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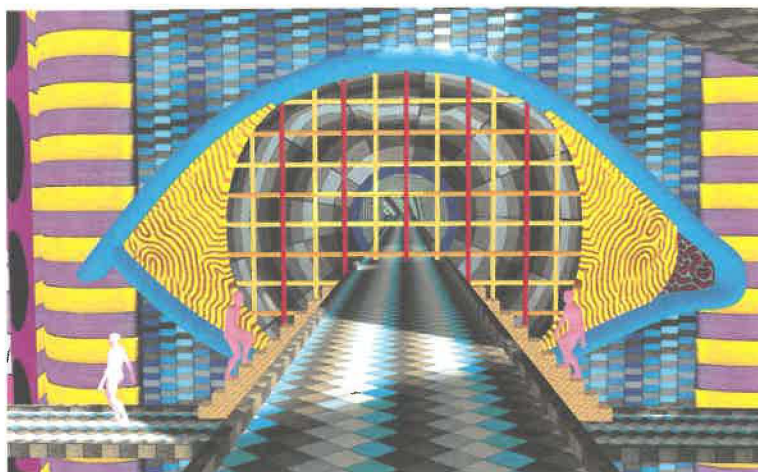
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Virtual Reality
— Ways of seeing



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Fleshold Crossing, 2018,
still from virtual reality animation.

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Image courtesy of the artist

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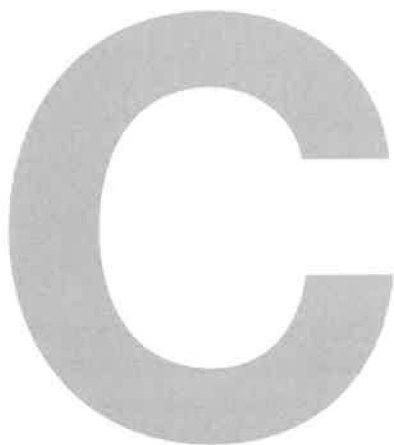
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The BADFAITH machine

The phantom point of view in VR

Kit Messham-Muir

At the 2018 Melbourne International Film Festival BADFAITH, an Australian-based virtual reality (VR) content creation collective, premiered its latest production—a twelve-minute VR work titled *Exquisite Corpse*.¹ As the title suggests, this is a twenty-first century rebirth of the Surrealist parlour game in which a team of collaborating artists each renders a part of a body on a folded segment of paper, working from the head down, without seeing anything of the other contributions.² It is only when the paper is finally unfurled that any of the collaborators see the completed body in its entirety; bizarre, disjointed and often monstrous. When the “Pope of Surrealism” André Breton created exquisite corpse drawings with poet Paul Eluard or artist Valentine Hugo, their aesthetic of disjuncture resonated with the Zeitgeist of Europe between the Wars—estranged, ruptured and, similar to Berthold Brecht’s photo-epigrams and montages, “broken so that the space between things can appear.”³ BADFAITH’s *Exquisite Corpse* 360-degree video shifts at right angles about its temporal axes, delivering first the head (Tony Albert), the neck (Shaun Gladwell), the heart (Natasha Pincus), the groin (Luci Schroder), the hands (Amiel Courtin-Wilson) and the legs (Daniel Crooks). The work is curated and produced by the collective’s lynchpin, Leo Faber. Evoking “punk”⁴ to describe his “slammed together” experimentation,⁵ Faber provocatively tests the limits of the emerging medium of VR. Gladwell, who began both creating VR and working with Faber and the collective in 2016, says “we came up with BADFAITH because of the reference to Jean Paul Sartre and his notion of bad faith as this kind of inauthentic movement but we also like the fact that it sounded like a ‘70s rock band.”⁶

Sartre’s notion of bad faith is an interesting frame through which to think about VR, which lays a claim to reality if perhaps only virtually. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre illustrates the idea of “bad faith” by imagining a café waiter who performs his job less to satisfy the patrons of the café and more for his own sense of play, “he is amusing himself.”⁷ But what is he playing, asks Sartre?

“He is playing at being a waiter in a café.”⁸ That is, the waiter is obliged to serve, politely and respectfully—but it is nothing more than an act. Who knows what he really thinks about you, the customer, or what he might have done to your cappuccino before bringing it to your table. Sartre goes on to distinguish this idea of bad faith from plain falsehood, that it is not “either a cynical lie or certainty” and that “bad faith is faith” nonetheless.⁹ The bad faith waiter still performs his job as well as one working in good faith. In considering the current point of evolution of VR in contemporary art, I want to crack-open this narrow space between the powerfully persuasive experience of “reality” in VR and the point at which that belief fails—the point at which the belief is in bad faith, neither a cynical lie nor certainty. And, in doing so, I want to question an assumption that extends from the persuasiveness of VR, that in its capacity to engender a sense of “presence,” it can enable a powerful intersubjective connectedness. Focusing on some recent 360-degree video art works, viewed through a VR headset, I want to consider my own subjective experiences of VR, as well as a well-documented sense of unease that VR is known to create in its audience. I will consider the extent to which VR and 360-degree video fall short of actual reality, positioning its viewer in the uneasy point-of-view of a “phantom subject,” feeling both present and absent.

Since VR became popularised around 2015 (with the Samsung Gear VR, followed in 2016 by the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift) some misty-eyed claims have been made on its behalf. Perhaps most famously, Chris Milk, CEO of VR company Within, believes that because of its supposed power as an “empathy machine” creating a direct intersubjective connection between people, “virtual reality has the potential to actually change the world.”¹⁰ In one of two effusive TED Talks, Milk argues VR is, “a machine, but through this machine we become more compassionate, we become more empathetic, and we become more connected. And ultimately, we become more human.”¹¹ VR and 360-degree video in the hands of visual artists is still an emerging form, and in the last few years we’ve seen



B

Shaun Gladwell
Orbital Vanitas (detail), 2016
 still image from virtual reality videowork.
 Courtesy the artist, Anna Schwartz
 Gallery and BADFAITH

Shaun Gladwell *AR 15 Field Strip*, 2016
virtual reality artwork with sound.
Cinematographer: Judd Overton. Production: BADFAITH VR.
Courtesy the artist and Gene & Brian Sherman Collection, Sydney

Opposite:
Natasha Pincus "Heart" in (Dir.) Leo Faber, working with artists
from the BADFAITH collective: Tony Albert, Amiel Courtin-Wilson,
Daniel Crooks, Shaun Gladwell, Natasha Pincus, Luci Schroder,
Exquisite Corpse, 2018, virtual reality artwork. Courtesy the artists



works as diverse as Nonny de la Peña's *Kiya* (2015), Jordan Wolfson's *Real Violence* (2017) and Gladwell's works produced with BADFAITH, such as *Reverse Readymade* (2016),¹² *AR 15 Field Strip* (2016) and *Storm Riders* (2018). While 360-degree videos such as Milk's *Evolution of Verse*, Red Bull's adventure videos and other corporate VR content emphasise the potential hyperbolic expansiveness of VR, cultural producers are more likely to test the edges of the medium—the points at which, when stretched, it fails.

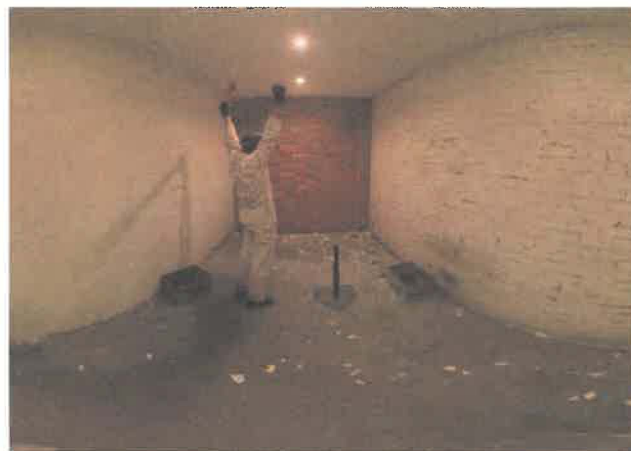
Gladwell works primarily in video installation since about 2000, and at the core of his video works is the examination of the performance of skilled human action, usually in urban subcultures. He has also worked as an Australian Official War Artist in 2009, and his works since then have often addressed the ethics of modern weaponry and the role of the digital image in conflict. *AR 15 Field Strip* is Gladwell's second completed VR work, first exhibited at the *Traces of War* exhibition at Kings College London in late 2016. It is a 360-degree video in which we, the audience, are brought into a suburban garage in Los Angeles, facing a bearded man depicted kneeling on a concrete floor as he blindfolds himself and then, over the course of several minutes, disassembles and reassembles

an AR15 assault rifle. He completes the process by testing the firing pin, then lays the weapon back in front of him. He removes the blindfold and gets to his feet. He then walks past "us", and we can turn around to see him engaged in the process of manufacturing soap.¹³ In her review of *AR 15 Field Strip*, Daisy Schoenaich-Carolath says, "the everydayness of the setting is disturbed by the presence of conflict, the kneeling man's face is covered with a long beard, embodying the encounter between 'the other' and 'the self' within oneself."¹⁴ The work is suggestive of a "lone wolf" preparing his weapon of choice—an AR15, the type of firearm used in the massacre of 49 people at an Orlando nightclub on 12 June 2016, only weeks before the shooting of this 360-degree video. In the context of one of the most-deadly incidents of modern gun violence in America, Gladwell drops us into this confined and isolated place, watching this man prepare his weapon. Our point of view matches the kneeling head height of the bearded man; we can look around at the contents of this cluttered single-car garage, but we are fixed within this space, unable to move.

In the essay to accompany this work for the *Traces of War* catalogue, I noted that "we have an ocular presence that is not corporeal, which is powerfully reinforced if,

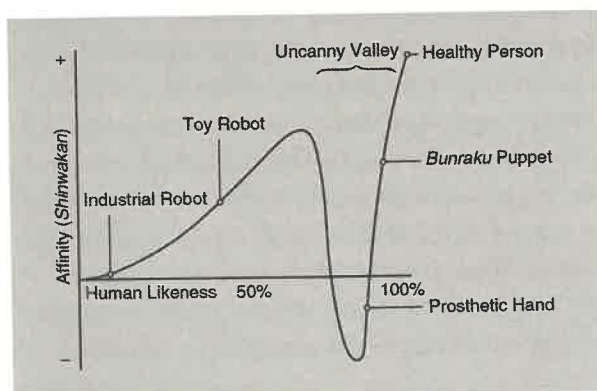
while immersed in this VR work, we look down towards what should be the sight of our body and see no body.”¹⁵ *AR 15 Field Strip* was the first VR (or 360-degree video) I had ever experienced—of any kind—and this unnerving sensation of presence/absence made a strong impression on me at an intuitive level, which I have grappled since to process. Fixed in this point in space, in a suburban Los Angeles home, despite the obvious intellectual rationalising of entering the VR headset, I felt, “how is it that this man cannot see me?” So, while I was immediately in awe of the level of immersion I experienced, I also felt an uneasy sense of incomplete presence, occupying—as I noted in my essay— “a point in space and time that sees but is empty, devoid of subjective agency.”¹⁶ In *Exquisite Corpse*, Natasha Pincus’s segment evokes a similar sense of unease. We are trapped against the back wall of a Melbourne “rage room,” where a figure dressed in protective gear hurls plates and bottles at a wall and takes a baseball bat to an ornate plate. The soundtrack’s short reverb reinforces the enclosedness of the space, and as he tee-balls a tea cup we hear an unnerving “oh yeah ...!” He is enjoying this a little too much. As a vignette on the heart, it feels like a heart shattered and spewing rage.

The perceived removal of the frame—allowing us to step into Alberti’s window—fundamentally sets VR apart from all preceding media. Many of the more compelling claims for VR place much emphasis in its capacity to engender a sense of “presence”. Presence is a subjective, slippery, and fundamentally existential term—but Daniel Mestre and Jean-Louis Vercher suggest that simple behaviours of participants in VR, such as shutting one’s eyes as an object approaches, can “objectify the concept of presence.”¹⁷ Presence, they describe, is “the feeling of being (being situated) in the virtual world or even as a feeling of non-mediation between the subject and the virtual world.”¹⁸ Eva and John Waterworth similarly argue, “When this feeling of ‘being there,’ immersed in a virtual world, is strong, users do not seem to have to conceptualize about the world to make sense of what is portrayed.”¹⁹ Milk



likewise claims: “All [preceding] mediums require what we call ‘suspension of disbelief,’ because there’s a translation gap between the reality of the story and our consciousness interpreting the story into our reality... Virtual reality bridges that gap... So here’s what’s special about VR. In all other mediums, your consciousness interprets the medium. In VR, your consciousness is the medium.”²⁰

I am not convinced. In my experience of VR, I find any convincing sense of presence to be broken by two main factors: the first is the lack of visible body I have mentioned; and the second is what I can only describe as the “deadness” of the point-of-view—at once subjectivised and empty. The artist Harun Farocki talks about this kind of point of view image without subjectivity as a “phantom-subjective image,” taking a term used in early cinematography to describe a shot “taken from a position that a human cannot normally occupy.”²¹ In Amiel Courtin-Wilson’s *Exquisite Corpse* segment on the hands, we are pinned to a painted concrete floor in a studio or warehouse and surrounded by young children, who poke and taunt us to a discordant soundtrack. They see us, but we are not human; we are a tortured insect. The “phantom-subjective image” is less noticeable in other media, such as film and photography. Yet in VR, a sense of presence is vital to the seemingly haptic experience of the visual. We feel neither present nor absent in any absolute ways, but rather somewhere in between—a chimera of



The graph depicts the uncanny valley, the proposed relation between the human likeness of an entity, and the perceiver's affinity for it. Translator's note: Bunraku is a traditional Japanese form of musical puppet theatre. © 2012 IEEE. Reprinted, with permission, from Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," (Trans. Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki) IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine 19:2, 2012.

Top:

Amiel Courtin-Wilson "Hands" in (Dir.) Leo Faber, working with artists from the BADFAITH collective: Tony Albert, Amiel Courtin-Wilson, Daniel Crooks, Shaun Gladwell, Natasha Pincus, Luci Schroder, *Exquisite Corpse*, 2018, virtual reality artwork. Courtesy the artists

detached mechanical vision and feeling, vulnerable flesh.

In its virtual approximation of reality, VR video echoes the notion of "the uncanny valley"—a phenomenon in robotics, where the more uncannily humanlike robots become the greater sense of unease they generate in us. It is an idea that emerged in the field of robotics theory in a 1970 article by Masahiro Mori.²² According to the editor's note for the 2012 republication of Mori's article, he "hypothesized that a person's response to a humanlike robot would abruptly shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached, but failed to attain, a lifelike appearance. This descent into eeriness is known as the uncanny valley."²³ Specifically, the word used by Mori (or its close translation) is "creepy."²⁴ You can scroll down a Google images search for "humanoid robots," or see the images in Maya B. Mathur and David B. Reichling's article on the uncanny valley.²⁵ Mori argues that our affinity (in Japanese, *shinwakan*) with a humanoid robot increases as human likeness increases—but only up to a point. Nearing resemblance to a healthy human being, we are more likely to perceive a humanoid robot as

dead rather than simply not alive.²⁶ In Mori's visualisation of this phenomenon in graph form, we see human likeness plummeting into the uncanny valley at around 80% on the "human likeness" axis.²⁷ It is at this point that we find the human corpse (humanlike, but dead) and even lower down the affinity axis is the zombie (humanlike, but undead), in a psychologically abject state of non-living, present but not-present. Mori's notion of the uncanny valley, while conceived with humanoid robots in mind, offers a useful model for thinking about how we currently experience VR technology. If future VR technology were capable of rendering a body for us within its virtual spaces, one in which we see the hands that we raise in front of us, our body below us and legs extending to the ground, in which we know our scale relative to the space, and others acknowledge our presence, we just may achieve the point at the top-right of Mori's chart—a virtual space as convincing as a robot that seems to be human. But VR falls significantly short of reality. Its phantom subjective point-of-view plummets current VR into the realms of the uncanny valley. We might almost believe we are present, but at best within a willing suspension of disbelief, in a "bad faith" presence.

Perhaps *AR 15 Field Strip*, or Pincus's or Courtin-Wilson's *Exquisite Corpse* segments feel "creepy"—disturbing, carrying an overall negative affect—because of their phantom subjective point-of-view, in which we experience only a partial presence. Nonny de la Peña's *Kiya* (2015), a seven-minute 360-degree video rendered in computer generated imagery, similarly places us in a phantom subjective point-of-view, but raises the ethical stakes by reconstructing the scene of a real domestic violence murder around the audio of recorded 911 calls.²⁸ Alyssa K. Loh says the work asks its audience to "listen to the real audio of two women pleading with police to help them save their sister from an abusive ex-boyfriend, who has a gun on her, and then listen to the gunshots that killed her as her sisters scream and scream. This audio—and I stress, this is the real audio, taken from two recorded 911 calls—is accompanied by a crude digital animation of the events as they unfold."²⁹

The crudeness of the animation is all the more obvious against the stark realness of the audio. To me, viewing this in VR, the movements of the CGI figures seem unnatural, their eyes affectless—and rather than a terrifying reliving of this tense and traumatic scene, I felt the animation disconnected me from the confronting reality of the audio. Essentially, this palpable gap between the real audio and the crude animation push the *mise en scène* back down Mori's graph, into the uncanny valley. Yet, the eerie uncanniness was perhaps more strongly emphasised by the "phantom subjective" point-of-view in *Kiya*, which places us (the viewer) in a seemingly invisible third-person position, sometimes in the relative calm outside of the house, and other times in the volatile scene in the living room. The crudity of the animation aside, in this potentially explosive scene, we are unseen and not present—and the jumping point-of-view, to the outside of the house, further reinforces this. A similar effect is at work in Jordan Wolfson's 360-degree video *Real Violence* (2017), which Diane Solway claims was "Perhaps the most unnerving work you're likely to experience" at last year's Whitney Biennial.³⁰ In the recent special issue of *Artforum* on VR Michelle Kuo describes *Real Violence* as presenting "an all-encompassing scene in which a man, who closely resembles the artist, beats another man senseless. The result is not interactivity but isolation; for all the realism of the VR, viewers cannot intervene."³¹ The "victim" is a mannequin, CGI-ed in post-production to look like a living human. But it seems that the very lack of capacity to intervene is both something the artist sought to achieve,³² and what audiences have found particularly troubling.³³

VR's presence/absence predicament has the additional effect of creating what Gladwell describes in discussing his VR work *Orbital Vanitas* (2017) as a "scale crisis."³⁴ In *Orbital Vanitas*, we are fixed in a point of view floating in space above the Earth while a skull floats towards us.³⁵ As it approaches us, at a point about two minutes in, our one-to-one sense of scale becomes quickly ruptured as colossal teeth pass above us and we enter the

enormous foramen magnum, the hole at the base of the skull. We spend the next four minutes flying low over the vast landscape of the bony protrusions of the interior skull. Above us is a cavernous cranial space, as we are surrounded by a thunderous rumbling that magnifies the differentiation of scale. Are we miniscule, as we feel with Courtin-Wilson's *Hands* segment of *Exquisite Corpse*, or is this skull of planetoidal proportions? With *Orbital Vanitas* Gladwell fully exploits the ways in which the lack of body and the phantom subjective point of view cuts us loose of normative expectations of scale.

In a paper presented last year at the CHI PLAY conference in Amsterdam, San Francisco-based design researcher Kate Carey and her team argue that claims for VR as an "empathy machine" are "more reflective of the hopes of VR content creators and their excitement about the medium than they are of the current state of scholarship about empathy and VR,"³⁶ and, in fact, that reliable methods for even measuring empathy in VR simply do not yet exist.³⁷ Certainly, media theorists are researching this new intellectual terrain, and VR's peculiarities present manifold challenges for the medium's ongoing commercial development, particularly a raft of unresolved narratological issues when the medium is used to tell a story.³⁸ Does the role of the VR camera represent a first-person point-of-view? If so, how does that first-person speak; after all, you occupy its subjective position, how are you to know what is to be said? Can the VR camera represent a third-person point-of-view? To assert VR's capacity to engender a sense of presence can enable an intersubjective connectedness is at best an optimistic overclaim. Moreover, to regard VR as a mere extension of existing media, particularly documentary and narrative cinema, is to be willfully blind to anomalies of the medium, and to foreclose upon its experimental fecundity. For artists, VR's possibilities (or impossibility) for empathy, its uncanniness, its phantom subjectivity, its scale crisis, are all grist to the mill. These anomalies of the medium only reveal themselves to us as we experience and create within VR.

As they become known, they are open to being manipulated experimentally to full effect. In similar ways Lynda Benglis experimented with the viscosity of polyurethane foam or Jackson Pollock exploited the thinness of house paint.

It has been a long time since artists have had access to a medium so nascent and unexplored as to demand genuine experimentation, in a truly modernist sense. For the *Legs* segment by Daniel Crooks, the very last part of *Exquisite Corpse*, we begin with a two-dimensional screen suspended in a black background, showing the lower half of a figure in sneakers, trousers and a shirt. The screen then multiplies to five flat screens that encircle us, moving slowly around us, showing a complete pan of the lower space of a room. A few moments in, the lower edges of the screen slowly drop, while the five sets of legs lengthen, distort and twist into paint-like columns that drift eventually into a black hole directly below. As if edited in flat video, Crooks experiments with the spherical distortion that allows VR to project an equirectangular image into a 360-degree space. Crooks is circuit-bending the technology, jamming a spanner into the works to see how it fizzles and pops to generate random effects. And in some important ways, this is where we are with the technology. These are the VR equivalent of the Rayographs from the 1920s or Nam June Paik's 1965 *Magnet TV*. The cathode ray tube did not replace the canvas, as Paik prophesied, and neither will VR. Anyone who got to experience MoMA's first VR exhibit as part of *Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams* will know the practical obstacles to even showing VR work in a gallery—the queuing, the requirement for instruction by docents, the disposable protective face cover, the restricted viewing time hindering the opportunity to try different views. As a reader you probably well know the frustration of trying to access these works as they are meant to be experienced. If, like me, you missed Wolfson's *Real Violence* at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, you have only the accounts of the few that saw it to rely on. You will not find even still images of it on the internet. No amount of creative imagination can activate the reproductions from spherical images that sit awkwardly,

Daniel Crooks "Legs" in (Dir.) Leo Faber, working with artists from the BADFAITH collective: Tony Albert, Amiel Courtin-Wilson, Daniel Crooks, Shaun Gladwell, Natasha Pincus, Luci Schroder, *Exquisite Corpse*, 2018, virtual reality artwork. Courtesy the artists



distorted and in miniature form on a flat printed page or screen. And this is the current bind we find ourselves in with VR—we really must experience it to disbelieve it.

1 "BADFAITH is an Indie Content Collective"; <http://badfaith.co> 2 See Steve Dow, "'Exquisite Corpse': reinventing a parlour game in immersive VR," *The Monthly*, 14 August 2018: www.themonthly.com.au/blog/steve-dow/2018/14/2018/1534208511/exquisite-corpse-reinventing-parlour-game-immersive-vr?utm_3 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When images take positions*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Toronto, Cambridge Mass. and London: RIC Books and MIT Press, 2018, p. 70 4 Dov Kormits, "Exquisite VR," *Filmink*, 15 August 2018: www.filmink.com.au/exquisite-vr/ 5 Steve Dow, *The Monthly*, 2018 6 Shaun Gladwell, "Interview with Shaun Gladwell on VR work 'Orbital Vanitas'," 8 January 2017, *StudioCrasher*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-J9PGJ-UyQ> 7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1956, p. 102 8 Sartre, p. 102 9 Sartre, p. 112 10 Chris Milk, "How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine," March 2015 at TED2015, TED Talks, URL: www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine?language=en 11 Milk, TED2015 12 Ashleigh Wilson, "For Simon Mordant, art ownership is relatively virtual", *The Australian*, 6 June 2016: www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/for-simon-mordant-art-ownership-is-relatively-virtual/news-story/31e68aacbee031e3a747c2deca874f6c 13 I discuss this work in greater details in Kit Messham-Muir, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?: Intersubjectivity and the Phantom Subjective Image in Shaun Gladwell's War Art Works," London: Kings College London, 2016 14 Daisy Schoenaich-Carolath, "Traces of War", *The World Weekly*, 27 October 2016: www.theworldweekly.com/reader/view/magazine/2016-10-27/traces-of-war/9325 accessed 19 January 2018 15 Messham-Muir, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"; p. 51 16 Messham-Muir, p. 52 17 Daniel Mestre and Jean-Louis Vercher, "Immersion and Presence," *Virtual Reality: Concepts and Technologies*, edited by Pascal Guitton, Boca Raton FL: CRC Press, 2011, p. 99 18 Mestre and Vercher, "Immersion and Presence," p. 97 19 Eva L. and John A. Waterworth, "Focus, Locus, and Sensus: The Three Dimensions of Virtual Experience", *CyberPsychology & Behaviour* 4, no. 2, 2001, p. 203 20 Chris Milk, "The Birth of Virtual Reality as an Art Form, February 2016 at Ted2016," TED Talks: www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_the_birth_of_virtual_reality_as_an_art_form 21 Harun Farocki, "Phantom images", trans. Brian Poole, p. 13. Text based on a talk delivered at ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2003: https://monoskop.org/images/f/f8/Farocki_Harun_2004_Phantom_Images.pdf 22 Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley", *Energy* 7:4, 1970, pp. 33–35 23 Editor's note in Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley", *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*, 19:2, 2012, p. 98 24 Mori, "The Uncanny Valley", 2012, p. 100 25 Maya B. Mathur and David B. Reichling, "Navigating a Social World with Robot

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