

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

There is No I in Self

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Abstract

My work is an exploration of psychological phenomenon utilizing bodily and technological imagery. I am interested in exploring our sense of embodied self and internal psychological experiences regarding selfhood, consciousness, and the affective dimension of our external world. This exploration pulls from disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and metaphysics.

The works discussed are a combination of digital media, performance, and installation. The work functions to create a sense of embodied engagement through material choice and multivalent narrative. I present the viewer with work that is rooted in our shared reality yet requires them to be engaged in the act of viewing. In creating these works the viewer is brought into physical dialog with the ideas presented in the work.

Frailty of the Flesh

My childhood memories have a specific location attached to them. They are remembered from behind my body, slightly above it and to the left. I felt disassociated from my body for most of my life. It's strange to think that we are able to have these kinds of experiences.

Where exactly was *I*?

Some of my earliest memories are of my father letting me look at his blood under his old microscope from college. He would prick his finger and exaggeratedly wail, pretending to be in pain. I felt bad making him injure himself, but I was utterly fascinated by the living organisms slowly moving around on the glass slide.

I *needed* to see them.

It was strange to realize that these tiny things *were him*.

Inside, Outside.

It was in part through my father that I began to question the relationship between body and self. Towards the end of his life he battled a severe staph infection that nearly cost him his foot, and a case of diverticulitis which left him with an ostomy bag. I remember him lifting his shirt and letting me see the little, pink piece of intestine poking through. I watched as the pink nub expelled shit into the clear plastic bag. And the smell. The smell was of the inside of someone's body.

Inside, Outside.

His autopsy report listed the primary cause of death: pulmonary contusions.

Ultimately it wasn't a pathogen or some other internal failure that caused his death, but rather the hard reality of metal and plastic violently meeting the soft space of his internal tissues.

He died in a car accident.

Outside, Inside.

His corneas and some skin tissue were taken and placed into some stranger's body.
Organs that saw and felt for him now seeing and feeling for someone else.

So where was *he* now?

I had a tense relationship with my body. It was me, and yet it was something other than *me*. It could turn against me. It could fail. It was unsettling and I didn't want to be in it.

I remember realizing that the brain, a piece of corruptible flesh, was responsible for all my thoughts, actions and feelings. My sense of self. I was in fourth grade when I read a book called *Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy*. It was a memoir about a young girl whose sister was diagnosed with schizophrenia. My uncle was schizophrenic. I thought he was born that way, that he was always crazy. I didn't realize that he was once like me. I didn't realize the neurochemical soup in my skull could go sour.

I share his DNA. Was I going to go crazy and lose *myself*?

What do we hold onto when we're always at risk of our body turning against us?
I needed a place to anchor to. To come to some understanding about what *I* was.

Eventually I began practicing a type of meditation that was based in Taoist and Buddhist teachings. Through this practice I came back into my body. I deeply probed the relationship between body and self, between my internal psychological self and the external world. I began to conceive of myself differently, as intricately connected to my physicality, to the energetic environment around me, and to some deep sense of self that wasn't rooted in any particular place or "thing".

Introduction

At the core of my work is a deep desire to understand myself and my embodied conscious experience; the connections between our inner worlds and our outer reality. It is a desire to see and make physical the connections, processes, and psychological phenomena that we experience as human beings. This exploration takes form through objects, video, performance and immersive spaces in an attempt to “map out” or externalize the complex relations between body, mind, and environment; between self and other. I make palpable and external the intricacies of my own experience in order to make sense of them. In creating the work, I question what constitutes our sense of self, our latent fears and desires, and how we might (re)discover¹ ourselves.

The process of mapping is ongoing. It is like a living thing, always in dynamic flux. It does not seek an answer or definitive form. It incorporates new ideas and creates new connections between seemingly disparate ideas. However, I will discuss central themes in the work related to embodied consciousness, anxiety, meditative states, and technology.

¹ To discover fundamental aspects of the nature of our experiences in order to envision ourselves differently

The Body

*Our identities are precious, safeguarding our
subjectivity begins with the limits of our bodies²*

The body is the foundation on which all of our experiences are based in and out of. It has always been central to my artistic investigations. The body as a site of exploration began as a way to interrogate and express my own psychological experiences and inner life. The body, and the experience of being embodied, is something that everyone has a relationship to. It is something that viewers can recognize in the work and *feel* themselves in it.

The body as it appears in my work is distilled down to its essential elements. It is body as organism; of disconnected parts that make up a whole. Images, material and sculptural elements that reference body parts and biological processes weave a common thread throughout my work. The separated body becomes a visual metaphor for the idea of interdependence³ and the latent anxieties about the flesh's unknowable otherness.

The anonymous body is illustrated in my work as pieces and parts, which are never made whole. The work exists as printed images of skin and eyes, and ambiguously fleshy sculptural elements that hang on perforated metal structures. These metal structures act as a skeletal system, something that is the foundation, something that both can be used to illustrate both the act of building and breaking something down. It is a kind of body. An architectural body. Something constructed that lacks permanence. These scaffolding-like structures are bolted together with screws but appear as though they could be easily taken apart and reconfigured. Their stability as objects falls apart upon further inspection, just as the sense of body as self does.

² Trigg, Dylan. *The Thing a Phenomenology of Horror*, 139

³ Defined in *How to See Yourself As You Really Are* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as the self that arises though sets of conditions and relations in the world.

Science fiction/body horror films like John Carpenter's *The Thing* or Cronenberg's *The Fly* have always been a source of inspiration for me. These films delve into themes surrounding the body as an organism separate from one's sense of self and the inherent anxiety of that condition. In Dylan Trigg's *The Thing, A Phenomenology of Horror*, he outlines the imagery of the abject, separated body as an anonymous body one that, "...is shown as having another side that is fundamentally independent of expression and perception".⁴ Trigg calls this body the *pre-personal body* and states that while it is "...constitutive of the personal self" it also "...marks an incipient threat to selfhood."⁵ Our sense of self is contingent upon this physical organism, and yet separate from it. The anxiety of the flesh as a separate entity, with its own pre-conscious desires, frailties, and hidden traumas is central to my work. Illustrating this relationship is not only cathartic for me, but it also prompts the viewer to investigate the relationship to their own embodied experience.

⁴ Trigg, Dylan. *The Thing a Phenomenology of Horror*, 53

⁵ Ibid, 72

Inside/Outside

*...you and I were, from inception, already suffused with an ancient somatic wisdom concerning this world...a wisdom which embodies a skein of somatic triumphs... a reflection mirroring the lengthy corridors of biological time.*⁶

The pre-personal body is ancient. It is the culmination of all the experiences of the beings that lived before it. It comes with its own habits and language built up over generations. It is dynamic and situated in time as both a remnant of the past and vehicle to the future. It has a language of its own and we have to learn how to speak it. In my work I am not only interested in investigating the latent anxiety of our corporeal existence, but also the idea of “coming back to the body” or deepening one’s exploration of the relationship between self, our physical nature, and the environment. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Zen Buddhist monk, once said in a lecture about self-love that:

“...In every cell of your body, you can recognize the presence of your ancestors, not only human ancestors but animal, vegetal, and mineral ancestors...And if you can get in touch with your body, you can get in touch with the whole cosmos, with all your ancestors, and also with the future generations that are already inside of your body.”⁷

My body is not *mine*. It is intimately and as deeply connected to all of its small intricate parts as it is as to the world at large. It is the focal point through which both internal and external realities meet, where energy and impulses from both inside and outside are felt and made known to our consciousness.

My experience with Sum Fhat⁸ meditation have also played a role in how I have come to understand the energetic exchange between body, self, and environment. Within this

⁶ Hanna, Thomas. *Bodies in Revolt A Primer in Somatic Thinking*, 140

⁷ Plum Village. *How Do I Love Myself? Thich Nhat Hanh Answers Questions*

⁸ A meditation practice rooted in both Chinese Buddhism and Taoism

practice I was taught to allow my body to move and release stored traumas, and to feel the energetic interplay between what is within and what is outside myself. One of the major components of Sum Fhat meditation is an emphasis on blending your personal energy with your surrounding environment.⁹ During these meditations, it becomes difficult to discern what is *you* versus what is outside of you. My experiences with this type of meditation have left me with a deep appreciation of the term interdependence; the idea that the phenomenon of our individual consciousnesses and experience of self is dependent on a variety of other phenomena.

There is no singular *I* or self. Instead there is a series of phenomena that coalesces into an experience of being; an infinitely interconnected continuum that is always in flux.¹⁰

⁹ A practice of becoming aware of the relationship between your personal energy and the energy of the environment for the purpose of promoting harmony. This is achieved through movement based meditation practices.

¹⁰ Dalai Lama, *How to See Yourself as You Really Are*, 156-157

The New Flesh

*The television screen has become the retina of the mind's eye*¹¹

We are in a dynamic co-creative process with ourselves; one in which we are constantly reshaped by the tools and technologies we create. We make our tools based out of our own somatic experiences; designing and describing them in human terms. They are extensions of our body. *Neural* nets, *retinal* displays; computers have *language and memory*. We begin to understand ourselves through technological terms; we *short circuit*, *blow fuses*, are *wired differently*, and *recharge our batteries*. These technologies change our bodily and perceptive experiences, and we consequently begin to conceive of ourselves differently.¹² Vivian Shoback in *The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic and Electronic "Presence"*, states that:

“we have been radically “remade” by the perceptive (as well as expressive) technologies of photography, cinema, and the electronic media of television and computer—these all the more transformative of “the interior of embodied consciousness”...electronic media have not only historically *symbolized* but also historically *constituted* a radical alteration of the forms of our culture’s previous temporal and spatial consciousness and of our bodily sense of existential “presence” to the world, to ourselves, and to others.”¹³

Through electronic media we experience ourselves selves as multiple, distributed across devices and digital platforms.¹⁴ Information that would otherwise be processed and stored in our biological brain is now stored in the hardware of our computers, externalizing our bodies and minds. Digitized interactions project us into a diffused and disembodied plane of experience.¹⁵ We are mutating, blurring the boundaries between our electronic and embodied selves.

¹¹ Quote from the character Professor Brian O’Blivion in Cronenburg’s *Videodrome* (1983)

¹² Shoback, Vivan. "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic “Presence”." In *Post Cinema Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, 92

¹³ *Ibid*, 88-89

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 110

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 118

These perceptual shifts in our embodied consciousness via technology enmesh us deeply in a reciprocal relationship. Cronenburg's *Videodrome* is a film that addresses these ideas and is one that I have often taken visual cues from. Imagery of flesh melding with synthetic, construction materials, and video screens figures prominently in my work. In both *Videodrome* and in my work, this relationship is presented as a thing of horror. Tying back into the latent anxiety of the pre-personal body, the body is again presented as an organism with no clear-cut boundaries; it is something that absorbs the *seemingly* foreign presence of technology and is fundamentally transformed by it. In my work, both the biologic and technologic elements are laid bare, serving as a visual metaphor for the ways we are refigured by this relationship.

I am also interested in thinking about this relationship as a kind of mirror. The embodied and phenomenological changes brought on by our technologies also give us space to contemplate them, and more deeply consider our embodied experience and human behaviors.

We have displaced some of our intellectual, social, and even physical labors onto our technologies. In externalizing these human processes, we can see ourselves in ways we previously could not. In *Bodies in Revolt a Primer in Somatic Thinking*, Thomas Hanna describes technologies like computers as a "...cast off homunculus...a human function which man is abandoning so that he can do something else."¹⁶ The *something else* that Hanna proposes is a deeper exploration of the embodied sensory experience.¹⁷ The idea of technology not only changing us but of allowing for a deeper exploration of self is something I explore in my work.

¹⁶ Hanna, Thomas. *Bodies in Revolt A Primer in Somatic Thinking*, 230

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 232

Discussion of Work

The exploration of these ideas has taken the form of performance and installation works. In the performance piece *Connectome*, my collaborator Leslie Rollins and I used an EEG headset and analog synthesizer to externalize psychological states through sound. I pre-recorded sounds of me laughing, crying, guttural yelling, and various other emotive utterances. We then mapped them to brainwave states, which would trigger sounds in response to shifts in my mental state during meditation. The performance took place in the walled off window display of a former department store, which had been partially concealed from street view with privacy film. This semi-public space mirrored the inside-made-outside nature of the performance. Choosing this space was important, as I was thinking about the permeability of our outer experience and inner life. I was seated in meditation and viewers were invited to come into the space. Their physical presence in the space changed the energy in the room and therefore my mental state which was then broadcast into the room via the speakers. This in turn affected the viewer's experience, creating a feedback loop between bodies, the environment, and internal experience. The energetic enmeshment of our lived experience is made palpable through the use of technology.



Images from *Connectome*, 2019

Creating installation works is my way to actualize my psychological space. In the piece *Soft Edges*, video projection was used to create an immersive space that explored themes of disassociation and the contingent nature of the self through bodily and digital aesthetics. The projection was roughly the size of the wall in the gallery, giving the illusion that the viewer could potentially walk into the video. The video is composed of 3D digital renderings of spaces and organs as well as footage of my body. The video begins with shots of my face, which are disrupted by footage of 3D rendered spaces. The use of projection is important, as it is literally projecting this internal world into the viewer's reality. Digitized animations become a metaphor for the mental landscape; an internal space that is not "real" and yet can be inhabited. My interest in digital processes and aesthetics began as I was searching for a way to visually represent psychological phenomena. I began to see computer generated imagery as an analog for our mind's eye. The digital landscape is a place of disembodied information, a space that is "real" and yet has no corporeal existence. Our inner psychological landscape is similar in that it allows for individual experiences, yet it does not concretely exist. The video cycles between the "real" body and the "unreal" psychological space, all while questioning where the *I* (or sense of self) is actually located. Is it in the body, the mind, or somewhere else?



Installation shot of *Soft Edges*, 2019



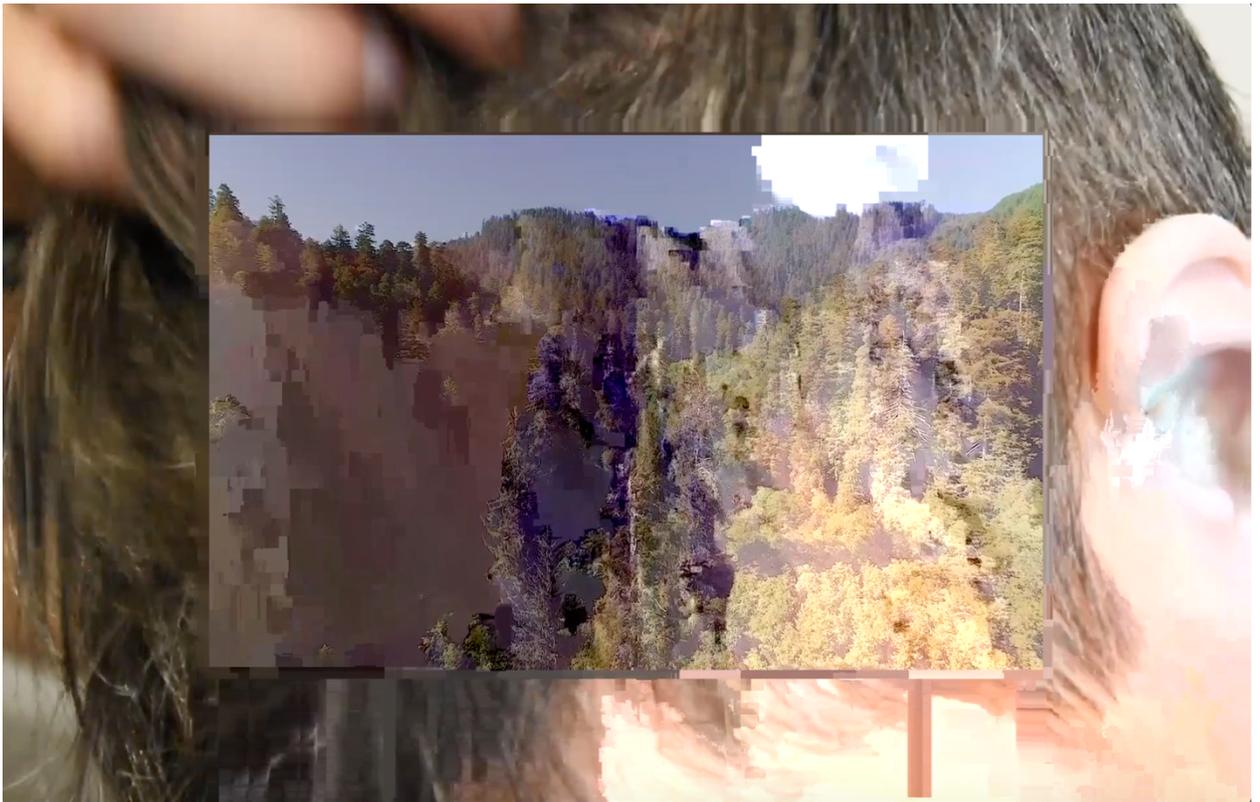
Still Images from *Soft Edges*, 2019

The Shift is a video piece in which images of body and environment endlessly morph into one another, pixels from one image bleeding ceaselessly into the next frame. Images of the body become insects, landscapes, 3D renderings, and unicellular organisms.

The video was made utilizing a glitch technique called datamoshing. With datamoshing, a compressed video file is intentionally corrupted by removing I-frames¹⁸, which encodes a whole image into the video. What is left are P-frames¹⁹, or information that “tell” the pixels from the previous frames where to move in relationship to the next frame. Essentially datamoshing removes the computer’s ability to understand the encoded file as a series of whole images, and a glitchy, pixelated effect is created as a result. Pixels from previous frames become stuck in place while the image in the subsequent frame moves underneath the preceding one. This removal of information constitutes a removal of the boundary between images. This is a metaphor for the unbounded space between self and what is other, and the difficulty in constructing a whole picture of one’s relationship to these experiences. I talked earlier about mapping and about how my process of mapping is never complete; *The Shift* is an exploration of how the sticky interdependence of our embodied experience resists intelligibility. Recognizable images surface momentarily and then are disrupted by another, and then another. What was thought of as stable and discrete becomes one. Their boundaries have been removed and their interdependent nature exposed.

¹⁸ I-frames are frames in a compressed video file, also called a key frame or intra-coded frame, it holds the information for the complete image in that frame

¹⁹ P-frames are frames in a compressed video file that only holds the changes in the image from the previous frame



Still images from *The Shift*, 2020

Sculptural works are also a part of my practice. In *Structure*²⁰, perforated steel is used to create various structures which house and attach to a myriad of other objects. The steel structures become like scaffolding. An impermanent, contingent, frame that holds fleshy, bodily sculptural elements, monitors, and other electronic elements. They are visibly bolted together and feel as if they could easily be dismantled and infinitely reconfigured; expanding and mutating as biological and technological entities do.

These structures situated in space become a landscape in which the viewer can see a physical representation of my pulling apart the viscera of the body and technological components to their essences, and then recombining them. These frames become a physical representation of “mapping”, or in other words, they make connections between seemingly disparate objects and ideas. This map is never quite legible and is constantly being redrawn, with new potentialities and relationships between the human and non-human coming into focus before dissolving into something new.

The melding of bio-likenesses with construction materials becomes a material representation of not only the stickiness between living and non-living but of biology and technology. Technological aesthetics give off a feeling of “other”, but here are curiously enmeshed with bodily viscera. Here, this enmeshment becomes more than an intimate relationship with the physical environment, but also to technology and the digital environment. These structures are the embodiment of a futile attempt to locate, or map out, with specificity the separation between body, self, and the external world.

²⁰ The completion and subsequent documentation of this work was disrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak, the images included are of work that was in progress

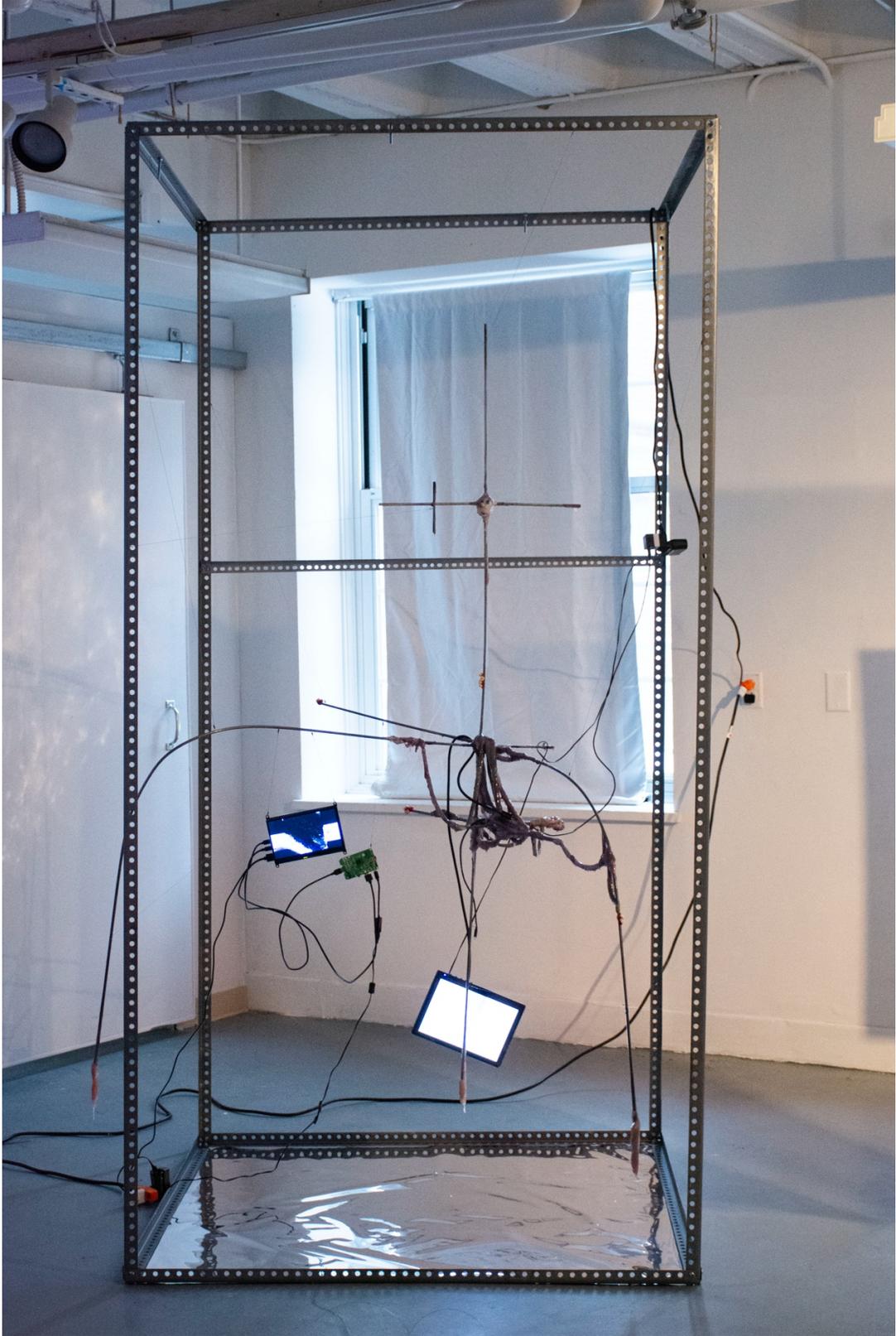


Image of *Structure*, 2020

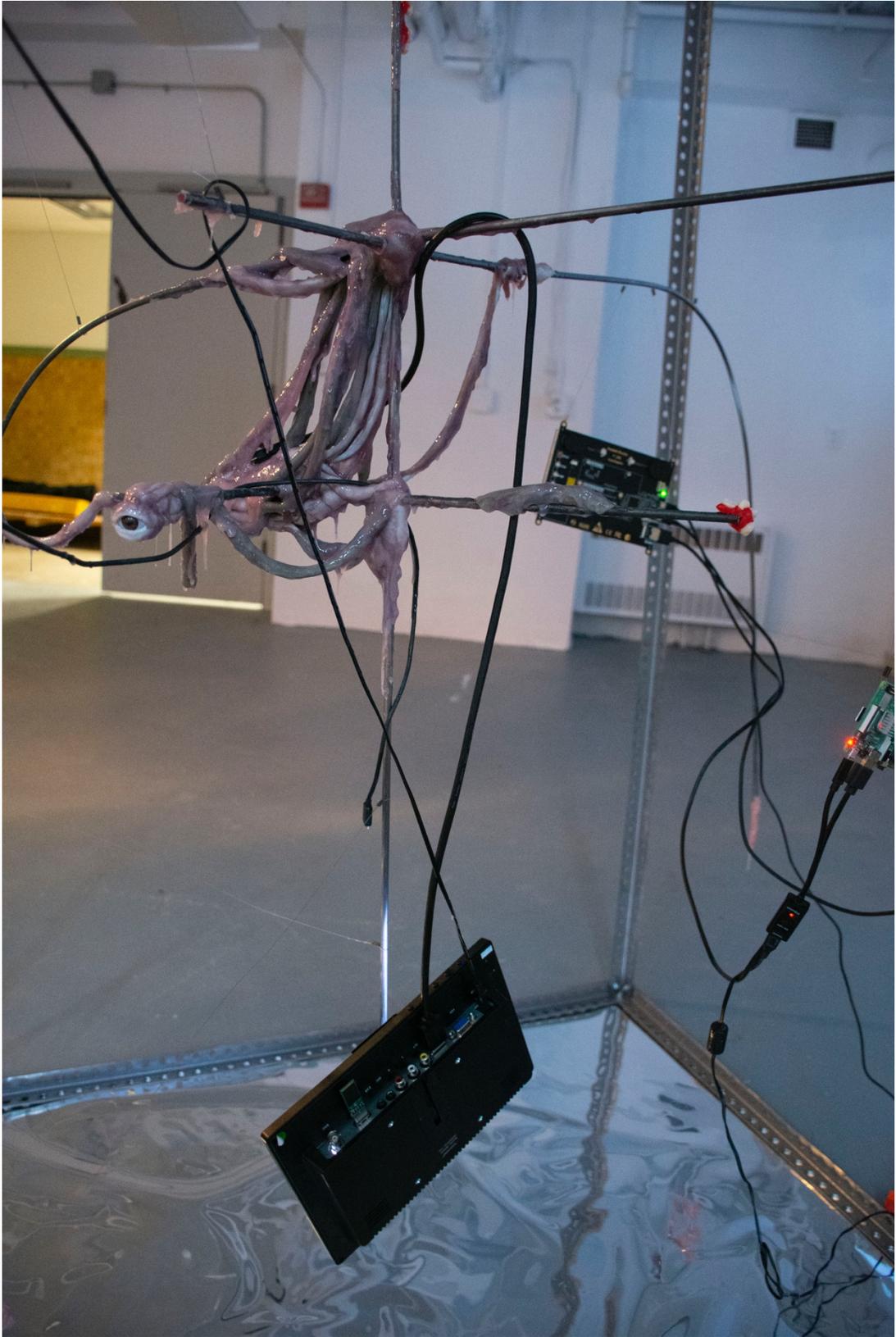


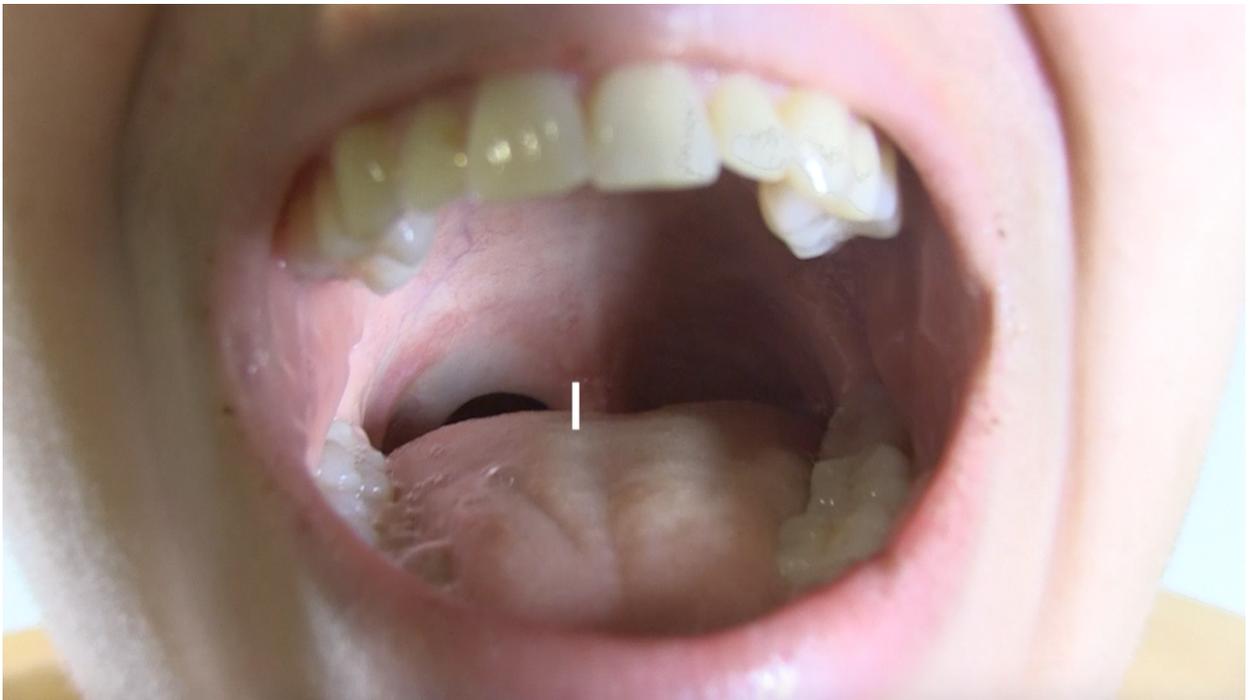
Image of *Structure*, 2020

Conclusion

At the core of the work is my desire to make visual the connection to our inner and outer realities; to represent the interdependent nature that underpins our sense of self.

I described this earlier as mapping, and although I am attempting to make physical these connections, I do not see my mapping as something that will ever be completed. The map will expand and contract with new revelations and ideas like the dynamic human organism I am. Ultimately, I want people to spend time reflecting on their relationship to ideas of body, self, and what is *other*. To probe these relationships exposes the anxious nature of a sense of self that seems to dissolve, but also opens up new possibilities for understanding.

After all, there is no *I* in self.



Still image from *Soft Edges*, 2019

A Note on COVID-19 and Concussions

During 2019, the global outbreak of COVID-19 caused a massive shift in people's everyday lives. Social distancing and mandatory shelter-in-place orders were issued, and nationwide campuses shuttered their doors and moved classes to online platforms. Alfred University followed suit and transitioned all classes to online platforms for the second half of the Spring 2020 semester.

Needless to say, this meant that there was no studio access and ultimately no MFA thesis exhibition. As I write this, my half-finished thesis work lies abandoned in my studio. As disappointing, bizarre, and confusing as this current moment is, I'm quite struck by how the current situation parallels some of the ideas I have been thinking about in relation to my work. The virus mutated and leapt from some mammalian cousin of ours and found a new home within the human body. The porosity of our human bodies, its frailty, and connections to other bodies and to the world surrounding it seem very apparent. Right now, for me at least, there is a strange sense of global unity that is centered in the human body; nearly everyone is affected by this virus in some way. The startling realization that other people's health can affect you, makes it feel as though we are all intimately connected.

Our digital technologies and social media are playing an even greater role in our lives now. Staring at screens of other people staring at screens has displaced physical communication. We are literally living through our computers; electronically extending ourselves towards one another, even in isolation. Perhaps in the future we will be better adapted, our senses fully synced with our electronic appendages. But for now, we are in the throws of struggle between our new reality and our old flesh.

On another note, while writing this thesis I experienced another kind of body-centered disruption. Currently, I am recovering from a concussion. I fell while roller-skating; the full force of my body hitting the back of my head.

I have no memory of the fall. But I have a vague memory of waking up. Only it didn't feel like waking up. There was nothing and then a sudden sense of presence. No past, no sense of who *I* was.

There were only impulses and disjointed sensory information.

Blue.

Up. Numbness.

Move body. There.

Get to car.

Brightness.

The mechanism that joined my consciousness into a continuous and flowing whole was knocked temporarily off-line. Looking back, it was a bit like functioning on autopilot. My body moved itself, muscle memory working in place of conscious action. Although I couldn't see I managed to skate back to my car.

After some time, moments began to coalesce into something like memory. Vague notions of what had happened moments before dissipated quickly.

From somewhere under the sound of ringing was the first gasping of *I*.

Something is wrong.

Something happened to *me*.

Call Teisha.²¹

In the first few days that followed, moving my eyes or head too quickly would cause my vision to momentarily cease. My brain simply could not keep up with the input from my eyes.

²¹ Teisha Holloway, my colleague, friend and fellow 2020 MFA candidate

A full week later, I went for a walk and although I could clearly see a map of my neighborhood in my head, and knew I was not lost, I did not recognize my street.

It felt as though parts of my brain were executing tasks separately, no longer working in tandem. It made me think about my work. In a sense, I felt pulled apart. Separated. Disjointed.

As I am writing this, I am coming back together. This experience has been preserved and is digitized via MRI technology. The exact information of my brain at that moment; a hazy *I* memorialized.

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