny is critical to my own work on this theme, my studio work attempts to articulate the notion of the uncanny and the emotion of abjection specifically through the object moving, twitching, pulsating, breathing, quivering and being reanimated via electricity, a category it seems which sits outside of those as defined by Kelley. It is my position that movement is integral to activating the uncanny, which is principally based on Freud's notion of the body being controlled by external forces to itself. An early example of this would be the mechanical and clockwork automatons that were prevalent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with their uncanny ability to appear alive and operate with their own agency.

If the physical object is not animated in any way and is static, our reading of it requires that we must imagine and identify with its potential to move, to be alive. I feel this is a very different aesthetic experience of an object to one that is actually moving and breathing, which amplifies the Freudian world caught in the blurry zone of in-between states of the living and dead in ways that the static merely hints at.

Artists have explored the abject and the uncanny as themes in the static visual arts for some time, rendering the body as still, frozen and dead. The history of abjection and the uncanny here have largely centered around this notion of the corpse-like association of the static object. It is presented as if it has arrived from elsewhere, from the edges of our understanding of the world and what we are. We are confronted by the uncanny and abject object and its all-empowering stasis.

However the moving image, kinetic, and new and emerging electronic and robotic activated works can take the conversation of the uncanny-bject elsewhere, removed from the fixation of the static object of the visual arts. Just as Freud stated, dismembered limbs and other body parts have a degree of the uncanny about them; however it is when they have the ability to *move* by themselves that they intensify the uncanny nature of such things.<sup>126</sup>

## ***The technological uncanny***

I want to explore here the relationship between the uncanny, electricity and technology, which seems to me a critical one in activating the abject within the context of media arts. The uncanny nature of electricity arcs through the human body but also remains a firm fixture in much of my studio work. The notion of electricity as a conduit of reanimation, of activating bodies and bringing to life what probably should be dead, is a central theme in much of my work, the very notion of reanimation of what has been thrust aside - the abject body - making it visible and current within a culture of art and technology which seeks to keep it dead. The uncanny nature of electricity as a technology itself and its activation of the abject body ties together works such as *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, *Some Thing*, *Night of the Living Hippy* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation*. The uncanny and abject attributes in these works are partly activated by the spark of electricity in crude depictions of reanimation, B-grade theatrics and abject human organs.

Curator Brigitte Felder, in her catalogue essay for the exhibition *The Digital Uncanny*, has recently framed the uncanny specifically around media based forms:

*The irrational consequences of advanced technological enlightenment are revealed in the uncanny.*<sup>127</sup>

She makes the point that all electronic media by definition is somewhat uncanny in that it uses fictions to build its reality - from disembodied voices and virtual architecture to

objects brought to life.

Media art provides a fertile zone for the uncanny to operate in – it is a space of bringing things to life, of the dead given motion, of things caught in between states of the real and the unreal. Technology has long had the ability to evoke and bring to life notions of the uncanny - the history of electricity has been associated with the territory of the inanimate and animate in a variety of ways. Technology can be a catalyst for a state between that which is living but should be dead, together with providing aesthetic feelings of dread, horror and distress.

In the following I will discuss a number of cultural examples of how we can consider technology and electricity as facilitators of the uncanny. Perhaps one of the most striking and memorable experiences of the uncanny and electricity occurred on a personal level on visiting an exhibition with my at the time one-year-old daughter featuring the work of artist Tony Oursler. On entering the darkened room of the gallery and upon seeing one of Oursler's familiar 'electronic effigies' of projected video onto a small mannequin, all was calm as both myself and my young daughter contemplated Oursler's piece.

However, once the video started to move and talk, my daughter let out a blood-curdling scream of sheer and all consuming terror, which I haven't witnessed since. Clearly she was disturbed by what she believed to be an inanimate doll suddenly come to life. Seeing her react in such an extreme and distressing way intensified the uncanny effect.

The experience of viewing the Oursler piece with my child became doubly uncanny. His work was already playing with notions of uncanniness, of the inanimate made animate, through the ethereal and ghostly effects of video projection onto anthropomorphised dolls. The intense emotional reaction my daughter had on viewing Oursler's piece was as if she herself were possessed. Such an episode recalls Freud's notion of epileptic seizures and madness having their origin in the uncanny,<sup>128</sup> of the body being momentarily taken over or possessed. Indeed the middle ages ascribed such behaviours to demonic influences.

Like the prisoner on death row, their body on the receiving end of 24,000 volts, the epileptic seizure is uncanny in its appearance. It recalls the violent surge of the body electrocuted; electricity not as the spark of life, but death. The epileptic fit is a kind of uncanny living death that one recovers from. As the body slips over into another state of being, the nerve cells that transmit electrical impulses of the brain are momentarily disrupted.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, electricity was an ongoing preoccupation for many. Benjamin Franklin, the American politician and inventor, presented a paper in 1751 at the Royal Society putting forward the idea that lightning was an electrical force. As the new world was being discovered, various new and exotic animals too were being discovered. One was shipped to London in 1774: the electric eel – combining the absorbing preoccupation of the uncanny wonder of electricity together with the strange and almost other-worldly new species of biology which could emit an electric charge. The electrical eel also inspired the bizarre and popular craze in London of 1775 of electric eel parties. To see how many people could feel the electrical charge, people joined hands and shocks were felt by all.<sup>129</sup>

Recently a Japanese aquarium featured a Christmas tree with an assortment of Christmas lights that were revealed to be powered by an electrical eel. The electric eel reminds one of the biological wonder of electricity, as a kind of uncanny life force which integrates our connection of electricity to the biological world.

In 1786, the Italian, Luigi Galvani, caused a dead frog's legs to twitch simply by touching muscles and nerves with electricity, thereby discovering that bioelectric forces exist within living tissue, commonly now referred to as *galvanism*. In the same time as Galvani, recently executed prisoners were plied with electricity, providing the galvanic twitch of brief bodily movement.

Such a fascination with electricity and the reanimation of the dead body inspired Mary Shelley who went on to write *Frankenstein*:

*Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed and among others the nature of the principle of life and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated... Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things.*<sup>130</sup>

Percy Bysshe Shelley, who would later go on to marry Mary Goodwin (Mary Shelley) was deeply fascinated with the new wonders of electricity, referring to the human body as ‘a lump of electrified clay.’<sup>131</sup> Shelley remained convinced that ‘electrical fluid’<sup>132</sup> was the animating life force of the human body.

An episode of the Fox TV series *Fringe* recently featured a character whose natural electromechanical field had become amplified through an experiment. A scientist explained to his team and the viewers at home:

*human beings are merely highly complex electrical systems.*<sup>133</sup>

Recently media artist Garnet Hertz (where, bizarrely the artist’s own surname references electrical frequencies) implanted a miniature web server in the body of a frog specimen in a work entitled *Experiments in Galvanism* (2003). The work connected the Frog’s inert body to the internet with remote viewers triggering the left or right leg of the frog.

Body parts with their own bio-electricity and electrical energy can have an uncanny life force of their own making - a potentially abject reanimation. As electrical impulses of the body misfire, that zone of the dead behaves as if alive. The notion of kinetic movement is critical in our engagement with the uncanny, as Freud has pointed out:

*Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves – all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove able to move of themselves in addition.*<sup>134</sup>

The technological uncanny finds its home in medical equipment, devices for keeping the body from slipping over into death. The medical machine infused with a high degree of uncanniness and downright creepiness as Bruce Grenville has articulated is the iron lung.<sup>135</sup> The machine embrace of the iron lung was once the only way to assist individuals whose chest muscles had become progressively damaged by polio. The iron lung has many connections to the uncanny; the undead body being kept alive by the assistance of a machine designed to expand and contract the chest; not to mention the associations of the machine and its relationship to the unsettling fear of a horrific and devastating infectious disease, as if somehow the iron lung embodied the disease of polio within itself. There is also the notion of the iron lung as a kind of perverse cyborgian architecture, the notion of the body being controlled by a force outside of itself.

Andy Warhol's *Big Electric Chair* from 1967 also understands the idea of a technology that can embody an unsettling quality. The electric chair provides us with an aesthetic quality that arouses a feeling of dread. Warhol's iconic image revealed that aspect of the uncanny, where something is seen which is normally hidden from view; Death by electrocution, planting the seed of the electric chair in the popular consciousness as a technological object imbued with a devastating fear.

Electricity could create life as easily as it could destroy it, it might transform the inanimate into the animate and back again. For some time it was believed that it could also heal the sick and the diseased. Electrotherapy has a long history in early 20<sup>th</sup> century medical practices, in particular the galvanic bath - of soaking in electricity infused bath water as a cure all.

This includes electro-shock therapy, now renamed as *electroconvulsive therapy*, a psychiatric treatment in which seizures are electrically induced into the patient's brain.

Early electro-shock therapy often resulted in extreme side effects, or seizures, and turning patients into a vegetative state as consciousness slipped over into that uncanny space between being alive and dead.

It is the alternative health fraternity that have carried the torch for electrotherapy in recent years. They put forward the belief that the human body is composed of negative and positive electrical energy and that all living matter carries with it an electrical charge.

The electrical zapper is designed for the user to wear. It literally zaps the user's body with an electrical current to rid the body's internal organs of pathogens and disease and thereby renders the body as an uncanny conduit for electrical impulses.

L. Ron Hubbard, father of Scientology, developed the E-meter, thought of as 'religious artifact'. The E-meter was designed to register the electrical information of the 'static field' surrounding the body and its energy. When operated by a trained Scientologist the E-meter is supposed to register if one has moved on from past spiritual developments and blockages.

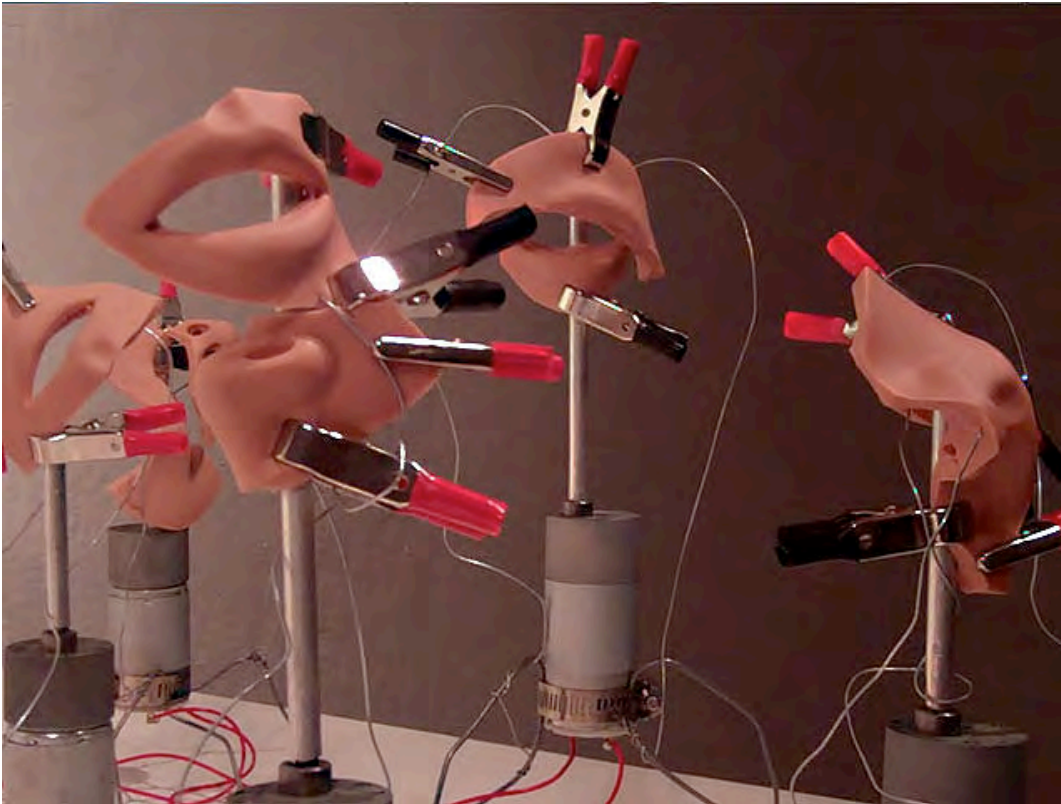
In the following I will discuss just how the uncanny nature of electricity has played out in the production of one of my works. in which electricity is seen as a facilitator of the galvanic twitch.

## ***Twitch of the Death Nerve, 2011***

Potentially the least abject of all of my studio works, *Twitch of the Death Nerve* operates in the uncanny space of the uncomfortably strange. Consisting of a series of cannibalised mechanical devices, facial components from medical training dummies and electrical motors, which sit on a large table, the works are reanimated via simple and crude motors and electronics.

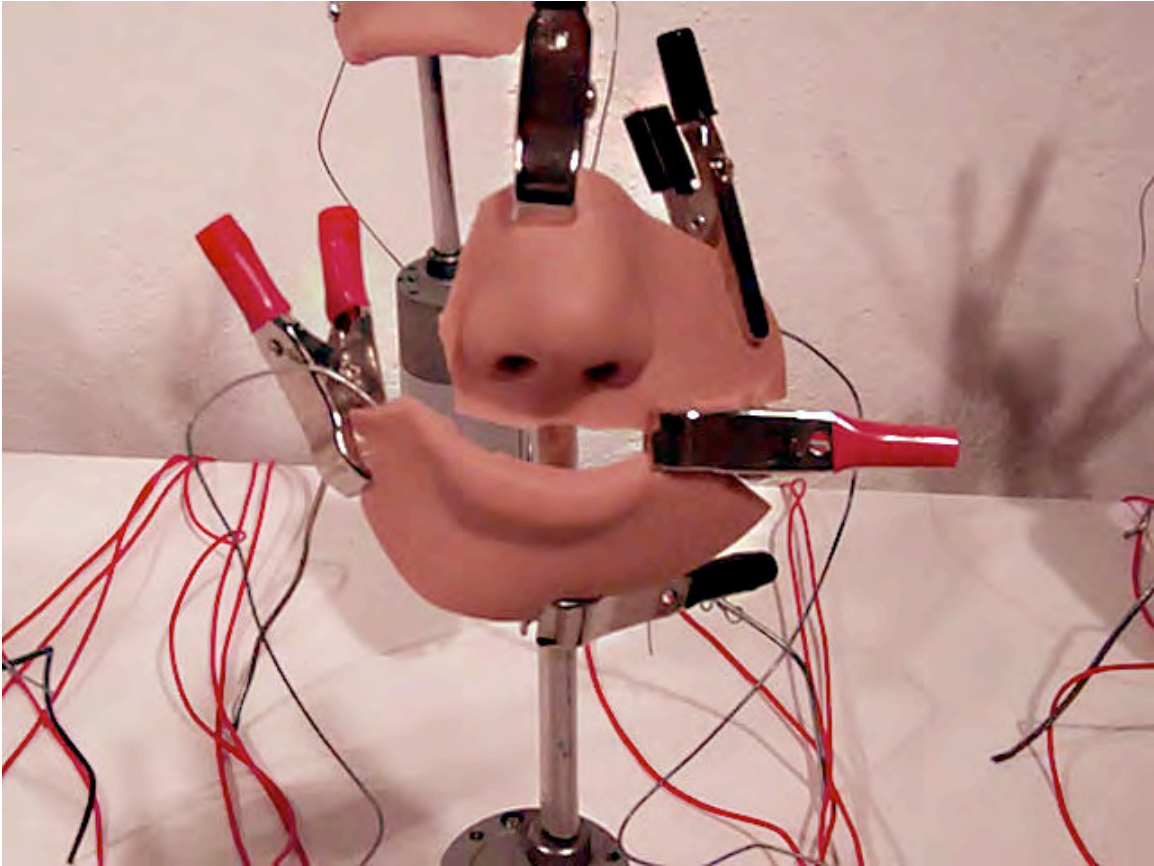
This work directly explores the disturbing qualities of the human face - or lack of a face

or the face recombined into something else altogether. Taking its name from Mario Bava's 1971 horror film *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, it seeks to explore the uncanny and the unsettling feeling of seeing elements of the face cut up, recombined and reanimated through simple electrical devices.



**Figure 11. Ian Haig, *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, 2011 (kinetic, electronic sculptures)**

In this work the removal of the face exposes the face as part mechanical being and part human. In addition, this work plays with caricature and notions of robotics and simulation by presenting extremely crude, grotesque and simple devices that behave in pathetic and horrible ways. The installation appears very much like a worktable with robots that are half finished, incomplete, broken and malfunctioning. The project also references ideas of genetic engineering and the breeding and manufacture of synthetic body parts.



**Figure 12. Ian Haig, *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, 2011 (kinetic, electronic sculptures)**

Death is registered primarily on the face; the human connection of the face is quickly rendered disturbing once it is broken, distorted and fragmented. This work also plays on the boundaries between the living and not living, while also offering a rendering of the monstrous as that which is lacking parts, unformed and unfinished.

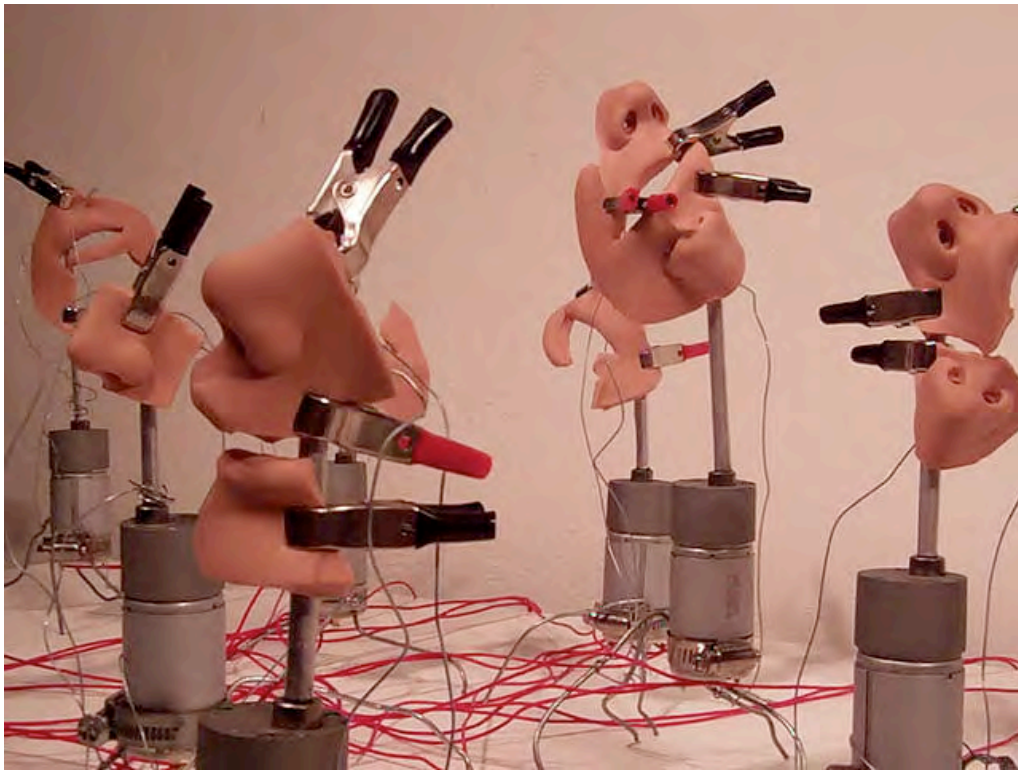
The work also finds resonance in the literal translation of Deleuze's notion of the facial machine, with Deleuze referring to the face as an '*abstract machine of faciality*.'<sup>136</sup> The body and face has its own mechanics, all of which work together to produce its own brand of a special effect. The facial machine produces a collection of emotions, expressions, sounds and so on; however, it is those moments when the machine begins to malfunction and break down which *Twitch of the Death Nerve* begins to explore - the

uncontrollable twitch or the facial tic, which reveals the machine in a kind of revolt with itself.

In Brandon Cronenberg's film *Antiviral* from 2012, the nature of the face comes under a different kind of analysis, as one character explains:

*For human beings the face is a structure with a high information resolution.*<sup>137</sup>

The face as a form of information echoes Deleuze's own reading of the face as a structured system. *Twitch of the Death Nerve* corrupts the information of the face, its data fragmented and unusable. The face here becomes a non-face, a monstrous version of itself.



**Figure 13. Ian Haig, *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, 2011 (kinetic, electronic sculptures)**

The title of the work playfully references the uncanny nature of reanimation, of re-activating what is dead into a *Danse Macabre* of the undead, in a horrible display of quivering prosthetics and motors.

The piece plays with ideas of the lab experiment, and the ambiguity of the machines activating the facial parts, keeping them alive or a weird display of a tissue engineering experiment gone wrong. Elements of the work almost appear not to be working correctly and the notion of the malfunction itself becomes a kind of monstrous behaviour.



**Figure 3. Ian Haig, *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, 2011 (kinetic, electronic sculptures)**

The work employs a degree of chance in its utilisation of technology, as each of the face components are attached to hollow aluminum tubes. These sit on top of a series of 12 volt motors, which spin and oscillate the aluminum tubes, giving the impression of jiggling and quivering movement.

Such a focus on electricity in the work almost comes across as entirely elemental and somewhat retro within the framework of developing media technologies. However it is the cultural narratives of electricity, from Galvani, to Mary Shelley, which my work also attempts to activate and bring to life, as much as the uncanny body parts in the works themselves.

I was pleased with this extremely low-tech solution to creating the kinetic behaviour of the work. Such a D.I.Y approach to technology and 12 volt motors contributes to the work's garage aesthetic, which has also followed through into some of my other projects. Such an approach hopefully removes the work from the imperative of technical sophistication and engineering that is all too present in some media artworks. Instead *Twitch of the Death Nerve* offers a hopeless, malfunctioning and crude fusion of the body and technology.

In this chapter I have explored the origin of abject art; in addition to the various theories associated with encountering abjection and the abject body, I have also examined the abject and its close relationship to both the monstrous and Freud's notion of the uncanny and its connection to emerging art and technology.

## **Chapter 3: Abjection and media art**

In this chapter I begin to chart the history and trajectory of media artists who have explored bodily themes and the abject within their practice. I also frame the abject around the metaphor of disease, the computer virus and the worm within the framework of technology.

As much as the abject body was being revisited in the 1990s with visual artists exploring the transgressive ideas of the aesthetics of disgust and repulsion, the world of emerging media seemed to be erasing the abject body to a degree in the early to mid 1990s. Or

rather the body was being rethought and recast in the context of the very non-abstract material of technology and the narratives of improvement and advancement.

To consider media artists and their use of technology in another perspective, I want to travel back for a moment to the body horror films discussed in Chapter 1. *Alien*, *Videodrome*, *The Thing* and *The Fly* appeared at a cultural moment in the 1980s when technology as we know it today was in its infancy. This was a time of Betamax video, brick-sized mobile phones and crude video games. The technological revolution of networks, digital downloads, hyper media and so on which later unfolded in all their utopian glory was still a decade or so away.

This becomes an important point in the trajectory and narrative of the abstract body in the genre of technology and art. The early body horror films were operating outside of an advanced technological culture in a sense and, in their own way, they offered precursory warnings and critiques of the coming dawn of technological media. This cultural situation was reversed with the development of emerging media art in the 1990s. As culture itself was in the midst of adapting to rapid technological change, media art was no longer outside of such developments but indeed part of the process, often appropriating the same revolutionary and utopian sensibilities of commercial technological products.

Jeffery Sconce has articulated a similar line of thought when discussing his book *Haunted Media* from 2000:

*It's also strange to see artists and academics replicating the exact same marketing discourses of the telecommunications companies. This whole occult fascination with disembodied presence and telematics is such a major part of the promotional campaigns for these media.*<sup>138</sup>

Sconce articulates an interesting point. How can artists avoid duplicating and appropriating the utopianism that is hard-wired into the very technological media they

use in constructing an artwork? One strategy is to engage in material that is entirely removed from commercial and marketing discourses: the abject.

Disgust, repulsion, the monstrous and the abject can never really be misunderstood as something else. Such material is often so direct and un-subtle that it cannot successfully co-exist with notions of progress, technological advancement and forward thinking. It would appear, then, that the abject within the context of emerging media art culture provides an important and critical function: to remove, eradicate and short-circuit the discourse and framework of technological utopianism and determinism.

In his provocative commentary on contemporary art, Jean Baudrillard goes further still in his perception of contemporary artists' naval gazing:

*Nothing now distinguishes it from the technical, promotional, media, digital operation. There is no transcendence, no divergence any more, nothing of another scene: merely a specular play with the contemporary world as it takes place.*<sup>139</sup>

Baudrillard could be talking about contemporary art in general or, possibly, he had his sights set specifically on digital art. He makes the valid point that art needs to transcend the norm, to take the conversation and the material in other directions and to other cultural locations. Here, the abject and its relationship to the technological world can potentially provide for that other location.

As previously stated, the emergence of the abject art period in the 1990s coincided with the rapid interest in the possibilities of new technology. In Australia this coincided with the emergence of the Creative Nation policy and the embrace of all things digital. The rapid uptake of new technologies was occurring and moving in the opposite cultural direction of the abject body. It was as if the utopian structure of such technologies activated the escape velocity of the body falling by the wayside, a kind of collateral damage in the rush of pre-millennium cyber hype and promise.

However some media artists in the mid 1990s responded to the emerging new media with a critical eye and did engage themes of the body, disease and bodily material as I will discuss in this chapter. A number of media artists indeed have integrated the abject body and its relationship to the interface of technology in the early wave of CD-ROM media. This included provocative and viscerally intense works from artists like Linda Dement and Graham Harwood. However more recent work in the genre which engages with the potential of the abject appears to be less visible.

The emotion of disgust is primarily a physical response to material - an object, an image and so on - that can threaten and contaminate us. Often such an emotion relates explicitly to our gut reaction. The crude physicality of the abject as it relates to a perceptual response is perhaps one reason why the abject is less common in media art practices as it is the aesthetic antithesis of the technological. The abject is all about boundaries breaking down - the technological itself is a kind of boundary, a structure that cannot accommodate material that is essentially about the erosion of such boundaries.

I want to revisit a quote by Kristeva and her definition of the abject, for it clearly finds resonance in the context of the ordered/structured system of technology:

*what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.*<sup>140</sup>

The abject, then, is the ambiguous, the material that doesn't belong and has no place within the logical framework of the computer.

The notion of the gut reaction connects the abject to a primitive emotional response, a hard-wired recoil to that which is offensive or threatens the body. In the context of a technological narrative, the base level gut response of repulsion and the abject could perhaps appear simplistic, unsophisticated and entirely primitive, hardly the territory of increasingly sophisticated and complex systems which art and technology provide with

their positive aesthetic experiences. Erroneously such a reading could account for the removal of the abject from the progressive narrative of emergent media art cultures.

As discussed previously, as one recoils from the abject, the automatic response of disgust is perhaps best understood as largely, but not entirely, as a fear of disease. Abject bodily materials like pus, mucus or excrement, all of which are the carriers and agents of disease of the physical body, appear as an unconscious threat, a sense that the integrity of the body could break down at any moment.

In a literal sense the computer virus is essentially a metaphor for disease of the body. It is uniformly avoided at all costs from the framework of emerging technology. The computer virus infects a computer system and like its human counterpart it breaks down the integrity of that system; its rapid replication needs to be eradicated through firewalls, anti-virus software and mail servers that 'quarantine' spam.

Further, the notion of *abort* plays out in the language of technology. The aborting of software and programs connect the computer to the biological material of the aborted foetus, a failed, rejected operation, command or human body.

Another abject and low life form is the worm, a parasite which infects the human gastrointestinal tract and also its electronic malware variety infecting the computer. Both the computer virus and the worm provide literal fears of the abject diseased human body. A contagion within the world of the computer, the worm has an association with the low life form of the maggot with its relationship with the fly and the rotting corpse. (I am reminded here of Cronenberg's *The Fly* which is essentially a 'bug' in the technological system.) In some respects, technology has an implicit, if not lateral, relationship with the abject body.

The world of computing and technology has built into it the metaphors of human disease - abject body signifiers to be thrust aside and excluded - such as notions and aesthetics of malfunction, system breakdowns, crashing software and corrupted data and

the mutant cells of the virus. The web artwork of [www.jodi.org](http://www.jodi.org) comes to mind here, as a recognition and playful engagement with the aesthetics of the infected and disease-ridden computer, of damaged and sick code which replicates and mutates its form.

Indeed, the very notion of code as a system of computer-based language, of logic, data and commands, functions as the inverse of the body and its unpredictability and messy organic reality. *Jodi.org* on the other hand, provides us with damaged code, sick commands and diseased algorithms. It is the inverse of the interface of the web as a site of information, knowledge and productivity.

The idea of disease - a virus, a festering wound or a weeping scab - are all aesthetic metaphors that come to mind not just in the context of technology but also in art. Perhaps my own contribution to media arts culture and the worlds of art and technology is best conceptualised and thought about in such terms. Contemporary media arts culture attempts to inoculate itself against the presence of the abject, sick and diseased body. My own work functions in such a context less as a progressive, sophisticated and enlightening project and, rather, one of an ugly cancer, a disease to be eradicated and removed at all costs for fear that it will spread and multiply.

As a character in David Cronenberg's *Stereo* (1969) exclaims: '*the disease is possibly a form of creative cancer*'.<sup>141</sup> Or in Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975): '*Disease is the love of two kinds of alien creatures for each other*'.<sup>142</sup> For Cronenberg, the virus, disease, and 'creative cancers' become agents of change and transformation within a particular structured system.

Some years ago, I conceptualised my own practice in such terms, which has, I believe, an even stronger resonance in the context of my thesis and my recent body of work for the PhD:

*Art and artists are the diseased, sick and injured. The whole idea of making art is indeed a kind of pathology. Creativity a form of sickness, art as a disease.*<sup>143</sup>

In the following I will discuss a number of media artists who can be thought of as offering bodily eruptions of different kinds within the ordered system of technology. I offer a brief overview of artists that have explored the potential for abjection and media art.

Graham Harwood is a critical artist in the early development of emerging media art and its link to uncomfortable and difficult and, at times, abject subject matter. Harwood is best known for his collaborative CD-ROM work *Rehearsal of Memory* (1995) produced with maximum security mental patients at Ashworth Hospital in the UK.

The interface for the work is made up of scanned body parts of inmates. The scanning of the flesh of the inmates provides for a visceral, physical mark of lived experience where notions of insanity and normal/abnormal are cast against the logical framework of the computer and the ordered navigation of the CD-ROM.

As Francesca da Rimini wrote in 1995 of Harwood's *Rehearsal of Memory* and the relationship of his work to the clean spaces of the computer;

*Its hygienic procedures contaminated with the effluent of excluded human relations. For a long time we have assigned machines our dirty laundry whilst maintaining the image of their enameled white veneers.*<sup>144</sup>

Harwood claimed back in 1995, during the developing era of new media art, the catch cry for this thesis: '*Now is the time for filth!*',<sup>145</sup> which in many respects underpins my own sensibility and research into the abject body and technology.

In 2000 Harwood was commissioned by The Tate to produce the online work: *Uncomfortable proximity*. Like *Rehearsal of memory*, this new web work put the user/viewer in close proximity to unpleasant subject matter - the interface of the web or CD-ROM enabled closer examination and scrutiny of such material. The project was

active throughout 2000 and was an exact replica of The Tate website as it existed in 2000. The work was based on images from The Tate's collection, along with found images, collages and images of The Tate website.

By viewing such images under Harwood's critical microscope within the framework of The Tate's website, we are forced to reconsider and question notions of aesthetic value, beauty, identity and race and their social and cultural constructions within the institution.

Harwood is associated with the UK media art collective *Mongrel*, and *Uncomfortable proximity* provided for a mongrelised and bastardised intervention into The Tate website. It remains an enduring example of media art and its relationship to the grotesque, abject body.

More recently Japanese artist Mio Izawa's practice has focused on the themes of the inner body and disease and its fusion with technology in a number of biological media installations. Her works focus explicitly around ideas of interactivity including *Mechanical Tumour* from 2008, which features a visceral silicon-like tumorous growth which expands in size as it registers the user's CPU usage. This work explicitly offers us the idea of biologically abject bodily material, coupled with the logic of the computer interface.

Her interactive work *External Heart* (2006) reads a person's pulse and moves accordingly to the speed of the pulse of the user. Her umbilical cord *iPhone* charger from 2010 is a direct reference to David Cronenberg's flesh-computer game interfaces from *eXistenZ*. Izawa's work fuses ideas around interior/exterior and the organic/technological as organs and growths of biological material are framed within a variety of computer-based interfaces.

Other artists who have explored the terrain of technology and the abject body include collaborative artists Anthony Aziz and Samuel Cucher who have produced a series of

works on the altered body, in particular the face. Their digitally altered photographs often feature people with their mouths, nostrils and eyes disturbingly replaced with a layer of skin. These works explore the boundaries of the body and orifices that have been closed over and erased. Referred to as the *Dystopia* series from 1994–95, such works point towards ideas of advancing technology and evolutionary change which have signaled the individual's loss of identity.

While not strictly within the idiom of media art, the material of the internal human body and its relationship to various technologies can be seen in a variety of artists' work in video. Timm Ulrich's video work from 2004 involved the artist swallowing a tiny camera to document the journey through the digestive tract as a kind of inner body introspective autobiographical work. Ulrich thought of the work in 1971 but needed to wait for the technology to become available to produce the work.

Artist Mona Hatoum underwent a colonoscopy for creative purposes in her 1994 video *Corps étranger*. The camera surveys her interior body in a very different take on the notion of self portraiture. A similar vein is explored in the Chapman Brothers' music video clip for The Peth's - *Let's go fucking mental*, in which the spaces of the interior body provided by the endoscope camera sings the lyrics to the song.

Valie Export has a long history of working with the body and its relationship to the abject. In 2007 she produced *The voice as performance, act and body* involving a performance highlighting the dislocated relationship of the voice to the body. As the artist stated, '*the voice is hidden in the clothing of the body.*'<sup>146</sup> The work features an endoscope with video camera attached which travels into the artist's throat providing the viewer with visceral evidence of the bodily function of the voice and its action inside the body. Stelarc also has produced *Stomach Sculpture* from 1993, which I discuss later in this chapter, along with Stelarc's other body of work. In addition another important artist to be added here would be Orlan and her ongoing project of plastic surgery modifications which the artist refers to as 'Self Hybridizations', often displaying photographic and video work featuring liposuctioned fat and other bodily material.

Many of the following artists that I will discuss are Australian. This isn't by any means an exhaustive survey of media artists that have engaged the somatic and abject body. Yet the emergence of an antipodean theme is interesting.

Pre-colonisation, the edge and boundary of the known world that geographically was Australia existed in isolation which resulted in the development of unique and bizarre fauna in the form of marsupials that were unknown anywhere else in the world. Such strange biological realities have been recast centuries later in the boundaries, not of geography and obscure fauna, but of the body and technology within an Australian context.

Over the last twenty or so years a particular aesthetic has emerged in this country within the media arts on the theme of the body, albeit on the edges of the dominant media arts culture. This includes mutant creatures, weird cells grown in petri dishes, the malleability of flesh, and the reactivation of animal organs, all of which point towards a highly unique take on the body and technology emerging out of Australia by various media artists.

More recently, another preoccupation with the body and contemporary art has emerged at the end of the world in the form of MONA (The Museum of Old and New Art), located literally at the edge of the world in Hobart, Tasmania. MONA, with its focus on the themes of sex and death and artworks that push boundaries and buttons of acceptance, has emerged as a significant site for contemporary art in the world. Their display of works by the Chapman Brothers and Mat Collishaw, and rare performance videos by The Viennese Actionists, confirms their position as engaging in the somatic body within the visual art world. Tellingly there is very little of what could be described as media art or art and technology that engages with bodily material on display at MONA, which is possibly a reflection of the curatorial framework of MONA but, perhaps more importantly, an indication of the lack of such material within the media arts.

One exception here is Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* (2010) on exhibition at MONA which combines the technological with the bodily in the construction of a machine which produces shit without the need of a body. However while *Cloaca* clearly offers an aesthetic of the abject with the technological, I believe the work is quickly rendered somewhat sanitised through its method of presentation. Appearing like a scientific or educational display, it is clearly a work that wouldn't appear out of place in a science museum as much as an art museum. This notion of the educational or a scientific display for demonstrating human digestion underpins the work, which, ultimately, I believe transforms the work into one that has meaning and purpose and the non-abject.

In Darren Tofts's exhaustive survey and history of Australian media art, *Interzone – media arts in Australia*, there is little mention of media artists who have engaged in themes of the abject body. This is not a flaw in the survey or an oversight by Tofts, but an indication of the lack of work that has been produced along such lines over the last twenty years. One artist that Tofts does spend some time exploring, however, is Linda Dement. In the 1990s in the context of an emergent culture of cyber feminism in Australia, the notion of appropriating the new platforms of digital space for expression opposed to a male dominated space of control is highlighted by Tofts in relation to Dement's work and others:

*The cyber feminist approach is described by VNS Matrix member Virginia Barratt as a rupture in the system, the successful co-optation of a previously masculine, info-tech dominated sphere of computer culture.*<sup>147</sup>

For Tofts, Dement is a good example of such a rupture with her trilogy of CD-ROM works *Typhoid Mary* (1991), *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* (1995) and *In My Gash* (1999), which all negotiate the territory of the 'physical body and the body politic'.<sup>148</sup>

Dement's work appeared in the heyday of artist CD-ROMs in the mid 1990s in Australia along with cyber feminist collective VNS Matrix with their work *Bad Code* (1996). Both

artists forged a strong and provocative discourse and discussion around gender within the developing genre of new media art and technology. Twenty years later, the encoding of gender within the dominant narrative of new media technology is even more of a potential issue but, as it would seem in 2013, bodily fluids and technology don't mix. As Anna Munster argues:

*uneasy or unpleasant experiences do not fit comfortably into this user-friendly framework.*<sup>149</sup>

It's interesting to note that Dement's abject inspired work *Typhoid Mary* (1994) appeared very early in the emergence of CD-ROM media. One could suggest this establishes a closer link in Dement's work to other visual artists working with the body and abjection in the mid 1990s. It's also interesting that such an intense critical discourse on the body and gender was emerging with artists such as Dement and VNS Matrix at the height of the mid 1990s multimedia revolution. This was a breath of fresh air and a critical voice premised on the reinstatement of the physical corporeal body; it was the inverse of the vapourware, utopianism and posthumanism that was emerging at the time.

Further, Dement's media-based artwork came out of a photographic practice in the 1980s with photographs that often featured overly sexualised, violent and abject imagery. Such a trajectory was an important one for Dement, unlike many of the media artists who emerged in the early to mid 1990s in Australia who gravitated to technology based practices. Dement was already concerned with abject subject matter in themes prior to her CD-ROM based work and her utilisation of new media.

(Such a trajectory for Dement follows my own as an artist to an extent. Some thirty years ago, I produced noise music in a group called Socioculus,<sup>150</sup> the clinical term for losing one's hearing due to noise pollution. My brief involvement in the industrial/noise music scene of the early to mid 1980s in Melbourne laid the groundwork for producing unpleasant experiences for the listener. This was complete with the visual aesthetic of choice for industrial music: medical procedures, grisly surgery and dental examinations

in the form of super-8 movies and videos designed to revolt and shock an audience. In some respects I see my own research into the aesthetics of the abject and technology as a project I started thirty years ago.)

Dement's works, with their hardcore feminist underpinning, attempted to put blood and guts and the aesthetic of the body back into technology. Her ongoing art project seeks to give form to the unbearable. Her difficult aesthetic of disease and landscapes of bodily interiors is in direct opposition to the ordered, logical environment of technology. She is interested in allowing her bodily aesthetic to fester within the framework of the computer. As the artist has stated:

*There is great value in the dangerous areas. I am ever grateful to the discipline, order, increments, numbers, scales and settings of my chosen field, within which unreason, imagination and cathartic fury can have free reign.<sup>151</sup>*

Dement makes a valuable point here; while art and technology may exclude the abject body, it conversely offers a zone and context for the abject to freely operate in, unrestrained and unhindered. Indeed media art culture's denial of the abject body produces the conditions for it to exist.

In 2000, the exhibition *Cybercultures: sustained release - infectious agents*, staged at Casula Powerhouse in Sydney, explored ideas of infection and contagion both in a literal biological sense and also as metaphors for media technologies and global communication networks. *Cybercultures* featured a range of works by media artists using disease, viruses and infection as themes, including the work of Dement.

Australian media artist Michele Barker's 2001 CD-ROM work *Preternatural* undertook an investigation into otherness in the digital realm of new media art. Her work *Stuck* (2004) with Anna Munster explored our understanding of disease via various technological imaging technologies such as MRI imaging. Both works posit technology and the materiality of the body as central to their theme.

Philip Brophy's interactive work *The Body Malleable* (2004) is another project that combines the bodily with technology while not being overtly concerned with the materiality of the body as abject matter. *The Body Malleable* presents the body as a polymorphous inside-out entity and also explores the interchangeability and malleability of gender. The work's bodily interface consists of perversely fingering a small hole. *The Body Malleable* builds on Brophy's commentary and writing on the body over the last thirty years and explores the ability of the body to transform its flesh but also its sexual orientation and the body's polysexual otherness. As Brophy has stated:

*the crucial value of digital technologies and their direction within limited lines of interactivity lies not in any way they have reconfigured the individual, but in the ways that they have rendered the body immaterial, invisible and indistinguishable.*<sup>152</sup>

*The Body Malleable* defines notions of interactivity as ejaculatory and emissive, the fixation of digital interactivity as a 'naïve yet pathological will to penetrate.'<sup>153</sup>

As writer Darren Tofts has written about the work:

*The Body Malleable is the first work of media art to finally and emphatically tell it like it is: interacting with computers is a completely embodied experience. With its penetrative and very literal digital interface, The Body Malleable is an ironic and playful exploration of the human-computer interface that dares us to be squeamish.*<sup>154</sup>

Tofts highlights a critical point here; as much as it is perceived to leave the body behind, withering away as we interact with the screen, the opposite is true of the computer interface. Technology reminds us of our bodies, we are reminded of its limitations and its corporeal structures in direct contrast to the perceived limitlessness of the computer interface.

More recently the collaborative project between media artists Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor, *The body is a big place* (2011), has explored the possibilities of a language of the interior body. As the artists have stated:

*We are interested in presenting the interior body in a way that avoids gore and sensationalism, but which also avoids the objectification of the interior body through its over medicalization.*<sup>155</sup>

Their project involves maintaining a pair of animal hearts in a functioning state once removed from the body. The artist's interest is in the complex and ambiguous relationship of the donated organ and the notion of an unitary subject, as their work fuses notions of media art together with the life sciences.

In some respects I feel Clancy and Pynor's project operates as almost the inverse of my own work. My piece *Workshop of Filthy Creation* functions as a perverse parody of such art–science crossovers. Any aspirations of value and cultural worth or enlightenment are quickly dispensed with. I want to explore the body in all its difficult and objectified abject sensationalism.

One area within emerging media art where bodily material can be literally located is in the field of bio art and synthetic tissue engineering. While this area is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth briefly touching on. The work of Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr of SymbioticA is a key example here. In many respects their work sits outside the field of contemporary media arts and defines its own genre of bio art. Their numerous engineered tissue parts and synthetic flesh are clearly bodily, they explore the body as raw material; however, they often sidestep the difficult and messy abject reality of the body - of bodily fluids, disgust, repulsion and the visceral. Instead, their project engineers not the abject body, but body parts that are ultimately indistinguishable from the real thing. In addition, like many art–science crossovers, SymbioticA ultimately frame their practice within the language of the progressive, redemptive and worthy, hardly the domain of the confrontation of the abject body.

Rather than embrace the malformed and deformed, or the vast potential of the mutant body that could be rendered from SymbioticA's petri dishes, the focus here is the normative and recognisable body. In some respects their work is already too sensitive to the ethical dimension of growing artificial body parts. To potentially engage in the intentionally malformed or abject body would add a layer of ethical difficulty on their practice.

The range of media artists I have covered here is by no means a complete survey but a breakdown of some of the key works of media art and its interface with bodily material and abjection over the last twenty years. One omission here is the work of Stelarc, an artist who has clearly explored the limits of the body and technology. I will discuss his work in detail later.

In many respects the mid 90s saw intensity and energy around difficult bodily themes but, like the abject body itself within media arts, this has dissipated somewhat over time. In the following I discuss the developing theme of science which has underpinned the practices of a number of media artists and the culture in general over the last two decades. I maintain that science–art crossovers, in some respects, can be seen as the inverse of the abject body.

## ***Science, art and technology and the non abject***

The emergence of media arts culture in Australia and internationally during the 1990s also saw the developing convergences and interdisciplinary crossovers of new media art and science emerge. In some respects as I outline here, art/science crossovers, with their focus on the sanitised, scientific body, helped lay the groundwork for the removal of the abject body from the paradigm of art and technology.

The 1990s saw many media artists collaborating with scientists in the disciplines of programming, artificial life, synthetic biology, artificial intelligence, software art and

computer science. Indeed much of the history of computing and software was first explored by scientists from the 1950s onwards, with the history of software first being its utilitarian and scientific function and later its creative applications.

While artists have clearly collaborated with the sciences before the 1990s, including leading figures like John Whitney and others, the focus of my research here is the 1990s and the emergence of art and science as a particular strain of media arts culture. In the Australian context, the early 1990s saw the emergence of a number of projects in which new media artists and scientists collaborated or, at least, artists were increasingly paying lip service to the theme of science. This included exhibitions such as *Virtualities* (1995) curated by Peter Morse at Melbourne's Science Works, *Sci Art 99* curated by Paul Brown and *Artists thinking about science*, which was part of *The Great Australian Science show* in 1993, curated by ANAT (The Australian Network for Art and Technology) which established itself in the late 1980s with a strong science/art agenda. There were also numerous other art/science exhibitions throughout the 1990s. In some respects, new media art has co-developed with a growing interest in ideas of science as a primary way of articulating ideas of technology and the body.

The mid 1990s also saw two high profile projects appear on the cultural landscape where the body was specifically interpreted through scientific imaging technologies. Firstly, there was the mapping of the *Human Genome Project* and the sequential structure of human DNA, detailing its functions and processes. Secondly, the body was visualised in an entirely new way with the US National Library of Medicine's *Visible Human Project*. This project digitised thin slices of male and a female cadavers and resulted in a new, previously unseen view of the internal human body.

Both the *Human Genome Project* and the *Visible Human Project* depicted the body as a scientific and sanitised entity. They provided a clinical and scientific enquiry of the body and its interior. Both projects have also been explored and referenced in various media artworks from the 1990s – for example, Patricia Piccinini's *The Mutant Genome project* (1994-95), a new media installation exploring ideas around bio-technology, and Justine

Cooper's *Rapt II* (1998), which uses MRI scans to represent the body as data. Both of these artists' work, like the science projects they reference and critique, explore a particular medical aesthetic, one of sterility and clinical enquiry into the body and its relationship and representations in science.

Lev Manovich has contributed a critique on the subject of art and science in his 2003 review of the media art festival Ars Electronica, which had a theme that year of CODE. Manovich argues that the worlds of art and science are sometimes problematic bedfellows, because artists working in such areas are sometimes preoccupied with formalism – that is, the possibilities offered by software alone and not the culture and circulating ideas surrounding their practice. As Manovich articulates:

*The reason that we continue discussing Duchamp's urinal or Paik's early TV sculptures as though these works were created today has nothing to do with the artistic and technological skills of these artists – it has to do with their concepts, i.e. the discursive statements these artists were making through their objects. In short, if modern and contemporary art is a particular discourse (or a game) where the statements (or moves) are made via particular kind of material objects identified as "artworks," digital artists need to treat their works as such statements if they are to enter the larger cultural conversation.*<sup>156</sup>

In some respects the cultural conversation which Manovich mentions can extend to other areas of culture, to other themes and research that sit outside the formal investigation of software or programming or notions of what the software *can do*. This other cultural location is the site of my own research and work.

In relation to science, the abject body operates as the fundamental opposite of the scientific body. It is the body of disease, decay and the dying. Abjection that is present in the discipline of science is quickly rendered non-abject due to its context in the clinical, the educational and scientific, it is within a paradigm of rationality and empirical knowledge. The inability for science to represent the abject body without the frame of

the clinical and the empirical is perhaps the inability for a media arts culture which embraces the idiom of science to incorporate it into its framework.

The notion of art and science which has developed as a dominant trajectory in the media arts can be seen as a point of departure for many artists and curators and their ways of thinking about new media art in relation to the real world outcomes of science (bio technology, synthetic biology and artificial life, and the computer sciences). This continues until this day in the work of artists like Eduardo Kac, Jon McCormack, SymbioticA and many others.

However in the context of this thesis I prefer Philip Brophy's provocative assessment of artists working with scientists, which is ultimately about securing a more base level, bodily enquiry for the media arts. In 1997, Brophy wrote the catalogue essay for the media art show *Trick or Trick*. In his essay entitled *Digital manias*, Brophy identifies art and science as one particular mania and he articulates that: '*Fucking the arse of science is the cheapest of all self-validating practices.*'<sup>157</sup> After complaints from the gallery, Brophy suggested another version: '*artists rimming the arse of science*', an entirely more offensive and base level scenario and the one that went to print.

In the same spirit, much of the artwork produced during my PhD is an aggressive and provocative refusal of the authority of science and the sanitised, clinical, rational scientific body. In its place I embrace the real reality of the body: moist, wet, visceral and abject.

In this art/science world of rational binary data, networks of information and artificial life is the project, developed in the 1880s, of the Enlightenment with its notion of art and science as a progressive, educative and forward thinking coupling. In addition, the Enlightenment was concerned with an opening up of our understanding of the world via new technologies of the day, ie: the microscope and the stethoscope and in particular their relationship to understanding the hidden interiors of the body.

The Enlightenment also provided the foundation of aesthetics and its relationship to the emotion of pleasure, laying the conceptual framework of aesthetic appreciation which still dominates today. In addition, the Enlightenment consciously eradicated the aesthetic appeal and pleasure of the emotion of disgust and the abject, disqualifying it from the aesthetic register.

Contemporary media art and its themes of art and science remind us of the period of the Enlightenment, of rationality, insight and reason. The antithesis of this aesthetic, the abject, has little value in this paradigm.

In this chapter I have charted the trajectory of media arts practice, with a particular focus on the Australian context. This included media artists who dealt with the difficult bodily themes of the mid 1990s as a critical interrogation and confrontation of the body into male dominated paradigms of new media, through to the engagement of science as a central theme in the media arts where the abject body is sidestepped to a degree by media artists working with the themes of science. I now will turn my attention to the cyborg as a potentially uncanny entity and one which has influenced a range of media artists as well as my own practice and research.

## ***Cyborg phantasms***

The posthuman cyborg has made a regular appearance within the fields of media art; in particular, in connection to notions of the uncanny, a kind of by-product of the emotion of the abject. On the topic of the uncanny cyborg, Bruce Grenville has stated:

*The cyborg functions as an uncanny construction, not because it is alien or unfamiliar, but because it is too familiar. It is the body doubled, duplicated by the omnipresent and ubiquitous machine.*<sup>158</sup>

The cyborg relationship to the human body is, at times, an uncanny and potentially disturbing pairing. The idea of the body enhanced and augmented from a force exterior

to the body – ie: through technology and machine enhancements - has the potential to offer a highly uncanny reading of the body and its relationship to technology.

As Bruce Grenville has expressed:

*The cyborg is a shifting, ever evolving cipher of our own anxiety and desire to give meaning to the technological ethos.*<sup>159</sup>

A key reference here is Donna Haraway who proclaimed back in 1985 that *We are all Cyborgs*.<sup>160</sup> In her seminal text *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway extends the cultural manifestation of the cyborg by rejecting and removing the anxiety that has historically been associated with the cyborg and various critiques of technology. Haraway maintains that we are already living, breathing cyborgs, thanks to enhancements in pacemakers, Nike runners, cochlear implants and so on. Like Kristeva's topic of the abject, Haraway has influenced a generation of artists into rethinking the very notion of what the cyborg represents. In some respects, however, I return to the anxiety and disturbing qualities of the cyborg in the context of the abject body, the very area Haraway has attempted to move away from in her reconceptualisation of the cyborg within a vast range of sites within contemporary culture.

William Gibson also noted that the cyborg emerged in culture as a literal man machine; however, such a depiction of the artificial man/cyborg is a retro and outdated one and out of step with the true notion of the cyborg in contemporary culture. Like Haraway, Gibson has recast the historical notion of the cyborg to a more contemporary reading. Gibson maintains that as a species we have grown an extended communal nervous system through media and our engagement with it. We are the union of biology and machine, 'we tend not to see it, because we are it.'<sup>161</sup> Gibson's idea is a compelling one; the cyborg is us. With this in mind, the fusion of the physical body and technology seems explicitly related. Unlike the notion of the cyborg as a machine that is separate and divorced from us, it is a construct that is increasingly an extension of ourselves. Gibson suggests that we can't recognise it because of its ubiquitous, everyday banality. The

cyborg remains invisible but ever present in our relationship to the media landscape.

The theme of the cyborg runs through my works *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, with its simulated, monstrous human face parts controlled by an electrical current, and the elaborate cyborg fantasy of *The Joey Machine* with its exploration of the mind of an autistic child thinking he was a machine. It also features in my works *Some Thing*, *Night of the Living Hippy* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation* with their strange motorised behaviours. All of these works explore themes of the body, or parts of the body, being controlled and manipulated by exterior forces as well as the potentially uncanny behaviour derived from such material. My own projects fall into the category of a potentially retrograde aesthetic - of the uncanny cyborg body as a separate entity to human biology. Uncanny and abject bodies and organs that appear alive, and in some cases without the need of a body, occur in a number of my works.

My discussion of the cyborg focuses less on artists' work and more on the malfunction of the cyborg and its various cultural narratives, which I maintain has been a dominant theme within popular culture. In addition, a key figure within the media arts I am discussing here is the work of Stelarc (which I will discuss as the 'Stelarc Problem'). I frame my discussion around the image of the cyborg we are familiar with in popular culture from Kraftwerk, Andy Warhol's Android, The Philip K. Dick Android project to the *Tetsuo* films of Shinya Tsukamoto, to name a few examples. Importantly, in many of these works, the image of the cyborg is manifested not as a utopian, augmented and enhanced future body (as in Stelarc's cyborg project) but as a self reflexive, self aware, cynical, and self conscious failure of the cyborg.

The idea of the dystopian and failed cyborg is central to my research and studio-based works. Contained within the cyborg is the construction of the enhanced human and the idea of technology as progress. This can just as quickly be undercut with notions of the cyborg control and navigation systems crashing and malfunctioning. Here the cyborg can take on an altogether different and more disturbing reading and, in some respects, I

believe a more interesting behaviour and cultural resonance around the failure of the future and the breakdown of science and the promise of advanced technologies.

Such a notion can be thought of as the cyborg fantasy or the phantasm of the cyborg which has haunted popular culture for some time. It is this spectre of the cyborg in pop culture as an enduring uncanny entity and, at times, exhausted fictional image that is of interest here. Unlike the work of Stelarc, whose body of work appears entirely without irony, humour or cynicism towards the cyborg, the following examples provide us with a very different, and in some respects, radical and critical notion of the uncanny cyborg, read through various pre-existing cultural narratives.

The notion of the mechanical being, the human with body parts replaced by a machine, is one which can be traced back to Edgar Allan Poe in his short story *The Man That Was Used Up* from 1843, which features a character with extensive artificial prosthesis.

William Burroughs referred to the body as the *soft machine*, as a form that is penetrable from outside influences and exterior forces. For Burroughs, these forces were different systems of control and addiction; however, one can consider the exterior forces of technology impacting and controlling the membrane of the body.

One cannot engage in a discussion of the cyborg without a reference to Shinya Tsukamoto's remarkable and seemingly out of control films *Tetsuo – The Iron Man* (1989), *Tetsuo 2 – Body Hammer* (1992) and *Tetsuo – Bullet Man* (2009). All films provide an enduring image of the extreme cyborg body, in particular, technology that has landed on the body so to speak, an originator of the mecha-org aesthetic, of organic matter fusing with technology.

The third installment, *Tetsuo - Bullet Man*, was advertised as '*A new chapter in metal*'. Not the body as a soft machine but as metallic exoskeleton, the organic vulnerability of flesh replaced with a new and improved metallic membrane. The mechanic viscera of the *Tetsuo* films also extend and subvert the aesthetic in the way in which the organic and

the technological have been depicted within the one organism. Another example is *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*'s 'mercury man' from 1991. In this film the human form melts into a liquid metal version of itself. Terminator's slick CGI metallic liquid body is the inverse of *Tetsuo*'s mechanised bodily mess.

The *Tetsuo* films revel in a kind of abject mechanical/organic aesthetic - blood, guts and the visceral nature of the body replaced with molten metal, oil, electrical wiring and cabling stand-in for organs, musculature and bodily emissions. This is an aesthetic which recalls the complex, messy and organic appearance of overhead electrical power lines in cities like Tokyo and Seoul. The body here is less about an augmented and enhanced entity, as we see in Stelarc's 'Borg' and more about a grisly extension of the technological, urbanised landscape itself.

In the context of this thesis, the *Tetsuo* films provide a compelling meditation on the object/subject of the body coupled with technology to horrific and perverse ends. Tsukamoto's films provide an absurdly violent collision of the technological with the biological. What they may lack in subtlety they make up for in their intense confrontation of the body functioning as a kind of magnetic attractor for the machine. They depict a new form of mutant technology, explosively landing on the body like a disease, spreading its machine infection and revealing a new kind of pathology for the body.

This violent coupling of flesh and machine feels like a cyborg orgy of machine parts, ruptured skin and throbbing metallic erections, which is part cartoon, part horror of the body in a state of extreme and accelerated evolution.

As Philip Brophy has commented on the Tsukamoto films:

*A chameleon machine, governed by metaphysical mechanics and controlled by orgiastic violence.*<sup>162</sup>

The films feature overloaded visual references to William Gibson's cyberpunk ethos, together with the visual excess of assorted Japanese Anime and David Cronenberg's polymorphous extensions of the body. There remains something of a caricature of the cyborg body in the *Tetsuo* films. The body is exaggerated, overwrought, overloaded, and out of control, which make them an important addition to my study of the phantasm of the cyborg. They provide a consistent example of technology and the perverse.

I want to touch briefly on other manifestations of the uncanny cyborg from the databanks of popular culture, with particular focus on the malfunctioning cyborg, the failed cyborg and the self-critical image of the cyborg, all of which have informed my work. This is the cyborg not as an extended body, but as a monstrous and indeed quasi-abject incarnation, as in the *Tetsuo* films.

In the late 1970s Kraftwerk explored a tongue-in-cheek futuristic-retro aesthetic. Their *Man Machine* equated the human automaton with the aesthetic of the autobahn, the railways and the computer terminal. This was an aesthetic that simultaneously embraced the possibilities of technology but, in the same breath, also provided an image that presented technology as a de-humanising agency in a posthuman world.

Perversely, the group presented robotic versions of themselves performing in concert – this was the ultimate man machine fantasy of sending a cyborg version of the group on tour. Oddly Kraftwerk's ironic po-faced embrace of technology in the 1970s is now perceived as classic electronic pop. The contextual irony of their playful use of themes around technological utopianism now seems lost in the contemporary reading of Kraftwerk.

The phantasm of the cyborg is summoned also in Andy Warhol's often quoted quip, 'I want to be a machine', in which he is alluding more to the efficiency of the machine as an art and fame generating device. For Warhol the notion of the machine was also an entity that was not bound up with human neurosis and emotional baggage.

Warhol's embrace of the machine also manifested itself as the Andy Warhol android. The artist had his own doppelganger built by Alvaro Villa just before his death. The android was initially built for a stage show called *Andy Warhol: A No Man Show*, which was based on Warhol's books *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* and *Exposures*.

As Bob Colacello, associate of Warhol and editor of *Interview magazine*, put it:

*Andy loved this idea; he loved the fact that there was going to be this Andy Warhol robot that he could send on lecture tours. It could do talk shows for him. The idea was that the show, if it was successful in New York, could then also simultaneously be running in London, Los Angeles, Tokyo with cloned robots. And people would actually be able to ask questions of the robot, which would be programmed with a variety of answers. The whole thing was so Warholian and so perfect.*<sup>163</sup>

Following Warhol's death, the android project wasn't continued by Warhol's business partner Fred Hughes. Had the Warhol android been realised after the artist's death it certainly would have seen the artist return from the dead, permanently fixed in an artificial machine state of uncanny un-death. Fittingly, the Warhol android was resurrected and exhibited as part of Mike Kelley's *Uncanny* exhibition at the Tate Liverpool in 2004 (as discussed earlier).

A failed cyborg and in some respects monstrous project, which should also be mentioned in this context, is The Philip K. Dick Android project, an interesting case of cybernetics, simulation, the uncanny and Dada. During public demonstrations, if asked too many questions at once, the Philip K. Dick Android would utter nonsensical responses of interconnected relationships between things and objects, conspiracies, politics - all was up for grabs. On one hand, the Android was perceived to be malfunctioning; on another, it perfectly embodied the schizoid-paranoid mind of the true Philip K. Dick.

The reanimation of the organic can also be found in the early work of San Francisco robotic performance group SRL (Survival Research Laboratories). Well known for their over-wrought and overloaded robotic spectacles, one of their infamous early works employed a dead rabbit that SRL crudely reanimated by connecting its various limbs to robotic extensions. The rabbit known as *Rabot* (part robot, part rabbit) appeared to move and quiver. The dead was re-activated through the interface of the machine, technology and organic matter, a monstrous and disturbing example of robotic simulation. The work of SRL has often engaged in the notion of ‘*useless mechanical activity*’, as publicity for their performances has exclaimed over the years,<sup>164</sup> an aesthetic that my own work shares. SRL’s own web site, exclaims: ‘*Dangerous and Disturbing Mechanical Presentations since 1979.*’<sup>165</sup> Their work features robotics and the visceral conjoined as one. The work of SRL, particularly their earlier fusion of animal cadavers and crude mechanical reanimation, is an art practice that fuses the aesthetics of body parts, mechanics and technology. It is a clear reference to some of my own projects, such as *Workshop of Filthy Creation* and *Night of the Living Hippy*.

Such manifestations of the cyborg are in no way exhaustive, they are merely examples that have had an impact on my thinking and making in particular the broken, short-circuited, malfunctioning properties of examples like the failed Philip K. Dick Android project. Such a notion of the malfunctioning prosthetic body can be seen in my works *Twitch of the Death Nerve* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation*. Malfunctioning technology as an aesthetic takes on the notion of monstrous behaviour, of a system that is out of control and no longer has a purpose or a function. Like the abject body, the failed cyborg and short-circuiting technology is often incompatible with the technological determinism of media art culture. The malfunctioning in its own way takes onboard the strange and almost surreal properties of the technologically uncanny, particularly when considered and conceptualised in the context of the body which is broken, distorted, ugly, twitching, half dead, and half alive, the technology of otherness.

## ***The Stelarc problem***

Stelarc provides an enduring and spectacular image of the cyborg within contemporary media arts. Much has been written on Stelarc over the years, much of it fundamentally positive about the artist's project to improve and enhance the body through modern technology.

I will pay particular attention to Stelarc's work here, for it remains an iconic and significant contribution to the way the body has been conceptualised within media arts culture. However by the same token I feel Stelarc's practice indicates a particular position which works towards the removal of the abject body. His practice, like other aspects of media arts culture, is underwritten by ideas of progress and advancement of technology which erases the visceral and the bodily.

For some decades now, Stelarc's practice has focused on the changing and shifting definitions of the body. The artist's inquiry is not, however, centered on the aesthetics of the material body or the body and abjection; indeed, the artist consciously avoids such territory. This is an important point within the context of this thesis; a key practitioner of the media arts such as Stelarc, with his enduring themes that principally focus on the body and its limit, ultimately turns away from the aesthetics of the abject body and instead his work occupies ideas around utopianism and the posthuman.

In Stelarc's cyborg phase of the mid 1990s, in his performances the artist commonly covered his genitalia with a flesh covered sheath. Such a move articulates the artists' refusal to address the sexuality of the body and the cultural baggage that goes with it. Having his genitalia exposed would call up many difficult issues on the power relations of sexuality and the male performer and his status as heroic, masculine performance artist. These are problematic and difficult to deal with, and potentially divert one's attention from the paramount issues of Stelarc's project; 'The obsolete body' and its accelerated evolution through technology. Instead, Stelarc presented himself in such performances

as a non-body, an abstraction of the body, and often when speaking of his work he refers to himself in the third person as 'The body'.

(Is Stelarc, in his use of the familiar cybernetic man archetype perhaps unaware of the more obvious and loaded pop culture connotations of 'The body'? Such as 1980s World Wrestling Federation champion Jessie 'The body' Ventura or the supermodel Elle McPherson!)

Stelarc explores the body not as an individual, but as a biological entity. However Stelarc's way of addressing the body is in an almost clinical manner which sees the body as interchangeable with and indistinguishable from another body. This interchangeability of the body is on the way to rendering the body as invisible and non-existent, the body as a generic type.

Stelarc's cyberman phase rehashed very familiar pop cultural archetypes and caricatures of the cybernetic man such as *The Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Star Trek: The next Generation*, *The Six Million Dollar Man* and the replicants of *Bladerunner*. As Mark Dery has noted when referencing Stelarc's work of this period:

*Stelarc bears a striking resemblance to a Borg - one of the cyborg villains of Star Trek; The Next Generation. With his Amplified Body, Laser Eyes, Third Hand, Automatic Arm and Video Shadow.*<sup>166</sup>

Dery's accurate critique of Stelarc continues in that the writer views his post-evolutionary rhetoric as talking a lot about the future of the body but not of its social or economic context. One could also add sexual discourse and materiality of the abject body. It is a conveniently context-free zone that Stelarc occupies, as Dery continues:

*Sheathed in an impregnable exoskeleton, the Stelarcian cyborg is powerful but not empowered, a pharaonic monument to the mummy like body withering inside it.*<sup>167</sup>

The image of Stelarc's ageing and withering body is an apt one. While engaged in the utopian idea of the body enhanced and augmented with all manner of sophisticated new technology, his real body remains static, fixed in time, ageing and, ultimately like everyone, a body that will die and rot away. In this context Stelarc's immortalisation of the body through technology seems particularly open to criticism.

Arthur and Marilousie have commented specifically on 'the body' in Stelarc's work:

*For Stelarc, the body has always been prosthetic - a site of radical experimentation that in his art has been objectified, penetrated, virtualized, roboticized, emptied out, alienated and suspended with such ferocity that the purely prosthetic quality of the body has been forced to surface.*<sup>168</sup>

Such descriptions of the prosthetic body recall that other 'body artist' of a very different order discussed in detail elsewhere: David Cronenberg. Unlike Stelarc, Cronenberg's re-imaginings of the body coupled with technology are perverse, extreme and entirely provocative. Most of all, Cronenberg depicts the reality of our bodies when coupled with technology: wet, moist, visceral, and very, very weird. Such concerns are often entirely absent from Stelarc's sanitised prosthetic body. (While Stelarc's body modifications are 'real' and those that appear in Cronenberg's movies prosthetic special effects, I am referring here to the ideas and concepts underpinning the two.)

There is a particular scene worth mentioning here in this context in David Cronenberg's re-imagining of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1996). Here Stelarc's project in relationship to the body and technology also comes to mind. Elias Koteas (Vaughan) is describing his latest series of projects to James Spader (Ballard) when Ballard questions him:

*I thought your project was about the reshaping of the human body through modern technology? Vaughan replies: That's just a crude sci-fi concept, it kind of floats on the surface, and doesn't threaten anybody.*<sup>169</sup>

It's a scene that could be seen as a critical stab at Stelarc's practice.

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, on the other hand, provide a more positive commentary on Stelarc's work, maintaining the artist has a deep understanding of the present construction of the body:

*But what is most futurist about Stelarc is that his artistic imagination is a relentless, critical dissection of present regimes of bodily understanding. In the literal sense, we are living within the architecture of Stelarc's "outered" mind: the "absent bodies" of networked communication, the "phantom bodies" of the image simulacrum, the "hollowed out" bodies of global capitalism. Ours is the age of liquid Stelarc.<sup>170</sup>*

If Stelarc's 'relentless, critical dissection of present regimes of bodily understanding'<sup>171</sup> is really the case, one has to ask the question: what of the theory of the abject body which has played out in art practices, popular media and contemporary theory over the last thirty years? And which has in many respects been a fundamental way of conceptualising bodily understanding since the mid 1980s, as demonstrated by the research of artists exploring such territory that I outlined earlier in this thesis.

In many respects Stelarc's earlier suspension work provided for a far more visceral and intense aesthetic of the limits of the body. Since the 1990s the artist has abandoned this and instead formulated his practice more around the narrative of new technology, which could be argued lacks the visceral materiality of his earlier suspension work. However, Stelarc is now returning to the aesthetics of the body in his *Extra Ear project* and the notion of human flesh as a malleable material. While the artist's cyberman phase saw technology land upon the body in a literal incarnation of the cybernetic man, the recent *Extra Ear project* points to an intriguing development, as Darren Tofts has pointed out:

*Recent work by Stelarc is seeking to reintroduce the mutant body back into history.<sup>172</sup>*

Collaborating with the Tissue Culture & Art project, Stelarc's *Extra Ear project* from 1997 attempts a new bodily convergence in the extremes of bio art through producing new kinds of organs with new kinds of uses. It's also interesting to note that, in the context of my research, Stelarc, after some years of extending the body through technology, is now more interested in a more confronting and provocative aesthetic of the augmented body. Stelarc's practice had moved intensely away from bodily material for some decades; as technology has become increasingly sophisticated, Stelarc is opening up the body, complete with a biological and a medical-inspired aesthetic. One could also argue works like *Extra Ear project* appear as unintentionally abject and certainly with a degree of bodily strangeness and weirdness. In addition Stelarc's *Ping Body* and *Movatar* explore the uncanniness of the technologically re-animated stimulated body - which Stelarc conceptualises as a kind of zombie possession; both works like the *Extra Ear project* take on board a degree of uncanniness almost as a by-product, and not as the central concern.

Stelarc's concerns, however, still appear very much like his overt technological projects, with familiar rhetoric about improving and extending the architecture of the body. This new bio art and 'soft technology' phase of Stelarc's practice has the potential to offer us a new kind of bio-engineered aesthetic of the monstrous and the abject but, instead, it is self-consciously framed by the 'improved' body; the opposite of the unformed, monstrous and abject.

One can conceptualise the art world as a body itself, with its various sites of conscious/unconscious, disease/sickness, health, bodily function and intellect. In such an example, the media arts rarely travel beneath the waist to the bodily pathways of abjection and disgust; the anus and genitalia. This again brings to mind Stelarc's flesh coloured sheath material; the lower body is strictly off limits.

Stelarc has presented a need to hollow out and dry out the body and to develop a new kind of synthetic skin in order to make the body more suited to a symbiotic fusion of technology and flesh.<sup>173</sup> However, once again, probably unintentionally, Stelarc's

'obsolete body' rhetoric is bizarrely abject in the picture it paints for the viewer: organs removed and replaced, bodies flayed open like cattle, skin peeled away and replaced with an artificial membrane. This is the imagery of the dissection table of organ harvesting and the grisly details of the autopsy.

The documentation of the medical procedure for Stelarc's *Ear on Arm project* from 2008 by Nina Sellars touches on aspects of the abject body and the dissolution of boundaries, more so than the finished work that was produced by Stelarc.

However, Stelarc's work from the early to mid 1990s period offered a different kind of investigation of the body, which saw him produce a range of works on the interior body. This included filming the stomach, colon and lungs and, later, his *Stomach Sculpture* from 1993, for the fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial. The notion of a sculpture made of the internal body is certainly a lateral interpretation of the notion of sculpture and one that posits our bodies as sculptural forms, its interior documented on endoscope video. Stelarc's *Stomach Sculpture* mapped out an alternative space for a new kind of sculpture to exist in and operates in a very different way to the artist's other work surrounding the idea of the body and its augmentation through contemporary technology.

Finally, a great deal of Stelarc's discourse, artist statements and manifestos centre around the 'new', which makes claims like aspects of media arts culture: the new possibilities of augmenting the body, the new potential of digital technology and bio technology, a new architecture for the body, new media and new genres of art practice. This preoccupation with the 'new' appears like early 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction and the modernist idea of technological utopianism, progress and determinism. For Stelarc, such newness is a consistent utopian ambition of wanting to improve the body, to assist, extend and amplify its limitations and shortcomings. Here, Stelarc's own practice is one ultimately of R&D, of problem solving, design implementation and engineering.

Stelarc's ambition for the improved and extended body runs in a counter direction to abjection and the body and its relationship to a technological framework. The artist's

investigation into the ‘corporeal architectures of the body’<sup>174</sup> often denies and edits out the *bodyness* of the body — in all its messy and difficult reality.

Finally the Stelarc problem is manifested in his very acceptance, in the celebration of his notable achievements and high standing within the culture of international media arts. This remains a lasting and telling reminder of the genre’s popular embrace of an artist - whose primary project over the last thirty years or more has been the body and technology that contains barely a hint of the abject, not a suggestion of bodily fluids, nor a slight mention of excreta, or an indication that the corporeal body dies and rots away. In addition to Stelarc, in the following chapters I highlight a number of other high profile media artists as examples where the abject and visceral body has been edited out of the framework of a developing media art culture.

## ***The Joey Machine, 2011***

While culturally we think of the cyborg as personified by the robotic, cybernetic man, the term cyborg is more accurately referenced as an entity that contains both biological and technological properties. My work, while referencing the organic body, results in projects that engage with the fictional cyborg in a sense.

*Twitch of the Death Nerve*, *Night of the Living Hippy* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, with their crude robotic simulation, and *Some Thing* with its limited animatronic movement, point towards a restricted and primitive cybernetic relationship. The ambition of animatronics is to simulate life-like realism and realistic behaviours, which, like photo realistic CGI special effects, leaves no mystery or ambiguity for the viewer’s imagination. Aesthetically, I am interested in this ambiguity and its limitations and potential to activate the viewer’s wondering mind.

The work I discuss here, *The Joey Machine*, has the potential to be dismissed as a puerile project about a soiled child’s bed. However, I maintain its potential dismissal is part an inability to deal with the base level idea of bodily fluids, as it is easier to reject than to

try and understand such material in an artwork. In the framework of art and technology - a world of logic, ordered systems, and structure – bodily fluids like shit are the inverse of such a paradigm and perceived not only as having no value but less than no value: the complete antithesis of the technological.

However behind the work lies an intriguing back story and narrative on the notion of the cyborg within culture, if one can get past the icky subject matter. Like many of my works, *The Joey Machine* intentionally creates an incompatible aesthetic for the genre of art and technology. Indeed, *The Joey Machine*, more so than any other work I have produced during my PhD, is perhaps the least technologically-driven work. It could almost sit outside of the realm of contemporary media arts. However, I maintain it is the conceptual underpinning of the work, along with its extremely basic kinetic behaviours of a vacuum cleaner powering on and off, which warrants its attention here, particularly in relation to the cyborg body (albeit quite a lateral one). In addition, the simple powering of the vacuum cleaner on and off, as if the work is possessed with the ghost of Joey, provides for an uncanny space for the work to operate in.

*The Joey Machine* explores shit and its relationship to the cybernetic. Indeed the toilet occupies a unique and lasting position as a site of repression and abject bodily denial but also as a technological interface. It is the body's base level connection to the technology of the toilet, a fusion of the abject with the high-tech gloss of the bathroom.

In order to address *The Joey Machine*, it's necessary to provide a back story for the work. In the 1950s at the Sonya Shankman Orthogenic School in Chicago, Illinois, noted child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim treated an autistic child who came to be known as 'Joey the mechanical boy'. Joey's every human action was taken over by his imaginative fantasy that he was a machine. Bettelheim published his research into Joey's condition in *Scientific American* in 1959.

In 1980 Bruno Bettelheim committed suicide. After his death co-workers revealed the emotional abuse of children entrusted in his care. In the case of Joey, his psychology of

autistic machine fantasies were replaced with another psychology of brutality as therapy. A concentration camp survivor, Bettelheim – or ‘Dr. B.’ as both staff and patients called him – passionately believed that:

*if the Nazis could create an environment to destroy personality, he could build an environment that could foster and re-create personality.<sup>175</sup>*

*The Joey Machine* is a recreation of Joey’s bed machine apparatus built to ‘live him’. *The Joey Machine* is not an exact replica, more a fusion of Joey’s fantasy world of machines, bodily fluids, shit and vacuum tubes.



**Figure 15. Ian Haig, *The Joey Machine*, 2011 (sculpture)**

*The Joey Machine* is a complex and precise technological apparatus as dreamt up by the mind of a six-year-old autistic child. The complexity of the machine and its variety of functions were partly unknown; however, the primary function of the machine seemed to be designed to isolate Joey from being human. For Joey, his bed machine, and the

other machines he created and imagined in his drawings, were his reality and anything outside of it was less than reality.

Joey's condition was diagnosed as a product of infantile autism brought on – it was believed in 1959 – by improper parenting. Autism often motivates those inflicted with it to isolate themselves from the world, from human emotions and socialisation. In Joey's case this took on the extreme manifestation of literally becoming a crude cyborg incarnation of the body as an other, a primitive self-regulating human-machine system. His body connected to an imaginary electrical current assisting his digestive system while eating; his bowels evacuated with the use of vacuum machines; his sleeping enabled by his bed machine.



**Figure 16. Ian Haig, *The Joey Machine*, 2011 (sculpture)**

The bed was made out of materials at hand (masking tape, cardboard, rope) and here such materials take on almost psychic possibilities, a crude collection of autonomy for the body. The steering wheels, radios, controllers, speakers and engine parts to drive

Joey's fantasy as he slips off into the very human state of sleep with a fear that, without such contraptions, he would emerge awake as a human boy.

Joey was eventually rescued from his machine fixations and went on to leave his obsessions behind. Did Joey retreat into his machine fantasy because of the emotional abuse at the institution? In order to remove himself as much as possible from the human race he perhaps became its absolute opposite: a machine.

For Joey this machine was so intensely real it verged on its own form of machine-biology. While shitting functions as an everyday reminder of our true organic selves, of our humanness, this was something Joey feared. A machine, on the other hand, that takes on such a realistic fantasy of a functioning self-regulating human-machine system, must also take on human characteristics such as regularly emptying its bowels. For the machine to be real it needs to be more than a machine, it needs to be part human.



**Figure 17. Ian Haig, *The Joey Machine*, 2011 (sculpture)**

*The Joey Machine* is a work that explores the boundaries of the body. The line between the organic and mechanical is increasingly blurred, with a bed that is more than simply a

pathetic child's bed smeared in fake shit with its crude cardboard contraptions. Shit signifies the human element of *The Joey Machine's* strange narrative, a human element that is rejected and categorised as disgusting and revolting but which is ultimately a reminder of our true, messy, organic selves. In this sense, I see the work as a key one on my thesis on the abject body and technology.

The work explores how one forms relationships with the world at an early age and, in particular, how those relationships can be transformed, perverted, skewed and confused so that they almost take on another kind of reality and other kinds of meanings. *The Joey Machine* attempts to extend Joey's fantasy. While Joey probably didn't really shit in his own bed – although one of his drawings alluded to a bed assisting in the eradication of the contents of his bowels – my Joey fantasy employs the idea of shit as the residue of a new kind of machine biology.

From an aesthetic position, *The Joey Machine's* pathetic use of low value materials - from found cardboard, masking tape and simulated shit - deny the viewer any kind of obvious value in the work. Indeed the notion of shit as a material of complete non-value. The conscious choice to use these materials calls on the viewer to bring meaning to the work, opposed to the notion of meaning presented as self-contained within the work and its materiality. Such an aesthetic pre-occupation with the aesthetics of non-value also appears in my work *Night of the Living Hippy*. Next to shit, the corpse is devoid of value and currency. The idea of such abject materiality within the context of the gallery means that such materials are read as having value, of containing meaning, when everything about them is about the denial of meaning and value. This is particularly apt I believe in the context of art and technology where cultural value is often instantly implied through the use of sophisticated new technologies.

Also of importance here is Freud's theorisation of the anal stage.<sup>176</sup> Joey expresses Freuds' notion of the 'anal expulsive' - the inverse of the anal retentive - where soiled clothing and bedding is potentially used as a form of rebellion. In Joey's case one could

consider a rebellion of both his institutionalisation and of the very condition of being human.

As mentioned, *The Joey Machine* with its cardboard machine controls, is barely a technological-driven artwork but, when included in a gallery, we are forced to read value in the work. The work thus becomes less a soiled child's bed and transforms into a meditation on the nature of the abject body and machine.

In the following chapter I discuss just where the construction of the abject body and art and technology is located post the 1990s, where it has traveled to, and what cultural conditions have marked its evolution to the present day.

## **Chapter 4: The trajectory of emerging media art culture**

### ***The cultural context in the 1990s***

I outline here the trajectory of media arts culture throughout the 1990s, which saw the emergence of the narrative of posthumanism and transcendence of the body that resulted in the jettisoning and recasting of the biological body in the worlds of art and technology. The removal of the corporeal body occurred within the genre of media art and also within culture in general. The 1990s saw changing definitions of the body and its relationship to the mediasphere, which provided a utopian setting for the refusal and denial of the abject body.

While the body horror film revels in the visceral destruction of the body, various technologies also destroy the body but in an entirely different way – by making the body

absent, as in virtual spaces, which gives us the destruction of the body without the gore, gristle and adrenalin.

In 1971, J.G. Ballard speculated on the developing media landscape and the way in which it was facilitating a removal of our bodies and biology. He almost forecasted the emergence of digital media technologies some decades later in the 1990s:

*Modern technology is beginning to reach into our dreams – and change our whole way of looking at things and more and more it is drawing us away from contemplating ourselves and contemplating its world.*<sup>177</sup>

Ballard's point is an accurate one; In the 1990s, in the developing world of technology - of computers, the web, CD-ROM, virtual reality and games – the focus moved away from the body to the world of the digital - to the mediated world of screen culture, interactivity, immersive worlds, data spheres, information systems and programming. While abject art and bodily themes were being explored in the visual arts in the 1990s, new media art was exploring virtual reality and the promise of no body and with it, no abjection.

While technology has brought about an unprecedented change in how we deal with the world around us, the sophistication of the new media landscape has seen our technologies evolve but our bodies remain stagnant and sedentary. Our bodies are not evolving at the same rate as the media that surrounds us. As William Gibson has pointed out, the web, for example, provides the ultimate channel for the procrastinator.

<sup>178</sup> Mark Dery has also made the comment:

*our bodies can be defined as earthbound relics of Darwinian evolution that the digerati sneeringly refer to as “meat.”*<sup>179</sup>

Technology may advance to dizzying heights but, in terms of evolution, we are trapped within our meat bodies; they are left behind in the rush for us to continually embrace

new technologies and they don't look like evolving anytime soon. In a sense, the body is left standing at the gate as we rush increasingly forward. This absence of the abject body within contemporary media art can perhaps be explained by the belief system that our bodies are indeed obsolete and that new developments in technology will ultimately see the cyber fantasies of William Gibson play out. When our consciousness is downloaded into the computer, the body is not just obsolete, but irrelevant. Here is the utopian construct of virtual reality, of living one's life in computer space. As digital art collective etoy founded in 1994 state in their mock corporate slogan: '*Leaving reality behind*'.<sup>180</sup> Etoy are a clear example of a high profile media art collective that have embraced the warm glow of the digital, producing many varied projects premised on the aesthetic, political and social potential of the new information economy. Etoy present an entire art practice within the framework of the computer - the body entirely absent.

Stelarc too would have us believe that telepresence will see our bodies colonise electronic space and leave our earthly bodies behind:

*Electronic space restructures the body's architecture and multiplies its operational possibilities.*<sup>181</sup>

Such fantasies have permeated and haunted the media arts since the early 1990s. It is increasingly the posthuman body on the media arts agenda, not the reality of the everyday materiality of bodily fluids and bodily functions of the abject body, which constitutes so much of who and what we are.

Other cultural manifestations of the removal of the body from the interface of the computer appeared in 1999 including the films *The Matrix* (directed by the Wachowski brothers) and *eXistenZ* (directed by David Cronenberg). Both films deal in a kind of suspended animation of the physical, and feature an increasingly blurry line between the virtual and the biological body. Clearly there was something in the air in the late 1990s;

it was a time when the sci-fi constructs of virtuality, advanced technologies and networks became readily available and enmeshed in people's lives. There was a sense that the future had indeed arrived and, with it, the future of the human body.

The notion of the erasure and transformation of the body can be traced back to the 1970s and to comic artist Robert Armstrong who coined the term couch potatoes. This term described characters leading a sedentary lifestyle, and it has come to represent a widespread critical term for someone who watches too much TV with little or no physical exercise. Taken literally, the term conjures up a transformed body, suffering from severe muscle atrophy. The couch potato, in the context of this thesis, sees the erasure of the body as a result of contemporary media, the body forgotten about and ignored in the glow of the electronic display.

The new wave post-punk group Devo perversely referred to their army of fans as 'spuds', an idea that the faceless masses could be manipulated and controlled by the all pervasive contemporary media landscape. This was the human body perversely reduced to nothing more but malleable organic material for TV marketing campaigns.

A key cultural precursor in the development of media arts throughout the 1990s was William Gibson's *Neuromancer* which was published in 1984. *Neuromancer* planted the seeds of the fantasy reality of cyberspace, the matrix, the information data stream and the interface - all of these were foretold in Gibson's fiction. *Neuromancer* has colonised the mind of many media artists, theorists, programmers, filmmakers and advertising agencies the world over.

As Eric Davis has articulated in relation to Gibson's book:

*He characterized his hero Case's banishment from cyberspace as a fall into the 'prison of the flesh'...obviously virtual technologies encourage a distinct shift of identification away from our phenomenal embeddedness in the material world where we eat, defecate and die.<sup>182</sup>*

The transcendence of the body is a popular theme in the media arts: technology is conceptualised as a sophisticated system, while the body is regarded as a primitive non-technological system. There is a powerful desire to escape the earthly pull of the body as we increasingly spend our time as a head in a jar in front of the screen. More recently, the notion of *Second Life* positions the body as a superseded biological system and puts in its place an artificial version of the body as avatar – the body not as a living biological entity, but the body as a version of itself, a fake body, a simulacra.

Coming on the heels of William Gibson's powerful unfolding cybernetic world in the late 1980s and early 1990s were sophisticated new media like CD-ROMs, the World Wide Web, interactivity and Virtual Reality. These appeared on the media landscape as if Gibson had written them into our increasingly disembodied reality. Other writers and theorists in the early part of the 1990s like Donna Haraway's seminal *A Cyborg Manifesto* in 1991, spoke of a coming mediated world, of human and cyborg relations. This also included Nicholas Negroponte's popularist *Being Digital* in 1995, which spoke of the liberating effects of ones and zeros in the fields of education, society and culture.

The late 1980s also saw the appearance of *Mondo 2000*, a glossy magazine and ad for the mediasphere of the next millennium with regular stories on virtual sex, smart drugs, cryptology and nano-cyborgs. The enthusiasm contained in the pages of *Mondo 2000* often verged on the fervor of digital evangelism. *Mondo 2000* embodied the mid 1990s idea of the looming digital revolution as leading to a technological singularity in which bodies are one with technology. The pages of *Mondo 2000* are full of techno add-ons and strap-ons for the obsolete human body.

Australia had its own version of *Mondo 2000* in the publication *21C*, which began in 1990 as a publishing venture from the sci-fi and futuristic-sounding The Commission for the Future. *21C* negotiated the new information and mediasphere with a critical voice and with less evangelism than *Mondo 2000*.

As mentioned previously, the mid 1990s in Australia saw the bold move of a new federal cultural initiative in the Creative Nation policy. There existed a certain amount of technological determinism in the Creative Nation policy, which framed new media artists more as cultural content providers. There was the belief that these artists were working at the cutting edge of technology and involved with the development of a new kind of digital democracy afforded by interactivity and new technology. The world was changing and with it our ideas about the body were changing, or rather, being sidestepped in the rapid uptake of the shiny new technological Shangri-La.

Writer Mark Dery refers to the notion of *Escape Velocity* at the end of the millennium and our desire to escape the body:

*the speed at which a body, a spacecraft, for instance overcomes the gravitational pull of another body, such as the Earth.*<sup>183</sup>

The Y2K millennium fever of the late 1990s provided a particular cultural context for new developments in technology, part technological apocalypse and part born again rapture of the New Age. It's no wonder the abject body was no longer on the radar; other bigger issues were at stake: technology and the internet were remaking the world for us; we were moving beyond the body to virtual and networked space.

An important line of thought here in the context of the transcendence of the body in relationship to cyberspace and new technologies is the notion of Cartesian Dualism as proposed by René Descartes. In 1641, Descartes claimed the human body and the human mind occupy two very different worlds. His theory is often invoked within cyber theory to explain our mind–body relationship with virtual space and, in some respects, it underpins new media art's enthrallment with virtuality and the non-space of cyberspace. Descartes's mind/body split, however, is open to criticism, as Erik Davis has articulated: *we are bodyminds deeply embedded in the world.*<sup>184</sup> The divide that Descartes made between the mind and body does not serve the idea of the corporeal abject body and its relationship to the technological landscape. Perhaps the erasure of the abject body from

the imagination of media arts culture can be partly explained by the stark separation of the mind/body split put forward by Descartes, which has underwritten to a degree the theory of our bodily relationship with cyber culture.

The new transcendence of the body was occurring in another way in 1997 with the well publicised suicides of the Heavens Gate cult. The cult's own rhetoric and 'earth exit statements'<sup>185</sup> described reaching 'the level above human'<sup>186</sup> and leaving one's container or vehicle (body) behind. The cult believed that 'to be eligible for membership in the next level, humans would have to shed every attachment to the planet.'<sup>187</sup> In addition some members of the cult castrated themselves in order to modify their bodies so they would escape the earthy desires of the flesh - castration manifesting a desire to be reborn as something other than human.

Within the extremes of the Heavens Gate cult is the narrative of transcendence of the physical body, which, at the same time as the cult's activity, was also occurring within the worlds of digital art culture. The cult's various manifestos and rhetoric is also not dissimilar to the language of certain aspects of media arts culture in the 1990s. In particular, Stelarc's numerous posthumanist and utopian statements such as his oft quoted quip 'The body is obsolete'<sup>188</sup> to a variety of others:

*It is time to question whether a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1,400-cc brain is an adequate biological form.*<sup>189</sup>

*Evolution ends when technology invades the body. Once technology provides each person with the potential to progress individually in its development, the cohesiveness of the species is no longer important.*<sup>190</sup>

Or, as Lisa Blackman has puts it:

*we are confronted with new ways of making and re-making bodies. The singular, bounded, carbon-based body is being replaced by the proliferation and emergence of*

*technologies and practices which enable enhancement, alteration and invention of new bodies.*<sup>191</sup>

Taken out of context such statements from the 1990s world of electronic art come with a conviction and fervour that appear like the pre-millennia cult speak and rhetoric of Marshall Applewhite, leader of the Heavens Gate cult. Indeed, one of Applewhite's earlier organised cults had the title Human Individual Metamorphosis.

There are other similarities between the cult's notion of the transcendence of the body and digital media. Some members of the cult were web designers and used the new digital platform as one of their chief methods of recruitment. Connecting the developments of new technology, the coming Y2K apocalypse, and the end of the body all together created a unique cultural moment back in 1997. Even more bizarrely the cult's website (heavensgate.com) remains active to this day, fifteen years after the members left their container bodies behind and reached escape velocity. This is testament to the idea of the demise of the organic body, or rather the organic body rendered and born again as data. The Heavens Gate cult is alive and well, just not on the physical plane we call reality but forever in cyberspace.

As Mark Dery has articulated;

*the rhetoric of escape velocity crosses cyberpunk science fiction with the Pentecostal belief in an apocalyptic Rapture, in which history ends and faithful are gathered up into the heavens.*<sup>192</sup>

One could add here the transformative rhetoric of the Heavens Gate cult.

The positivity and utopianism underpinning the digital media art and millennial cultures of the 1990s were also embodied in the rapid emergence of the musical sub-genre techno, along with an emergent rave culture and its amalgam of Cyberdelica, Tribalism, New Age mysticism and technology. Techno developed as a kind of pre-millennium

hedonistic peak, a futuristic technological nirvana of pulsating bodies and electronic sound. A central tenet in New Age culture is the transcendence and ascension of the body. In addition, trance states, meditation-themed chill out rooms and the mandala made regular appearances within the rave culture scene of the 1990s – they were born again hippies of the digital age.

In the Australian context the 1990s saw the emergence of media art collective CyberDada (Troy Innocent and Dale Nason) with their own unique brand of cyber slogans from the new digital reality. Their CyberDada Manifesto simultaneously satirised and engaged in the technological utopia of posthuman bodies and the new possibilities of technological culture. As excerpts from their manifesto reveal, the body was being superseded and left behind in the fervour of all things digital. CyberDada exclaimed:

*DIGITIZE THE WORLD. (A new life awaits you) TECHNOLOGY is speeding ahead:  
DIGITIZE THE WORLD. (A new life awaits you.)*<sup>193</sup>

*Forget the meat of your bodies. Full-on brain experiences await you inside a computer. Organic life is no longer a valid lifestyle. Fully synthesized environments where all physical and emotional feelings can be chemically simulated. Soon it will be possible to inject a biological computer to program your brain, extend your life. This is your future.*

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CyberDada's practice from the early to mid 1990s is a key example of how the utopian virtual, non abject body was being conceptualized within digital art culture. Drawing on the language of media art culture, CyberDada's particular non-body and virtual artificial realities recycled and appropriated the digital evangelism of the time in a number of media art projects.

As Darren Tofts has outlined, CyberDada were part of a critical moment, when computers transformed their meaning into creative tools:

*According to Troy Innocent, the historical moment of CyberDada's birth held several contradictions. On the one hand, computers were seen purely as 'tools' in the design world; and on the other, incredible claims were being made elsewhere about the potential of new technologies to change the world. The concept of virtual reality was generating considerable hype; techno music inspired investigations into beat-induced trance states. But the creative capacities of computers remained relatively unexplored, mostly dormant since the 'cybernetic art' experiments of previous decades.<sup>195</sup>*

Another development of interest in the context of the ever developing mediasphere and the absent body is the Otaku, who also emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Otaku is the name given to Japanese youth who lock themselves away in their bedrooms, existing and communicating solely through media forms. Their obsession centres around anime, manga, games, computer networks and online communities. As William Gibson has noted:

*The Otaku are passionate obsessive, the information age's embodiment of the connoisseur, more concerned with the accumulation of data than of objects.<sup>196</sup>*

The Otaku are an intriguing manifestation of the erosion of the physical body through the embrace of technology. For the Otaku, the body is not just obsolete but irrelevant. Their body is completely and utterly absent, not merely a body without organs but a body without a body.

The mid to late 1990s pre-millennium rush to transcend the body resulted in numerous cultural manifestations of the ascension, transformation and transcendence of our earth-bound biology. In this chapter I chart our return to the body and our emerging love affair with violence, horror, the perverse, and visceral sensation. This has been facilitated by the contemporary mediasphere of YouTube and the web, just not within the worlds of new media art and art and technology it would seem. Indeed the emergence of media art culture within the 1990s both in Australia and internationally has seen new media art closely aligned with that period. The premier international electronic art event Ars

Electronica, with its annual 'Cyber Art' exhibition, firmly places its artistic sensibility in the mid 1990s; of pre millennium fervour, digital evangelism, cyber hype and the absent abject body.

Indeed my own studio work during the PhD is an aggressive reaction to a certain 1990s form of media art practice. In my work I attempt to conjoin media arts with that of another 1990s cultural moment in contemporary art practice: abject art.

### ***The mediasphere from 2000 onwards***

I now want to discuss what I believe to be a central position in my argument around locating the abject and visceral body. The abject body is not visible in the genre of media arts but it can be located in the ubiquitous mediasphere of contemporary technologies such as YouTube and the internet. It is here the abject is free to fester and spread, embedded deep within the frameworks of our everyday technologies.

To revisit William Ian Miller's notion of 'life soup' for a moment; death, decay and rot - the abject is us. Contemporary media also sees that we find ourselves floating in life's soup; abjection is everywhere online, it cannot be avoided, it inundates us and enters our unconscious minds. My work is therefore a natural outcome, a perfect response, to the environment of technologically-mediated, bodily abjection which forms part of our everyday existence. As J.G. Ballard has articulated:

*Now modern technology tames these aberrant desires and makes them part of the furniture of everyday life.* <sup>197</sup>

As noted, the 1990s produced a specific set of cultural, social, and technological conditions that allowed for the embrace of all things digital in relation to the new worlds of mediated environments. As mentioned at the start of this thesis, Laurie Anderson's critique of virtual reality, included the question: where is the dirt? One could extend this

question: where is the abject body? There is no sagging or ageing flesh, indeed no bodily fluids, within the new matrix of new technological art. Like white bread television sitcoms from the 1950s, where characters never went to the toilet, the world of emerging technological art would also have us believe that bodily fluids and the somatic body do not exist.

In such a context, Apple Mac's recent domination of all things technological, with their world of apps, iPads, Apple TV, iPods, and iTunes's propriety video and film libraries, has given rise to a closed system of the world according to Apple. The unwholesome is strictly avoided – there is no pornography here, no visible signs of the sexual body. This is the complete inverse of the early development of previous technologies like VHS, where pornography dominated the home video market.

Apple's removal of the sexualised body from its paradigm of new delivery systems bizarrely sees a multi-national company determining cultural content and is a reminder, much like electronic art, of a distancing of the extremes of the body - an erasure of its presence and materiality. On the other hand, new media platforms like YouTube and the web have opened a portal to newer and more extreme states of the human body.

Almost in direct proportion to Apple Mac's refusal of the sexualised or abnormal body, the emergence of media such as YouTube and other web technologies has provided us with depictions of the visceral body, previously unseen. A door has been opened to all manner of perversions. As J.G. Ballard wrote in his introduction to *Crash* back in 1995, while offering us an unerring prescience of our emerging fascination for all things visceral enabled by contemporary technologies:

*Will modern technologies provide us with hitherto undreamed of means for tapping our own psychopathologies?* <sup>198</sup>

Now, in 2013, we are living in a time where the visceral body is entirely visible. This includes: internet pornography, with its every conceivable sex position available for

close and detailed scrutiny; to grisly medical images in Google image searches; YouTube videos of surgery; *World Federation Wrestling* and the over-extended body; sensationalist bodily themed reality TV shows like *The Biggest Loser* or *Embarrassing Bodies* and their obsession with extreme states of the body and close-up medical procedures that foreground the visceral, messy reality of human flesh; ultra violence and the visceral body in TV series such as *The Walking Dead*, *Dexter* and *Hannibal*; confronting and grisly TAC (Traffic Accident Commission) TV advertising; the spectacle of the body in *Jackass*; and sensationalist supermarket magazine fodder such as *NW* and *OK* magazines with their regular stories on *body boopers* and *surgery shockers*. The visceral body - and its flesh in all shapes and forms - has never been more available, more visible. The body, it would appear, is back on the cultural radar.

Ballard's position on how the emergence of media technologies corresponds with a particular psychopathology is further evidenced by recent manifestations of horror films dubbed torture porn or gorno (a combination of gore and porno) such as the *Saw* film franchise (2004–2010), *Hostel* (2005) and *Human Centipede 2* (2011). In such films mutilation, torture and brutality are available for your viewing pleasure on DVD and Blu Ray. Other material now accessible includes television shows of airplane disasters and extreme police chases, the bloody YouTube meme of the last moments of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011, and Gunter von Hagen's televised public autopsy, in 2002, which was the first in 170 years in the UK.<sup>199</sup> As Ballard speculated, we are living in the age of pure visceral sensation, which often centres on the extreme states of the human body.

Ballard has pointed out the grisly appeal of contemporary television shows like *C.S.I.* and their relationship to the body:

*I suspect that the cadavers waiting their turn on the tables are surrogates for ourselves, the viewers. The real crime the C.S.I. team is investigating, weighing every tear, every drop of blood, every smear of semen, is the crime of being alive. I fear that we watch, entranced, because we feel an almost holy pity for ourselves and the oblivion patiently waiting for us.*<sup>200</sup>

Another location for the pathological and abject body that is facilitated by contemporary technology is on the alternative health website Curezone. Many of its forums are devoted to the internal body and its associated pathologies, from gall stones, parasites and worms to other assorted bodily secretions and fluids. Curezone ultimately is a site devoted to assisting its user network who seek alternative treatments for difficult medical conditions. However one can't help thinking that there is a degree of voyeurism here, an element of a freak show of the interior body on display, with things revealed about our bodies that one would prefer not to know.

The Curezone website is a fertile zone for the cyberchondriac. Browsing the Curezone website one can't help thinking that the natural condition of the body is that of disease and sickness. The notions of wellness and the body existing in a state of equilibrium and balance are the exception here rather than the rule. Curezone provides a catalogue of the body in a state of crisis with its forums on unidentified skin parasites, strange growths, body odor and scabies. Perhaps the most direct of all is a forum simply titled 'Help me', which describes the body existing in a state of emergency and desperation, constantly fending off disease in an ongoing battle with itself.

Our appetite for the visceral, abnormal and abject body which '*ravishes the senses*' is perhaps best summarised by Bataille in his *Visions of Excess*. In his study of the deviations of nature, he wrote;

*Among all things that can be contemplated under the concavity of the heavens, nothing is seen that arouses the human spirit more, that ravishes the senses more, that horrifies more, that provokes more terror or admiration to a greater extent among creatures than the monsters, prodigies, and abominations through which we see the works of nature inverted, mutilated and truncated.*<sup>201</sup>

Such a notion of visceral sensation can be traced back to the origins of the modern museum which derive from the wunderkammer which incorporated a fascination and wonder in the grotesque. The grotesque body was a regular feature of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities, which often featured two-headed cow fetuses or human flesh on bones. Now, such material is often relegated to the confines of the science museum underwritten by the disciplines of biology, anatomy and science.

Today it is YouTube (founded in 2005) that delivers to us the contemporary version of the wunderkammer and cabinet of curiosities. Enough content is uploaded every day to sustain eight years of viewing - every day. YouTube gives us plenty of opportunity to view the weirdness of the world and the perverse body. It is a portal into the world of the deeply strange and of things unknown together with the sheer banal.

Beyond YouTube the website that functions as a direct link to the pathological and disturbing is [www.rotten.com](http://www.rotten.com), a website that is probably the closest thing to a snuff film. Attracting over fifteen million hits per day and online since 1996, rotten.com, with its pathological archive of sicko images of decapitations and manufacturing industry accidents, offers a shotgun blast in the face of decency. Rotten.com is the internet as putrefaction. As their byline states; *a truly unpleasant experience*.<sup>202</sup> This is the web at its most disturbingly abject and base, a door into all that is depraved and extremely nasty. The site's sheer popularity and longevity is testament to its audience's never-ending fixation for the unshowable and the unspeakable.

In some respects the abject within culture is now found not in the pristine white washed hygienic walls of the gallery and museum, nor in the worlds of media art and art and technology, but in the mysteries of the network that is the internet. The web is now the cultural site for extreme bodies, diseased bodies, horrible bodies, bodies in states of decay, bodies beyond repair, inside out bodies, bodies beyond abjection. How can one produce abject art in the era of the web and the over-visibility of the abject body? Some of my own projects have attempted to reference the 'abject internet' in a variety of lateral ways which I discuss in detail later. This includes *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, and its connection to the trafficking of harvested human organs on the web; my web based streaming video project, *Melted Head Connected to the Internet* with its explicit reference to the abject body and networked media; my video work *Skin Freak*, with its

rendering of the digital screen as visceral bodily material; and *GooTube*'s more direct link with disgust, bodily fluids and the internet. In addition, my piece *Some Thing* represents a bio-morphic horror, a physical manifestation of a new kind of body which the web has given birth to.

Over the years different technological media platforms have had an association with the perverse and the sinister. This includes the 'video nasty' in the 1980s, a name given to certain exploitative and ultra violent horror films for the VHS domestic market, or the more recent notion of the 'dark web', an alternate online portal to torture, brutality and guns for hire.

Just as the popularity of pornography on the web has risen in recent years, depictions of straight hetero sex have become omnipresent almost to the point of banality. The allure of pornography and the body has historically been the fact that it's been hidden from view, removed from the mainstream and relegated to back rooms or under counter tops. The sheer over-visibility of porn begs the question can such images still function as pornography? The web now provides extended definitions of porn in an assortment of ever 'expanding' categories of the body and sex: MILF, Teen, Giant pussies, Female ejaculation, Generation gaps, Black hermaphrodites, Cock oddities, Puffy pussies, Shemale, Pregnant to Thalidomide sex, Torture porn and - by far the strangest I have encountered in the DVD series - *Do you believe it; Octococks*, a genetic mutation of eight erect penises in one. This truly monstrous genitalia was no doubt entirely fake but perhaps its fakeness no longer matters. When pornography is so available and visible, any deviation from the straight white-bread hetero porn will find an audience, no matter how absurd, fake or beyond the limits of the body.

Pornography has clearly been defined by technology. From *Playboy*'s ultra glossy colour photo shoots to saucy film loops and stag films of the 1960s and 1970s, to the 1980s video revolution and home video rentals, to telephone sex and live porn web cams, there remains an indisputable link between the development of technological media and that of the body.

In previous decades, before YouTube delivered to us surgical experiments gone wrong or videos of home colon cleansing, a number of exploitation movies or 'shockumentaries' made their appearance, providing us with a catalogue of the body and its interior that was difficult to look at and difficult not to look at. Video libraries, unsure of what to do with such films, resorted to filing them under the special interest category. Such films loosely came under the 'mondo movie' genre, thinly disguised as exotic and educational in their intent.

A film like the original *Mondo Cane* (A Dog's World) from 1962, directed by Paolo Cavara and Gualtiero Jacopetti, was followed up by *Mondo Cane 2* and, later, a host of imitators which had wider distribution through the home video market of the 1980s. Films such as *Shocking Asia 1* (1976) and *Shocking Asia 2* (1985) and *Faces of death* (1978) provided cannibalistic travelogues of far off places, exotic peoples and even stranger abject bodies.

Regarding the phenomena of mondo movies in the cultural context of the 1960s, J.G. Ballard made the comment: 'We needed our tastes to be corrupted.'<sup>203</sup> Films like *Mondo Cane* provided that corruption. According to Ballard, such films were part of an unconscious desire to view such material at a time when cultural values were being reassessed and rethought. The televised footage of Vietnam, and the slow motion footage of the Kennedy assassination formed an evolving media landscape of violence and visceral sensation, which in a very real sense is being reactivated through contemporary media today.

The phenomenon of the mondo movie enabled a darker side of the human psyche to emerge and no doubt influenced a generation of horror filmmakers over the years with their assortment of confronting tribal rituals and exotic initiation ceremonies.

The desire to be corrupted connects with Tom Gunning's interesting observation about our collective fascination with horror.<sup>204</sup> In the contemporary environment one creates

a second skin or membrane to filter out noise, danger and visual stimuli in order to survive; however, at the same time, part of us is dissatisfied with being protected and we want the membrane to be pierced. The appeal of abject, visceral sensation can, in part, be explained by a desire to see the erosion of our second skin which insulates us from the world. Mondo movies also recall Ralph Rugoff's analysis of the pathological beauty of Philadelphia's Mutter Museum:

*Such sights inevitably confirm our own 'normality' by comparison, but the Mutter's gigantic colons and two headed skeletons can also lead us to contemplate twists of fate, accidents of birth and the plasticity of all living matter. One's own body after all is potentially just as capable of metamorphosing into yet another example of expressionistic biology.*<sup>205</sup>

As Ballard has suggested, contemporary media and screen technologies have potentially allowed us to tap into the darker side of our psychopathologies, obsessions and desires around sex, violence and the abject. In many respects doesn't it therefore make sense that contemporary media arts and the genre of art and technology should do the same? This is the new visceral electronic world we now find ourselves in.

In many respects J.G. Ballard's novel *Atrocity Exhibition*<sup>206</sup> comes to mind in the context of my work and research, surrounded as we are by such extreme states of the human body, violence, and the abject through the lens of contemporary media. My work, like the psychiatrist in Ballard's fiction, is an attempt to understand such imagery, 'in a way that makes sense'.<sup>207</sup>

I argue that, in recent years, abject, visceral body horror is implicitly entangled within the framework of new technology, digital delivery systems, online websites and the contemporary popular mediasphere. More so than ever before, such advances in media forms since the late 1990s provide us with Ballard's notion of *pure visceral sensation*. The mandate of contemporary art is to reflect the culture it finds itself in in order to

understand it, critique it and deconstruct it. The question then remains - which I started with at the beginning of this thesis - where is the abject body within media art culture?

As Ballard again has pointed out:

*The media landscape of the present day is a map in search of a territory. A huge volume of sensational and often toxic imagery inundates our minds.* <sup>208</sup>

Such abject imagery is no longer out there, external to ourselves and our world, but is now, in a very real sense, part of our developing unconscious, defining who and what we are.

Matteo Pasquinelli has asked the question of the true nature and latent meanings of our media landscape:

*What is the nature of this dark side of the machinic landscape? Irrational violence, animal instincts, sexual impulses and natural aggressiveness emerge as constitutive of the “biomorphic horror” pulsating through the collective technological imaginary.* <sup>209</sup>

Perhaps contemporary culture is already so enthralled and obsessed with such topics that the media arts offers us an alternative, an escape route from the abject bodily reality of our lives and provide a clear move away from the worlds of rotten.com, pathologies, disease and body horror.

I want to return to J.G. Ballard once again, for perhaps it's Ballard's observation which so accurately sums up the condition of the contemporary networked media landscape which has become such an integral part of our lives - this condition that combines our love affair with the same technologies and networks of consumerism and the darker edges of technology as a source and facilitator for human perversion.

*The marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century has*

*given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the specters of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy.*<sup>210</sup>

Here Ballard defines the aesthetic that, in many respects, summarises much of my research: '*the marriage of reason and nightmare*'. Technology, the computer, programming, electrical motors, hardware, electrical wiring, video screens, data, all fused with the abject, the visceral, the non technological, the bodily, the repulsive, the unpleasant and the perverse. Importantly what appears to be a seemingly incompatible aesthetic within the worlds of media arts culture, art and technology and the abject is, as Ballard points out, entirely compatible, the essence, in fact, of our contemporary media driven existence.

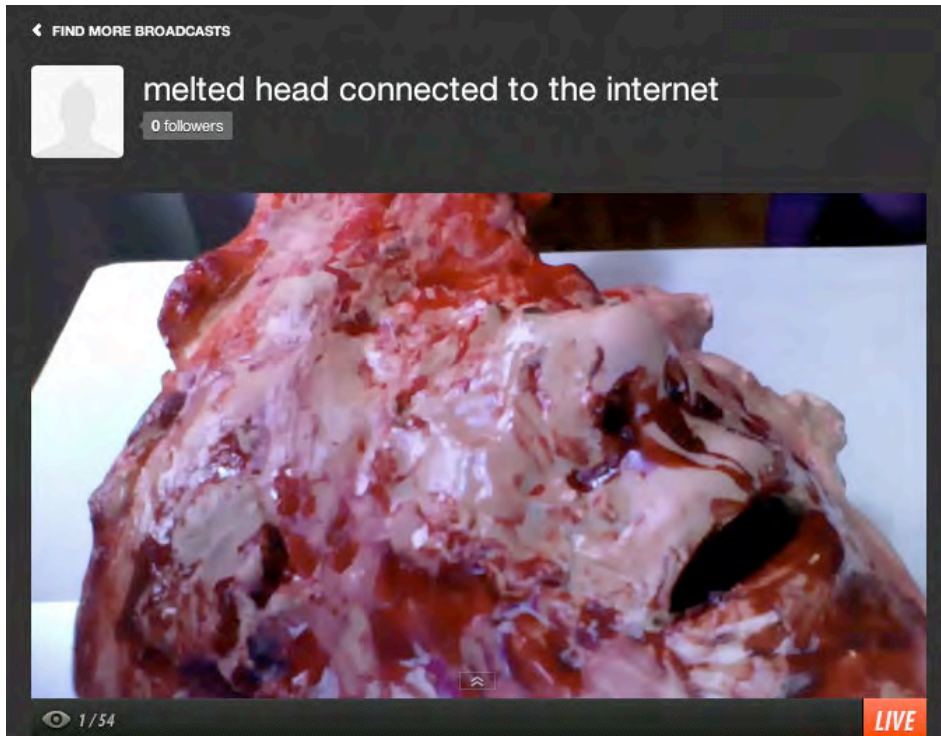
It appears that the more advanced our technologies become - the more sophisticated our mediated environment and digital delivery systems - the more there is a desire for the primitive, the violent and the visceral. In response to the development of such technologies, our primitive evolutionary switches are turned on and our latent appetite for the visceral is activated. An unconscious need arises for such material.

I will now discuss three video artworks produced during my PhD: *Melted Head Connected to the Internet*, *Skin Freak* and *GooTube*. All consider our implicit and, at times, perverse relationship to abject-screen based media in very different ways.

### ***Melted Head Connected to the Internet, 2013***

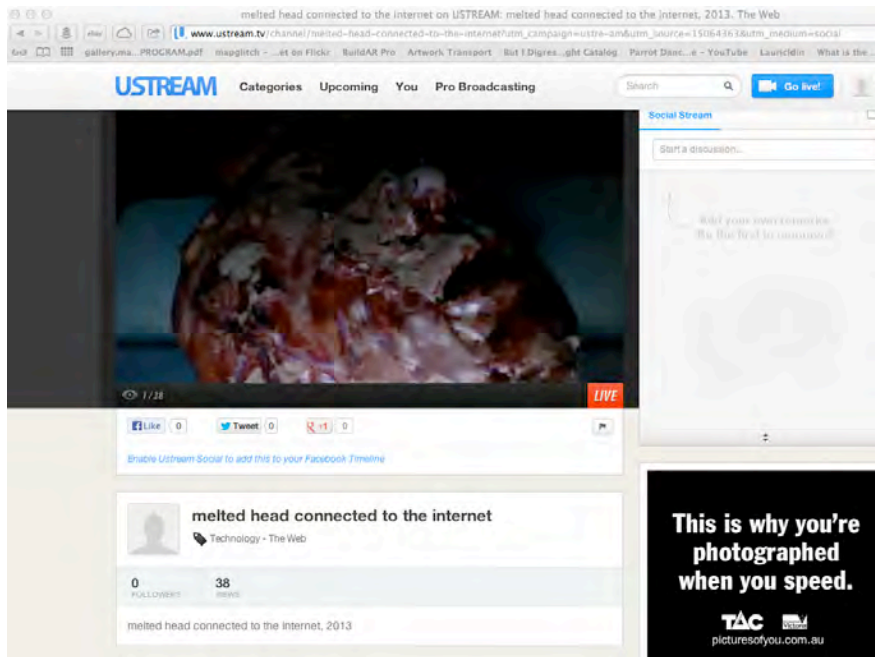
This work depicts a live streaming video of a static silicon sculpture depicting what resembles to be a melted human head. The work attempts to distil both the banality and inanity of the internet and the web's seemingly insatiable appetite for the visceral, the bodily, the mutant – specifically the method in which the banal and the extreme states of the human body have been conjoined online.

Perversely the work is presented as a live video stream; it is a pathetic and absurd attempt to somehow activate and make real the inanimate, dead, static sculpture reanimated by the system of live video streaming distributed over the internet.



**Figure 18. Ian Haig, *Melted Head Connected to the Internet*, 2013 (streaming video work)**

The work is a let down, an anticlimax, a disappointment and a failed project within the framework of art and technology. The work never changes, is never updated and has no beginning and no ending. The project has at its heart, however, a critique of the nature of the web and its relationship to the human body. By placing emphasis on the visceral melted head in a continuous live stream, we are forced to consider the banality of the visceral body online. *UStream*'s banner ads and the video stream being regularly interrupted by various ads for movie trailers and new models of smart TVs all contribute to the sheer everyday banality of what we are viewing.



**Figure 19. Ian Haig, *Melted Head Connected to the Internet*, 2013 (streaming video work)**

With its references to schlock horror, the melted head itself and its abject, unclassifiable materiality points to an unknown human face, its identity erased - but also a reference to a new form of human identity - where violence, horror, abjection and the visceral co-exist with the technological.

## ***Skin Freak, 2012***

The notion of the video screen as a site of abjection, an entry point to visceral bodily material and matter is played out in my work *Skin Freak*. In a simple way *Skin Freak* explores the screen as an extension of our own viscera, a new biological/technological outgrowth of our corporeal bodies.

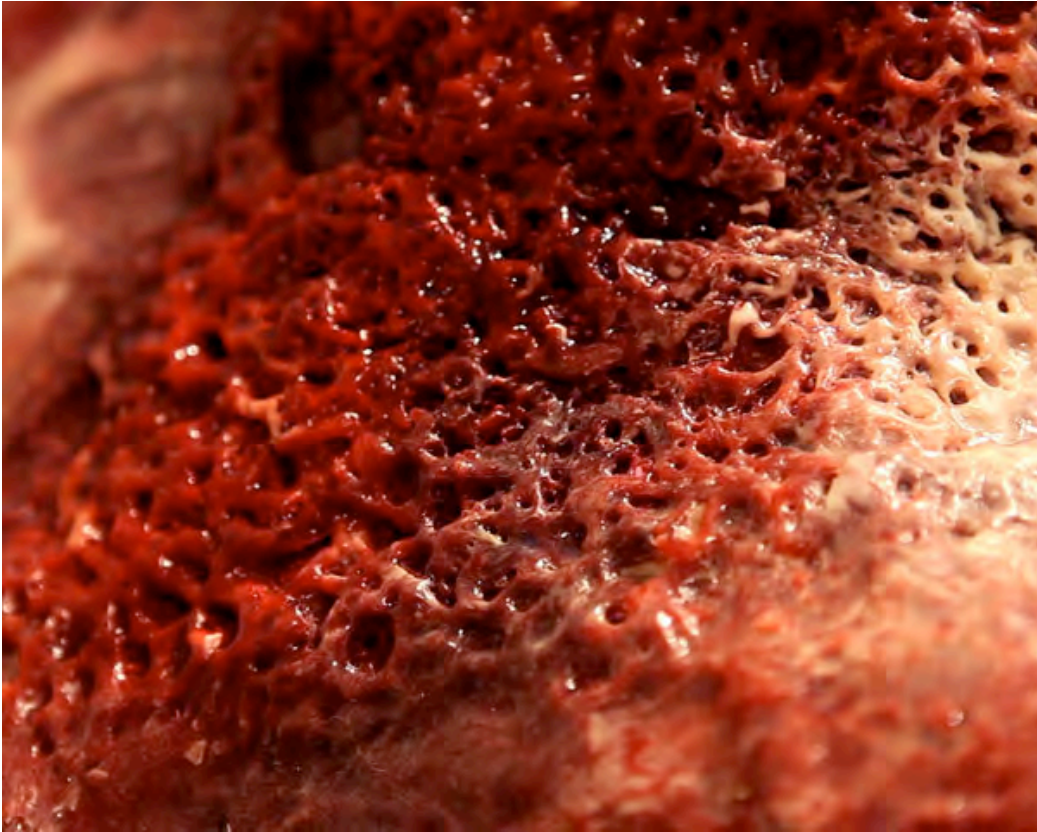
The work consists of a single channel video work based on the sculptural work *Some Thing*. Here, a short looping video work offers a textural exploration of the surface and skin of some kind of creature. Slowly breathing, the skin appears more like raw exposed meat, rather than the smooth perfection of the idealised texture of flesh. The work's name alerts the viewer to the idea of the skin fetishist; the skin freak. The work plays on

the notion of a new kind of reverse beauty of the flesh, a new aesthetic of the porous membrane that is human skin.



**Figure 20. Ian Haig, *Skin Freak*, 2012 (video artwork)**

J.G. Ballard's *Crash* describes a new appreciation for damaged and battered flesh which has been bruised and marked as a result of the extreme experience of the car wreck. *Crash* signposts a developing pathology of the human body and its relationship to the technology of the automobile. *Skin Freak* also explores a new kind of skin fetish, that of the non-human, alien, monstrous and mutant skin of the other – a new kind of skin, with new aesthetic properties and possibilities.



**Figure 21. Ian Haig, *Skin Freak*, 2012 (video artwork)**

The work also renders the video screen as a biological surface, reminiscent of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* with its breathing televisions and pulsating video cassettes. *Skin Freak* is a short video excursion into the abject bodily surface of flesh and screen, of the body as technology and technology as the body.

### ***GooTube*, 2010**

The abject body is also found in my studio-based work *GooTube*, a kind of visceral, bodily version of YouTube, which references YouTube's rhetoric that revolves around the foregrounding of 'you', the unique individual, a living breathing human body at the other end of the computer screen. YouTube's democratising rhetoric around the individual and user generated content is played out here to represent the body of the individual in all its literal, perverse, visceral messiness of bodily fluids. *GooTube* is a project that borders on absolute disgust and revulsion, perhaps more so than any of my other works. In many respects the imagery of the work is difficult to look at. Ultimately,

however, the content of the *GooTube* is about foregrounding the notion of our abject interior biology coupled with contemporary screen technologies. The narrative of 'you' and user generated content which is so common in emerging new media is taken to its logical and repulsive conclusion of over sharing of personal information which gives new meaning to the word 'Selfie'.

*GooTube* consists of images of the mysterious bodily material know as 'muroid plaque', which is the dark matter of colon cleansing. The images are taken from Google image searches and various websites on body detoxing and alternative health practices. YouTube is reconfigured as a portal to the inner biological body, a way into the unknown, mysterious, unclassifiable and entirely abject body.



**Figure 22. Ian Haig, *GooTube*, 2010 (video artwork)**

The internet here provides us with Ballard's *facilitator of the perverse*, a series of images of disgusting body fluids that users post examples of online. Muroid plaque resembles more a slimy prosthetic special effect from a movie such as John Carpenter's *The Thing*,

rather than part of our own body. The alien is no longer out there but rather it is down there, in the dark recesses of our own bodies. Mucoid plaque ultimately is us, as much as it is alien to us.

While YouTube may be all about 'you', the individual, such a premise is perversely extended here to include what makes you unique - your own individual biology, complete with disgusting body fluids which are as much part of you as anything else.

*GooTube* recalibrates YouTube as an entry point to the inner body, a direct pathway to the unseen contents of our inner selves. It is technology as a microscope into our bodies, revealing things probably best not revealed. Just as Facebook enables the increased visibility of the individual online, *GooTube* takes such a notion of the contents of one's identity and their bodies and bowels to an absurd outcome.



**Figure 23. Ian Haig, *GooTube*, 2010 (video artwork)**

Perhaps the incomprehensibility of the dreaded mucoid plaque becomes a denial of our own death - death as the ultimate transformation. Or, as one website devoted to colon cleaning, exclaims, about mucoid plaque: '*The death that existed inside of me.*'<sup>211</sup>

Lastly, the topic of death is covered in the following chapter, for no account of the abject body can be complete without an analysis of the corpse, in particular the corpse and its relationship to technology.

## Chapter 5: The dead

I have reserved the final chapter in my thesis for the dead, death and the dying. Following the logic of my trajectory and timeline, I have explored body horror and the abject art movement of the 1990s, together with media art and abjection and to media art culture in the 1990s and beyond. The next stop is the final and terminal one, the end of our bodies. As Norman O. Brown has articulated: *'Death is the reality in which human beings cannot come to terms'*.

Death is the final and ultimate form of abjection that none of us escape; it is the ultimate end. In many respects the refusal of the abject body within the worlds of media art is quite possibly less a refusal of the abject body and more a denial of death. Death is the reality; we all become rotting organic matter in the end.

Georges Bataille has explored the notion of death as contagion, the idea that on seeing death one will catch it from the dead body. He writes: *'Death is a danger for those left behind.'*<sup>212</sup> The need to bury a corpse and dispose of the body is to remove it from one's life. Bataille also links the horror of death as more about the:

*decay that sends the dead flesh back into the general ferment of life, for life is always a product of the decomposition of life.*<sup>213</sup>

Technology and media culture has an interesting relationship to death, for new technology is the narrative of newness, paradigm shifts, new ways of thinking about culture and our place in it. Technology and new media are firmly entrenched in the narrative of the future, an idealised state, a place of tomorrow of ever changing

possibilities. The abject body and its relationship to death is clearly a backwards step here. The dead body represents the non-future, the terminal and the end of all possibilities. With this in mind, a number of works I discuss here specifically focus on the theme of death, the abject and its relationship to the framework of technology, including *Night of the Living Hippy* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation*.

Once again there remains something in William Ian Miller's comments on our relationship to disgust and death, of 'life's soup' as a site for bodily abjection and recurrence. The technology of distributed identities online, avatars and virtual worlds of *Second Life*, for example, conjure up the notion not of biological recurrence but digitised immortality. When art and technology de-abjectifies the body, it de-abjectifies death.

As Tom Gunning has observed, the beginning of cinema with the Lumiere brothers in 1895 was interpreted as a manifestation of immortality;

*death will no longer be total...what first seems to promise immortality ultimately delivers ghosts. What we get is not someone who lives forever, but someone whose image or shadow has been caught and forced to repeat the same gestures over and over again, condemned to an eternal repetition.*<sup>214</sup>

The notion of pseudo immortality has framed our fascination with technologies for some time, from the birth of cinema to the phenomena of life logging – the attempt to capture one's entire life through digital still images and video. This includes online memoriams for the recently deceased; or the banal minutia of people's online lives on Facebook. Death also makes up a high percentage of Facebook 'users' in the thousands of 'active' profiles of dead people. The notion of non-death is clearly part of the framework of the technological landscape and mediasphere. Confrontation with the corporeal dead body or corpse is an incompatible idea within the posthuman utopia of digitised immortality.

Nothing is more abject than the dead body according to Kristeva; the corpse encompasses the abject entirely through its breakdown of the distinction between subject and object. The corpse is the ultimate transgressor of the border of life and death.

A number of my works have explored the notion of the dead and the un dead - of technology reactivating dead matter of corpses that come alive, of organs without bodies that are reanimated; my work includes references to zombies, half-life, and Dr. Frankenstein. My artworks explore abjection through the blurry space between life and death.

During the two years of medical school undertaken by J.G. Ballard, his most memorable experience was the dissection of the cadavers. He realised that the cadaver is more than just a dead body, it is the body in its entirety, and totality - every thought, frustration and dream of the person is there on the dissecting table. As he said in a 1970 interview:

*One had built one's whole life on an illusion about the integrity of one's body, this 'solid flesh'... Then to see a cadaver on a dissecting table and... to find at the end of term that there was nothing left except a sort of heap of gristle and a clutch of bones... was a tremendous experience of the lack of integrity of the flesh.* <sup>215</sup>

Ballard also has articulated that the sudden and shocking death of his wife from pneumonia in 1964 prompted the writer to attempt to view death not as merely the end of life and the demise of the body, but for death to attain some kind of meaning and purpose beyond this. <sup>216</sup>

Just as we refer to the abattoir as the processing plant, cow as beef, the pig as pork, shark as flake and dead animals as bone meal, the dead body is known as the cadaver, which separates the body from a thing of life to death. In their first year of medical school, physicians need to go through a process of objectifying the body in order for them to continue to view it not as a person and individual that had a history and a personality but an object, a thing.

Death is often regarded with denial and absolute repression, an inevitability that our bodies must face; however, many of us go through life rarely encountering a dead body. Our relationship to death is therefore mediated by media through movies, television and art. The horror movie prepares us for our potentially grisly fate, and enables us a rehearsal of the body at the end of term. We are surrounded by constructed depictions of death and dying and the body in a state of transformation, which we are familiar with but, at the same time, entirely removed from.

As Stephen King has pointed out;

*Horror and supernatural tales are a form of preparation for our own deaths, a "danse macabre" before the void, as well as a way to satisfy our curiosity about the most seminal event in our lives except birth.*<sup>217</sup>

## ***Night of the Living Hippy, 2012***

One work of mine which directly engages in the theme of death, the dead body as abject matter, and death as a transformative agency of the body, is *Night of the Living Hippy*. This work references Paul Thek's *The Tomb* from 1967 (also known as *Death of a hippy*) in which the artist cast himself as a dead hippy. Some forty years later, my project reanimates the dead corpse of the artist and the artwork and explores the notion of the hippy brought back from the dead. My work utilises simple Arduino micro controllers and electronic servo motors to reanimate Thek's corpse.

As Kenny Schachter has discussed in a piece on Paul Thek entitled *Famous... & Forgotten... & Famous*,<sup>218</sup> Thek has gone through his own resurrection of sorts as an artist. He came to prominence in the 1960s with his iconic abject meat sculptures. Thek later left the US for a long period to work in Europe. On returning to the US he was all but forgotten as an artist, and later died in 1988. Recently a major retrospective entitled *The Diver*, exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York, restaged Thek's work and

put the spotlight back on the artist's contribution, particularly with regards to his contribution to 'abject art'.

My work, *Night of the Living Hippy*, is a project about the resurrection of Thek; literally in this case of the artist's body, which it appears I have exhumed from the grave and brought back from the dead. The work is perhaps one of the most self-consciously 'technological' of my studio-based works, with its obvious use of Arduino micro-controllers and visible wiring connected to various servo motors. The work attempts to make the link between technology and death an explicit one through its Dr Frankenstein inspired theme of reanimation where bodies are never truly dead.

The work plays off a number of ideas related to the artist, death, the abject, the art world, the gallery and notions around how history is constructed. Paul Thek cast himself as the dead hippy and, in some ways, his piece *Death of a hippy* has become something of an iconic work with its reference to the hippy subculture and the Vietnam war. Thek died of AIDS; his real body became a monstrous version of itself, of which, like his earlier cast version of himself from 1967, nothing remains. The only documentation of Thek's original piece is through photographs.



**Figure 24. Ian Haig, *Night of the Living Hippy*, 2012 (kinetic sculpture)**

The notion of bringing a hippy back to life enables a range of ideas to be explored such as: a play on transcendental states, past lives, bad trips, and technology as a catalyst - the spark of technology reanimating the dead matter of the corpse. The work also recalls Freud's ideas of the uncanny in which something that should have remained hidden from view has instead come to the surface - literally in this case. If one follows the fictional narrative of the work, it tells of the body of a dead artist exhumed and reanimated in the present day.

My work is also a playful reference to George Romero's *Night of the living dead* (1968), made soon after Thek's *Death of a hippy* from 1967. The work utilises a ready-made corpse produced by a Hollywood special effects company that I purchased online. The corpse is a realistic prosthetic assemblage with rotting and decaying skin and matted hair and it appears creepily authentic. My corpse lays on a trestle table in a darkened gallery lit by spot lights positioned above for dramatic effect with the aim of giving a sense of an autopsy or art on the dissecting table. Servo motors surround the corpse bringing it to life in constant reactivation and reanimation. The corpse is playfully presented as caught in-between the states of dead and un-dead.

Attached to the limbs, neck, fingers and torso of my hippy corpse are a series of micro controllers connected to guitar strings and small servo motors with the perverse idea that contemporary technology is bringing back from the dead an artwork from 1967 of a rotting hippy corpse. The movement of my corpse is very simple and elemental; an arm being raised slightly, fingers twitching, and a head moving slightly. These simple movements add to the uncanny and creepy aesthetic of the work. The various servo motors and guitar strings attached to my corpse suggest that even in death we are controlled by machines. Technology has become so pervasive that it reaches us in the grave.

The use of guitar strings also connects the idea of the hippy to the electric guitar.

In fact, in a lateral way, the entire work appears to function as a strange otherworldly electric guitar as numerous guitar strings and servo motors 'play' the corpse. The work essentially becomes a simple form of electronic puppetry, the corpse activated in a crude display of regeneration and awakening. Technology is implicit in the construction of the work, both in its materiality and how it operates as an artwork. The electric guitar itself is a technology that functioned as a conduit to other states of consciousness. In the late 1960s it was regarded as a potent symbol of sexuality and portal to the unknown.



**Figure 25. Ian Haig, *Night of the Living Hippy*, 2012 (kinetic sculpture)**

The work aims to produce a dense reading of the way one thinks about history and art, including ideas of the abject and uncanny in art practice and its ignition via technology. I am reinstating Paul Thek's dead hippy work in a contemporary setting, writing it back into history as it were. My version of Thek's work is clearly only a version, as the original no longer exists - it is a copy, a version of the original. The work also plays with the idea of reanimating and recovering not only the corpse of a dead artist but abject art

itself, Thek's work being a seminal precursor to ideas of the abject in contemporary art practice.

The dead body of an artist is depicted here as having a value beyond the 'live' artist. Thek was critically ignored in life only to receive attention years later. There were various retrospectives of his work some twenty years after the artist's death. As is the case with many artists, their cultural currency only surfaces upon death. Recognition is only achieved from the grave. Art history is primarily the study of dead artists, it aims to give meaning to the corpse or art and the artist's 'body' of work. In a very real sense art and its cultural encodings and value systems are often surrounded in ideas of death, from the deceased estate or the posthumous exhibition to 'the death of painting', and the museum site itself, which is a kind of mausoleum and tomb for the dead, and its artworks, embalmed in time.

Perversely the work playfully engages with ideas of technology that could reanimate the living. However the notion of reanimation for artists would potentially destroy the art economy, which is premised on the notion of artists staying dead and unable to produce any new work. It seems for the artist that death achieves a value where, in other aspects of culture and society, death is the definition of no value, the end of term.



**Figure 26. Ian Haig, *Night of the Living Hippy*, 2012 (kinetic sculpture)**

Our reference for the reanimated corpse is clearly the movies - many of us have never seen a real corpse, let alone a real corpse regenerated. The electronically controlled jerky movement of my corpse is entirely unrealistic, but unrealistic only in the context of how one has seen a corpse move and behave within the context of a movie. So, in some respects the movement of my corpse is entirely realistic, as it's occurring in reality as opposed to the constructed and artificial space of a movie. Such a notion connects the work to the language of cinema and the special effect and ideas of perception.

This work explores some of the critical aspects of my PhD – such as reclaiming the abject into the context of contemporary art making, revisiting the abject and activating it through the use of new media technology. I also like the idea of the gallery, with its white-washed walls, hospital-like sterility and controlled environment, functioning as the site for bringing back to life a dead artwork but also a dead artist into the future/present of 2013, which plays out like a kind of mock time travel experiment.



**Figure 27. Ian Haig, *Night of the Living Hippy*, 2012 (kinetic sculpture)**

There remains further links to the hippy and death, not just in Thek's own work but also the hippy in its cultural association to the Manson Family, for example. After the Manson killings the image of the hippy was irrevocably changed. No longer the benign peace loving drop-out, here the hippy was a brainwashed, anti-social killer.

The hippy subculture with its association with drugs like LSD gives us the bad trip, a kind of uncanny, living death where one is inside their body but out of it at the same time. There is also the Grateful Dead and their legions of 'dead head' fans following the band around the country like zombies or the call of punks in the mid 1970s for the 'death of the hippy' or with the hippy and their preoccupation with the idea of a past life.

Finally, there is also the notion of the 'dirty hippy' which suggests the hippy as closer to dirt, closer to death. This is the idea of the hippy being part of a 'subculture', hidden from view, a subterranean existence, underground and in closer proximity to dirt and decay, the stuff of death. The hippy, as a cultural and social construction, has become implicitly related to death, dying and the dead.

The hippy finds its implicit relationship to technology and the origins of free information on the internet which is the hippy counter-culture dream of the 1960s made flesh. This includes notions of open source paradigms and the decentralised flow of information and the embodiment of 'community' through certain web-based applications like torrent sites, file sharing and user generated content of Web 2.0 like Wikipedia. The hippy has been reborn and resurrected into the paradigm of the new technological and information economy.

Another more lateral resurrection that the work plays with is the rebirth of the legacy of late 60s counter-culture which has increasingly seen the rise of the environment movement within the context of contemporary art practice. 1960s and 1970s inspired 'issue-based' art once again appears very much on the cultural agenda in the themes of

global warming, climate change and ecology. Such themes have become commonplace in visual arts and, particularly, media arts, where the spectre of the hippy lives on.

My work *Night of the Living Hippy* conflates the relationship of the hippy and the dead and the reanimation of countercultures. The work plays at bringing the dead back to life, but it also suggests the hippy as the incarnation of death itself. The idea of the zombie is also referenced here. The carcass of the zombie has been theorised ad nauseam and is an enduring image of popular culture; however, its history provides some insights into the nature of contemporary culture and media.

The history of zombification can be traced back to Haiti and the discovery of powerful toxins in plant and animal life, in particular certain marine life, that contains a nerve toxin within their viscera and skin which is one thousand times more toxic than cyanide. When exposed to this poison one's metabolism drops sharply and the pulse becomes imperceptible, giving one the medical appearance of being dead but alive. This, it seems, is the origin of the zombie. The fear the Haitians had of the zombie has always been more about becoming a zombie and not the zombie itself; it is the notion of enslavement to an uncanny un-death that strikes the true fear of a body controlled by external forces outside of itself and against its own free will.

Our living and breathing bodies are becoming increasingly zombie-like and a composite of the dead and living. For example, a common practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to extract the teeth of the dead and deposit them into the mouth of the living, particularly the sugar affected rotten teeth of the wealthy. In our present day the tissue of cadavers is injected into the faces of the living in need of a nip and tuck. Furthermore, infectious diseases grown in aborted human fetuses are, in turn, used in vaccinations and injected into our bloodstreams or healthy organs transplanted from the dead to the living. The dead body is increasingly being resurrected and given a new lease on life.

The presence of the corpse also provides us with an interesting idea around waste, not the obvious waste of a life, of someone's time cut too short, but of material waste and

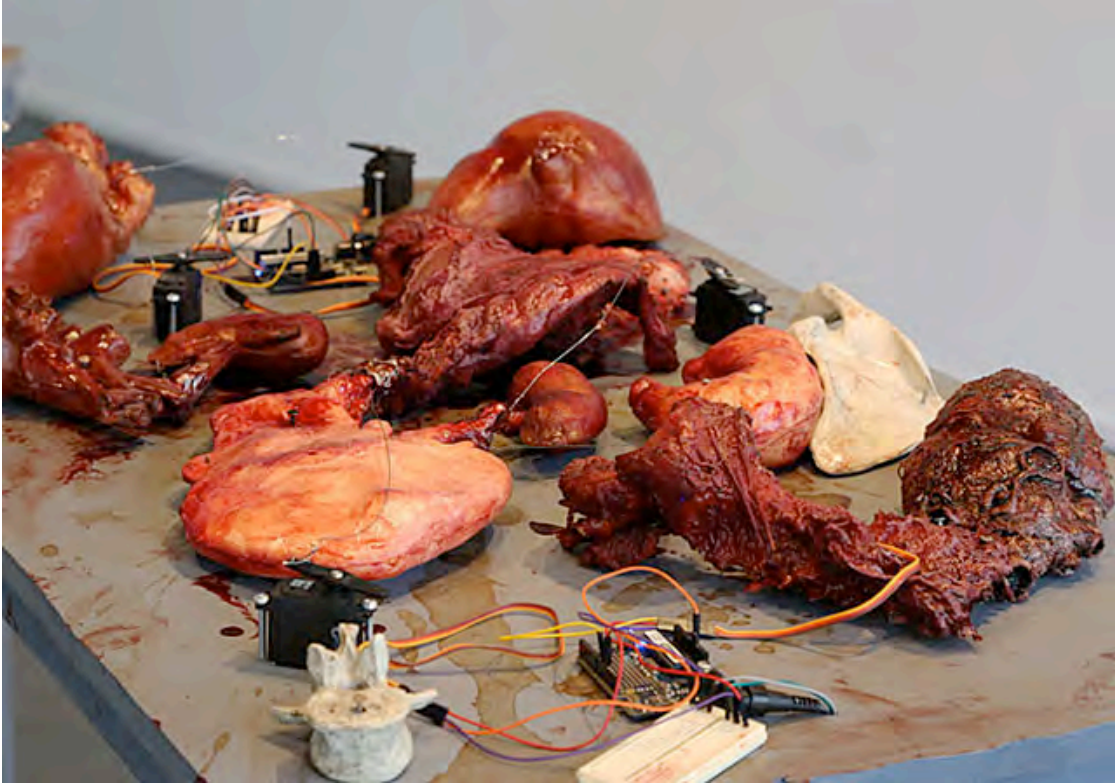
the meaning of the corpse after death. Cannot the corpse be used in some way? Cannot some use value be attached to it? One spends their entire life beholden to value systems but upon death the body is quickly rendered meaningless. It is perhaps the swiftness of this transition from value to no value that remains disturbing and irreconcilable.

Finally, my resurrected zombie hippy also connects the idea of technology as the spark of uncanny reanimation to the idea that, for contemporary media and technology, nothing is truly dead, nothing is off limits, everything can be brought back to life, reborn, remixed, recombined, reconfigured and mashed up, including the corpse of a hippy artist from 1967. In many respects, contemporary media is the media of the undead, the half-life, the zombie. Like the hippy it is the new 'natural' state of existence in the world.

## ***Workshop of Filthy Creation, 2013***

The final work, I will discuss, titled *The Workshop of Filthy Creation*, also explores the uncanny space of un-death. This work incorporates an extension of some of the themes explored in *Night of the Living Hippy*, such as the idea of bringing the dead back to life, and the space of reanimation. In addition, the work utilises the same simple technological processes of *Night of the Living Hippy*, with its combination of servo motors, Arduino micro controllers and guitar strings.

The work of Paul Thek, in particular his meat sculptures of the late 1960s, which were discussed earlier, are referenced in this and other works of mine such as *Some Thing*. Here the body, to paraphrase *The Simpsons*, is depicted as 'mystery meat' - that is, flesh of unknown origin and purpose, neither human nor animal but the flesh of otherness.



**Figure 28. Ian Haig, *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, 2013 (kinetic, electronic sculpture)**

The realistic prosthetic organs in the work were all purchased online, then cannibalised and coupled together to create new mutations and combinations. The internet as a site for human organ trafficking is also an underlying theme that is present in the work. It could be argued that the human body (or human body parts) has become a distributed system via the internet and the electronic network - messy human biology is alive and well online, the internet as an extension of our bodies.

The work takes its name from the workshop of Dr Frankenstein, a story that depicts a kind of disgusting, horrid and distorted notion of divine creation. The figure of Frankenstein is an aberration of the concept of life - this is life hacked together in the laboratory from an assortment of body parts and electricity. The newly reanimated, monstrous creatures in my work have no purpose and function. This is mutation for its own sake, a hybrid species, part human and, in some cases, part monkey, interspecies

mutation as a thing in and of itself. The title of the work also summarises much of my PhD work - the fusion of the rational and the technological with that of the disgusting and base level abject body.



**Figure 29. Ian Haig, *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, 2013 (kinetic, electronic sculpture)**

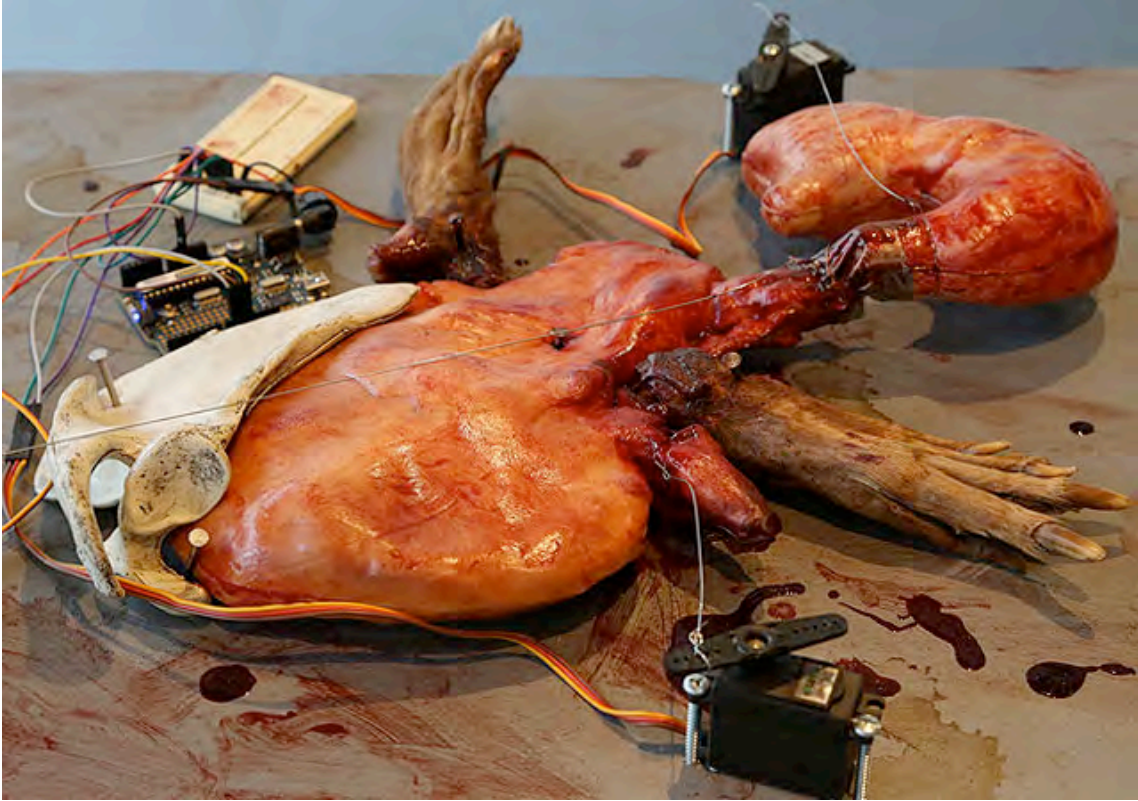
This piece is I feel the most successful of all my PhD projects. I feel it most clearly addresses the research question of fusing new technology with the aesthetics of bodily abjection. While all of the works undertaken as part of the PhD explore this terrain, it is *The Workshop of Filthy Creation* which I feel is most resolved in its realisation. It features material that appears ugly, horrible and horrific which seems entirely incompatible within the idiom of art and technology and, possibly, for that matter, the world of visual art in general.

The piece also most directly addresses the notion of the incompatibility of the horror movie aesthetic in my work. Why is the internal body, in all its grisly and gory detail, often omitted from the worlds of art practice when at the same time it is part of the aesthetic language of many horror movies, TV series and other forms of mass entertainment readily consumed by huge audiences? Why does it appeal in one form,

but it is banished from the framework of serious art? Why is the exterior human body accepted on one level but the interior rejected when it is the same body? Clearly the work opens up more questions for me than answers.

In some respects *The Workshop of Filthy Creation* is about the destruction of the body – perhaps the aftermath of a brutal and grisly death or a scene from a zombie apocalypse. However, the work is also about the reactivation of a new kind of body and new disturbing possibilities of what the human body could be. So amongst the horrible blood and gore, there is a weird sense of twisted and ugly potential. Where organs are crudely gaffer-taped together into new combinations and nailed to the table, reanimated and brought back from the brink of death, they are given a new lease of life and a new meaning.

This also occurs in J.G. Ballard's dystopian visions which are often undercut by a sense of affirming potential. On one hand, Ballard's *Crash* offers us a brutal and horrific fantasy of sex and technology. Indeed Ballard has described *Crash* as '*The pornography of technology.*'<sup>219</sup> On the other hand, however, he provides the reader with a sense of human potential, change and a perverse form of logic. With this in mind, *Crash* appears as an optimistic meditation on the body and the impact of technology on our psyches. *Workshop of Filthy Creation* is also potentially disturbing, not simply because of its abject subject matter, but because it is abjection with a purpose, a possibility.



**Figure 30. Ian Haig, *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, 2013 (kinetic, electronic sculpture)**

*Workshop of Filthy Creation* is a direct reference to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through its exploration of the notion of a workshop or laboratory for producing filth, disgust and bodily abjection. The imagination as a laboratory space for a particular kind of perversity is explored in the piece, which resembles more the work of a serial killer or mass murderer more than it does an artwork.

The work is the final project I created in my PhD. The deeper I went into my research, the more intense and extreme my artworks became in their visceral aesthetic approach. In retrospect I see that I needed the works to be as extreme as I could make them for them to function aesthetically and conceptually within the context of the research.



**Figure 31. Ian Haig, *Workshop of Filthy Creation*, 2013 (kinetic, electronic sculpture)**

In a similar manner to *Night of the Living Hippy*, *Workshop of Filthy Creation* offers a pathetic and extremely crude assemblage of body parts and servo motors. The lack of technical sophistication in both works is intentional. I wanted to cast technology in a horrible and ugly light. I wanted the movement, noise, and repetition to be an extension of the aesthetics of disgust as much as the organs, bones and rotting corpse.

Both *Night of the Living Hippy* and *Workshop of Filthy Creation* refuse to offer pleasing aesthetic experiences for the viewer. Like many of my works, they refuse the idea that the repellent, the gross, the disgusting and the abject are devoid of value and meaning. As my research and body of work has explored, the abject body and technology are fertile areas, full of ideas, possibilities, cultural resonances and meaning, which extends beyond their icky aesthetics and, rather, consider the nature of who and what we are.

# Conclusion

My research has attempted to locate the abject body within art and technology. I have charted the cultural conditions that have resulted in its removal. However, actually locating the abject body has proved to be increasingly difficult in media art culture. I have formed my argument around the changing cultural settings for the body and its relationship to technology. I have explored how such a context can possibly explain the removal of the abject body from the genre of contemporary media art and the worlds of new media and art and technology.

My thesis has explored the appearance of the abject body and technology in 1980s body horror, the abject art periods of the late 1980s and 1990s, and the emergence of media art and its relationship to new media systems such as CD-ROMS and interactivity which saw the removal of the abject body. This removal was further amplified by the mid to late 1990s framing of the body and technology in utopian terms, which saw the transcendence of the body and the notion of technology as an idealised state. Finally, in 2013, the contemporary media landscape has seen a return of the body and notions of abjection through contemporary media forms. Ultimately, contemporary popular culture's love affair with the abject visceral body, and the body in extreme states, is not one shared by media artists.

Ultimately, if simplistically, the invisibility of the abject body within media art culture comes back to the old dichotomies of high and low culture. One could argue such divisions have been eroded by the user generated content of YouTube and the internet. Rather than embracing the extremes of the body - with all its grisly abjection - media artists separate themselves from such sensationalistic, crude and lowly themes.

My own emergence and education as an artist over the years included a discovery of body horror, media art and trash cinema. All occurred at the same time in the early 1980s. I make no cultural distinction or hierarchies of one over the other which, no doubt, is reflected in my research.

The abject body is a reminder that our bodies are not fixed – they are not stable, they change and transform through different stages of our lives. In evolutionary terms, the human body is in a state of progress. Technology often seeks perfection and stability (but, at the same time, is bizarrely unstable in the form of computer crashes, viruses and the continual need for software upgrades). The removal of the abject body is perhaps more about our own corporeal, organic instability.

As I have attempted to argue in this thesis, the abject and its relationship to media arts occurs for a number of reasons across different cultural conditions and a variety of aesthetic incompatibilities. This includes: the abject and the denial of death; the abject and its boundary disruption with the logical and rational world of computing; the abject and the confrontation of the corporeal body; the abject as a low form (literally of the lower body in some cases) in comparison to media arts sophisticated cultural agenda; the abject body and the animalistic body as the inverse of the technological; the abject body as the opposite of the utopian and futurist narratives that are often played out in media art culture; the abject body as regression and the inverse of science, progress and advancement; the abject body's close alignment with the aesthetics of disgust, ugliness and the anti-aesthetic; and, perhaps most curiously of all, the abject body and its regular appearance online but its lack of visibility within the worlds of art and technology. My questions around this absence of the abject body within media arts are complex and involved. This absence is determined by a range of cultural, social, ideological, political, institutional, art world, and non-art world reasons.

My PhD research resulted in a number of new works, all of which have attempted to provide an answer to the research question. I have aimed to produce artwork which fully integrates the abject, visceral body with technology. My thesis has provided a cultural analysis as well as discussion of my individual works. I feel my approach to the thesis has attempted to locate an important cultural context for my art practice. As mentioned in my introduction, I believe it difficult to ignore the cultural conditions, histories and contexts that underscore the production of artwork. For this reason, in

framing my research I have written in detail on both my art and the culture it finds itself in.

My PhD started with a problem - the absent abject body in media arts. Rather than trying to solve this problem or provide answers, my research and thesis have attempted to understand the absence and to explore how it relates to media arts culture, art, technology, emerging new media practice, culture, and, indeed, life in general.

In some respects describing it as a 'problem' assumes that others see it as a problem - an issue to be fixed, solved and corrected. I use the term 'problem' idiosyncratically. It is perhaps only a problem for me. I imagine others are quite happy for the abject body to be absent from media arts.

In my introduction I suggest that the abject body needs to remain absent, it needs to exist on the periphery of media arts for it to maintain any kind of transgressive currency. Ultimately for me this is a bizarre outcome of my PhD research. This topic that I researched and attempted to reactivate and reinstate, I ultimately want to remain repressed and hidden. Regardless of this fact, I feel this is still an interesting and important outcome of the research.

With this in mind, my research explored Freud's ideas of the uncanny and the repressed, of material that is hidden from view but which appears uncanny once it is uncovered. That is, something made visible that should remain in the dark. I, too, want the abject body to remain hidden, repressed and buried in our unconscious.

I needn't be concerned for, within the culture of media arts and the genre of art and technology - as I have outlined over the course of this thesis - abject bodily material is simply not on the agenda and it certainly doesn't look like becoming a commonplace theme anytime soon.

I feel my research has attempted to constructively position media arts culture in a relationship with the history of visual arts. I aimed to look back in the rear vision mirror

at history as much as forward, in order to draw on and consider the way the body has been explored as abject material within the visual arts.

If media arts and new media art events such as Ars Electronica and ISEA (International Symposium of Electronic Art) have jettisoned the abject body, does my own work belong at all in such a context? Or alternatively should my work be located within visual art culture which has a history of dealing with the abject body? I maintain, however, that it is the very absence of the abject body within art and technology frameworks like Ars Electronica and ISEA, which do repress and ignore it, that makes it an interesting context for my work. The ideal location for the abject body to surface is within the context of media arts and not outside of it. The site of sophisticated contemporary technology, and the framework of logic and data, makes it the perfect opposite to the abject and an ideal space for the abject to fester.

The culture of emerging media art has established its own international events and conferences such as Ars Electronica and ISEA. These organisations were initially established to provide a platform for artists working at the interface of art and technology when the conventional and traditional networks of galleries and biennales and so on ignored such work.

Some media art/new media artists who exhibit their work in events like Ars Electronica and ISEA possibly consider more traditional art forms as part of a dated museum culture removed from the language of emerging media art. Consequently, they move away from themes associated with more conventional art practice, including themes of the abject body and the aesthetics of disgust. These are possibly viewed as part of the visual art world and not the domain of media art.

Lev Manovich has articulated this division of the visual art world and the media arts world of ISEA and Ars Electronica as Duchamp and Turing lands - one ironic and playful, the other logical and rational. He argues that the differences are so vast that a convergence of the two is unlikely.<sup>220</sup>

A more recent update here is that the program for Ars Electronica in 2013 includes a major survey of Herman Nitsch, the father of abject performance art presented in a context of new media art, which seems like an incongruous fit. However it is a recent sign at least, of potential possibilities, of new ways of contemporary media art being informed by the abject body and vice versa.

Also worth mentioning in this context is Melbourne's biennale media art event Experimenta. Over the last ten years Experimenta made the curatorial decision to move away from more difficult and potentially transgressive media artworks. Perhaps such topics become too problematic for government art funding or inconsistent with Experimenta's aim to become increasingly popularist and family friendly. The notion of experimental, transgressive avant gardism in media arts practice is, in this context, questionable. Experimenta is an interesting cultural barometer signifying the ways the abject body has been left out of the framework of media arts culture.

In addition, because of their cost and complexity, contemporary media art and art and technology practices, unlike other visual arts practices, are often reliant on funding bodies, university departments, institutions or the framework of ARC (Australia Research Council) research funding in Australia. Such institutions don't readily accommodate the themes of the abject body, aesthetic disgust, bodily fluids and so on, which possibly results in less work being produced on such themes in the area of art and technology.

In many respects, abjection and technology sit outside of the world of contemporary media art and also outside the commercial gallery system, the institutional gallery space and the world of visual art. Curiously, however, the abject body paired with technology is everywhere (for example, on the web as outlined in Chapter 4) and nowhere at the same time, caught within the invisible/visible divide that constitutes our engagement with culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I will finish with a last exchange of dialogue from David Cronenberg's *The Fly*. It seems an appropriate comment to end on. Jeff Goldblum (Seth) is explaining to Geena Davis (Veronica) why his teleportation experiment involving a steak has failed:

*The flesh. It should make the computer crazy. Like those old ladies pinching babies. But it doesn't; not yet, because I haven't taught the computer to be made crazy by the... flesh.*<sup>221</sup>

Ultimately this PhD is exactly that; an attempt to conjoin the framework of art and technology with abject bodily material and pure visceral sensation. I am attempting to make the computer crazy by the flesh.

Undertaking this PhD and interrogating my practice through researching the topic of the abject body within art and technology has significantly transformed my art practice. I may have finished my PhD research, written the thesis, outlined my argument, and produced a series of new artworks. However rather than thinking of the PhD as a process that has come to an end, I feel I am now at the beginning of a new chapter in my twenty year history as a media artist.

The following works were produced through my PhD research:

**GooTube** (2010)

**Twitch of the Death Nerve** (2011)

**The Joey Machine** (2011)

**Some Thing** (2011)

**Skin Freak** (2012)

**Night of the Living Hippy** (2012)

**Melted Head Connected to the Internet** (2013)

**Workshop of Filthy Creation** (2013)

My studio work has been included in the following public exhibitions during the course of my PhD:

**The Joey Machine**

*Tyger, Tyger*, West Space gallery, Melbourne (with Kotoe Ishii), 2011

**Twitch of the Death Nerve**

*ISEA2011*, Cumhuriyet Art Gallery, Istanbul, Turkey, 2011

**GooTube** (edited component)

*BYOB*, Tristian Koenig Gallery, Melbourne, 2011

**Some Thing**

*National New Media Art Award*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012

*The world below*, Presgrove Place, Melbourne (part of *White Night Melbourne* event) 2013

*Some Thing*, West Space gallery, Melbourne, 2013 (solo show)

**Skin Freak**

*Unco*, Torrance Art Museum, Los Angeles (Australian contemporary video art exhibition curated by myself) (Also touring to Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, in 2014)

*VideoFormes*, video art festival, Clermont–Ferrand, France, 2013

*9<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Directors Lounge*, Germany, 2013

*Channels*, Video art festival, Melbourne, 2013

**Night of the Living Hippy**

The Substation Contemporary Art Prize, Substation, Newport, Melbourne, 2012

*ISEA2013*, Verge Gallery, Sydney, 2013

**Workshop of Filthy Creation**

Kings ARI, Melbourne, 2013 (solo show)

**Melted Head Connected to the Internet**

(exhibited online)

In addition I presented the following papers, talks and provocations at various conferences, public forums and artist talks during my candidature, including:

Paper, *The confrontation of the body: The Parasite*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Conference, Body Horror: Contagion, Mutation, Transformation, Athens, Greece, 2013

Speaker, *Video art in the internet age*, Channels video art festival, Melbourne, 2013

Presentation, *The absent abject body in media arts*, ISEA, Sydney, 2013

Illustrated Lecture, *The unclassifiable body*, Morbid Anatomy/The Observatory, New York, 2013

Paper, *Inside out bodies*, Sensualising Deformities conference, Edinburgh University, UK, 2012

Paper, *That strange feeling*, ISEA, Istanbul, Turkey, 2011

Panel, *Thresholds, Fluids and the Materiality of Perversion - Metamorphoses: Transformations, Transgressions*, English, Media & Performing Arts Postgraduate Symposium, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2010

Paper, *Goo goo muck*, 8th Global Conference on Monsters and the Monstrous, Oriel College, Oxford University, UK, 2010

### **Book Chapter**

*Goo goo muck*, ebook chapter, *Inversion of Power & Paradox*, Inter-Disciplinary Press, UK (edited by Jonathan A. Allan and Elizabeth E. Nelson), 2012

### **Various articles**

McCarthyism, *Un Magazine*, No. 7.2, 2013

Deranged Disney, *OnScreen*, *Realtime* No.116, 2013

The horror of the toilet, *Vlak* magazine, No. 4, 2013

You're Unco (catalogue text), (Torrance Art Museum, Los Angeles), 2013

The Darkness Inside, *interalia, journal of queer studies, bodily fluids*, issue 7, 2013

Dr Benway - notes on Some Thing, *21C Magazine* ([www.21cmagazine.com](http://www.21cmagazine.com)), 2012

Electronic art must be destroyed, *Scan* magazine, journal of media arts culture, 2011

The Joey Machine (catalogue text) West Space Gallery, Melbourne, 2011

I also presented numerous artist talks around my PhD research:

Artist talk, *Lunchbox Art Forum*, RMIT University, 2013

Artist talk, West Space gallery, Melbourne, 2013

Artist talk, College of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, China, 2012

Artist talk, *National New Media Art Award*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012

Artist talk, West Space Gallery, Melbourne, 2011

## **End Notes**

### **Introduction**

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## Chapter I: Body Horror

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<sup>196</sup> Gibson, Op.cit, p.128

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Von Hagen put the interior of the body in the spotlight in his famous world touring *Bodyworlds* exhibitions. Upon leaving the *Bodyworlds* exhibition in Los Angeles in 2008, I was given some information about plasticisation. The information asked for people to donate their bodies for plasticisation after death. One can also donate their body via the *Bodyworlds* website.

I was intrigued and so, without thinking, I signed on the dotted line. This was not merely donating one's body for scientific research or donating a kidney to someone in need. Nor is it even freezing one's body cryogenically to be resurrected in the future, as done by Walt Disney. Rather, it is the complete transformation of one's body into another material, another 'thing'. I doubt whether Von Hagen will come looking for me after my death, like a body snatcher desperate to plasticinate me before my corpse starts to decompose, but the concept is an intriguing one.

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